

Deal Pentecostal Church Sermon Outlines 2022

Daily Prayer for 2022

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 unfulfillment—they stand fast as the eternal hills.

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

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.

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January

Thought for the Month: Faith is the deliberate confidence in the character of God whose ways you may not understand at the time. *Oswald Chambers*

January's Theme: 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}

Sunday 2nd January 2022. Ps.130 Luke 2

Faith—Forsaking All I Trust Him. Faith is that secret ingredient which changes an unbeliever into a Believer, a spiritually dead person into a spiritually alive person, a son of man into a son of God. Faith is essential and yet it can't be seen or measured—*For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.* ^{Eph.2:8-10} To those who through the righteousness of our God and Saviour Jesus Christ have received a faith as precious as ours: Grace and peace be yours in abundance through the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord. ^{2Pet.1:1-2} The real Christian faith is not blind and neither is it a “leap-in-the-dark” and although Christian faith is a God-given faith, it is also credible because it based on evidence: *Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. For by it the elders obtained a good testimony.* ^{Heb.11:1-2} Jesus answered: “Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? Don't you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? The words I say to you are not just my own. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work. Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; or at least believe on the evidence of the miracles themselves.” ^{Jn.14:9-11} And like other gifts from God, faith can't be bought or sold. Peter answered: “May your money perish with you, because you thought you could buy the gift of God with money! You have no part or share in this ministry, because your heart is not right before God. Repent of this wickedness and pray to the Lord in the hope that he may forgive you for having such a thought in your heart. For I see that you are full of bitterness and captive to sin.” ^{Acts.8:20-23} But we can “buy” spiritual things from God without money: *Come, all of you who are thirsty. Come and drink the water I offer to you. You who do not have any money, come. Buy and eat the grain I give you. Come and buy wine and milk. You will not have to pay anything for it. Why spend money on what is not food? Why work for what does not satisfy you? Listen carefully to me. Then you will eat what is good. You will enjoy the richest food there is. Listen and come to me. Pay attention to me. Then you will live. I will make a covenant with you that will last forever. I will give you my faithful love. I promised it to David.* ^{Is.55:1-3} Faith is the currency of God's kingdom and God does respond to our faith. Jesus turned and saw her. “Dear woman, don't give up hope,” he said. “Your faith has healed you.” The woman was healed at that very moment. ^{Matt.9:22} However, we don't need lots of faith to believe God—only living faith: *Then the disciples came to Jesus in private. They asked, ‘Why couldn't we drive out the demon?’ He replied, ‘Because your faith is much too small. [Because you're not yet taking God seriously.]TM What I'm about to tell you is true. If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, it is enough. You can say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there.’ And it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you.* ^{Matt.17:19-22} But we don't have to keep our faith small—we can grow faith and build ourselves up in our faith. *Dear friends, build yourselves up in your most holy faith. Let the Holy Spirit guide and help you when you pray.* ^{Jude.21} So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness. See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the elemental spiritual forces of this world rather than on Christ. ^{Col.2:6-8} And because true faith comes from God, it will always have God's “DNA” on it—**true faith will always be living, loving and loud.** If faith is not living, it is dead: *What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? Suppose*

a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. But someone will say, "You have faith; I have deeds." Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by my deeds. [Faith and works, works and faith, fit together hand in glove.] You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder... As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.^{1Jas.2:14-26} And if faith is not loving it is nothing but an empty noise. If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing. Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.^{1Cor.13:1-7} And if faith is not loud it is dumb: Zechariah asked the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man, and my wife is old too." The angel answered, "I am Gabriel. I serve God. I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. And now you will have to be silent. You will not be able to speak until after John is born. That's because you did not believe my words. They will come true when the time is right."^{Lk.18-20} But faith is living, loving and loud: Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?" "Yes, Lord," she replied, "I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world."^{Jn.10:25-27} And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us.^{1Jn.3:23} It is written: "I believed; therefore I have spoken." Since we have that same spirit of faith, we also believe and therefore speak, because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you to himself. All this is for your benefit, so that the grace that is reaching more and more people may cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God.^{2Cor.4:13-15} And because faith is living, loving and loud, **it is active**—faith is always speaking with the same attitude as Jesus and backing up the words with action: *We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith.*^{Rom.12:6}

But faith has a goal and a purpose—and that goal is to be like Jesus. Faith works out our salvation and keeps us in harmony with God: *Although you have never seen Christ, you love him. You don't see him now, but you believe in him. You are extremely happy with joy and praise that can hardly be expressed in words as you obtain the salvation that is the goal of your faith.*^{1Pet.1:8-9} Faith is not intimidated by circumstances. Abraham is called the "father of faith" and so Christians can look to him as their spiritual father—they share the same faith as Abraham: *So then, Abraham is the father of all who believe but have not been circumcised, in order that righteousness might be credited to them. And he is then also the father of the circumcised who not only are circumcised but who also follow in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised.*^{Rom.4:11-12} "Listen to me, you who pursue righteousness and who seek the LORD: Look to the rock from which you were cut and to the quarry from which you were hewn; look to Abraham, your father."^{Is.51:1-2} When Abraham faced an impossible situation, he did not despair—the situation looked hopeless but Abraham knew that he wasn't helpless! Abraham stopped living according to what he could see and started living according to what God had said—Abraham had confidence in God: *When everything was hopeless, Abraham believed anyway, deciding to live not on the basis of what he saw he couldn't do but on what God said he would do. Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead—since he was about a hundred years old—and that Sarah's womb was also dead. Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised. This is why "it was credited to him as righteousness."* The words "it was credited to him"

were written not for him alone, but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness—for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.^{Rom.4:18-25} This sort of faith has to believe in miracles—in God intervening in our situation. It is not “blab it and grab it” or “pie in the sky while we wait” but it is “steak on the plate while we wait”! Faith is what God responds to. God’s kingdom is a spiritual kingdom and everything in God’s kingdom obtained spiritually. Although we cannot buy answers to prayer, we can use faith as currency in God’s kingdom because God responds to faith. Jesus replied, “I tell you the truth, if you have faith and do not doubt, not only can you do what was done to the fig tree, but also you can say to this mountain, ‘Go, throw yourself into the sea,’ and it will be done. If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer.”^{Matt.21:21-22}

Yes, faith is an active trust in God—the deliberate confidence in the character of God, whose ways we may not understand at the time. And because our faith is in God not what He does, our faith is never disappointed! Through him you believe in God, who raised him from the dead and glorified him, and so your faith and hope are in God.^{1Pet.1:21} Thousands of years ago, Job understood that much about faith: After Job heard all of those reports, he got up and tore his robe. He shaved his head. Then he fell to the ground and worshiped the LORD. He said, “I was born naked. And I’ll leave here naked. You have given, and you have taken away. May your name be praised.” In all this, Job did not sin by charging God with wrongdoing.^{Job.1:20-22} His wife said to him, “Are you still continuing to be faithful to the LORD? Speak evil things against him and die!” Job replied, “You are talking like a foolish woman. We accept good things from God. So we should also accept trouble when he sends it.” In spite of everything, Job didn’t say anything that was sinful.^{Job.2:9-10} But faith also has a legacy—we leave an example for others to follow: And by faith Abel still speaks, even though he is dead.^{Heb.11:4} These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised, since God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect.^{Heb.11:39-40}

So let’s make every effort to leave a legacy of faith for others to see and follow. Let’s be an example of active trust in God who cares about every detail of our life—the little details and also the large details. So I tell you to stop worrying about what you will eat, drink, or wear. Isn’t life more than food and the body more than clothes? Look at the birds. They don’t plant, harvest, or gather the harvest into barns. Yet, your heavenly Father feeds them. Aren’t you worth more than they? Can any of you add a single hour to your life by worrying? And why worry about clothes? Notice how the flowers grow in the field. They never work or spin yarn for clothes. But I say that not even Solomon in all his majesty was dressed like one of these flowers. That’s the way God clothes the grass in the field. Today it’s alive, and tomorrow it’s thrown into an incinerator. So how much more will he clothe you people who have so little faith? Don’t ever worry and say, ‘What are we going to eat?’ or ‘What are we going to drink?’ or ‘What are we going to wear?’ Everyone is concerned about these things, and your heavenly Father certainly knows you need all of them. But first, be concerned about his kingdom and what has his approval. Then all these things will be provided for you. So don’t ever worry about tomorrow. After all, tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.^{Matt.6:25-34}

Faith—Forsaking All I Trust Him.

Questions

Define “faith”

Find some examples of faith in the Bible

What is the difference between doubt and unbelief?

Can we have doubts and still be a Believer?

How do we get faith?

How do we grow our faith?

Prayer of Victory

Divine Redeemer, Great was Your goodness in undertaking my redemption—in consenting to be made sin for me and in conquering all my foes. Great was Your strength in enduring the extremities of divine wrath and in taking away the load of my iniquities. Great was Your love in manifesting Yourself alive and in showing Your sacred wounds—that every fear might vanish and every doubt be removed. Great was Your mercy in ascending to heaven, in being crowned and enthroned; there to intercede for me; there to help me in temptation; there to open the eternal Book; there to receive me finally to Yourself. Great was Your wisdom in devising this means of salvation—bathe my soul in rich consolations of Your resurrection life. Great was Your grace in commanding me to come hand in hand with You to the Father; to be knit to Him eternally; to discover in Him my rest; to find in Him my peace; to behold His glory; to honour Him who is alone worthy. You gave the Spirit as Teacher, Guide and Power, that I may live—repenting of sin, conquering temptations and finding victory in life. When You are present all blessings are mine.

Sunday 9th January 2022. Ps.132:1-9 Lk.3

A voice cries out in the desert: Prepare the way for the Lord! Make his paths straight! Every valley will be filled. Every mountain and hill will be levelled. The crooked ways will be made straight. The rough roads will be made smooth. All people will see the salvation that God gives.^{Lk.3:4-6}

Following our theme for this month on Faith, we are looking again at what it really means to believe God. Jesus said that with faith, we could speak to mountains and see them removed: *Truly I tell you, if you have faith and do not doubt, not only can you do what was done to the fig tree, but also you can say to this mountain, 'Go, throw yourself into the sea,' and it will be done. If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer.*^{Matt.21:21-22}

A reasonable explanation of Jesus' statement is that we can remove any obstacle between us and God by speaking to it. And because Jesus linked the mountains with the fig tree, He especially meant we could remove any religious obstacles that hinder our relationship with God. Fig leaves represent man's attempt to cover himself before God—a religion of trying instead of trusting. When Adam became aware of his nakedness before God, he tried to cover himself with fig leaves: *Then both of them knew things they had never known before. They realized they were naked. So they sewed fig leaves together and made clothes for themselves. Then the man and his wife heard the LORD God walking in the garden. It was the coolest time of the day. They hid from the LORD God among the trees of the garden. But the LORD God called out to the man. "Where are you?" he asked. "I heard you in the garden," the man answered. "I was afraid. I was naked, so I hid."*^{Gen.3:7-10}

But the fig leaves didn't work—Adam knew he was naked before God and was afraid! The only covering that will remove the fear of being in the presence of a holy God is the covering that God Himself provides: *The LORD God made clothes from animal skins for the man and his wife and dressed them.*^{Gen.3:21}

The covering God gave Adam and Eve was from a dead animal and illustrated the covering that would be given us from Jesus' death. *I delight greatly in the LORD; my soul rejoices in my God. For he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of his righteousness.*^{Is.61:10} *So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.*^{Gal.3:26-27} *The Lamb who was slain from the creation of the world.*^{Rev.13:8}

But because God's covering for Adam and Eve was only an illustration (a type) of the covering that would come with the New Covenant, that didn't actually deal with the real problem—either to deal with God's justice for their sin or to salve their guilty conscience—and so Adam and Eve were expelled from God's presence: *Then the LORD God said, "The man has become like one of us, since he knows good and evil. He must not reach out and take the fruit from the tree of life and eat. Then he would live forever." So the LORD God sent the man out of the Garden of Eden to*

farm the ground from which the man had been formed. After he sent the man out, God placed angels and a flaming sword that turned in all directions east of the Garden of Eden. He placed them there to guard the way to the tree of life.^{Gen.3:22-24} Thousands of years later, when Jesus cursed the fig tree, He was declaring that man's attempt at covering himself before God was ended: *The next day, when they left Bethany, Jesus became hungry. In the distance he saw a fig tree with leaves. He went to see if he could find any figs on it. When he came to it, he found nothing but leaves because it wasn't the season for figs. Then he said to the tree, "No one will ever eat fruit from you again!" His disciples heard this.*^{Mk.11:12-14} After Jesus cursed the fig tree, He went into the Temple and drove out those who were providing the trappings of the Temple worship—the Hebrew money and the animals for sacrifices. On reaching Jerusalem, Jesus entered the temple courts and began driving out those who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves, and would not allow anyone to carry merchandise through the temple courts. And as he taught them, he said, "Is it not written: 'My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations'? But you have made it 'a den of robbers.'"^{Mk.11:15-17} Thirty years previously Mary and Joseph had bought doves from these same people! Then it was time for their purification offering, as required by the law of Moses after the birth of a child; so his parents took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord. The law of the Lord says, "If a woman's first child is a boy, he must be dedicated to the LORD." So they offered the sacrifice required in the law of the Lord—"either a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons."^{Lk.2:22-24}

But Jesus was demonstrating that the New Covenant had come and so the Old Covenant was finished! From now on, ritualist religion has no place in true worship—we must now worship God in Spirit and in Truth: *Jesus replied, "Believe me, dear woman, the time is coming when it will no longer matter whether you worship the Father on this mountain or in Jerusalem. You Samaritans know very little about the one you worship, while we Jews know all about him, for salvation comes through the Jews. But the time is coming—indeed it's here now—when true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth. The Father is looking for those who will worship him that way. For God is Spirit, so those who worship him must worship in spirit and in truth."* The woman said, "I know the Messiah is coming—the one who is called Christ. When he comes, he will explain everything to us." Then Jesus told her, "I AM the Messiah!"^{Jn.4:21-26}

When John the Baptist was born, his father Zechariah, prophesied that his new born son would later tell people how to find salvation through forgiveness of their sins. *We have been rescued from our enemies so we can serve God without fear, in holiness and righteousness for as long as we live. And you, my little son, will be called the prophet of the Most High, because you will prepare the way for the Lord. You will tell his people how to find salvation through forgiveness of their sins. Because of God's tender mercy, the morning light from heaven is about to break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death and to guide us to the path of peace.*^{Lk.1:74-79} This was fulfilled about 30 years later when John started to preach: *John travelled throughout the region around the Jordan River. He told people about a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. As the prophet Isaiah wrote in his book, "A voice cries out in the desert: Prepare the way for the Lord! Make his paths straight! Every valley will be filled. Every mountain and hill will be levelled. The crooked ways will be made straight. The rough roads will be made smooth. All people will see the salvation that God gives."* Crowds of people were coming to be baptized by John. He would say to them, "You poisonous snakes! Who showed you how to flee from God's coming anger? Do those things that prove that you have turned to God and have changed the way you think and act... People's hopes were rising as they all wondered whether John was the Messiah. John replied to all of them, "I baptize you with water. But the one who is more powerful than I is coming. I am not worthy to untie his sandal straps. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing shovel is in his hand to clean up his threshing floor. He will gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn the husks in a fire that can never be put out." With many other encouraging words, he told the Good News to the people.^{Lk.3:3-18} As John declared Jesus to be the Lamb of God, he was removing the obstacles between people and God: *John saw Jesus coming toward him the next day and said, "Look! This is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. He is the one I spoke about*

when I said, 'A man who comes after me was before me because he existed before I did.' I didn't know who he was. However, I came to baptize with water to show him to the people of Israel." John said, "I saw the Spirit come down as a dove from heaven and stay on him. I didn't know who he was. But God, who sent me to baptize with water, had told me, 'When you see the Spirit come down and stay on someone, you'll know that person is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.' I have seen this and have declared that this is the Son of God."^{John 1:29-}

³⁴ As we acknowledge Jesus Christ to be the Son of God, we too can remove obstacles between us and God. That is what faith is—acknowledging Jesus to be God and placing our trust in Him: *Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand.*^{Rom. 5:1-2} When we trust God with a simple, uncomplicated, yet credible faith, we have direct access to Him—with no blockages and no obstacles: *Truly I tell you, if you have faith and do not doubt, not only can you do what was done to the fig tree, but also you can say to this mountain, 'Go, throw yourself into the sea,' and it will be done. If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer.*^{Matt. 21:21-22} *Because of Christ and our faith in him, we can now come boldly and confidently into God's presence.*^{Eph. 3:12} *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} *Brothers and sisters, we are not afraid to enter the Most Holy Room. We enter boldly because of the blood of Jesus. His way is new because he lives. It has been opened for us through the curtain. I'm talking about his body. We also have a great priest over the house of God. 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. Our bodies have been washed with pure water. Let us hold firmly to the hope we claim to have. The One who promised is faithful.*^{Heb. 10:19-23} Sometimes our circumstances don't seem to change—no matter how much we are trusting God. But even if the obstacles remain, they are not obstacles to God—and He will enable us to overcome them! *'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. 8:36-39} *There might not be any sheep in the pens. There might not be any cattle in the barns. But I will still be glad because of what the LORD has done. God my Saviour fills me with joy. The LORD and King gives me strength. He makes my feet like the feet of a deer. He helps me walk on the highest places.*^{Hab. 3:17-19} When divine strength comes, human weakness is irrelevant! *Three different times I begged the Lord to take it away. Each time he said, "My grace is all you need. My power works best in weakness."* So now I am glad to boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ can work through me. *That's why I take pleasure in my weaknesses, and in the insults, hardships, persecutions, and troubles that I suffer for Christ. For when I am weak, then I am strong.*^{2Cor. 12:8-10} No wonder John exhorted people to be part of the New Covenant: *And with many other words John exhorted the people and proclaimed the good news to them.*^{Luke 3:18}

The New Covenant is a covenant of the Holy Spirit: *We are confident of all this because of our great trust in God through Christ. It is not that we think we are qualified to do anything on our own. Our qualification comes from God. He has enabled us to be ministers of his new covenant. This is a covenant not of written laws, but of the Spirit. The old written covenant ends in death; but under the new covenant, the Spirit gives life.*^{2Cor. 3:4-}

⁶ And the Holy Spirit is often linked with wine as an illustration or a type of the New Covenant: *Don't be drunk with wine, because that will ruin your life. Instead, be filled with the Holy Spirit.*^{Eph. 5:18} *The LORD, who scattered his people, will gather them and watch over them as a shepherd does his flock. For the LORD has redeemed Israel from those too strong for them. They will come home and sing songs of joy on the heights of Jerusalem. They will be radiant because of the LORD's good gifts—the abundant crops of grain, new wine, and olive oil, and the healthy flocks and herds. Their life will be like a watered garden, and all their sorrows will be gone.*^{Jer. 31:10-12} The Holy Spirit and the new Covenant are likened to new wine in a

new wineskins but sadly, people often prefer the old to the new—even though it doesn't work! *Then Jesus gave them an example. He said, 'People don't tear a patch from new clothes and sew it on old clothes. If they do, they will tear the new clothes. Also, the patch from the new clothes will not match the old clothes. People don't pour new wine into old wineskins. If they do, the new wine will burst the skins. The wine will run out, and the wineskins will be destroyed. No, new wine must be poured into new wineskins. After people drink old wine, they don't want the new. They say, 'The old wine is better.'*"^{Lk. 5:36-39}

Although we have no need for the religious rituals of the old Covenant—such as a human priest, elaborate clothes, special festivals and animal sacrifices—we do need Jesus who is our true Priest: *Jesus has been given a priestly work that is superior to the Levitical priests' work. He also brings a better promise from God that is based on better guarantees. If nothing had been wrong with the first promise, no one would look for another one.*^{Heb. 8:6-7} And we also need a living relationship with Jesus: *Jesus is 'the stone you builders rejected, which has become the cornerstone.' Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved.*^{Acts. 4:11-12} *This one who is life itself was revealed to us, and we have seen him. And now we testify and proclaim to you that he is the one who is eternal life. He was with the Father, and then he was revealed to us. We proclaim to you what we ourselves have actually seen and heard so that you may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. We are writing these things so that you may fully share our joy.*^{1Jn. 1:2-4}

So, like John, let's keep our message simple as we facilitate access to God by removing the obstacles between people and God and then we shall see the salvation that God gives: *Prepare the way for the Lord! Make his paths straight! Every valley will be filled. Every mountain and hill will be levelled. The crooked ways will be made straight. The rough roads will be made smooth. All people will see the salvation that God gives.*^{Lk. 3:4-6}

Questions:

What you think Jesus meant by this: Truly I tell you, if you have faith and do not doubt, not only can you do what was done to the fig tree, but also you can say to this mountain, 'Go, throw yourself into the sea,' and it will be done. If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer. Matt. 21:21-22

What is true religion?

Is there a place for Old Covenant rituals in true religion?

Is there a place for any rituals in true religion? (i.e. clerical garments, incense, crucifixes and crosses, etc.)

What sort of obstacles do you think you can remove by speaking to them?

Should we remove obstacles or rituals in other ways that speaking to them?

Are names important? (i.e. "priest" or "pastor"; "altar" or "table"; "sacraments" or "ordinances")

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, my Director and my 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.

Sunday 16th January. Ps.132:10-18 Lk.4

Three Scriptures that saved Jesus from satan's snares.

Jesus always successfully resisted the devil and obviously the 3 wilderness temptations were not the only tests Jesus faced. Jesus' previous 30 years life in Nazareth had presented Him with every kind of temptation, but these wilderness trials set the scene for Jesus' public declaration of His purpose and His holiness. Jesus' resolution and determination to remain sinless eventually brought Him to Calvary where for the first time a Man overcame the world and the devil—as well as the weaknesses and fears of human existence. The reason Jesus became human was to save us human beings: *Because God's children are human beings—made of flesh and blood—the Son also became flesh and blood. For only as a human being could he die, and only by dying could he break the power of the devil, who had the power of death. Only in this way could he set free all who have lived their lives as slaves to the fear of dying.*^{Heb.2:14-15}

And in becoming human, Jesus was subject to the same troubles and testing that we are—yet never sinned. And because of His submission to His Father, Jesus refused to let any trouble dominate Him and so He overcame every temptation. *This High Priest of ours understands our weaknesses, for he faced all of the same testings we do, yet he did not sin. So let us come boldly to the throne of our gracious God. There we will receive his mercy, and we will find grace to help us when we need it most.*^{Heb.4:15-16} When Jesus did the groundwork for us to build upon, He guaranteed our future. And so, when we are exposed to temptations, we can prove that, in Christ's love, we can face the world, the flesh and the devil—and overcome them; then by faith, we can live victorious lives! *Dear friends, don't be surprised by the painful suffering you are going through. Don't feel as if something strange were happening to you. Be joyful that you are taking part in Christ's sufferings. Then you will be filled with joy when Christ returns in glory.*^{1Pet.4:12-13}

The Word of God is described as a “sword”: *Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints.*^{Eph.5:17-18} And this “sword” of God's Word is very sharp: *I turned around to see the voice that was speaking to me. And when I turned, I saw... someone like a son of man... his voice was like the sound of rushing waters... and coming out of his mouth was a sharp, double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance. When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. Then he placed 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, and now look, I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades.”*^{Rev.1:12-18}

The Word of God is able to divide between our thoughts and God's thoughts, our desires and God's desires: *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.*^{Heb.4:12-13}

Jesus defeated satan's temptation by using the spiritual sword of the Word of God: *The devil said... Jesus answered him, “Scripture says...”*^{Lk.4:3-4}

Because Jesus became a human like us, we can be confident that what worked for Jesus, will work for us—with God's Word dwelling within us, we can be overcomers too: *I write to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God lives in you, and you have overcome the evil one.*^{1Jn.2:14} *He made my mouth like a sharpened sword, in the shadow of his hand he hid me; he made me into a polished arrow and concealed me in his quiver. He said to me, “You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will display my splendour.”*^{Is.49:2-3}

The three Scriptures that saved Jesus from satan's snares are: 1) 'Man shall not live on bread alone.' 2) 'Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.' 3) 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'

Scripture is not a formula that we can recite like a magic spell—that would make Christianity a superstitious fantasy. The cliché “*name it and claim it*” may sound slick but it is not Christian. Reciting God’s Word is not a means to get what we want in life but speaking God’s Word is a means to gaining faith because: *faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ.*^{Rom.10:17} But if God hasn’t said something, then it’s irrelevant what we say! And no amount of reciting, “*confessing*”, or even “*believing*” will change God’s mind because His Word is forever settled in heaven—and God does not change His mind. *Forever, O LORD, your word is firmly fixed in the heavens. Your faithfulness endures to all generations; you have established the earth, and it stands fast.*^{Psa.119:89-90} Although we believe the Bible to be the Word of God (that it is the written record of what God has spoken to us), we must still believe it (have faith), for it to be of any spiritual value to us. *The Father who sent me has himself given witness about me. You have never heard his voice. You have never seen what he really looks like. And his word does not live in you. This is because you do not believe the One he sent. You study the Scriptures carefully. You study them because you think they will give you eternal life. The Scriptures you study give witness about me. But you refuse to come to me and receive life.*^{Jn.5:37-40} And so it is essential that we are “*Bible literate*” and know what the Bible really says and how to apply it. To expect God to fall in line with what we say by just quoting Scripture at Him is pure presumption. *But Moses said, ‘Why aren’t you obeying the LORD’s command? You won’t succeed. So don’t go up. The LORD isn’t with you. Your enemies will win the battle over you. The Amalekites and Canaanites will meet you on the field of battle. You have turned away from the LORD. So he won’t be with you. And you will be killed with swords.’ But they wouldn’t listen. They still went up toward the high hill country. They went up even though Moses didn’t move from the camp. They went even though the ark of the LORD’s covenant didn’t move from the camp. Then the Amalekites and Canaanites who lived in that hill country came down. They attacked the people of Israel. They won the battle over them. They chased them all the way to Hormah.*^{Nu.14:41-45} Faith is not speaking positive words over negative circumstances—faith is not even quoting Scripture verses! But by using Scripture as God intended us to understand them, we can build their truths into our life and consciousness in dependence on the Holy Spirit. Faith enables us to trust God, to enjoy Him and stay in fellowship with Him even when we are sick and everything seems to be going wrong. Faith won’t make things easy but it will make them possible!

The 1st Scripture that Jesus used to save Him from satan’s snare was: *Jesus answered, ‘It is written: ‘Man shall not live on bread alone.’*^{1Lk.4:4} There is a spiritual dimension to life and this spiritual life is more important than the physical life that we can experience with our 5 senses. If we don’t feed our spirit, we will have no spiritual strength *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} *Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you—unless, of course, you fail the test?*^{2Cor.13:5} *If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all.*^{Is.7:9} If we want to live well, we must look after our spiritual life: *Dear friend, I pray that you may enjoy good health and that all may go well with you, even as your soul is getting along well.*^{3Jn.1:2} However, if our faith does fail, we have a Saviour who is praying for us. *Simon, Simon, satan has asked to sift all of 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.*^{1Lk.22:31-32} And if we sin, we have a Saviour who is interceding for us: *My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.*^{1Jn.2:1-2} ² *Christ Jesus who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.*^{Rom.8:34}

The 2nd Scripture that Jesus used to save Him from satan’s snare was: *Jesus answered ‘It is written: ‘Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.’*^{1Lk.4:8} Worship is our priority but it is essential that we worship only God—and that we worship God in spirit and in truth: *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. [Those who worship him must do it out of their very being, their spirits, their true selves, in adoration.]^{John 4:23-24} We cannot truly worship God when we are believing wrong things about Him. That is why we should strive to know as much about God as we can—and the Bible is our only point of reference for spiritual matters. To worship God is the greatest attainment we can achieve! “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?” Jesus replied: “ ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment.”^{Matt. 22:36-38}

The 3rd Scripture that Jesus used to save Him from Satan’s snare was: Jesus answered, “It is written: ‘**Do not put the Lord your God to the test.**’”^{Lev. 24:12} Although we can trust God’s Word completely, it is more than presumption to try to back God in a corner by quoting Scripture—that is opposing God, which is sin! God can’t be manipulated into performing for us or even to answering prayer. *Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not think you can say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham.*^{Matt. 3:8-9} Religion (even Christian religion) can be a false hope. Ritual without relationship is anathema to God. Going to Church, saying prayers, giving to the poor are all commendable activities but by themselves they don’t impress God. Here is what God said to Jeremiah about people who thought they were alright by just going to church: *A message came to me from the LORD. He said: Stand at the gate of my house. Announce my message to the people there. Say, “Listen to the LORD’s message, all of you people of Judah. You always come through these gates to worship the LORD. The God of Israel is speaking to you. He is the LORD who rules over all. He says, ‘Change the way you live and act. Then I will let you live in this place. Do not trust in lies. Do not say, ‘This is the temple of the LORD! This is the temple of the LORD! This is the temple of the LORD!’ You must really change the way you live and act. Treat each other fairly. Do not treat outsiders or widows badly in this place. Do not take advantage of children whose fathers have died. Do not kill those who are not guilty of doing anything wrong. Do not worship other gods. That will only bring harm to you. But look! You are trusting in worthless lies. “You continue to steal and commit murder. You commit adultery and tell lies. You burn incense to Baal. You worship other gods you have not known anything about before. Then you come and stand in front of me. You keep coming to this house where I have put my Name. You say, ‘We are safe.’ You think you are safe when you do so many things I hate. My Name is in this house. But you have made it a den for robbers! I have been watching you!” announces the LORD... Jeremiah, do not pray for those people. Do not make any appeal or request for them. Do not beg me. I will not listen to you. Don’t you see what they are doing? They are worshiping other gods in the towns of Judah. They are offering sacrifices to them in the streets of Jerusalem. The children go out and gather wood. The fathers light the fire. The women mix the dough. They make flat cakes of bread for the goddess who is called the Queen of Heaven. They pour out drink offerings to other gods. That makes me very angry. But am I the one they are hurting? Aren’t they only harming themselves? They should be ashamed of it.*^{Jer. 7:1-19} God will not respond to any attempt to manipulate Him, even by saying prayers—but God does respond to faith. *Just then a woman who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years came up behind him and touched the edge of his cloak. She said to herself, “If I only touch his cloak, I will be healed.” Jesus turned and saw her. “Take heart, daughter,” he said, “your faith has healed you.” And the woman was healed from that moment.*^{Matt. 9:20-22} *The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.*^{Jas. 5:16} *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}

In the New Covenant, God forgives our sin, writes His law on our heart and gives us the desire to be faithful: *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.^{Heb.8:9-12} The Holy Spirit enables and empowers us to serve God with the same character as God—love: *See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!*^{1Jn.3:1} Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.^{1Jn.4:11} God has made us finite mortals capable of sin, to prove that even under the greatest pressures, love conquers and that we have victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. That is the destiny of the redeemed—we overcome and become Christ's spotless Bride: *Christ loved the church. He gave himself up for her. He did it to make her holy. He made her clean by washing her with water and the word. He did it to bring her to himself as a brightly shining church. He wants a church that has no stain or wrinkle or any other flaw. He wants a church that is holy and without blame.*^{Eph.5:25-27} When Jesus returns (or if we join Him first), our days of temptation and testing will be over—there will be no more pressures of the world, flesh or devil, but the power of His love will purify the Church utterly. Having conquered on earth, no temptation will ever reach us. So let's follow Jesus' example and defeat every snare of the enemy by having God's Word in our heart and on our lips and then like Jesus we will return *in the power of the Spirit.*^{Lk.4:14}

Three Scriptures that saved Jesus from satan's snare

Questions

Why did Jesus become a human being?

What can the "Sword of the Spirit" do?

How do we use the "Sword of the Spirit"?

Is there a difference between quoting Scripture and confessing Scripture?

How is Scripture our spiritual food?

Is it possible to try to worship God but not serve Him?

Why shouldn't we put God to the test?

A Convert's First Prayer

My Father, unless You had first loved me, I could never have sought my happiness in Your love. 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, I have restraining power and I have renewing grace. It is by Your Spirit that I call You Father, that I believe in You and that I 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 enjoy constant fellowship with Him. By Your Spirit may I daily live to You, may I daily rejoice in Your love, may I daily find it the same to me as to Your Son and may I 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.

Sunday 23rd January. Ps.133 Lk.5

Never give up! *Master, we've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything. But because you say so, I will...*^{Lk.5:5}

When was the last time we actually led someone to the Lord or even met a brand-new Christian? It seems so easy to share the Gospel **and** see people respond in other countries—we hear what is happening in the Philippines, Turkey and even Ukraine and ask: *Why not here?* The video series “Encounters” by Douglas Mowat, that we are watching each week, reminds us how dramatic conversion really is as we hear how people have turned to God and have had their lives completely turned around—it encourages us to pray: *Lord, do it here, do it here!* Although it could be easy to get despondent and say: “*we’ve tried everything but caught nothing*,” this morning’s text encourages us to make the same response as Jesus’ Disciples: *Master, we've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything. But because you say so, I will...*^{Lk.5:5} The last thing Jesus said before He went back to His Father was: *Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned. And these signs will accompany those who believe: In my name they will drive out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up snakes with their hands; and when they drink deadly poison, it will not hurt them at all; they will place their hands on sick people, and they will get well.*^{Mk.16:15-18}

Because Jesus has told us to go into all the world and preach the Gospel, we must keep doing it—it’s called “obedience”! “Preaching” is not an optional extra for us but a commission to go in Jesus’ authority: *All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me, so you must go.*^{Matt.28:18} However, preaching is not restricted to the pulpit—and neither is preaching restricted to words. Francis of Assisi wrote: *But as for me, I desire this privilege from the Lord, that never may I have any privilege from man, except to do reverence to all, and to convert the world by obedience to the Holy Rule—rather by example than by word.* (The Little Flowers of St. Francis: Chapter 50) In other words, what we say will be either validated or invalidated by how we live. That’s why at the beginning of Covid, we said that we were determined to come through this pandemic with a good conscience and a good testimony. Peter puts it this way: *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.*^{2Pet.2:13-17}

If we are not going to lose heart we must stay encouraged and the best way to stay encouraged is read the Bible and see how God helped others: *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} But just reading the Bible stories and feeling encouraged isn’t enough—we must share our encouragement with others: *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.15:5-6} *All praise to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is our merciful Father and the source of all comfort. He comforts us in all our troubles so that we can comfort others. When they are troubled, we will be able to give them the same comfort God has given us.*^{2Cor.1:3-4} When we share what we believe about God, others are blessed and God is glorified (honoured): *It is written: “I believed; therefore I have spoken.” With that same spirit of faith we also believe and therefore speak, because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you in his presence. All this is for your benefit, so that the grace that is reaching more and more people may cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God.*^{2Cor.4:13-15}

Of course, we all want to see a harvest of righteousness, both in our own life and also in the lives of others, but we must never change the Gospel message in order to make it more

acceptable to those who are not yet Christians. Years ago, when milk was sold by the jugful out of a milk-churn, some unscrupulous vendors used to add water so they got a bigger profit. Nowadays, milk has to be tested and graded according to the butter-fat before it is sealed and sale to prevent this happening. Even in Paul's time, some preachers "*watered-down*" their message by giving half-truths about God so they could reap a bigger "*profit*"—they hoped more people would buy into the Gospel and then they would appear more successful. *But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him. For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life. And who is equal to such a task? Unlike so many, we do not peddle the word of God for profit. On the contrary, in Christ we speak before God with sincerity, like men sent from God. [No—but at least we don't take God's Word, water it down, and then take it to the streets to sell it cheap. We stand in Christ's presence when we speak; God looks us in the face. We get what we say straight from God and say it as honestly as we can.]*^{2Cor.2:14-17} But if we don't present the whole Gospel to others, we are presenting a different Gospel which is a false hope, especially in times of trouble. *I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned! As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned!*^{Gal.1:6-9} If we preach a different Gospel than the one the Apostles preached, we are charlatans and will be held accountable by God.

Even when the whole Gospel is preached, some fall away—but some will be saved!!! *But everyone who hears my words and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man. He builds his house on sand. The rain comes down. The water rises. The winds blow and beat against that house. And it falls with a loud crash.*^{Matt.7:26-27} *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. Listen! Here is the meaning of the story of the farmer. 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.13:16-23}

Our Bible reading today encourages to do what Jesus has told us to do—regardless of any previous results. *Master, we've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything. But because you say so, I will...*^{Lk.5:5} And actually, in God's Kingdom, it really doesn't matter who sows and who reaps. What is important though, is that we each work in God's harvest field and then we can all rejoice in the harvest: *Jesus told them, "My food is to do what the one who sent me wants me to do and to finish the work he has given me. Don't you say, 'In four more months the harvest will be here'? I'm telling you to look and see that the fields are ready to be harvested. The person who harvests the crop is already getting paid. He is gathering grain for eternal life. So the person who plants the grain and the person who harvests it are happy together. In this respect the saying is true: 'One person plants, and another person harvests.' I have sent you to harvest a crop you have not worked for. Other people have done the hard work, and you have followed them in their work."*^{Jn.4:34-38} Competition in God's Kingdom demonstrates immaturity which leads to division and disunity. *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. I had to feed you with milk, not with solid food, because you weren't ready for anything stronger. And you still aren't ready, for you are still controlled by your sinful nature. You are jealous of one another and quarrel with each other. Doesn't that prove you are controlled by your sinful nature? Aren't you living like people of the world? When one of you says, "I am a follower of Paul," and another says, "I follow Apollos," aren't you acting just like people of the world? After all, who is Apollos? Who is Paul? We are only God's servants through whom you believed the Good News. Each of us did the work the Lord gave us. I planted the seed in your hearts, and Apollos watered it, but it was God who made it grow. It's not important who does the planting, or who does the watering. What's important is that God makes the seed grow. The one who plants and the one who waters work together with the same purpose. And both will be rewarded for their own hard work. For we are both God's workers. And you are God's field. You are God's building. Because of God's grace to me, I have laid the foundation like an expert builder. Now others are building on it. But whoever is building on this foundation must be very careful. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one we already have—Jesus Christ. Anyone who builds on that foundation may use a variety of materials—gold, silver, jewels, wood, hay, or straw. But on the judgment day, fire will reveal what kind of work each builder has done. The fire will show if a person's work has any value. If the work survives, that builder will receive a reward. But if the work is burned up, the builder will suffer great loss. The builder will be saved, but like someone barely escaping through a wall of flames. ^{1Cor.3:1-15}

If we all want to honour Jesus as our Head, our Lord and our Saviour, we will not let our differences divide us but allow them to strengthen us. We can be different without being divisive because our unity is a spiritual unity that comes from sharing the same Heavenly Father, the same Saviour and the same Holy Spirit. *May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.* ^{Jn.17:23} *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.15:5-6}

Of course, we are not there yet and the ministry gifts of the Holy Spirit in the Church are to bring us to that place of unity and maturity: *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.4:12-1}

Our difficulty is deciding who is a real brother in Christ and who is a false brother—who is a true Christian and who is a fake christian. *I hear that when you come together as a church, there are divisions among you, and to some extent I believe it. No doubt there have to be differences among you to show which of you have God's approval.* ^{1Cor.11:18-19} We have try to answer questions such as: Can someone

be a Christian and not believe in the basic doctrines of the Church including the Trinity; the physical death and resurrection of Jesus; the vicarious death of Jesus; the physical return of Jesus; the final Judgement; *etc.* (c.f. the Apostolic and Nicene Creeds)? Or, can someone live an unholy life and be a real Christian? The answer to these questions is “Yes, probably! But would you want to learn from them or be associated with them! *Do not be misled: “Bad company corrupts good character.”* ^{1Cor.15:33} And however much we wish to avoid confrontation, these are the issues that we have to resolve. But when we are in fellowship with God, His Word and His people, it is easy to work together in the Kingdom without any sense of competition. *We sent Timothy, who is our brother and co-worker in God's service in spreading the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you in your faith, so that no one would be unsettled by these trials.* ^{1Thess.3:2-3} *Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness. You will be enriched in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God.* ^{2Cor.9:10-11}

We should always be looking beyond the physical and into the spiritual—but this is especially important when we face difficulties and start to feel like giving up. *Since you were brought back to life*

with Christ, focus on the things that are above—where Christ holds the highest position. Keep your mind on things above, not on worldly things. ^{Col.3:1-2} By knowing what God has really said to us and also about us, we have a quiet and confident trust in Him to fulfil His Word. This is not just positive thinking—it is faith thinking. Scriptures such as: *Those who sow with tears will reap with songs of joy. Those who go out weeping, carrying seed to sow, will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with them.* ^{Ps.126:5-6} *But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.* ^{Jas.3:17-18}

So let's persevere and keep sowing God's Word in the confidence that Jesus has told us to do so—then like those Disciples we will see a great catch: *"Master, we've been fishing hard all night and haven't caught even a minnow. But if you say so, I'll let out the nets."* *It was no sooner said than done—a huge haul of fish, straining the nets past capacity. They waved to their partners in the other boat to come help them. They filled both boats, nearly swamping them with the catch.* ^{Lk.5:5-7}

Don't give up! *Master, we've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything. But because you say so, I will...* ^{Lk.5:5}

Questions

Why do we go through hard times?

Why is it important to do what God has told us to do?

Is it more important to say the right things or to do the right things?

How can we work with other Churches to build the Kingdom?

Is it ever right to distance yourself from other Churches?

How can we stay encouraged when all around us discouraging?

What does "perseverance" mean?

Prayer of 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, my shortcomings, my unbelief and my 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 or more contented—for Your unsearchable riches are mine. One moment of communion with You, 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.

Sunday 30th January. 10. Ps.134 Lk.6

What's your diet like? *Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.*^{Heb.5:13-14}

The saying “*an army marches on its stomach*” is attributed to Napoleon. During 1812 Napoleon invaded Russia. With resources depleted and supply lines overextended, Napoleon's weakened forces moved into Moscow, where they expected capitulation from the displaced Tsar Alexander I. Instead, they found themselves in a barren and desolate city with three quarters of Moscow burned to the ground as part of the Russian's “*scorched earth*” policy to prevent the French from accessing any food for the troops or fodder for the horses. With the Russian winter setting in, many of the troops were dying of hunger and cold. On the night of 8th November, the French lost nearly 10,000 men and their horses as they froze to death! This left Napoleon with no option but to retreat—he had started with over 400,000 frontline troops but returned with fewer than 40,000. In 1869, Leo Tolstoy was published his full edition of War and Peace which described the Napoleonic invasion of 1812 and in 1880 Tchaikovsky composed the 1812 Overture to commemorate the successful Russian defence against Napoleon's invading armies.

We too “*march on our stomach*” and our spiritual food will determine our spiritual stamina. When we were born physically, we needed milk and when we were born-again spiritually, we also needed milk—spiritual milk, which is the Word of God. *Therefore, rid yourselves of all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander of every kind. Like new-born babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, now that you have tasted that the Lord is good.*^{2Pet.2:1-3} As babies, we had to be fed by others and we fussed when we were hungry but as we grew up, we fed ourselves and then we were able to feed others too. When we were new Christians, we needed to be fed on the pure milk of the Word of God by others, but as we grew in our faith and began to mature, we were able to feed ourselves by reading the Bible and pondering on the spiritual application (it's called “*meditation*” or as we read in the Psalms, “*selah*”) and we should be able to feed others too. As we grow up, we ought to leave our childish ways and think like an adult. *When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me. For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known. And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.*^{1Cor.13:11-13} Although none of us would claim to have reached complete spiritual adulthood maturity, we should have left our childish ways of immaturity and be able to distinguish between right and wrong and make the right choices. *We have much to say about this, but it is hard to make it clear to you because you no longer try to understand. In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.*^{Heb.5:11-14}

As we develop from babes to adults, our diet changes from liquid to solids—from milk to meat. Greg Koukl explains that the difference between spiritual milk and spiritual meat is maturity—which is hearing the Word of God and also acting upon it (it's called “*obedience*”): *Brothers and sisters, I could not address you as people who live by the Spirit but as people who are still worldly—mere infants in Christ. I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready. You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarrelling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere humans?*^{21Cor.3:1-3} However, if we do make wrong choices, we are not disqualified and we should never give up. We can easily get back on track by changing our minds—this is called

repentance. Repentance literally means to change your mind and will bring us back to God and to salvation: *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.2:25-26} This is what the Sovereign LORD, the Holy One of Israel, says: *In repentance and rest is your salvation, in quietness and trust is your strength (but you would have none of it).*^{Is.30:15} Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death.^{2Cor.7:10} We can come back to God because we have a great Saviour who is also our Advocate: *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.2:1-2} When we put God's Word into practice—when we do what God says (which is obedience)—then we are building on a sound foundation and will be able to overcome the greatest difficulties and ride out the roughest storms of life: *Why do you call me, 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I say? As for everyone who comes to me and hears my words and puts them into practice, I will show you what they are like. They are like a man building a house, who dug down deep and laid the foundation on rock. When a flood came, the torrent struck that house but could not shake it, because it was well built. But the one who hears my words and does not put them into practice is like a man who built a house on the ground without a foundation. The moment the torrent struck that house, it collapsed and its destruction was complete.*^{Lk.6:46-49} Hearing and doing what God says, shows that was part of His family: *Jesus answered them, "My mother and my brothers are those who hear and do what God's word says."*^{Lk.8:21}

If you are spiritually hungry, then take heart because our spiritual food is free and freely available: *"Listen! Whoever is thirsty, come to the water! Whoever has no money can come, buy, and eat! Come, buy wine and milk. You don't have to pay; it's free! Why do you spend money on what cannot nourish you and your wages on what does not satisfy you? Listen carefully to me: Eat what is good, and enjoy the best foods. Open your ears, and come to me! Listen so that you may live! I will make an everlasting promise to you—the blessings I promised to David.*^{Is.55:1-3} *Taste and see that the LORD is good. Blessed is the person who takes refuge in him. Fear the LORD, you holy people who belong to him. Those who fear him are never in need. Young lions go hungry and may starve, but those who seek the LORD's help have all the good things they need.*^{Ps.34:8-10}

Jesus said that if we are spiritually hungry, we will be satisfied: *Looking at his disciples, he said: Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied.*^{Lk.6:20-21} True Believers will always have a hearty appetite for God's Word but they will never be spiritually starving because they (and that includes you and me) have God's Word in them already: *Jesus answered, "All who drink this water will be thirsty again. But anyone who drinks the water I give him will never be thirsty. In fact, the water I give him will become a spring of water in him. It will flow up into eternal life."*^{Jn.4:13-14} God awakens us each morning with a word that will sustain us and also those we meet: *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. [He makes me want to listen like a good student.]*^{Is.50:4-5} And even if we feel inadequate, we should remember that under the New Covenant, the least of us is greater than all of those who were under the Old Covenant: *I tell you, among those born of women there is no one greater than John; yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.*^{Lk.7:28}

So, what sort of spiritual diet do you have? Let's feed on the 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} And let's turn our milk into meat as we live out the Kingdom principles in our daily life: *Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.*^{Heb.5:13-14} Then we will become the mature Christians that we should be. We will be able to face any storm

that life can throw at us—and we will be overcomers too. And remember, overcomers eat the best of food: *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} *He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give him a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to him who receives it.*^{Rev.2:17}

What's your diet like? *Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.*^{Heb.5:13-14}

Questions

Why is the Word of God our spiritual food?

What is the difference between spiritual milk and spiritual meat?

How do we grow up (mature)?

How do we get up if we fall?

What is the food from the “*tree of life, which is in the paradise of God*” (Rev.2:7)?

What is the *hidden manna* (Rev.2:17)? from the “*tree of life, which is in the paradise of God*”?

Jesus' Return

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.

February

Thought for the Month: Our prayers can go where we cannot go—there are no borders, no prison walls and no doors that are closed to us when we pray. *Brother Andrew*

February's Theme: Goodness—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.” ^{Ex.33:19}

Sunday 6th February. Ps.134 Luke 7

God is always right—but He's not always fair! *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.* ^{Lk.7:29}

Our journey through life can often be interrupted with the unexpected and is rarely smooth for very long (although we can and should pray for a good journey through life—the Greek for “prosper” literally means a good journey: *Dear friend, I know that you are spiritually well. I pray that you're doing well in every other way and that you're healthy. [I pray that you may prosper in all things and be in health, just as your soul prospers.] I was very happy when some believers came and told us that you are living according to the truth. Nothing makes me happier than to hear that my children are living according to the truth.* ^{3Jn.1:2-4}). Although we can blame Adam and Eve because they introduced sin and its effects, we all add to that original sin problem—even after conversion! But whatever the cause of our difficulties or problems, we have a choice to either let them build us up or knock us down. Of course, our foundation will determine whether we stand or fall: *I will show you what everyone who comes to me, hears what I say, and obeys it is like. He is like a person who dug down to bedrock to lay the foundation of his home. When a flood came, the floodwaters pushed against that house. But the house couldn't be washed away because it had a good foundation. The person who hears «what I say» but doesn't obey it is like someone who built a house on the ground without any foundation. The floodwaters pushed against it, and that house quickly collapsed and was destroyed.* ^{Lk.6:47-49} But how we build and what we build with, will also determine whether we stand. *But each one should build carefully. No one can lay any other foundation than the one that has already been laid. That foundation is Jesus Christ. A person may build on it using gold, silver, jewels, wood, hay or straw. But each person's work will be shown for what it is. On judgment day it will be brought to light. It will be put through fire. The fire will test how good everyone's work is. If the building doesn't burn up, God will give the builder a reward for his work. If the building burns up, the builder will lose everything. The builder will be saved, but only like one escaping through the flames.* ^{1Cor.3:10-15} Paul explains that not everything is WYSIWYG (what you see is what you get)! God sees everything (as Adam and Eve discovered. Hagar had this revelation too: *She answered GOD by name, praying to the God who spoke to her, “You're the God who sees me!” “Yes! He saw me; and then I saw him!”* ^{Gen.16:13} Hidden wrongs and faulty work will catch up with us eventually—and if we wait until Judgement Day, it will be too late to do anything about it!!! That is why it is so important to trust God NOW and this is especially so for the youth: *Young man, be happy while you are still young. Let your heart be joyful while you are still strong. Do what your heart tells you to do. Go after what your eyes look at. But I want you to know that God will judge you for everything you do. So drive worry out of your heart. Get rid of all of your troubles. Being young and strong doesn't have any meaning. Remember the One who created you. Remember him while you are still young. Think about him before your times of trouble come. The years will come when you will say, “I don't find any pleasure in them.”* ^{Ecc.11:9-12:1} Although we don't know what the future holds, we do know who holds the future. *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} And we know that God will always do what is right. *Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?* ^{Gen.18:25} It was this confidence in God and His justice, that kept Job spiritually safe (and sane)—even though his life was falling apart: *After Job heard all of those reports, he got up and tore his robe. He shaved his head. Then he fell to the ground and*

worshiped the LORD. He said, "I was born naked and I'll leave here naked. You have given, and you have taken away. May your name be praised." In spite of everything, Job didn't sin by blaming God for doing anything wrong.^{Job.1:20-22} His wife said to him, "Are you still continuing to be faithful to the LORD? Speak evil things against him and die!" Job replied, "You are talking like a foolish woman. We accept good things from God. So we should also accept trouble when he sends it." In spite of everything, Job didn't say anything that was sinful.^{Job.2:9-10} And listen to what God said about Job: Then the LORD said to Satan, "Have you thought about my servant Job? There isn't anyone on earth like him. He is honest. He does what is right. He has respect for me and avoids evil. You tried to turn me against him. You wanted me to destroy him without any reason. But he still continues to be faithful."^{Job.2:3} David also had the same confidence in God: According to your love remember me, for you, LORD, are good. Good and upright is the LORD; therefore he instructs sinners in his ways.^{Ps.25:7-8} Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his love endures forever.^{1Chron.16:34} And James says the same things about God's character: My dear brothers and sisters, don't be fooled. Every good present and every perfect gift comes from above, from the Father who made the sun, moon, and stars. The Father doesn't change like the shifting shadows produced by the sun and the moon. God decided to give us life through the word of truth to make us his most important creatures.^{Jas.1:16-18}

Yes, God is perfectly just and righteous and His rule will never end: Your throne, O God, will last for ever and ever; a sceptre of justice will be the sceptre of your kingdom. You love righteousness and hate wickedness; therefore God, your God, has set you above your companions by anointing you with the oil of joy.^{Ps.45:6-7}

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this.^{Is.9:6-7} However, although God is just and righteous, He is not fair! God is not fair because He gives us what we don't deserve—and He doesn't give us what we do deserve! That's what Grace and Mercy is. God's Grace is His unmerited favour because He give us what we don't deserve—His love and acceptance. God's Mercy is His unmerited forgiveness—forgiveness that is full and free. But when the kindness and love of God our Saviour appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Saviour, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.^{Tit.3:4-7} 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}

When we became a Christian, we acknowledged that God's ways are right and yielded (submitted) to His authority—we confessed Jesus as Lord: "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."^{Rom.10:9-11} Luke explains that when we acknowledge that God is right, we should back up our faith with Baptism. Baptism during the period between John the Baptist's ministry and Jesus' Ascension was limited to repentance for the forgiveness of sins: All the people, even the tax collectors, when they heard Jesus' words, acknowledged that God's way was right, because they had been baptized by John. But the Pharisees and the experts in the law rejected God's purpose for themselves, because they had not been baptized by John.^{Lk.7:29-30} And so John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.^{Mk.1:4} But when Jesus returned to His Father in heaven, He sent the Holy Spirit to indwell and empower Believers. Since then, Believers' Baptism has been an acknowledgement of repentance **and** an acknowledgement of the Holy Spirit's presence **plus** an invitation for the Holy Spirit to flow out of the person. I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.^{Matt.3:11}

Paul said, "John's baptism was a baptism of repentance. He told the people to believe in the one coming after him, that is, in Jesus." On hearing this, they were baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus. When Paul placed his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied. There were about twelve men in all.^{Acts.19:4-7} 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 quoted from Isaiah (which John explains was a prophecy about the Holy Spirit) and He made it clear that under the New Covenant, we will never "run dry" or be empty of the Holy Spirit because He (the Holy Spirit) permanently dwells within every Believer: *Your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday. The LORD will guide you always; he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land and will strengthen your frame. You will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail.*^{Is.58:10-11}

Let's take encouragement from Scripture—and, like Job, never blame God for doing wrong; like David, keep declaring that God is good; like James, keep affirming that every good and perfect give comes from our heavenly Father; and like the Tax Collectors acknowledge that God's ways are right. Remember God's Grace and His Mercy—He gives us what we don't deserve and He doesn't give us what we do deserve. God doesn't change *I the LORD do not change.*^{Mal.3:6} Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.^{Heb.13:8} And God won't change His mind either: *God isn't a mere man. He can't lie. He isn't a human being. He doesn't change his mind. He speaks, and then he acts. He makes a promise, and then he keeps it.*^{Nu.23:19} So we can be confident that as New Covenant Believers, we have streams of living water flowing from within us and so we will never be thirsty again.

O Christ of God, rise up within me and cause me to triumph and walk in victory every moment of this day.

God is always right—but He's not always fair! *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.*^{Lk.7:29}

Questions

Find examples in the Bible where God did not appear to be fair.

Explain why God was right in those examples.

What foundation do we build our life on?

What are the good materials that we should use to build our life with?

What are the poor (combustible) materials that we should not use to build our life with?

What did Jesus mean when He quoted (from Isaiah 58:11): *streams of living water will flow from within him.*^{Jn.7:38}?

Jesus' Return

This corruptible shall put on incorruptible, this mortal shall put on immortality, this natural body shall put on a spiritual body, this dishonoured body shall put on a glorious body, this weak body shall put on a body of power. 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, for Your elect there is: peace and rest, life and service, employment and enjoyment. O God, keep me in this faith, and ever looking for Christ's return.

Sunday 13th February. Ps.136:1-9 Luke 8

What sort of Farmer are you? *The seed is the word of God... those with a noble and good heart, hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop.*^{Lk.8:11-15}

We usually think of the Word of God as the Bible but actually the Word of God is 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.*^{Jn.1:1-2} *I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True... on his head are many crowns. He has a name written on him that no one knows but he himself... his name is the Word of God... On his robe and on his thigh he has this name written: KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS.*^{Rev.19:11-16} Obviously, because Jesus is God, what He says is the Word of God too: *One day as Jesus was standing by the Lake of Gennesaret, the people were crowding around him and listening to the word of God.*^{Lk.5:1} And God still speaks to us today through Jesus: *In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son.*^{Heb.1:1-2} But we are not left to our own imagination to guess what God is saying to us through Jesus. Everything that God wants us to know about Him and about our salvation is recorded in the Scriptures. *For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope.*^{Rom.15:4} *The nations will worship the LORD. All of the kings on earth will respect his glorious power. The LORD will build Zion again. He will appear in his glory. He will answer the prayer of those who don't have anything. He won't say no to their cry for help. Let this be written down for those born after us. Then people who are not yet born can praise the LORD.*^{Ps.102:15-18} God inspired the Scriptures through the Holy Spirit prompting the human authors as they wrote: *The main thing to keep in mind here is that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of private opinion. And why? Because it's not something concocted in the human heart. Prophecy resulted when the Holy Spirit prompted men and women to speak God's Word.*^{2Pet.1:20-21} And so the Bible is exactly what God wants it to be—which is our hand-book for life: *We believe the Bible, as originally given, to be without error, the fully inspired and infallible Word of God and the supreme and final authority in all matters of faith and conduct* (ELIM Statement of Faith). Jesus is the Word of God incarnate not the Bible! It is the spirit of the words of the Bible that contain life, not the original words that were written by the authors of the Bible (which we don't have now anyway!). *Every word I've spoken to you is a Spirit-word, and so it is life-making.*^{Jn.6:63} *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. And so when the Scriptures are translated, God's life is not diminished or restricted.*^{Ps.119:129-130} And so when the Scriptures are translated, God's life is not diminished or restricted. *But God's word is not chained.*^{2Tim.2:9} *The word of God is living and active. It is sharper than any sword that has two edges. It cuts deep enough to separate soul from spirit. It can separate joints from bones. It judges the thoughts and purposes of the heart. Nothing God created is hidden from him. His eyes see everything. He will hold us accountable for everything we do.*^{Heb.4:12-13} Of course we should look for the true meaning of the Scriptures and use “exegesis” not “eisegesis”. **Exegesis** is the process of getting “out” (‘ex’) of the text what is truly there in the first place, whereas **eisegesis** is the process of putting “into” (‘eis’) the text something that wasn't intended by the author and is almost a “blank cheque” to make the Bible say whatever you want it to say! **The first principle of Bible interpretation (hermeneutics) is context** and we should always read the entire passage before interpreting a verse. **The second principle is consistency** and we should never interpret a text so that the interpretation contradicts the overall message of Scripture (and especially New Covenant doctrine). When we do this, the Scriptures will give us true wisdom for life, starting with eternal life: *From infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures. They have the power to give you wisdom so that you can be saved through faith in Christ Jesus. Every Scripture passage is inspired by God. All of them are useful for teaching, pointing out*

errors, correcting people, and training them for a life that has God's approval. They equip God's servants so that they are completely prepared to do good things.^{2Tim.3:15-17}

But for many people, the Scriptures are a closed book—they read the pages of the Bible, and they may even theologically understand the content of the passages they read, but it makes no difference to them because they refuse to come to Jesus. Spiritual life and spiritual help only come from Jesus Christ, the Son of God! *You study the Scriptures carefully. You study them because you think they will give you eternal life. The Scriptures you study give witness about me. But you refuse to come to me and receive life. [You have your heads in your Bibles constantly because you think you'll find eternal life there. But you miss the forest for the trees. These Scriptures are all about me! And here I am, standing right before you, and you aren't willing to receive from me the life you say you want.]*^{Jn.5:39-40} This is because the Scriptures are a spiritual book with a spiritual content that only those with the Holy Spirit can accept: *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} But when we are born-again, we are given the Holy Spirit (actually, it is the Holy Spirit who converts us, so we can't even be a Christian without the Holy Spirit). Jesus opened the Disciples' spiritual eyes to understand the Scriptures: *He said to them, "How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself... They asked each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?" ...Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, "This is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high."*^{Lk.24:25-49} And when Jesus returned to His Father in heaven, He sent the Holy Spirit to continue His ministry: *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.*^{Jn.14:16-17} So now the Holy Spirit opens our spiritual eyes so we can understand the Scriptures: *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} (Even before Jesus became a human, it was the Holy Spirit who gave people understanding: *However, there is in humans a Spirit, the breath of the Almighty, that gives them understanding.*^{Job.32:8})

Even though God challenges, convicts, converts, inspires and empowers us, we still have a responsibility to read the Word of God and apply it to our life: *Only be strong and very courageous, faithfully doing everything in the teachings that my servant Moses commanded you. Don't turn away from them. Then you will succeed wherever you go. Never stop reciting these teachings. You must think about them night and day so that you will faithfully do everything written in them. Only then will you prosper and succeed.*^{Josh.1:8-9}

We are responsible for how we build our life and we must build upon God's Word—the principles of God's Kingdom as recorded in the Bible. *Why do you call me, 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I say? As for everyone who comes to me and hears my words and puts them into practice, I will show you what they are like. They are like a man building a house, who dug down deep and laid the foundation on rock. When a flood came, the torrent struck that house but could not shake it, because it was well built.*^{Lk.6:46-48}

Another way of illustrating the way we build our lives is seed being sown in a field: *This is the meaning of the parable: The seed is the word of God. Those along the path are the ones who hear, and then the*

devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved. Those on the rock are the ones who receive the word with joy when they hear it, but they have no root. They believe for a while, but in the time of testing they fall away. The seed that fell among thorns stands for those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by life's worries, riches and pleasures, and they do not mature. But the seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop.^{Lk.8:11-15} Although God's Word is always good, safe and sound, the ground it is sown in, is not always good, safe and sound. Jesus' story is a warning for us to heed so that we keep a tidy garden! It is easy to apply the story to others but God is speaking to us personally through this story because He wants a good harvest from us. And it is to our own advantage that we produce a good harvest, because we then receive all the benefits of God's blessings: *The blessing of the LORD makes one rich and He adds no sorrow with it. [The blessing of the LORD brings wealth, without painful toil for it.]*^{Prov.10:22}

The paths represent hard hearts where it is easy for the devil to snatch away God's Word—just like a bird eating a seed. If we have a hard heart, the devil will put doubt into our minds—*did God really say...?* We need to keep our heart cultivated, open and receptive to God's Word and we do this staying in touch (fellowship) with God, His Word and His people.

The rocks represent shallow ground where people have no root. If we have no root we will not have any decent shoot and we certainly won't be able to withstand the storms of life: *So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness. See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the elemental spiritual forces of this world rather than on Christ.*^{Col.2:6-8}

The thorns represent immaturity. When we let natural cares dominate us or control us, they then choke us and prevent us from developing into mature believers. Worry is a vote of no confidence in God! *Then Jesus spoke to his disciples. He said: I tell you, do not worry. Don't worry about your life and what you will eat. And don't worry about your body and what you will wear. There is more to life than eating. There are more important things for the body than clothes... Don't spend time thinking about what you will eat or drink. Don't worry about it. People who are ungodly run after all of those things. Your Father knows that you need them. But put God's kingdom first. Then those other things will also be given to you. Little flock, do not be afraid. Your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom.*^{Lk.12:22-31}

But the good soil represents a noble and good heart—people who *seize the Word and hold on no matter what, sticking with it until there's a harvest.* Only mature plants produce fruit. *Our parents trained us for a little while. They did what they thought was best. But God trains us for our good. He wants us to share in his holiness. No training seems pleasant at the time. In fact, it seems painful. But later on it produces a harvest of godliness and peace. It does that for those who have been trained by it. [for it's the well-trained who find themselves mature in their relationship with God.]*^{Heb.13:10-11}

In all of these examples, the seed of God's Word is the same, but it is people's hearts that is different. Although God has a major part to play in peoples' response but every one of us has to choose what we do with God's Word. *Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it.*^{Lk.11:28} *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} *So then, each of us will give an account of ourselves to God.*^{Rom.14:12} *Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.*^{Heb.4:13} So what are you doing with God's Word?

What sort of Farmer are you? *The seed is the word of God... those with a noble and good heart, hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop.*^{Lk.8:11-15}

Questions

Why is Jesus called the Word of God?

What is the difference between “*exegesis*” and “*eisogesis*”?

How can we ensure we don’t “*put into*” Scripture what is not there?

Why is the Bible a closed book to so many people?

How can we make the Bible an open book?

In Jesus’ story of the sower, explain what the different types of soil are

- paths
- rocks
- thorns
- good soil

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 me a beginning but one day it will be perfected in the realm above. You have helped me to see and know Christ, to take Him, receive Him, to possess Him, love Him—and to bless Him in my thoughts, my words and my life. Let me study and stand for discipline and all the ways of worship. Out of love for Christ, help me to show my thankfulness, to seek and know Your will from love, to hold Your will in love, and to daily keep this state of thought.

Sunday 20th February. Ps.138 Lk.9:1-36

How much is enough? “*You give them something to eat.*” They answered, “*We have only...*” *Lk.9:13*

The Lottery has often been described as “*a tax on the poor*” because it stimulates the basic desire of getting rich without any work. Although life will always have struggles, for some it is a continual struggle and any way out of the struggle appears attractive—even if it is an impossible odds (like winning the lottery)! Only masochists enjoy a life of blood, toil, tears and sweat. But if blood, toil, tears and sweat is temporary and will lead to peace, tranquillity, comfort and rest, then it might be worth the struggle. (Winston Churchill used this phrase very effectively in his House of Commons speech a few days after taking up Office of Prime Minister; the Germans had the advantage and our troops were in retreat towards the coast where they would be evacuated at Dunkirk 10 days later.) To live in peace, tranquillity, comfort and rest is not only a natural desire but a Biblical principle: *Remember me, O LORD, when you show favour to your people, come to my aid when you save them, that I may enjoy the prosperity of your chosen ones, that I may share in the joy of your nation and join your inheritance in giving praise.*^{Ps.106:4-5} Moreover, *when God gives someone wealth and possessions, and the ability to enjoy them, to accept their lot and be happy in their toil—this is a gift of God. They seldom reflect on the days of their life, because God keeps them occupied with gladness of heart.*^{Ecd.5:19-20} This principle of enjoying life is captured in the *Westminster Shorter Catechism*. [The *WSC* consists of 107 questions about Christian Doctrine together with answers from Scripture—it was completed in 1647 by the Westminster Assembly and continues to serve as part of the doctrinal standards of many Presbyterian churches. During the Civil War, Parliament attempted to re-structure the Church of England and change it from Episcopalian (governed by bishops) to Presbyterian (governed by elected assemblies of elders). The Church in Scotland was already presbyterian and Parliament wanted to reform the English Church to ensure it moved even further away from its Roman Catholic roots. In 1645, the *Book of Common Prayer* was outlawed by Parliament and replaced by the *Directory of Public Worship*, which was more a

set of instructions than a prayer book and Cromwell used the Geneva Bible as the basis for his Soldiers' Bible rather than the Bible authorised by King James]:

Q. 1. What is the chief end of man?

A. Man's chief end is to glorify God, [a] and to enjoy him for ever. [b]

[a]. Ps.86:9; Is.60:21; Rom.11:36; 1Cor.6:20;10:31; Rev.4:11

[b]. Ps.16:5-11;144:15; Is.12:2; Lk.2:10; Phil.4:4; Rev.21:3-4

Q. 2. What rule hath God given to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy him?

A. The Word of God, which is contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, [a] is the only rule to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy him. [b]

[a]. Matt.19:4-5 with Gen.2:24; Lk.24:27,44; 1Cor.2:13;14:37; 2Pet.1:20-21;3:2,15-16

[b]. Deut.4:2; Ps.19:7-11; Is.8:20; Jn.15:11;20:30-31; Acts.17:11; 2Tim.3:15-17; 1Jn.1:4

But we are fools if we focus on enjoying life without abiding by God's principles: *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 [but is not rich in his relationship with God].*^{Lk.12:19-21} The Biblical principle for enjoying life is to be blessed by God: *Surely you have granted him unending blessings and made him glad with the joy of your presence.*^{Ps.21:6} And God's blessings are an overflow of His Presence because in God's presence there is complete joy, peace and protection: *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} *How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we have in the presence of our God because of you?*^{1Thess.3:9} The blessing of the LORD brings wealth, without painful toil for it. *A fool finds pleasure in wicked schemes, but a person of understanding delights in wisdom. What the wicked dread will overtake them; what the righteous desire will be granted. When the storm has swept by, the wicked are gone, but the righteous stand firm forever.*^{Prov.10:22-25} And so if we belong to Christ, His blessings belong to us! *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} However, although God has already blessed us with more blessings than we can handle, the overriding principle of enjoying life is that God will bless the work of our hands: *For the LORD your God will bless you in all your harvest and in all the work of your hands, and your joy will be complete.*^{Deut.16:15} But without discipline, we will squander God's resources and so we should live a disciplined life—a life where there is order, light and life. Order, light and life is the character of God and so where God is, there will be order, light and life. *In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was formless and empty, and darkness covered the deep waters. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the surface of the waters. Then God said, "Let there be light," and there was light.*^{Gen.1:1-3} And when God comes to live within us, He brings order, light and life to us: *For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ.*^{2Cor.4:6} *You, LORD, keep my lamp burning; my God turns my darkness into light.*^{Ps.18:28} If a person's life is chaos, dark and dead they need God's presence to turn their life around: *Jesus went and lived in Capernaum... to fulfil what was said through the prophet Isaiah: "Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali, the Way of the Sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—the people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned." From that time on Jesus began to preach, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."*^{Matt.4:13-17} [Note, living a life that is in chaos, darkness and death is not the same as going through a period of chaos, darkness and death—God has promised that if we do go through dark times, He will lead us and comfort us: *Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.*^{Ps.23:4}] A disciplined life honours God and Paul instructs the Church not to feed lazy people! Finally,

brothers and sisters, pray that we spread the Lord's word rapidly and that it will be honoured the way it was among you. Also pray that we may be rescued from worthless and evil people, since not everyone shares our faith. But the Lord is faithful and will strengthen you and protect you against the evil one. The Lord gives us confidence that you are doing and will continue to do what we ordered you to do. May the Lord direct your lives as you show God's love and Christ's endurance. Brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ we order you not to associate with any believer who doesn't live a disciplined life and doesn't follow the tradition you received from us. You know what you must do to imitate us. We lived a disciplined life among you. We didn't eat anyone's food without paying for it. Instead, we worked hard and struggled night and day in order not to be a burden to any of you. It's not as though we didn't have a right to receive support. Rather, we wanted to set an example for you to follow. While we were with you, we gave you the order: "Whoever doesn't want to work shouldn't be allowed to eat."²Thess. 3:1-10

But in our attempt to honour God with a holy, wholesome and disciplined life, we should never lose sight of the Christian message which is: *Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.*¹Tim. 1:15 The root problem with the world is sin, not inequality or oppression—and the world's problem is fixed by Jesus taking the punishment for our sins upon himself, dying the death we deserve, so we could be reconciled to God, not by activism, raised awareness or the overthrow of oppressive systems and their power. Our main purpose in life is to glorify God, not to free groups from oppression or poverty. We must put God and His Kingdom first rather than make these good objectives our goal!

Christians recognise that everything we have, has been given to us from God—and although we make the effort to earn wealth, it is God who gives us the ability to work: *You may say to yourselves, "I became wealthy because of my own ability and strength." But remember the LORD your God is the one who makes you wealthy. He's confirming the promise which he swore to your ancestors. It's still in effect today.*^{Deut. 8:17-18} O LORD our God, even this material we have gathered to build a Temple to honour your holy name comes from you! It all belongs to you! I know, my God, that you examine our hearts and rejoice when you find integrity there. You know I have done all this with good motives, and I have watched your people offer their gifts willingly and joyously.¹Chrom. 29:16-17

And so all that we have and all that we are, belongs in its entirety to God—He has given us stewardship of it and we are His stewards. Stewards must be faithful and trustworthy—and this is especially true when it comes to God's stewards: *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 Although God expects us to care for others, He also expects us to be good stewards of His domain and He certainly does not want us to squander our resources—we are not to give everything away to anybody who comes our way! However, God always gives seed to sow as well as bread to eat, i.e. some is for keeping and some is for sharing. *Remember this: The farmer who plants a few seeds will have a very small harvest. But the farmer who plants because he has received God's blessings will receive a harvest of God's blessings in return. Each of you should give whatever you have decided. You shouldn't be sorry that you gave or feel forced to give, since God loves a cheerful giver. Besides, 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.*²Cor. 9:6-

¹¹ So, when God's tells us to do something, we should never complain that we don't have enough resources—if we have a need, we should sow a seed! We can always do something with what we have—and then like the 5000 hungry people, we can do our part and then God will do His part: *But he said to his disciples, "Have them sit down in groups of about fifty each." The disciples did so, and everyone sat down. Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and*

broke them. Then he gave them to the disciples to distribute to the people. They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over.^{Lk.9:14-17} The same principle worked for Gideon: *Go in the strength you have and save Israel.*^{Jdg.7:14} And also for the widow in Sidon who baked Elijah a cake with the little flour she had left.^{1Kg.17}

God always ensures that we have enough to bless someone and in the blessing of others we too are blessed. *In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'*^{Acts.20:35} Giving enables us to enjoy life and when God is involved brings true satisfaction because we are enjoying God Himself and His presence.

How much is enough? *"You give them something to eat." They answered, "We have only..."*^{Lk.9:1}

Questions

How can we glorify God and enjoy Him?

Can we enjoy life without involving God?

What does *"to be blessed"* mean?

Can *"the valley of the shadow of death"* a place of blessing?

Explain: *the LORD your God is the one who makes you wealthy.*^{Deut.8:17-18}

Explain: *Moreover it is required in stewards that one be found faithful.*^{1Cor.4:2}

Do you agree with: *"if we have a need, we should sow a seed"*?

Christ Alone

You have led me to place all my 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 my heaven on earth)—but I need the force, energy and impulses of Your Spirit to carry me on my way to the Jerusalem. Here, it is my 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 I will have peace in death.

Sunday 27th February. Ps.139:1-8 Lk.9:18-62

Who is Jesus? *Jesus said to them, "But who do you say that I am?"*^{Lk.9:20}

The dictionary defines *"religion"* as *"the belief in and worship of a superhuman controlling power, especially a personal God or gods."* However, Christians do not believe in a superhuman controlling power but a spiritual Person who created us and is worthy of our worship! The actual word *"religion"* is linked to the word *"rely"* and comes from the Latin *"religare"* meaning *"to bind or tie fast"*. And religion can certainly bind people to superstition as well as all sorts of other nonsense. And not even Christians are immune from being bound to superstitions in their religion—just look at the pomp and ceremonies of some of the Churches! Some of the traditions of some of the Church denominations have no Scriptural basis and yet people believe God has prescribed them when actually God has proscribed them!!! And some of the beliefs (at least, some of what some preachers say in public—especially at funerals) have no Biblical basis either! Karl Marx said: *"Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people."* This quote summarised his argument that religion was constructed by people to calm uncertainty over their role in the universe and in society. But whatever Marx may have thought about religion, Christianity was not constructed by people and far from dulling people's minds, true Christianity opens people's minds to the Truth (who is Jesus) and He sets us free. *To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."*^{Jn.8:32} Christians believe in one God who is three Persons. This one God who we worship, consists of God the Father Almighty, Creator of

heaven and earth; God the Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary; and God the Holy Spirit. These three distinct Persons, God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit, together make up the one God. *Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one! You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength.*^{Dent.6:4-5} *As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."*^{Matt.3:16-17} *My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of My Father's hand. I and My Father are one.*^{Jn.10:29-30} However, if all we have is a belief in a God—even the triune God—that belief would only be a concept, an idea, a thought, and that belief in God would take its place alongside the beliefs all the other religions of the world. But what makes Christianity unique and distinct from all other religions, is that God became a human-being in Jesus. Jesus is not a demi-god like the Greek myths but He is truly God and truly Man, who was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary. Other religions have messiahs and prophets (although none come anywhere near the same category as Jesus). Some religions even have “*miracle-workers*” and some of their “*miracles*” appear to be supernatural (although most “*miracles*” are the result of a sleight of hand, like a conjurer). But although Jesus is a miracle worker, Christianity does not stand or fall on the miracles He performed (and still performs). Neither does Christianity stand or fall on a philosophy or a moral teaching (even though Jesus’ teaching is integral to Christian living). Christianity stands or falls on an historical event—the resurrection of Jesus Christ. *And if Christ has not been raised, then all our preaching is useless, and your faith is useless. And we apostles would all be lying about God—for we have said that God raised Christ from the grave... And if Christ has not been raised, then your faith is useless and you are still guilty of your sins... And if our hope in Christ is only for this life, we are more to be pitied than anyone in the world. But in fact, Christ has been raised from the dead. He is the first of a great harvest of all who have died.*^{1Cor.15:14-20} But not every “Jesus” is actually the Christian Jesus. Muslims refer to Jesus who was a prophet—but the Quran teaches that Jesus didn’t die on the cross. If the Quran is right and Jesus didn’t die, he couldn’t have been resurrected, and Christianity would be proven false. But if the Bible is right and Jesus died on the cross and was resurrected, Islam would be proven false. The “Jesus” in Islam is not the Christian Jesus! It is the same for Judaism—Judaism teaches that although Jesus really lived and may have been a prophet, he was not God’s only Son, the Messiah, and he never rose from the dead. If Judaism is right and Jesus is not God’s only Son, the Messiah, who died and rose again, Christianity would be proven false. The “Jesus” of Judaism is not the Christian Jesus! It is also the same for Jews and Mormons (and even CofEs, RCs, Methodists, Baptists and Pentecostals)—if the Jesus they talk about is not God’s Son, who died and rose from the dead, they are deceived, still in their sins and to be pitied above all people. Jesus is either God’s Son or He is not; He either died on the cross or he didn’t. And if the Bible is right and Christianity is true, we need to know why we believe that the Bible is right.

The early Church believed that Jesus died, was buried and raised from the dead. Without the resurrection of Jesus, you don’t have Christianity—it’s that simple. Paul connects the Resurrection with the Salvation: *Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins.*^{1Cor.15:17} In other words, if the Resurrection is not an actual event in history—if Jesus is still in the tomb—then it doesn’t matter whether he died for your sins because Christianity would be false. And since Jesus predicted His resurrection, if it didn’t happen, it would make Him a liar and He would not be the sinless Messiah Christians have long believed in. The early Church also believed that Jesus’ atoning death, burial, and resurrection were inseparable from the Scriptures. Also essential to early Christianity was a belief that the Jewish Scriptures were the Word of God. It’s popular in some circles to say that the first Christians didn’t have a Bible,

but this is simply not true. They had what we now call the Old Testament, and their core beliefs were supported by and affirmed in those writings. They also had the “*the apostles’ teachings*”^{Acts.2:42} which provided the very insights that would eventually be written down in our New Testament. Interestingly, twice Paul mentions “*in accordance with the Scriptures*”^{1Cor.15:3-4}—once in support of Jesus’ atoning death and once more in support of His resurrection. But the early Church also believed that their core belief in the Resurrection could be verified by evidence. This wasn’t some kind of “*What does Jesus mean to you?*” mushy oatmeal faith. It wasn’t based on a guru sitting under a tree, receiving some cosmic revelation, and then convincing a bunch of people to buy in. It centred on history and the evidence of eyewitnesses to an event—the Resurrection. Paul mentions twelve of these eyewitnesses, and in the very next verse, he refers to hundreds more and finally, he added himself to the list of those who’d seen the resurrected Jesus: *Then [Jesus] appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.*^{1Cor.15:6-8} And Paul wrote this when most of those witnesses were still living. They were alive and kicking with the opportunity to say, “*You’re making that up. I saw no such thing.*” But they didn’t say that. We have no record of any of the five hundred witnesses ever challenging that testimony.

Christianity’s authenticity revolves around Jesus’ resurrection—and it is the resurrection Jesus that makes Christianity a salvation religion that restores us to God. Our restoration with God is not just restoration with God in a Creator/created relationship but in a Father/son relationship—with no guilt or barrier between us and God.

Although Christianity is a heart-religion—a working of God in our heart (spirit)—it also has some essential basic beliefs. So, what must we affirm in order to be saved? First of all, we have to have a point of reference, a foundation on which base our beliefs. And our point of reference is the Scripture. The Scripture, also called the Bible, is God’s written Word and His final revelation. The *Westminster Shorter Catechism* (see last week’s sermon) states: *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.* Although the Believers who lived before Jesus was born didn’t know everything God would reveal to us about Jesus and our salvation through Him, they were saved in the same way we are now—which is by grace through faith. *Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness.*^{Gen.15:6} Even though he may not have been aware of the finer workings of the Trinity or Christ’s priestly intercession, Abraham was saved by grace through faith—and so was Abel, Noah, David, Isaiah, and all the other OT believers: *By faith Abel offered God a better sacrifice than Cain did. By faith he was commended as a righteous man, when God spoke well of his offerings... By faith Noah... became heir of the righteousness that comes by faith... Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets, who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised... These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised. God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect.*^{Heb.11:4-40} Today we have God’s final revelation, and according to the New Testament, for us to be saved and for us to call ourselves a Christian, we must believe these eight essential tenets:

1. God’s unity (there is one God);
2. Jesus’ deity (Jesus is God);
3. Jesus’ humanity (Jesus is man);
4. Jesus’ atoning death (Jesus died for my sins);
5. Jesus’ bodily resurrection (Jesus rose from the dead);
6. human depravity (I am a sinner);
7. the necessity of grace (I am saved by grace);

8. the necessity of faith (I must believe).

If we believe (place our trust and confidence) in these 8 statements, we should be able to articulate our belief—not just as statement of fact but also as a statement of our faith. But simply and succinctly, these tenets can be summarised as: *Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God*. When we can really say that with conviction, Jesus will say: *You are blessed for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven.*^{Matt.16:17}

Apostolic Creed

I believe in God, the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth. I believe in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord. He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary, He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried. He descended to the dead. On the third day He rose again. He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again to judge the living and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church, the communion of the saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting. Amen.

Questions

What is good about religion?

What can be bad about religion?

How is Christianity different from any other religion?

What point of reference do Christians have for their belief about God?

Find a Bible reference for each of these essential tenets

1. God's unity (there is one God);
2. Jesus' deity (Jesus is God);
3. Jesus' humanity (Jesus is man);
4. Jesus' atoning death (Jesus died for my sins);
5. Jesus' bodily resurrection (Jesus rose from the dead);
6. human depravity (I am a sinner);
7. the necessity of grace (I am saved by grace);
8. the necessity of faith (I must believe).

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, unbelief is the greatest sin. I see that whatever my sin is, yet no sin is like disunion 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.

March

Thought for the Month: Biblical meditation, is filling the mind with Scripture and then loading the heart with it until it affects not only the emotions but the entire life. *John Owen*

March's Theme: Knowledge—The fear of the LORD is the beginning of KNOWLEDGE, but fools despise wisdom and instruction. ^{Prov. 1:7}

Prayer for Ukraine

Heavenly Father, destroy the works of the enemies, divide their tongues, frustrate their efforts, and bring their counsels to naught; cause the enemy to fight within their own ranks, weaken their cause, force them to abandon the war and return home in shame, never to return! In Jesus' Name, Amen

We have sent £2000 to assist the orphans from House of Hope in Odessa to flee to Germany. Some of them have already arrived safely.

Sunday 6th March 2022 Ps.139:9-17 Lk.10

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

The Bible says a lot about rejoicing including that we should always rejoice: *Rejoice always.* ^{1Thess. 5:16}

But what does “rejoice” mean? Does “rejoice always” mean we should always be happy? But what if we are in trouble, or in turmoil, or in pain? Absolutely fundamental to understanding the Bible is the principle of never reading a single Bible verse—as is comparing Scripture with Scripture—and this next Bible passage explains that our rejoicing is in the Lord not in our circumstances: *Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.* ^{Phil.4:4-7}

The Greek word that is translated “rejoice” in these verses means “to cheer, gladden, to rejoice, make merry”. In another passage this same word is translated “fared sumptuously”: *There was a certain rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and fared sumptuously [rejoiced] every day.* ^{Lk.16:19} Other translations have: *living in mirth and splendour; lived in luxury; joyously living in splendour!* But this man's happiness didn't last long because we then read: *The rich man died and was buried. In Hades, where he was in torment...* ^{vs23} When the rich man discovered his fate was permanent, he wanted to prevent his brothers from ending up in torment (the opposite of mirth and splendour): *He answered, 'Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my family, for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.'* *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.16:27-31}

This story reminds that our life on earth is very short and eternity is very long—actually eternity is for ever! And the Biblical perspective of living *joyously in splendour and luxury* takes the long view of life into account—of eternity: *Remember, my child, that you had a life filled with good times, while Lazarus' life was filled with misery. Now he has peace here, while you suffer. Besides, a wide area separates us. People couldn't cross it in either direction even if they wanted to.* ^{Lk.16:25-26} We all hope that our life here on earth will be happy and contented—and for some people it appears that their life is just that: happy and contented. But actually, nobody has a completely happy and contented life—sooner or later, everyone of us will face some dis-ease or dis-comfort—but when our life is happy and contented, we should give thanks to God for our enjoyment: *This is what I have observed to be good: that it is appropriate for a person to eat, to drink and to find satisfaction in their toilsome labour under the sun during the few days of life God has given them—for this is their lot. Moreover, when God gives someone wealth and possessions, and the ability to enjoy them, to accept their lot and be happy in their toil—this is a gift of God. They seldom reflect on the days of their life, because God keeps them occupied with gladness of heart.* ^{Ecc.5:18-20}

But we should also give thanks to God when our life is not so happy and contented, because we know that we are not facing life's troubles alone: *Now, this is what the LORD says: Do not be afraid, because I have redeemed you. I have called you by name; you are mine. When you go through the sea, I am with you. When you go through rivers, they will not sweep you away. When you walk through fire, you will not be burned and the flames will not harm you. I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.*^{Is.43:1-3}

However, whatever our life is like—happy and contented or sad and troubled—there is a day of reckoning when we must all give an account to God for what we have done with our life: *All of us must appear in front of Christ's judgment seat. Then all people will receive what they deserve for the good or evil they have done while living in their bodies.*^{2Cor.5:10} Christ's judgement seat is not a place of judgement to see if we are good enough to make it into heaven because none of us are good enough to make it into heaven—and neither is there anything we could do to make us good enough for heaven. *Righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith.*^{Rom.3:22-25} Although all have sinned and so no-one is good enough to be accepted by a holy God, all are justified through God's grace and through the shedding of Jesus' blood and that this gift of forgiveness is received by faith. There is no exception—there is no other way anyone can be saved. *Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved.*^{Acts.4:12} I urge, then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people—for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. This is good, and pleases God our Saviour, who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all people.^{1Tim.2:1-6}

When we became a Christian, we acknowledged these 8 essential tenets of true faith:

1. God's unity (there is one God)
2. Jesus' deity (Jesus is God)
3. Jesus' humanity (Jesus is man)
4. Jesus' atoning death (Jesus died for my sins)
5. Jesus' bodily resurrection (Jesus rose from the dead)
6. Human depravity (I am a sinner)
7. The necessity of grace (I am saved by grace)
8. The necessity of faith (I must believe)

But this is not an exam that we pass by ticking the right boxes—we have to believe these doctrines. Although none of us understood all the theological implications of doctrines when we became a Christians, by study, prayer and practice, each one of these facts becomes a reality and a conviction that matures us. We change from new-born Believers who needs to be spoon-fed the pure milk of the Word of God, into adult Believers who can digest the solid food of God's Word. *Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, now that you have tasted that the Lord is good.*^{1Pet.2:2-3} *Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.*^{Heb.5:13-14}

But we all had to have that experience of conversion where we were born-again. Some of prayed a "sinners' prayer" that has been so helpful to so many people—something along the line of: *Dear God, I come to You in the name of Jesus. I know I am a sinner, I cannot save myself and I need Your forgiveness. I believe that Jesus paid the price for my sins when He died and that You raised Him from the dead. I confess*

that Jesus is my Lord and receive Your forgiveness for my sins. Thank You for giving me a new, holy and righteous spirit that will never be separated from You. I promise to love, honour and obey You for the rest of my life. You are my Father and I am Your child. Amen. Or it may have been a much shorter and simpler prayer, such as: *Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.*^{Lk.23:42} But however we came to faith, every one of us had to acknowledge that Jesus is Lord and that God has raised Him from the dead: *If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved.*^{Rom.10:9-10}

But once we became a Christian, we had an obligation to honour God by the way we live—in how we think, what we say and what we do: *Then he said to them all: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit his very self? If anyone is ashamed of me and my words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his glory and in the glory of the Father and of the holy angels."*^{Lk.9:23-26} *I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes.*^{Rom.1:16} *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. 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.5:21-27} And it is for the way we live our lives that we will be judged on the day of Judgement: *Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. The earth and the heavens fled from his presence, and there was no place for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books. The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and each person was judged according to what they had done. Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death. Anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire.*^{Rev.20:11-15}

So the criteria for entering heaven and spending eternity with God is not how good we have been but whether our name is in the Book of Life. No wonder Jesus said to His disciples: *He replied, "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}

Heaven is our real home as well as our destination and because God is with us, we can have a foretaste of heaven here on earth, in spite of our circumstances not because of them. So, let's continually rejoice, not because of our circumstances but because our names are written in heaven.

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

Questions

What does "rejoice" mean?

How can we rejoice continually?

How do we qualify for heaven?

What will we be judged for?

How do we become a Christian?

How do we mature in our Christian faith?

A Prayer of Union with Christ

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 the dominion of material 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.

Prayer for Ukraine

Heavenly Father, destroy the works of the enemies, divide their tongues, frustrate their efforts, and bring their counsels to naught; cause the enemy to fight within their own ranks, weaken their cause, force them to abandon the war and return home in shame, never to return! In Jesus' Name, Amen

Sunday 13th March. Ps.139:18-24. 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 their fortune selling rejuvenating potions, but disease and old age catch up with everyone sooner or later. Sometimes an epidemic (an epidemic affects the whole country)—and occasionally a pandemic (a pandemic affects the whole world)—occurs and most people panic. (2 years ago today was our last Sunday before the national lockdown!) 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. Each year many thousands of people die of the “*common 'flu*”—the Office for National Statistics data for deaths from Influenza and Pneumonia in England and Wales: 29,451 (2018); 26,342 (2019); 19,448 (2020 [49 weeks]). The ONS recorded 73,766 deaths from Covid19 in 2020 in England and Wales! Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky claims that already 1,300 Ukrainian troops have died since Russia has invaded—and Russia has probably lost even more troops. But actually, war and disease don't increase death because death is total in every generation—war and disease just bring death sooner than expected!

Although the knowledge of medicine and its application has advanced phenomenally over the last 100 years, no one has been able to stop people from dying and we remain mortal! Advances in medicine are greatest during times of war and other times of danger because most accomplishments are “*need specific*”—they happen because of a need. So what would you consider to be the greatest accomplishment mankind has done? 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 you need to visit someone, then the car, train or aeroplane might be the greatest invention. If you are hungry and need a meal in a hurry, then perhaps the microwave might be the greatest invention. If you have a serious infection, then antibiotics might be the greatest discovery. However great those inventions are, and however great the people who invented them are, Jesus said that there was something greater than anything else in life—and that 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} To 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. Matthew records a conversation the Sadducees had with Jesus about the resurrection (which they didn't believe in) and when a

Lawyer (who was a Pharisee who did believe in the resurrection) saw how Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, he thought he could trip Jesus up with a question about the Law. But after He answered the Lawyer's question from the Bible, Jesus silenced him with this question "*whose Son is the Christ?*" Matthew notes: *No one could answer Jesus 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 in order to inherit eternal life, the lawyer wanted to know who his neighbour was. So Jesus told a parable, that we now call "*the Good Samaritan*". Jesus explains that if we are to inherit eternal life, we must do more than be nice to people because our neighbour is not the person who lives next door or the needy person down the street, or even a refugee. Of course, we should love the person next door, and the needy person down the street, and refugees—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. *Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, unless you are born again, you cannot be in God's kingdom."* ^{Jn.3:3} And 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 someone you would have expected to show 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 of course, we should do that). This story is about 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 actually the One who helps the hurting and helpless and He is the One we are to love if we are to inherit eternal life. **Of course, this 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. **And so it is by loving God and loving our Neighbour Jesus** that we inherit eternal life.

[Interestingly 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.* ^{Matt.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** and instead of redeeming us with ransom money, Jesus has redeemed us with His own life!]

By nature, we are spiritually helpless and hopeless because we are born separated from God and spiritually dead. By our effort, 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 have all our sin cancelled by **receiving God's provision of Jesus' atoning sacrifice made on the cross**—and this 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.^{1Jn.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 it is not 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} It is not enough to just say that we love God—we must **actually** love God. This "love" is seen best in the marriage commitment of "respect, love, comfort, honour and keep, in sickness and in health and, forsaking all other, keep only unto him as long as you both shall live". Christianity is a heart religion and worship is "worthship"—the 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 never deceive God with a pretence of religion. It may deceive others if we go through the rituals of religion but don't mean what we say and do—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} Our emotions do not influence God and neither does our enthusiasm but our faith will because **God responds to 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, He counts us righteous (holy or acceptable). What does Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness." ...The words "it was credited to him" were written not for him alone, but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness—for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead.^{Rom.4:3;23-24} And if we are counted righteous, our prayers

are powerful and effective: *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.*^{1Jn.4:17-19}

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

What is “eternal life”?

What does it mean to love God?

What does it mean to love our neighbour?

In the Good Samaritan story, who was the neighbour?

How can we imitate the neighbour's example?

The All-Good

My God, You have helped me to see, that whatever good be in honour and rejoicing, it is You who gives them—and You can withdraw them! Blessedness does not lie so much in receiving good from You, but in holding forth Your glory and virtue—it is an amazing thing to see Deity in a creature, speaking, acting, filling, shining through it. Nothing is good apart from You and when I am near You, I am near good. To be like You is a glorious thing—and 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 in everything, Your will is good and even when Your will crosses mine, teach me to be pleased with it.

Sunday 20th March. 10.30am Ps.140:1-6. Lk.11:1-28

Prayer for Ukraine

Heavenly Father, destroy the works of the enemies, divide their tongues, frustrate their efforts, and bring their counsels to naught; cause the enemy to fight within their own ranks, weaken their cause, force them to abandon the war and return home in shame, never to return! In Jesus' Name, Amen

The Disciples' Prayer: *When you pray, say...*^{Lk.11:2}

The Disciples wanted help with their praying and asked Jesus to give them guidance (as John the Baptist had given his disciples guidance on prayer). Andrew, Simon Peter, Philip and

possibly Nathaniel had previously been John's disciples^{Jn1:35f} and had probably been taught by John on prayer but Jesus had brought a new dimension to their faith. Jesus wasn't just another prophet but "**THE PROPHET**" that Moses had prophesied about: *The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me. He will be one of your own people. You must listen to him.*^{Deut.18:15} Jesus was "**THE LIGHT**" that Isaiah had prophesied about: *Consult God's instruction and the testimony of warning. If anyone does not speak according to this word, they have no light of dawn... Then they will look toward the earth and see only distress and darkness and fearful gloom, and they will be thrust into utter darkness. Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress. In the past he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the future he will honour Galilee of the nations, by the Way of the Sea, beyond the Jordan—The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned.*^{Is.8:20-9:2} Jesus was "**THE LAMB**" who would take away the sin of the world: *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. He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.*^{Is.53:6-7} The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! This is the one I meant when I said, 'A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.'^{Jn.1:29-30}

Because Christianity is a heart religion, Jesus was not teaching a formula for prayer but a model, a pattern, a guide, so we could pray intelligently and purposefully, as well as accurately. God is Spirit and our worship (including our prayers) must be *in spirit and in truth.*^{Jn.4:23-24} Our prayers should come from our heart but they should make sense and also be in line with reality and truth. Sometimes people have confused faith with wishful thinking and when you hear them praying, you could imagine you are hearing a story from Alice in Wonderland—it all seems make-believe! But Christianity is not make-believe—God is real and our faith is based on reality. However, God is holy (or pure) and we cannot approach Him if we are less than holy (pure). We are instructed to: *pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made your good confession in the presence of many witnesses. In the sight of God, who gives life to everything, and of Christ Jesus, who while testifying before Pontius Pilate made the good confession, I charge you to keep this command without spot or blame until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ, which God will bring about in his own time—God, the blessed and only Ruler, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone is immortal and who lives in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see. To him be honour and might forever. Amen.*^{1Tim.6:11-16}

So although we don't need a formula for prayer, we do need some guidelines—a pattern for prayer—and this is what Jesus has given us in the "**LORD'S PRAYER**". Matthew records that Jesus introduced this pattern for prayer by explaining that it is not how public, or how prolonged, or how passionate we pray that counts—to pray a prayer that really counts we have to know God personally: *And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. This, then, is how you should pray: Our Father in heaven, may Your Name be honoured. May Your Kingdom come. May what You want to happen be done on earth as it is done in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins, just as we also have forgiven those who sin against us. Keep us from falling into sin when we are tempted. Save us from the evil one. For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.*^{Matt.5:5-9}

1) Our Father in heaven, may Your Name be honoured. True prayer starts with communicating with God as our heavenly Father. It is an honour to be part of God's family—to have God as our Father and Jesus as our Elder Brother. *The One who makes people holy and the people he makes holy belong to the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them his brothers and sisters.*^{Heb.2:11} As we approach prayer, we should anticipate fellowship, inspiration and rapport with God our Father through the indwelling Holy Spirit. It is a time to absorb God's love; it is a time to discuss with the Father His plans and how we are to be involved; it is a time to express our confidence in Him and our gratitude for the high honour of being a partner with Him. We draw near to God by pondering His Word; by reflecting on His plan; by rethinking His objectives; by remembering Christ's defeat of satan; by contemplating the Holy Spirit's power in our lives.

2) May Your Kingdom come. May what You want to happen be done on earth as it is done in heaven. Our desire is for God's kingdom to come now, not just in the future. We want to see justice, equity and rightness now: God's kingdom is 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.'* "You are a king, then!" said Pilate. Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. In fact, the reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me."^{Jn.18:36-37} But God's kingdom is still a real kingdom—it is the domain of the King of kings and Lord of lords. *I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True. With justice he judges and wages war. His eyes are like blazing fire, and on his head are many crowns. He has a name written on him that no one knows but he himself. He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is the Word of God. The armies of heaven were following him, riding on white horses and dressed in fine linen, white and clean. Coming out of his mouth is a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations. "He will rule them with an iron sceptre." He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh he has this name written: KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS.*^{Rev.19:11-16} Although Jesus is the Prince of Peace, His peace is a pure and holy peace, not a compromised, unjust peace—and it is an everlasting peace because He has defeated the devil. *But God gave you new life together with Christ. He forgave us all of our sins. He wiped out the written Law with its rules. The Law was against us. It opposed us. He took it away and nailed it to the cross. He took away the weapons of the powers and authorities. He made a public show of them. He won the battle over them by dying on the cross.*^{Col.2:13-15} Jesus has destroyed death itself: *This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Saviour, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.*^{2Tim.1:9-10} *I turned around to see the voice that was speaking to me. And when I turned I saw... someone like a son of man... The hair on his head was white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire. His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, and coming out of his mouth was a sharp, double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance. When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. Then he placed 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, and now look, I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades."*^{Rev.1:12-18} Reinhold Niebuhr (a 20th theologian) says that "Christian pacifists have an overdeveloped confidence in human goodness; they believe that the gospel law of love is enough to rid the world of violence and evil." Tish Harrison Warren, in her article "**Go Ahead. Pray for Putin's Demise**" in Christianity Today this month says: *Those of us who long for lasting peace cannot base that hope on an idea that people are inherently good and therefore unworthy of true judgment. Instead, we find our hope in the belief that God is at work in the world, and he is as real—more real—than evil. We hope that God will enact true and ultimate judgment. We look to him who knows every Ukrainian and Russian by name, who loves them more than I can understand, and who will avenge*

wrong and make things right. We don't forgo vengeance because we think that human evil is not worthy of vengeance but because we believe God is the avenger. We do not hope for peace only because we are indignant over unjust violence but also because we believe God is indignant and his judgment (not ours) can be trusted.

3) Give us today our daily bread. We need to trust Him for our daily needs on a daily basis, not a weekly or a *whenever-we-think-about-it* basis.

4) Forgive us our sins, just as we also have forgiven those who sin against us. Our attitude should be like Jesus—He didn't overlook hurt and hate but entrusted Himself to God: *Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. "He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth." 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.2:21-23}

5) Keep us from falling into sin when we are tempted. We need to stay humble and realise that we are still capable of falling when trouble comes. *If you think you are standing strong, be careful not to fall. The temptations in your life are no different from what others experience. And God is faithful. He will not allow the temptation to be more than you can stand. When you are tempted, he will show you a way out so that you can endure.*^{1Cor.10:12-13}

6) Save us from the evil one. Although the devil is defeated and disarmed, he is still like a roaring lion. *Control yourselves. Be on your guard. Your enemy the devil is like a roaring lion. He prowls around looking for someone to chew up and swallow. Stand up to him. Stand firm in what you believe. All over the world you know that your brothers and sisters are going through the same kind of suffering.*^{1Pet.5:8-9} We need to take care that we are not harmed by his deception: *I'm afraid that as the snake deceived Eve by its tricks, so your minds may somehow be lured away from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ. When someone comes to you telling about another Jesus whom we didn't tell you about, you're willing to put up with it. When you receive a spirit that is different from the Spirit you received earlier, you're also willing to put up with that. When someone tells you good news that is different from the Good News you already accepted, you're willing to put up with that too.*^{2Cor.11:3-4} *I say this because many deceivers, who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh, have gone out into the world. Any such person is the deceiver and the antichrist. Watch out that you do not lose what we have worked for, but that you may be rewarded fully.*^{2Jn.7-8}

7) For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. God has the power and the ability to keep us: *Give praise to the One who is able to keep you from falling into sin. He will bring you into his heavenly glory without any fault. He will bring you there with great joy. Give praise to the only God. He is our Saviour. Glory, majesty, power and authority belong to him. Give praise to him through Jesus Christ our Lord. Give praise to the One who was before all time, who now is, and who will be forever. Amen.*^{Jude.24-25}

8) Amen. Lastly agree with what Jesus taught! "Amen" means "I agree, I make this prayer mine!"

Questions The Disciples' Prayer: *When you pray, say...*^{Lk.11:2}

Are written prayers more effective or less effective than extemporaneous prayers?

Can anyone address God as "Our Father"?

How do we honour God's Name?

What is God's Kingdom?

Will God's Kingdom actually come to earth?

Why should we ask God for daily bread?

Is forgiveness of sins unconditional or conditional on forgiving others?

How can we be kept from sinning?

How can we be delivered from the evil one?

The All-Good God

Help me to see how in everything, Your will is good and even when Your will crosses mine, teach me to be pleased with it. Grant me to feel You in fire, and food and every providence—and to see that Your many gifts and creatures are but Your hands and fingers taking hold of

me. You are the bottomless fountain of all good. I give myself to You out of love, for all I have or own is Yours—my goods, family, church, self—to do with as You will. 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, then let me resign myself to Your wiser determinations.

Sunday 27th March. Ps.140:7-13. Lk.11:29-54

The signs of the times: *But the only sign I will give them is the sign of Jonah Lk.11:29*

We live in a time when we are never sure if what we hear or see is actually real. Fake news used to be the domain of countries at war because propaganda is an important weapon in attacking the morale of the enemy—and also in bolstering the morale on the Home Front! But today, the propaganda industry in universal and fake news is everywhere—even in the Church! Sadly, Christians sometimes seem more gullible than the world, especially if someone uses the phrase: “*God said...*” However, few people take the time or effort to find out what God has really said! To question what God has said and then twisting it to make it mean something different is the oldest trick in satan’s book: *The serpent was the shrewdest of all the wild animals the LORD God had made. One day he asked the woman, "Did God really say you must not eat the fruit from any of the trees in the garden?" "Of course we may eat fruit from the trees in the garden," the woman replied. "It's only the fruit from the tree in the middle of the garden that we are not allowed to eat. God said, 'You must not eat it or even touch it; if you do, you will die.'"* “*You won't die!*” the serpent replied to the woman. “*God knows that your eyes will be opened as soon as you eat it, and you will be like God, knowing both good and evil.*” The woman was convinced.^{Gen.3:1-5} This deception worked on Eve and satan has been using it ever since! So, how can we be sure that what we are told is the truth? The usual way to verify information is to check it against facts (things that we can be sure of) and then get a “*peer review*” by having people who have some expertise in the subject to check it out as well. But still we are often unsure what is fact and what is conjecture—what is sound and what is speculation! And just because lots of people believe something, doesn’t make it true! For instance, evolution is taught as fact and yet there is no evidence for it, only assumption. Actually, evolution goes against the law of conservation of mass, which states that, despite chemical reactions or physical transformations, mass is conserved—that is, it cannot be created or destroyed—within an isolated system. To put it simply, the elements of water (H₂O) are the same whether it is gas (steam/water vapour), liquid (water) or solid (ice).

And what about Christianity? How can we be sure that Christianity is true? What are the facts of Christianity? The facts of Christianity are the basic doctrines that we have been looking at recently. God’s unity (*there is one God*); Jesus’ deity (*Jesus is God*); Jesus’ humanity (*Jesus is man*); Jesus’ atoning death (*Jesus died for my sins*); Jesus’ bodily resurrection (*Jesus rose from the dead*); Human depravity (*I am a sinner*); The necessity of grace (*I am saved by grace*); The necessity of faith (*I must believe*). And we peer-review those facts by checking up the people who wrote the Scriptures and also seeing the difference the Christian faith has made to people down through the centuries. Sometimes this can appear a bit academic and it would be easy to think that if there was a clear sign to prove Christianity was right, people would be convinced. You may have heard people say: “*If only I had a miracle, then I would believe*”. However, to an unbeliever, a miracle is no miracle at all—it is just a coincidence. But even Believers would be foolish to look to miracles to base their life on because we only see part of the event. God has not left us to base our life on a subjective event like a “*miracle*”. Instead, God has given us His Word, which is far more dependable than an experience. *For we were not making up clever stories when we told you about the powerful coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. We saw his majestic splendour with our own eyes when he*

received honour and glory from God the Father. The voice from the majestic glory of God said to him, "This is my dearly loved Son, who brings me great joy." We ourselves heard that voice from heaven when we were with him on the holy mountain. Because of that experience, we have even greater confidence in the message proclaimed by the prophets. You must pay close attention to what they wrote, for their words are like a lamp shining in a dark place—until the Day dawns, and Christ the Morning Star shines in your hearts. Above all, you must realize that no prophecy in Scripture ever came from the prophet's own understanding, or from human initiative. No, those prophets were moved by the Holy Spirit, and they spoke from God.^{2Pet.1:16-21}

When the Jews asked for a miraculous sign to prove that Jesus was the Messiah, Jesus said the only sign they would have was that He would rise from the dead after they had killed Him: *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."*^{Jn.2:18-19} Jesus' resurrection will always be a stumbling block for unbelievers because to accept that Jesus rose from the dead, they would have to acknowledge that God is real—and right! *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.*^{1Cor.1:22-25} Jesus said that people who look for signs are evil (opposed to God and in a wrong relationship with God): *But Jesus replied: Only an evil, adulterous generation would demand a miraculous sign; but the only sign I will give them is the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was in the belly of the great fish for three days and three nights, so will the Son of Man be in the heart of the earth for three days and three nights. The people of Nineveh will stand up against this generation on judgment day and condemn it, for they repented of their sins at the preaching of Jonah. Now someone greater than Jonah is here—but you refuse to repent.*^{Matt.12:39-41} But the one sign that God has given is the sign of Jonah. Jonah lived in a small town near Nazareth in Galilee: *Jeroboam son of Jehoash king of Israel restored the boundaries of Israel from Lebo Hamath to the Dead Sea, in accordance with the word of the LORD, the God of Israel, spoken through his servant Jonah son of Amittai, the prophet from Gath Hepher.*^{2Kg.14:23-25} When God called him to preach to the Assyrians in Nineveh, Jonah rebelled and tried to go to Spain but his boat was caught up in a big storm. When the sailors asked Jonah to pray for calm, he acknowledged that the storm was his fault and asked them to throw him overboard—presumably Jonah thought that he could escape from God's commission of preaching! The Jonah was promptly swallowed by a large fish and after 3 days, the fish spat Jonah up on the shore. Jonah decided that God's way was right after all and went to Nineveh (modern day Mosul) where the people repented of their sins. However, Jonah wasn't happy that his enemies were not destroyed: *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. But to Jonah this seemed very wrong, and he became angry. He prayed to the LORD, "Isn't this what I said, LORD, when I was still at home? That is what I tried to forestall by fleeing to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity. Now, LORD, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live."* But the LORD replied, *"Is it right for you to be angry?"*^{Jon.3:10-4:4} Interestingly, the Jews didn't consider Jonah to be a prophet of any standing because the Ninevites had repented: *One of those Pharisees was Nicodemus, who had previously visited Jesus. Nicodemus asked them, "Do Moses' Teachings enable us to judge a person without first hearing that person's side of the story? We can't judge a person without finding out what that person has done."* They asked Nicodemus, *"Are you saying this because you're from Galilee? Study the Scriptures, and you'll see that no prophet comes from Galilee."*^{Jn.7:50-52} The sign of Jonah was that he died and came back to life on the 3rd day and Jesus said that this sign would verify that Jesus truly was the Son of God—the Messiah. But not even this sign of someone coming back from the dead makes people believe: *The rich man answered, "Then I beg you, father. Send Lazarus to my family. I have five*

brothers. Let Lazarus warn them. Then they will not come to this place of terrible suffering.' Abraham replied, 'They have the teachings of Moses and the Prophets. Let your brothers listen to them.' 'No, father Abraham,' he said. 'But if someone from the dead goes to them, they will turn away from their sins.' Abraham said to him, 'They do not listen to Moses and the Prophets. So they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.'

^{Lk. 16:27-31} Miracles don't produce faith—they are just signs to make people wonder! If miracles produced faith, then the Israelites would have walked straight into the Promised Land after they left Egypt. Instead, they all died in the wilderness because of their unbelief: *We belong to Christ if we hold firmly to the faith we had at first. But we must hold to it until the end. It has just been said, "Listen to his voice today. If you hear it, don't be stubborn. You were stubborn when you opposed me." 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. What people did God promise with an oath that they would never enjoy the rest he planned for them? Wasn't it those who didn't obey? So we see that they weren't able to enter. That's because they didn't believe.*

^{Heb. 3:14-19} And not even the miracles that Jesus performed made people believe either! *Even after Jesus had done all these miraculous signs in their presence, they still would not believe in him.*^{Jn. 12:37} This is because faith comes from hearing the Word of God, not from seeing miracles! *How can they call on him unless they believe in him? How can they believe in him unless they hear about him? How can they hear about him unless someone preaches to them? And how can anyone preach without being sent? It is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!" But not all the people of Israel accepted the good news. Isaiah says, "Lord, who has believed our message?" So faith comes from hearing the message. And the message that is heard is the word of Christ.*

^{Rom. 10:14-17} Our faith is in God the Miracle-Maker not in the miracles themselves. Miracles are signposts that point to God, and Jesus said that miracles will follow and confirm the preaching of God's word.

^{Mk. 16:18-20} Although miracles and signs don't produce faith, they do help people to believe: *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} However we need to exercise discernment because not everything that looks supernatural is from God. *To one there is given through the Spirit a message of wisdom, to another a message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit, to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another distinguishing between spirits... All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he distributes them to each one, just as he determines.*

^{1Cor. 12:8-11} The American Assemblies of God paper in 2000 on "Endtime Revival—Spirit-Led and Spirit-Controlled", stated: *Reports of souls saved and lives changed should never justify wrong theology and practices. Yet Paul said... 'Christ is proclaimed in every way whether out of false motives or true; and in that I rejoice' (Phil. 1:15-18). But Paul obviously wanted Christ to be proclaimed from right motives and with biblical integrity. So do we... Unconfirmed reports of unbelievable happenings in revival services discredit rather than advance the cause of Christ. Throughout the New Testament physical healings were the supernatural evidences of God's presence and working.*

Of course, miracles are a means of blessing in themselves especially healing, protection and provision! But miracles are especially tokens of God's love. In his book "Tokens of His Love" Harold McDougal says: *God loves us so much that he desires to give us visible signs of His love, something that not only we can see, but something that everyone around us can see as well. He wants to extend to us visible symbols of His favour upon our lives—Tokens of His Love.* Miracles are also tools for evangelism. Although baptism in the Holy Spirit gives us power to be Jesus witnesses,^{Acts. 1:8} many Christians struggle with evangelism. But those who received miracles from God find it difficult not to witness—they want to talk about God's love. Although the greatest miracle is conversion, the new birth is unseen and can appear ethereal. Tangible miracles are visible to others and wonderful conversation openers. After all who can keep quiet about a miraculous healing or

provision—including when a gold tooth was given to them personally by God! Miracles are not a sign of spirituality or maturity but they are a sign of God's glory and His love—and so we don't have to be "spiritual" or mature to receive a miracle. Not even tongues are a sign of spirituality or maturity but of immaturity, usually because people won't listen to God! *Dear brothers and sisters, don't be childish in your understanding of these things. Be innocent as babies when it comes to evil, but be mature in understanding matters of this kind. It is written in the Scriptures: "I will speak to my own people through strange languages and through the lips of foreigners. But even then, they will not listen to me," says the LORD. So you see that speaking in tongues is a sign, not for believers, but for unbelievers.*^{1Cor.14:20-22} But when God does shower us with a "token of His love", it should motivate us to be excited about going to Church, about sharing our faith and about growing in our faith. Any demonstration of God's love is a wonder and a marvel but we should never forget that the greatest miracle is to be born again into God's family: *See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!*^{1Jn.3:1} But we should always focus on the God who performs miracles, rather than the miracle itself. *You are the God who performs miracles; you display your power among the peoples.*^{Ps.77:14} Yes, we believe in miracles, signs and wonders, but the most important sign for us is the sign of Jonah—Jesus' resurrection—because without that our faith is dead!

Questions **The signs of the times:** *But the only sign I will give them is the sign of Jonah Lk.11:29*

What is a Miracle?

What role do miracles have within Christianity?

How did the sign of Jonah validate Jesus?

What is the "gift of discernment" (or *distinguishing between spirits*)?

How can we be sure that our faith is real?

Heaven Desired

O my Lord, I am standing in Your presence, an heir of Your kingdom, the spouse of Christ and a member of His body. Praise in the mouth of Your saints is comely, so teach me to exercise this divine gift, when I pray, read, listen, look or act, as I hope to praise You eternally hereafter—in the presence of friends and of strangers. And soon I shall arrive—where means of grace shall cease and I need no more to pray, weep or watch; where nothing defiles and there is no more grief, sorrow, sin, death, separation, tears, pale face, languid body, aching joints, feeble infancy, decrepit age, pining sickness, griping fears, consuming cares. Then there will be full knowledge of You, for I shall be with You and be one with You, exercising all my powers of body and soul in the enjoyment of You.

April

Thought for the Month: Stepping on the accelerator doesn't get us to our destination any faster if we are on the wrong road. If we are doing the wrong thing or doing something in the wrong way, increased zeal only makes it worse. *Eugene Peterson*

April's Theme: Self-discipline—For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and SELF-DISCIPLINE. ^{2Tim.1:7}

Sunday 3rd April. (AGM) Ps.140:7-13. Lk.12:1-34

The Holy Spirit will teach you at that time what you should say. ^{Lk.12:12}

Too often, we focus on the sensual instead of the spiritual—what we can know with our 5 natural senses: sight, smell, sound, taste and touch. These natural senses give us an awareness of the world around us and enable us to enjoy life—and also to avoid danger. Of course, these faculties also make us aware of pain and, unique amongst all of Creation, we also have the ability to anticipate what hasn't yet happened—whether it is pleasure or pain. Most of people's poor mental health problems are derived from their fear of what might happen (usually based on past experiences). That is why we need to replace our natural thoughts of worry with spiritual thoughts of God's Word—which is Christian meditation: *Biblical meditation, is filling the mind with Scripture and then loading the heart with it until it affects not only the emotions but the entire life.* ^{J.Owen} Study this Book of Instruction continually. Meditate on it day and night so you will be sure to obey everything written in it. Only then will you prosper and succeed in all you do. This is my command—be strong and courageous! Do not be afraid or discouraged. For the LORD your God is with you wherever you go. ^{Josh.1:8-9} The Psalmist put it this way: *Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Saviour and my God.* ^{Ps.42:5;11;43:5} Worry is an unnecessary concern which creates fear and destroys faith—*Worry is an old man with bended head, carrying a load of feathers which he thinks are lead.* ^{C.ten Boom} Worry and anxiety are sand in the machinery of life; faith is the oil. ^{E.Stanley Jones} When our concerns dominate us they turn into worry, which then begins to dominate us. Anything that dominates us (controls us) is an idol because it replaces the dominion of Jesus—fear becomes our lord instead of Jesus being our Lord. The antidote is to regularly return to our conversion and re-live that experience. As we go back to the Cross, we will realise the wonder and awe of our salvation: *“where we first saw the light and the burdens of our heart rolled away.”* Kathryn Kuhlman used to say: *“If you only knew”!*

The teachings of Jesus are so simple—and yet they are an impossible dream for anyone who has not yet submitted to the Lordship of Jesus Christ! Jesus' teachings were about the Kingdom of God (sometimes called the Kingdom of Heaven). *Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven... 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. 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.5:3-20} As we saw 2 weeks ago, Jesus' Kingdom is not of this world: Jesus said, *“My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now my kingdom is from another place.”* *“You are a king, then!” said Pilate. Jesus answered, “You say that I am a king. In fact, the reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.”* ^{Jn.18:36-37} But Jesus' Kingdom is a real Kingdom—it is the King of king's domain. *For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this.* ^{Is.9:6-7} The kingdom of the world has

become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign for ever and ever.^{Rev.11:15} 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} The King of king's domain (or rule) is in people's hearts (i.e. their spirit) and so it cannot be experienced through the natural senses of sight, smell, sound, taste and touch. That is why we must be born-again, or "born from above" by the Holy Spirit. Jesus answered Nicodemus, "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} In fact, until we are born again, we can't even begin to understand spiritual matters. The person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God but considers them foolishness, and cannot understand them because they are discerned only through the Spirit.^{1Cor.2:14} But at conversion (which is a "new birth" of our spirit), the Holy Spirit takes up residence within us and introduces us to a different dimension of life that is not dependant on our natural senses of sight, smell, sound, taste and touch. We enter a spiritual dimension—the heavenly realm. Of course, we are still in the natural realm of our senses where we need to eat and drink, work and rest, wash and clothe ourselves—but the heavenly realm is where we relate to God and God relates to us. We no longer have to struggle through life, depending on our own ability or resources—we have God's Presence with us every moment of every day. As we sung last week: *Pardon for sin and a peace that endureth, Thine own dear presence to cheer and to guide; Strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow, Blessings all mine, with ten thousand beside! Great is Thy faithfulness! Great is Thy faithfulness! Morning by morning new mercies I see; All I have needed Thy hand hath provided—Great is Thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me!* Another hymn that we sing puts it this way: *Tell me the same old story, when you have cause to fear that this world's empty glory is costing me too dear; And when the Lord's bright glory is dawning on my soul, tell me the old, old story: "Christ Jesus makes thee whole."*

Peter was concerned that we should regularly remember the basics of our faith and explained that the way to do this is to go to Scripture: *So I will always remind you of these things, even though you know them and are firmly established in the truth you now have. I think it is right to refresh your memory as long as I live in the tent of this body, because I know that I will soon put it aside, as our Lord Jesus Christ has made clear to me. And I will make every effort to see that after my departure you will always be able to remember these things...* 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.1:12-21} Peter then explained that people will try to distract us by bringing destructive heresies into the Church: *But there were also false prophets among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you. They will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the sovereign Lord who bought them—bringing swift destruction on themselves. Many will follow their depraved conduct and will bring the way of truth into disrepute. In their greed these teachers will exploit you with fabricated stories. Their condemnation has long been hanging over them, and their destruction has not been sleeping.*^{2Pet.2:1-3} But we can protect ourselves from distraction and deception by focusing on our heavenly home: *When sloth and indolence seize me, give me views of heaven. When sinners entice me, give me disrelish of their ways. When sensual pleasures tempt me, purify and refine me. When I desire worldly possessions, help me to be rich toward You. When the vanities of this world ensnare me, let me not plunge into new guilt and ruin. May I remember the dignity of my spiritual release and never be too busy to attend to my soul or so engrossed with time that I neglect the things of eternity—thus may I not only live, but grow towards You.*^{Puritan Prayers} *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} *And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith.*^{Heb.12:1-2} We focus on our heavenly home by studying the Word of God. Although we don't have to be theologians or academics, we do need to know the basic doctrines of Christianity and bear those doctrines in mind when we read the Bible. *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} *Ezra was determined to study the LORD's Teachings, live by them, and teach their rules and regulations in Israel.*^{Ezr.7:10} We should have a sense of assurance and confidence in these basic doctrines of our faith: God's unity (*there is one God*); Jesus' deity (*Jesus is God*); Jesus' humanity (*Jesus is man*); Jesus' atoning death (*Jesus died for my sins*); Jesus' bodily resurrection (*Jesus rose from the dead*); Human depravity (*I am a sinner*); The necessity of grace (*I am saved by grace*); The necessity of faith (*I must believe*). However, just studying the Bible is not enough, we must believe (place our trust) in Jesus, or we will be like the Jews of Jesus' day: *The Father who sent me has himself given witness about me. You have never heard his voice. You have never seen what he really looks like. And his word does not live in you. This is because you do not believe the One he sent. You study the Scriptures carefully. You study them because you think they will give you eternal life. The Scriptures you study give witness about me. But you refuse to come to me and receive life.*^{Jn.5:37-40} It is not God's Word in our head that saves us but God's Word in our head **and** in our heart! *"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.10:8-10} And when we hide the Scriptures in our hearts, they will become part of us and live within us: *I have hidden your word in my heart so that I won't sin against you. LORD, I give praise to you. Teach me your orders. With my lips I talk about all of the decisions you have made. Following your covenant laws gives me joy just as great riches give joy to others. I spend time thinking about your rules. I consider how you want me to live. I take delight in your orders. I won't fail to obey your word.*^{Ps.119:11-16}

God is Sovereign, which means He can do whatever He decides and so of course the Holy Spirit can speak to us independently of the Scripture—but He rarely does! The usual way that the Holy Spirit communicates with us is through the Scriptures that were completed nearly 2000 years ago. That's why the Holy Spirit doesn't give us new revelation—instead He applies those Scriptures that He has already inspired and caused to be inscribed. So, unless those Scriptures are in our head and in our heart, it is rare for the Holy Spirit to speak to us (and even more rare for us to hear God speak to us)!!! And because Scripture is the Word of God, the words of Scripture have intrinsic power within them. *For nothing is impossible with God [literally: no word of God is void of power].*^{Lk.1:37} However, the power of God is not in the physical words on the page but in the applied words that are spoken, read or remembered. God's Words are spiritual: *The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life. Yet there are some of you who do not believe.*^{Jn.6:63-64} But when the Holy Spirit guides us, He does it in a supernaturally, natural way. He prompts and nudges us in such a gentle way so that we are often unaware that it is the Holy Spirit leading us: *Don't worry about what you will say or how you will say it. At that time you will be given the right words to say. It will not be you speaking. The Spirit of your Father will be speaking through you.*^{Matt.10:19-20}

Actually, this is usually the way that the Holy Spirit manifests His gifts—including prophecy! All we have to do is stay in fellowship with God, His Word and His people—and then remember not to get in the way: *Dear friends, build yourselves up in your most holy faith. Let the Holy*

Spirit guide and help you when you pray.^{Jd.20} This will result in your being witnesses to them. 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... By standing firm you will gain life [By your patience possess your souls].^{Lk.21:13-19}

So let's remember that: *If God is for us, who can be against us?*^{Rom.8:31} God hasn't left us to our own devices but is with us every moment of every day—and He continues to speak to us and through us by the gentle prompting of the Holy Spirit as He applies the holy Scriptures.

Questions: The Holy Spirit will teach you at that time what you should say.^{Lk.12:12}

What are the main differences between humans and the rest of God's created beings?

Is there a difference between anxiety, worry and concern?

What did Jesus mean when He said: *My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them.*^{Jn.14:23} ?

How can we keep our minds focused on spiritual matters?

How does God speak to us?

What is the difference between the Holy Spirit prompting us and our own spirit prompting us?

True Christianity

Lord of Heaven, Your goodness is ineffably sublime—in the works of Creation, You are Almighty; in the dispensations of Providence, You are all-wise; in the gospel of Grace, You are 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 and 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 all 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 and 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 and our knowledge of Him. Give us a religion that is both real and progressive, that lives and works in the Spirit and that profits by Your correction.

Sunday 10th April. Ps.141:1-5. Matt.21

Peace in troubled times

Communication is 35% verbal and 65% non-verbal and so it easy to see why Jesus was so meticulous in the way He behaved—He wanted to clearly and effectively communicate His Father's plan of salvation: *I haven't come from heaven to do what I want to do. I've come to do what the one who sent me wants me to do.*^{Jn.6:38} *The one who sent me doesn't want me to lose any of those he gave me. He wants me to bring them back to life on the last day. My Father wants all those who see the Son and believe in him to have eternal life. He wants me to bring them back to life on the last day.*^{Jn.6:39-40} Everything Jesus did and said was didactic, deliberate and directed by His Father: *Jesus answered, "What I'm about to tell you is true. The Son can do nothing by himself. He can do only what he sees his Father doing. What the Father does, the Son also does. This is because the Father loves the Son. He shows him everything he does. Yes, you will be amazed! The Father will show him even greater things than these."*^{Jn.5:19-20} *Jesus said, "You will lift up the Son of Man. Then you will know that I am the one I claim to be. You will also know that I do nothing on my own. I speak just what the Father has taught me. The One who sent me is with me. He has not left me alone, because I always do what pleases him."*^{Jn.8:28-29} And so when Jesus said something challenging or did something radical—such as clearing the Temple or cursing the fig tree—He was not just “being human” and neither was He losing His temper! No! Jesus was teaching about God in both verbal

and non-verbal ways—about God His heavenly Father, about God’s Kingdom, about God’s love and about God’s plan of Salvation.

The Old Testament contains many prophecies about the coming Messiah and so when Jesus entered Jerusalem on a donkey, He was fulfilling some of those prophecies and declaring unequivocally that He was the Messiah—God’s Son and our Saviour—the Deliverer from sin. *This took place to fulfil the prophecy that said Tell the people of Jerusalem, 'Look, your King is coming to you. He is humble, riding on a donkey—riding on a donkey's colt.'*^{†Matt.21:4-5} [By riding on a donkey, Jesus was stating that He was coming in peace. But there is another prophecy (yet to be fulfilled) when Jesus will come in judgement—this is portrayed by Jesus coming on a horse: *I saw heaven standing open. There was a white horse, and its rider is named Faithful and True. With integrity he judges and wages war. His eyes are flames of fire. On his head are many crowns. He has a name written on him, but only he knows what it is. He wears clothes dipped in blood, and his name is the Word of God. The armies of heaven, wearing pure, white linen, follow him on white horses. A sharp sword comes out of his mouth to defeat the nations. He will rule them with an iron sceptre and tread the winepress of the fierce anger of God Almighty. On his clothes and his thigh he has a name written: King of kings and Lord of lords.*^{Rev.19:11-16}] When Jesus entered Jerusalem in peace, the crowds responded by shouting their praise and declaring “*peace in heaven*”: *Then the whole crowd of disciples began to praise God for all the miracles they had seen. They shouted joyfully, “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven.”*^{Lk.19:37-38} But most of them did not recognise what would bring them peace: *As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it and said, “If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace—but now it is hidden from your eyes.”*^{Lk.19:41-42} They did not understand that peace only comes through personally knowing God **and** His Son Jesus: *Grace and peace be yours in abundance through the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord.*^{2Pet.1:2} *But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace.*^{Eph.2:13-14} *I will listen to what God the LORD says; he promises peace to his people, his faithful servants—but let them not turn to folly.*^{Ps.85:8} However, those who did accept Jesus, God gave the right to become His children by being born again spiritually: *He went to his own people, and his own people didn't accept him. However, he gave the right to become God's children to everyone who believed in him. These people didn't become God's children in a physical way—from a human impulse or from a husband's desire to have a child. They were born from God.*^{Jn.1:11-13}

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

our sins! *The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness [remission or release] of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.* ^{Lk.24:46-47}

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

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

The second time Jesus cleared the Temple, He said that His Father's House was a House of Prayer: *Jesus entered the temple courts and drove out all who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves. "It is written," he said to them, "My house will be called a house of prayer," but you are making it 'a den of robbers.'* ^{Matt.21:12-13} This is a quote from Jeremiah who was condemning the people for not living out the reality of their religion: *Do not trust in deceptive words and say, "This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD!" ...But look, you are trusting in deceptive words that are worthless. You continue to steal and commit murder. You commit adultery and tell lies. You burn incense to Baal. You worship other gods you have not known anything about before. Then you come and stand in front of me. You keep coming to this house where I have put my Name. You say, 'We are safe.' You think you are safe when you do so many things I hate. My Name is in this house. But you have made it a den for robbers! I have been watching you!"* announces the LORD. ^{Jer.7:8-11}

God is the God of Peace: *So Gideon built an altar to honour the LORD there. He called it The LORD Is Peace.* ^{Jdg.6:24} And the Old Covenant was a covenant of peace—even though the leaders regularly rejected God's ways: *And you will know that I have sent you this warning so that my covenant with Levi may continue," says the LORD Almighty. "My covenant was with him, a covenant of life and peace, and I gave them to him; this called for reverence and he revered me and stood in awe of my name. True instruction was in his mouth and nothing false was found on his lips. He walked with me in peace and uprightness, and turned many from sin. "For the lips of a priest ought to preserve knowledge, because he is the messenger of the LORD Almighty and people seek instruction from his mouth. But you have turned from the way and by your teaching have caused many to stumble; you have violated the covenant with Levi," says the LORD Almighty.* ^{Mal.2:4-8}

And in Jesus' time the ruling party of the Sanhedrim, (including the High Priest) were Sadducees who had no living faith in God: *The high priest and all his companions were Sadducees.* ^{Acts.5:17}

The Sadducees say that people will not rise from the dead. They don't believe there are angels or spirits either. ^{Act.23:8}

But most of the Pharisees opposed God as much as the Sadducees did! *John saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing. He said to them, "You are like a nest of poisonous snakes! Who warned you to escape the coming of God's anger? Produce fruit that shows you have turned away from your sins. Don't think you can say to yourselves, 'Abraham is our father.' I tell you, God can raise up children for Abraham even from these stones."* ^{Matt.3:7-9}

Jesus was warning them against what the Pharisees and Sadducees taught. ^{Matt.16:12} So, when Jesus cursed the fig tree, He was declaring that the Old Covenant (and empty religion) was finished—and cursed. *Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he*

went to find out if it had any fruit. When he reached it, he found nothing but leaves, because it was not the season for figs. Then he said to the tree, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again." And his disciples heard him say it... When evening came, Jesus and his disciples went out of the city. In the morning, as they went along, they saw the fig tree withered from the roots. Peter remembered and said to Jesus, "Rabbi, look! The fig tree you cursed has withered!"^{Mk.11:13-21} Fig leaves can be taken as representing religion—man's attempt to cover up his guilt before a holy God, as illustrated by Adam and Eve: *Then their eyes were opened, and they both realized that they were naked. They sewed fig leaves together and made clothes for themselves.*^{Gen.3:7} The New Covenant makes us right with God and is illustrated by God's clothes for Adam and Eve: *The LORD God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them.*^{Gen.3:21} *For he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of his righteousness.*^{Is.61:10} However, you were taught to have a new attitude. You were also taught to become a new person created to be like God, truly righteous and holy.^{Eph.4:23-24}

So when Jesus cleared the Temple of the animals that were being sold for the Old Covenant sacrifices, He was declaring that the Old Covenant (the Mosaic Law) was about to become obsolete—and they killed Him for it.

Stephen and Paul preached the same message and got the same reception: *This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place. He also speaks against the law. We have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place. He says Jesus will change the practices that Moses handed down to us.*^{Acts.6:13-}

¹⁴ *When they heard this, they praised God. Then they said to him, "You see, brother, how many thousands of Jews there are who have believed, and they are all ardent observers of the law. They have been informed about you—that you teach all the Jews now living among the Gentiles to abandon Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or live according to our customs."*^{Acts.21:20-21}

Let's learn the lesson that Jesus was teaching—we must not resort to religion or rituals for our cleanness (righteousness) but trust God. It is not enough to go to Church and say our prayers—we must become a "House of Prayer" and reject obsolete rituals. Then we can live as New Covenant Believers and true children of God because: *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}

Peace in troubled times

Questions

Why did Jesus ride a donkey into Jerusalem?

Why did Jesus curse the fig tree?

Why did Jesus clean the Temple?

Is it wrong to be angry?

Why did God implement the Old Covenant if it didn't bring peace?

How does the New Covenant bring peace?

Puritan Prayers

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.

Sunday 17th Easter Sunday Ps.24. John 20

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

Initially, the early Church consisted of devout Jews who had received Jesus as their Messiah and so had become true children of God: *He went to his own people, and his own people didn't accept him. However, he gave the right to become God's children to everyone who believed in him. These people didn't become God's children in a physical way—from a human impulse or from a husband's desire to have a child. They were born from God.*^{Jn.1:11-13} They meticulously kept their Jewish calendar for some years after the Church was founded because they hadn't completely broken away from their cultural spiritual roots: *Paul had decided to sail past Ephesus to avoid spending time in the province of Asia, for he was in a hurry to reach Jerusalem, if possible, by the day of Pentecost.*^{Acts.20:16} And so for a time, the Christian Church was culturally Jewish but as more and more non-Jews became Christians, the Church became less and less Jewish. Eventually the Church came to understand that Christianity is cross-cultural and truly international (actually, Christianity does have racial culture—it is the spiritual culture of heaven!) *I now realize how true it is that God does not show favouritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right.*^{Acts.10:34-35} *And they sang a new song, saying: "You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased for God persons 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.5:9-10} But even so, many of them struggled with their new cross-cultural identity. *This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place. He also speaks against the law. We have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place. He says Jesus will change the practices that Moses handed down to us.*^{Acts.6:13-14} *When they heard this, they praised God. Then they said to him, "You see, brother, how many thousands of Jews there are who have believed, and they are all ardent observers of the law. They have been informed about you—that you teach all the Jews now living among the Gentiles to abandon Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or live according to our customs."*^{Acts.21:20-21} At one time, Paul publicly confronted Peter about his hypocrisy of trying to live according to the Jewish customs: *When I saw that they were not following the truth of the gospel message, I said to Peter in front of all the others, "Since you, a Jew by birth, have discarded the Jewish laws and are living like a Gentile, why are you now trying to make these Gentiles follow the Jewish traditions? You and I are Jews by birth, not 'sinners' like the Gentiles. Yet we know that a person is made right with God by faith in Jesus Christ, not by obeying the law. And we have believed in Christ Jesus, so that we might be made right with God because of our faith in Christ, not because we have obeyed the law. For no one will ever be made right with God by obeying the law."*^{Gal.2:14-16} But as time went on, Christians began to recognise that the New Covenant was actually the fulfilment of the old Jewish festivals and holy days of the Old Covenant—and because Jesus had fulfilled the Old Covenant, that Covenant together with its ceremonies was now obsolete: *Don't misunderstand why I have come. I did not come to abolish the law of Moses or the writings of the prophets. No, I came to accomplish their purpose. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not even the smallest detail of God's law will disappear until its purpose is achieved.*^{Matt.5:17-18} And so for the Church, the Jewish festivals took on their real meaning. This meant that it was no longer important to keep those festivals in the old way: *Get rid of the old yeast. Be like a new batch of dough without yeast. That is what you really are, because Christ has been offered up for us. He is our Passover lamb. So let us keep the Feast, but not with the old yeast. I'm talking about yeast that is full of hatred and evil. Let us keep the Feast with bread made without yeast. Let us do it with bread that is honest and true.*^{1Cor.5:7-8}

Under the Old Covenant, the weekly day of meeting together for worship was the last day of the week—this was called the “Sabbath” which means “rest” and it had its origins in the last day of Creation: *By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work*

of creating that he had done.^{Gen.2:2-3} But the Church changed the weekly day of meeting together for worship to the first day of the week—the day God created light and more importantly, the day of Jesus’ resurrection. *Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance.*^{Jn.20:1} This day of Resurrection was not an annual festival but was celebrated whenever they met together in the Name of Jesus (and 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} Now the New Covenant has come, the Old Covenant is obsolete: *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} And so, the religious festivals and sabbaths that were treated as “holy” days under the Old Covenant are also obsolete. But because the New Covenant is based on better promises than the Old Covenant, every day (and night) is now holy (that is dedicated to the Lord)—actually every Christian is now holy (that is, dedicated to God’s service)! *To all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be his holy people: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.*^{Rom.1:7} 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 Christians against 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, our hope in Him is certain and eternal. *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}

The Easter story is so well known to us that we can sometimes overlook the logistics of Jesus’ resurrection and forget that His resurrection was far greater than merely coming back to life again. 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 was raised through Peter and another through Paul). But these people were all **resuscitated** (albeit in a miraculous way), and so their revived bodies died again at a later date. However, when Jesus rose from the dead, He was **resurrected**—that is, He was raised to life with an immortal body.

Jesus’ resurrected body was similar yet different from His previous mortal body—although Jesus’ resurrected body had flesh and bones and could be touched, He could appear through locked doors and then disappear again; although Jesus ate real food, He didn’t need to eat; although Jesus’ clothes were real, they weren’t made of natural material; although Jesus walked on the ground, He ascended physically into heaven and this was witnessed by His Disciples! Because 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} His resurrection can be accepted

as a validated fact. And if we accept Jesus' resurrection as a validated fact, then we can accept that our sins are forgiven is a validated fact too: *We have preached that Christ has been raised from the dead... And if Christ has not been raised, what we preach doesn't mean anything. Your faith doesn't mean anything either. More than that, we would be lying about God. We have given witness that God raised Christ from the dead... And if Christ has not been raised, your faith doesn't mean anything. Your sins have not been forgiven. Those who have died believing in Christ are also lost. Do we have hope in Christ only for this life? Then people should pity us more than anyone else. But Christ really has been raised from the dead.*^{1Cor.15:12-20}

And because Jesus' resurrection is a validated fact, we can accept that our own personal resurrection is a validated fact (even though it is still in the future): *He is the first of all those who will rise... This is what Scripture says: "The first man, Adam, became a living being." The last Adam became a life-giving spirit. I'm telling you a mystery. Not all of us will die, but we will all be changed. It will happen in an instant, in a split second at the sound of the last trumpet. Indeed, that trumpet will sound, and then the dead will come back to life. They will be changed so that they can live forever. This body that decays must be changed into a body that cannot decay. This mortal body must be changed into a body that will live forever. When this body that decays is changed into a body that cannot decay, and this mortal body is changed into a body that will live forever, then the teaching of Scripture will come true: "Death is turned into victory! Death, where is your victory? Death, where is your sting?"*^{1Cor.15:45-55} After Jesus rose from the dead, He returned to His Father and sent the Holy Spirit to continue His Ministry here on earth, which includes giving us the assurance 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 placed our trust (faith) in Jesus, we acknowledged Jesus' bodily death and resurrection—and **His story** of redemption 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} It is a great advantage to have parents and friends who are Believers because we can learn the facts about Christianity from our childhood—but we still have to make our own personal 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} But whether we were brought up in a Christian family or not, let's make the facts of His story become the reality of our story as we celebrate Jesus' resurrection today. 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. Yes! *It is true! The Lord has risen.*^{Lk.24:34}

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!

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

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?

Puritan Prayer

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.

Sunday 24th Ps.142. John 21

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

There have been some phenomenal accomplishments throughout history. The Seven Wonders of the Ancient World were incredible achievements: Great Pyramid (the only one of the 7 Wonders that still exists), Colossus of Rhodes, Hanging Gardens of Babylon, Lighthouse of Alexandria, Mausoleum at Halicarnassus, Statue of Zeus at Olympia, Temple of Artemis at Ephesus. And there are also some modern great achievements that are probably even greater than those ancient Wonders—achievements such as electricity, radio, television, space travel and the internet. But regardless of how great and incredible these achievements are, love outstrips them all: *So, no matter what I say, what I believe, and what I do, I'm bankrupt without love... Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonour others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails... And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love. Follow the way of love and eagerly desire spiritual [gifts], especially the gift of prophecy.*^{1Cor.13:3-14:1} But to love God personally, purposefully and passionately is the greatest achievement anyone can accomplish: *"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}

But what does it mean to *"truly love"* God? Love can have many meanings, such as: to love your spouse; to love your children; to love your friends; to love your enemies. These *"loves"* all use different meanings of the word *"love"*. To love your spouse means to cherish, honour, respect and to give yourself unreservedly to your spouse—to seek their very best. To love your children means to provide and care for them, to help them to be the very best they can be, and to be there when they need you. To love your friends means to support them and befriend them because you enjoy their company. To love your enemies means to forgive them and be kind to them—even though you may not enjoy their company. We can also love our pets; love our home; love our work; love our hobbies; love our food—and these *"loves"* all use different

meanings of the word “love”, as well as having different degrees of emotion and commitment. Even though loving God will involve similar attributes of love as those other loves, loving God will surpass all other loves. Love for God does not make us afraid of God. The closest example of God’s love for us (and of our love for God) is the relationship of marriage. *Husbands, love your wives. Love them just as Christ loved the church. He gave himself up for her. He did it to make her holy. He made her clean by washing her with water and the word. He did it to bring her to himself as a brightly shining church. He wants a church that has no stain or wrinkle or any other flaw. He wants a church that is holy and without blame. In the same way, husbands should love their wives. They should love them as they love their own bodies. Any man who loves his wife loves himself. After all, people have never hated their own bodies. Instead, they feed and care for their bodies. And that is what Christ does for the church. We are parts of his body. As the Scriptures say, “A man leaves his father and mother and is joined to his wife, and the two are united into one.” This is a great mystery, but it is an illustration of the way Christ and the church are one.*^{Eph. 5:25-}

³² In the Marriage Service, the bride is asked: *will you live together in marriage according to God’s laws? Will you respect him, love him, comfort him, honour and keep him, in sickness and in health and, forsaking all other, keep only unto him as long as you both shall live?* Here love is defined as *respect, comfort (communicate with, speak kind words), honour and be together (as prescribed by God’s Word)*. And so, to love God means to respect God, to communicate with God (through prayer and praise), to honour God and to share your life with Him—as prescribed by God’s Word—and of course, we do this joyfully, cheerfully and willingly. **And so we are to love God passionately, personally and purposefully—that is, we are to love God with all our heart, with all our soul and with all our mind.**

Loving God passionately—with all our heart. Our love for God will be passionate if we realise that we have been forgiven much. *Then Jesus told him this story: “A man loaned money to two people—500 pieces of silver to one and 50 pieces to the other. But neither of them could repay him, so he kindly forgave them both, cancelling their debts. Who do you suppose loved him more after that?” Simon answered, “I suppose the one for whom he cancelled the larger debt.” “That’s right,”*^{Lk. 7: 41-43} One of the main words for “praise” is “Hallelujah” and it literally means to be so in love with God that we are not ashamed to use our voices to express our love for Him (as in a marriage). This love can be emotional but it comes from a deeper place than our emotions—it comes from our heart. Our biological heart is the part of us that pumps blood around our body and we could call it the source of our life—when it stops, we are dead! Our metaphorical heart is the source of our life—our real life—our heart is our spirit. Our love for God has to come from our spirit because our spirit is the God-conscious part of us. It is our spirit that distinguishes us from the rest of Creation: *Then the LORD God formed the man from the dust of the ground. He breathed the breath of life into the man’s nostrils, and the man became a living person.*^{Gen. 2:7} Since Adam sinned, mankind has been separated spiritually from God and until we are born again of the Spirit we can’t understand God: *The person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God but considers them foolishness, and cannot understand them because they are discerned only through the Spirit.*^{1Cor. 2:14} It takes the new-birth to enter God’s Kingdom: *Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You must be born again.’ The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.”*^{Jn. 3:5-8} This spirit-life is not a half-hearted, take-it-or-leave-it life but a gushing life: *Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them.” By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive. Up to that time the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified.*^{Jn. 7:38-39} Yes! God wants us to be totally absorbed with Him and His will and love Him from our heart

Loving God personally—with all our soul. Our new spiritual life involves living as part of God's family—the greatest and most wonderful loving family there is—and leads to a life that is rich and satisfying: *I came that they may have life and have it abundantly [My purpose is to give them a rich and satisfying life].*^{Jn.10:10} But this rich and satisfying life does not come from any self-help manual or through any personal effort—it is a gift from God: *For if, by the trespass of the one man, death reigned through that one man, how much more will those who receive God's abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ!*^{Rom.5:17} And although this spiritual life is a free gift, the way we live that life is our choice—we can decide to live God's way or our way. Living God's way is called “*maturity*” and comes from recognising the difference between right and wrong: *For someone who lives on milk is still an infant and doesn't know how to do what is right. Solid food is for those who are mature, who through training have the skill to recognize the difference between right and wrong. So let us stop going over the basic teachings about Christ again and again. Let us go on instead and become mature in our understanding.*^{Heb.5:13-6:1} Maturity is the development of our soul—our personality. Our spirit is a gift from God and is complete from our new birth—and imperishable (incorruptible) but our soul is not mature and is capable of being impure! *You have purified your souls by obeying the truth in order to show sincere mutual love. So love one another earnestly from a pure heart. You have been born anew, not from perishable but from imperishable seed, through the living and enduring word of God.*^{1Pet.1:22-23} Loving God involves choosing to love Him by obeying His commands and by respecting Him. Although we love God as “*Our Father, who is in heaven,*” we should always respect Him as “*Almighty God*”. *Fear the LORD, you his saints, for those who fear him lack nothing.*^{Ps.34:9} Some versions of the Bible translate “*fear*” as “*respect*”: *You people of God, have respect for the LORD. Those who respect him have everything they need.*

Loving God purposefully—with all our mind. Loving God not only involves our heart and our soul, it also involves our mind—we should think through our commitment to God and change our thinking by renewing our minds: *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} That, however, is not the way of life you learned when you heard about Christ and were taught in him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus. *You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.*^{Eph.4:20-24} Our mind is very complex and can store information both consciously and unconsciously. That information can be recalled at will (or not, if we forget) and used to assist us. There are some practical helps in retaining information, such as writing it down, reading it aloud, putting the words to music, associating the information with ideas or pictures, etc. Moses explained this to the Israelites thousands of years ago: *Israel, listen to me. The LORD is our God. The LORD is the one and only God. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul. Love him with all your strength. The commandments I give you today must be in your hearts. Make sure your children learn them. Talk about them when you are at home. Talk about them when you walk along the road. Speak about them when you go to bed. And speak about them when you get up. Write them down and tie them on your hands as a reminder. Also tie them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses. Also write them on your gates.*^{Deut.6:4-9} We took that advice seriously in May 2006 by having a monthly memory verse—starting with: *Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, “Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.” 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} But we should, remember that the Scriptures are more than just words—they contain life that feeds our spirit and will enable us to be strong in our faith: *The Scriptures say: People do not live by*

bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.^{Matt.4:4} The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life.^{Jn.6:63} Moses came with Joshua son of Nun and spoke all the words of this song in the hearing of the people. When Moses finished reciting all these words to all Israel, he said to them, ‘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.32:44-47} If we don’t work at our salvation, we are short-sighted and forget the reality of God forgiving our sins: In view of all this, make every effort to respond to God's promises. Supplement your faith with a generous provision of moral excellence, and moral excellence with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with patient endurance, and patient endurance with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love for everyone. The more you grow like this, the more productive and useful you will be in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. But those who fail to develop in this way are short-sighted or blind, forgetting that they have been cleansed from their old sins. So, dear brothers and sisters, work hard to prove that you really are among those God has called and chosen. Do these things, and you will never fall away. Then God will give you a grand entrance into the eternal Kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.^{2Pet.1:5-11} 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. Do everything without complaining or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe as you hold out the word of life.^{Phil.2:12-16}

Yes, as we truly love God personally, purposefully and passionately, we will attain the greatest achievement mankind can ever accomplish. And regardless of our upbringing or education, all of us can attain do this because all it takes is a pure heart and a new spirit. If you don’t love God like that yet, do what David did and ask God to: *Create a pure heart in me. Give me a new spirit that is faithful to you.*^{Ps.51:10}

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

Questions

What does it mean to “truly love God”?

Explain what it means to love God with all your heart.

Explain what it means to love God with all your soul.

Explain what it means to love God with all your mind.

Why do you think Jesus asked Peter three times if he loved Him?

What did Jesus mean by “feed my sheep”?

If salvation is free^{Rom.6:23} why do we have to work out our salvation^{Phil.2:12}?

Puritan Prayers

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.

May

Thought for the Month: It is a sad thing when you hear Christians with a moan. The secret of Christianity is the secret of Christ possessing the heart of a person, a person being yielded to Him so that His victory, His consciousness and His power possesses your spirit and mind. *John G Lake.*

May's Theme: Perseverance—We know that suffering produces **PERSEVERANCE**; **PERSEVERANCE**, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us. ^{Rom.5:3-5}

Sunday 1st May Ps.143:1-5 Luke 12:32-59

What are you wearing today? *Be dressed ready for service and keep your lamps burning.* ^{Lk.12:35}

Jesus told a story about wearing the right clothes: *The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son. He sent his servants to those who had been invited to the banquet to tell them to come, but they refused to come... Then he said to his servants, 'The wedding banquet is ready, but those I invited did not deserve to come. So go to the street corners and invite to the banquet anyone you find.'* So the servants went out into the streets and gathered all the people they could find, the bad as well as the good, and the wedding hall was filled with guests. But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing wedding clothes. He asked, 'How did you get in here without wedding clothes, friend?' The man was speechless. Then the king told the attendants, 'Tie him hand and foot, and throw him outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' ^{Matt.22:2-14} For many are invited, but few are chosen. But this story is not about what clothes we wear to a wedding or even to Church (although we should have a standard of decency and propriety) but what spiritual clothes we wear in our daily life. *Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace.* ^{Eph.6:14-15} *Awake, awake, Zion, clothe yourself with strength! Put on your garments of splendour, Jerusalem, the holy city.* ^{Is.52:1} *And I want women to be modest in their appearance. They should wear decent and appropriate clothing and not draw attention to themselves by the way they fix their hair or by wearing gold or pearls or expensive clothes. For women who claim to be devoted to God should make themselves attractive by the good things they do.* ^{1Tim.2:9-10}

The Bible has many references about what we wear and having the correct dress-code. When Adam and Eve made themselves clothes out of fig-leaves, they were not dressed appropriately to meet with God and so He provided them with the proper clothes. This early story in the Bible is actually very profound because it highlights God's dress-code—that we need to be clothed spiritually with what God has provided for us, not what we have achieved by our own efforts. Interestingly, the Jewish commentary on this story suggests that Adam and Eve were dressed in God's glory before they sinned and it was only after they had lost God's glory that they needed to have another covering. Jesus said we would once again have that glory: *I have given them the glory you gave me... 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.* ^{Jn.17:22-26} This story about clothes sets the scene for the rest of the Bible, which is a Book that describes God's plan of salvation for mankind through Jesus Christ.

One of the illustrations of God's spiritual dress-code for fellowship with Him, was the uniform of the priests. Under the Old Covenant, the priests had a simple linen uniform for their daily duties but the High Priest had a very elaborate uniform for his role of intercessor and mediator. Each part of that uniform represented an aspect of his ministry, from the different colours, the different materials and even the number of jewels. But when the High Priest went into the Most Holy Place (that special room where he was alone with God), he had to wear a simple linen

tunic of the ordinary priest because it represented holiness and purity. Most of the Old Covenant's rituals were representations or copies of the realities of the New Covenant that Jesus introduced at His death: *The observance of annual holy days, New Moon Festivals, or weekly worship days—these are a shadow of the things to come, but the body that casts the shadow belongs to Christ.* ^{Co.2:16-17} [The priests] serve at a sanctuary that is a copy and shadow of what is in heaven. This is why Moses was warned when he was about to build the tabernacle: “See to it that you make everything according to the pattern shown you on the mountain.” But in fact the ministry Jesus has received is as superior to theirs as the covenant of which he is mediator is superior to the old one, since the new covenant is established on better promises. ^{Heb.8:5-6} The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming—not the realities themselves.—And so the New Covenant made those rituals from the Old Covenant obsolete (including the clothes and ceremonies)—but the realities that they portrayed are still real and relevant. Jesus is our High Priest and He fulfilled the spiritual roles that the OT priests enacted out in their ceremonies: *Now the main point of what we are saying is this: We do have such a high priest, who sat down at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, and who serves in the sanctuary, the true tabernacle set up by the Lord, not by a mere human being.* ^{Heb.8:1-2} It is no longer a person who is our High Priest but Jesus—Jesus is our Mediator and Intercessor: *For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all people.* ^{1Tim.2:5-6} You have come to God, the Judge of all, to the spirits of the righteous 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.12:23-24} But because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood. Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them. Such a high priest truly meets our need—one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens. ^{Heb.7:24-26} Because he poured out his life unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors. For he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors. Sing, barren woman, you who never bore a child; burst into song, shout for joy, you who were never in labour; ^{Is.53:12-54:1} Even now my witness is in heaven; my advocate is on high. My intercessor is my friend as my eyes pour out tears to God; on behalf of a man he pleads with God as one pleads for a friend. ^{Job.16:19-21} And because Jesus has completed His ministry of securing our salvation, we never have to try to emulate those OT rituals: *We have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, and since that time he waits for his enemies to be made his footstool. For by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy.* ^{Heb.10:10-14} Yes, the days of trying to please God by religious performance ended at the cross, and the Holy Spirit wants to lead us into the free and abundant Life that Jesus died to bring us.

Under the New Covenant, all believers are priests: *To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father—to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen.* ^{Rev.1:5-6} The uniform of priests under the Old Covenant was a linen tunic: *Weave the tunic of fine linen and make the turban of fine linen. The sash is to be the work of an embroiderer. Make tunics, sashes and caps for Aaron's sons to give them dignity and honour. After you put these clothes on your brother Aaron and his sons, anoint and ordain them. Consecrate them so they may serve me as priests.* ^{Ex.28:39-41} In Revelation, Believers are depicted wearing the same linen tunics, portraying their ministry as priests: *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.) ^{Rev.19:7-8} These clothes are spiritual clothes—clothes of righteousness and praise: *The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor... to comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion—to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair... 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.^{Is.61:1-10} May your priests be clothed with your righteousness; may your faithful people sing for joy.^{Ps.132:9} The angel said to those who were standing before him, "Take off his filthy clothes." Then he said to Joshua, "See, I have taken away your sin, and I will put fine garments on you."^{Zech.3:4} And we are to offer sacrifices—but those sacrifices are spiritual: As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him—you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.^{1Pet.2:4-5}

We should always be dressed ready for service and keep our lamps burning.^{Lk.12:35} And there is a warning in Revelation for us to keep awake and with our clothes on: Look, I come like a thief! Blessed is the one who stays awake and remains clothed, so as not to go naked and be shamefully exposed.^{Rev.16:15} This is a direct reference to the Temple worship where during the night the "captain of the Temple" made his rounds. On his approach the guards had to rise and salute him in a particular manner. Any guard found asleep when on duty was beaten, or his garments were set on fire—a punishment, as we know, actually awarded. Hence the admonition to us who, as it were, are here on Temple guard, "Blessed is he that watcheth, and keepeth his garments."^{The Temple A.Edersheim} Jesus pleaded with the Church at Laodicea to wear the right clothes: These are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God's creation. I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth. You say, 'I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.' But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see. Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest and repent. Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me. To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I was victorious and sat down with my Father on his throne. Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.^{Rev.3:14-22}

God is pleased to give us the Kingdom: Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom.^{Lk.12:32} So, let's make sure we actually wear the clothes that the King has given us and not keep them in the wardrobe. Then we will always be dressed and ready for service and not found sleeping!

Questions

What are you wearing? *Be dressed ready for service and keep your lamps burning.*^{Lk.12:35}

What was the significance of the clothes that Adam and Eve made?

What was the significance of the clothes that God gave to Adam and Eve?

What was the significance of the various parts of the OT priests' uniform?

How do the OT priests' clothes relate to us under the New Covenant?

What spiritual clothes has God given to us?

Puritan Prayers

O God my exceeding joy, singing Your praises uplifts my heart 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. I take exceeding pleasure in the thought of You and I will at all times rest myself in Your excellences, Your goodness and Your loving-kindness. Give me the sweet results of faith in my secret character and in my public life. Cast cords of love around my thoughts for You hold me and will never let me go. May the Saviour's wounds sway me more than the sceptre of princes. Let

me love You with a love that covers and swallows up all, that I may not violate my chaste union with the Beloved.

Sunday 8th May. Ps.143:7-12. Luke 15

Working without getting weary. *Make every effort to enter through the narrow door, because many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able to.* Lk.13:24

The expression “*no gain without pain*” has a good soundbite but actually most of us want the opposite—we want gain without pain! We all enjoy a getting bargain—which is why the supermarkets’ sales technique of BOGOF (buy-one-get-one-free) is so effective. It is the “*something for nothing*” that is the attraction of gambling—even with the risk of losing everything! In the beginning, life was perfect and every day was a “*holy-day*”—actually work was worship! The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. ^{Gen.2:15} This word for work or serve is also used to for “*worship*”: And God said, “I will be with you. And this will be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will worship God on this mountain.” ^{Ex.3:12} True worship is not wearisome or tiresome but is the greatest achievement we can ever attain. ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. ^{Matt.22:37-38} And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love. Follow the way of love and eagerly desire spirituality. ^{1Cor.13:13}

However, Adam lost the joy and ease of work (and worship) when he sinned: *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 Jesus redeemed us from this curse: 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.” Christ Jesus set us free so that the blessing given to Abraham would come to us through Christ. He did it so that we might receive the promise of the Holy Spirit by believing in Christ. ^{Gal.3:13-14}

However, even though we have been redeemed from the curse of the Law, it is only our spiritual work that is guaranteed to be effortless and stress-free. Some people are fortunate and enjoy their daily work but some people have employment that they don’t enjoy—but regardless of personal preferences, we are all called to work. *We worked, even though we have the right to receive help from you. We did it in order to be a model for you to follow. Even when we were with you, we gave you a rule. We said, “Anyone who will not work will not eat.” We hear that some people among you don’t want to work. They aren’t really busy. Instead, they are bothering others. We belong to the Lord Jesus Christ. So we strongly command people like that to settle down. They have to earn the food they eat. Brothers and sisters, don’t ever get tired of doing the right thing.* ^{2Thess.3:9-13} But God has promised to send a blessing on everything we put our hand to. ^{Deut.28:1-8}

And for us Christians, we are to work for our employer as if we are working directly for God: *All slaves should show full respect for their masters so they will not bring shame on the name of God and his teaching. If the masters are believers, that is no excuse for being disrespectful. Those slaves should work all the harder because their efforts are helping other believers who are well loved.* ^{1Tim.6:1-2} Slaves, obey your earthly masters with deep respect and fear. Serve them sincerely as you would serve Christ. Try to please them all the time, not just when they are watching you. As slaves of Christ, do the will of God with all your heart. Work with enthusiasm, as though you were working for the Lord rather than for people. Remember that the Lord will reward each one of us for the good we do, whether we are slaves or free. ^{Eph.6:5-8}

Physical work (paid or unpaid) is good, but spiritual work is better because it has eternal consequences: *Train yourself to be godly. For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come. This is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance (and for this we labour and strive), that we have put our hope in the living God, who is the Saviour of all men, and especially of those who*

believe. *Command and teach these things.*^{1Tim.4:8-11} Spiritual work is always based on believing God (that is, placing our trust in Him). Jesus answered, *“Very truly I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw the signs I performed but because you ate the loaves and had your fill. Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For on him God the Father has placed his seal of approval.”* Then they asked him, *“What must we do to do the works God requires?”* Jesus answered, *“The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent.”*^{Jn.6:26-29}

“Faith has legs” and of course, if we really believe God (place our trust in Him) we will also live out our faith: *You foolish person, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? Was not our father Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did.*^{Jas.2:20-22} As I urged you when I went into Macedonia, stay there in Ephesus so that you may command certain people not to teach false doctrines any longer or to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies. Such things promote controversial speculations rather than advancing God’s work—which is by faith. The goal of this command is love, which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith. Some have departed from these and have turned to meaningless talk. They want to be teachers of the law, but they do not know what they are talking about or what they so confidently affirm.^{1Tim.1:3-7}

But we work out our salvation, not work for our salvation: Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfil his good purpose. Do everything without grumbling or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, “children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation.” Then you will shine among them like stars in the sky as you hold firmly to the word of life.^{Phil.2:12-16} And we work out our salvation by putting God’s Word into practice—that is, living by the principles of God’s kingdom and doing what He says: *Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it.*^{Lk.11:28}

When Jesus was tired and hungry, His disciples went to buy some food and on their return they were surprised to find his tiredness and hunger gone. Jesus explained that His energy came from doing God’s will—and completing it! *My food is to do the will of him who sent me and 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. Here is a true saying. ‘One plants and another gathers.’ I sent you to gather what you have not worked for. Others have done the hard work. You have gathered the benefits of their work.*^{Jn.4:34-38} Jesus’ spiritual food and energy came from evangelising—from sharing about His Father, sharing about true worship and sharing about Jesus being the Christ: Jesus told her, *“Believe me. A time is coming when you Samaritans won’t be worshiping the Father on this mountain or in Jerusalem. You don’t know what you’re worshiping. We Jews know what we’re worshiping, because salvation comes from the Jews. Indeed, the time is coming, and it is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth. The Father is looking for people like that to worship him. God is a spirit. Those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.”* The woman said to him, *“I know that the Messiah is coming. When he comes, he will tell us everything.”* (Messiah is the one called Christ.) Jesus told her, *“I am he, and I am speaking to you now.”*^{Jn.4:21-26} Jesus’ conversation was very fruitful because not only did the woman believe but many others in her village also believed: *Many more Samaritans believed because of what Jesus said. They told the woman, “Our faith is no longer based on what you’ve said. We have heard him ourselves, and we know that he really is the saviour of the world.”*^{Jn.4:41-42}

We can never achieve our salvation by our own efforts—and neither should we try to. However, to the one who does not work but trusts God who justifies the ungodly, their faith is credited as righteousness.^{Rom.4:5} God has designed our salvation and delivered our salvation—fully and completely. He saw that there was no one, he was appalled that there was no one to intervene; so his own

arm worked salvation for him, and his own righteousness sustained him. He put on righteousness as his breastplate, and the helmet of salvation on his head.^{Is.59:16-17} Because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood. Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them.^{Heb.7:24-25} If we do try to earn our salvation, we belittle God because we are actually saying that what God has done is not enough. Faith is active, not passive and we should be busy—but we should be busy believing God not busy trying to please God by our efforts.

True spiritual work will sustain us and nourish us but not weary us and the greatest spiritual work is worship. Worship is expressing what God is worth to us and worship is the atmosphere of heaven: *Day and night, they never stop saying, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God who rules over all. He was, and he is, and he will come." The living creatures give glory, honour and thanks to the One who sits on the throne and who lives for ever and ever. At the same time, the 24 elders fall down and worship the One who sits on the throne and who lives for ever and ever. They lay their crowns in front of the throne. They say, "You are worthy, our Lord and God! You are worthy to receive glory and honour and power. You are worthy because you created all things. They were created and they exist. That is the way you planned it."*^{Rev.4:8-11} And worship builds and sustain our faith because in worship, we focus on God, not on our situation or even our needs: *Sing to the LORD a new song, for he has done marvellous things; his right hand and his holy arm have worked salvation for him. The LORD has made his salvation known and revealed his righteousness to the nations.*^{Ps.98:1-2}

Solomon understood the importance of enjoying life and God: *I realized that it's good and proper for a man to eat and drink. It's good for him to be satisfied with his hard work on this earth. That's what he should do during the few days of life God has given him. That's what God made him for. Sometimes God gives a man wealth and possessions. He makes it possible for him to enjoy them. He helps him accept the life he has given him. He helps him to be happy in his work. All of those things are gifts from God. A man like that doesn't have to think about how his life is going. That's because God fills his heart with joy.*^{Ecc.5:18-20} So let's take Solomon's advice and be continually aware of God's goodness. Then we will work in God's Kingdom without getting weary as we *make every effort to enter through the narrow door, because many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able to.*^{Lk.13:24}

Questions

Working without getting weary. *Make every effort to enter through the narrow door, because many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able to.*^{Lk.13:24}

What was Adam's work before the Fall?

How did the Fall affect Adam's life?

In what way has Jesus changed the way we live?

What work does God require from us?

What is the difference between working out our salvation and working for our salvation?

How can we ensure that our spiritual work is a blessing and not a burden?

Puritan Prayers

O Lord God, there is no blessing we implore but that You are able to give, have promised to give and have already given, 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 we may look with wonder, submission and delight to the provision You have made in the salvation of sinners, for the glory of Your Name. 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.

Sunday 15th May Ps.144:1-6. Dave Smethurst

**As Dave Smethurst is with us today, I have used *The Heathen and the Unknown God*.
*The Heathen and the Unknown God***

“Mr. Koukl, I want to get in a pointed comment here.” The talk show host hesitated, dramatizing the moment for his radio audience. *“We were talking about the person in Southeast Asia,”* he continued, *“the pagan or Buddhist or anyone who has never heard of Western Christianity. Father Kidney said, according to his [Roman Catholic] faith, that a person may be saved if he is honest and follows his religion. Do you believe that, or do you believe he is damned?”* Inside, I winced. The question was phrased so bluntly that my answer was bound to offend. In fact, on one level—an emotional one—it even bothered me. *“No,”* I answered calmly, *“I don’t believe he will be saved without the gospel of Jesus Christ.”*

The Despicable Doctrine: This challenge has nipped at the heels of Christians for ages. It’s caused some to limp through their witness with shrugs, apologies, and uncertainties. When they respond with biblical clarity, they suffer dismissal for their “arrogant,” “narrow-minded,” or “insensitive” dogma. The fate of the unevangelized is one of the most taxing issues I face since answering it requires making the kind of thoughtful, theological distinctions critics are not fond of countenancing. No matter how carefully the answer is characterized, the truth is still odious to them—a genuine stumbling block, foolishness. The issue can be answered, though, but the solution has some theological twists. The question is fraught with misconceptions and is often laden with emotion. As with many apologetics concerns, however, sound and precise theology is frequently all that’s needed to untangle the elements and bring order. At face value, in a postmodern culture, the exclusivity of the gospel and the requirement of faith in Christ for salvation are a bit much even for many committed believers. To non-Christians, the doctrine is despicable. If hearing the name of Jesus is a requirement for salvation, then entire cultures have been consigned to perdition, reducing the Almighty to a petty racist. Is that fair? Is it just? Even C.S. Lewis drew the circle wider than many evangelicals would feel comfortable with. He distinguished between those who aggressively evade the Son of God and those who reject him out of “*honest ignorance or honest error.*” Of the latter, Lewis says: *If their intentions were as good as I suppose them to have been...I hope and believe that the skill and mercy of God will remedy the evils which their ignorance, left to itself, would naturally produce.* (C.S. Lewis, *God in the Dock*)

The Common Denominator: Is it possible that the Bible lends support to this idea? Paul argues against works salvation by appealing to a single common denominator of the redeemed of every age. God justified New Testament believers the same way he justified Old Testament believers—by faith. What of Old Testament believers who never knew Jesus? What of Melchizedek, a priest of El Elyon (a Canaanite name for God Most High)? Or Rahab, a pagan prostitute who knew only that the Hebrew God was “*God in heaven above and on the earth beneath*”? Peter tells Cornelius that “*God is not one to show partiality, but in every nation the man who fears him and does what is right is welcome to him.*” ^{Acts.10:34–35} Lydia was simply a “*worshiper of God*” whose heart the Lord opened to respond to the things spoken by Paul. ^{Acts.16:14} Doesn’t it make sense that, as Rabbi Weiss argued on that radio show, “*all human beings, as long as they are decent, as long as they uphold the fundamental commandments...are promised a place in the world to come*”? Some New Testament texts seem to agree. Paul writes, “[*God*] *will render to every man according to his deeds.... For there is no partiality with God.*” ^{Rom. 2:6;11} Jesus himself states, “*An hour is coming, in which all who are in the tombs shall hear his voice, and shall come forth; those who did the good deeds to a resurrection of life, those who committed the evil deeds to a resurrection of judgment.*” ^{Jn.5:28–29}

What Must I Do? Fundamentally, the question of salvation is a question about criteria. With the Philippian jailer, we ask, “*What must I do to be saved?*” How, though, can we know what God wants? I put this question to a group of Christians. Their answer: God must reveal himself. For example, he’s revealed “*his eternal power and divine nature...through what has been made.*” ^{Rom.1:20} “*Is the issue of salvation, though,*

a question of *who God is—his attributes—or of what God wants—his desires?*” They thought for a minute. “*What he wants,*” they agreed finally. “*Look at Betty at the end of the table. We can know some general things about her by observation. But how can we know her desires?*” Their response was immediate: “*She has to tell us.*” Right. The same is true with God. He reveals something of his nature through the created order. But we cannot know his desires—specifically, what we must do to be saved—unless he tells us. Only when God speaks can we move beyond vague inferences to specifics (knowing God’s moral desires—the law God has revealed by writing it on our hearts—would be an exception). The fact that God has spoken is foundational to the Christian message. We don’t have to guess what he wants. He’s told us, and when God speaks, his Word puts an end to speculation. So what has God said? What is the biblical answer to the question “*What must I do to be saved?*” Unfortunately, Scripture seems to offer two completely different—and contradictory—answers to that question, as evidenced in the verses above. When the Philippian jailer asked, “*Sirs, what must I do to be saved?*” Paul answered, “*Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved.*”² *Acts 16:30–31* When the specialist in the Jewish Law asked Jesus the same question, though, Jesus directed him to Moses. “*What is written in the Law?*” he asked. When the lawyer cited the two great commandments, Jesus simply responded, “*Do this and you will live.*”³ *Lk. 10:25–28*

So which is it? Believe or behave? Is salvation through trust in Jesus or through obedience to Moses? When it comes to the question of the unevangelized—those who worship the “unknown God” and seek to faithfully follow the precepts of their own religions in “honest ignorance or honest error”—are they heirs of eternal life, made righteous through their own religion, or are they rejected by God for rejecting a Christ of whom they’ve never heard? **It’s time to begin to untie that tangle.**

The Problem of God’s Narrow Ways: To properly understand the biblical teaching on salvation, we must be crystal clear on something crucial at the outset: The God of Scripture has always been narrow. The Passover was God’s first act of deliverance of the Hebrews from slavery. Yet, in the rescue, there was danger. Those not “under the blood” were at lethal risk. Note God’s sober warning through Moses that an angel of death would sweep over Egypt on the night of that first Passover: *For I will go through the land of Egypt on that night, and will strike down all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both man and beast; and against all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments—I am the Lord. The blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you live; and when I see the blood I will pass over you, and no plague will befall you to destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt.*⁴ *Ex. 12:12–13* The Egyptians were a profoundly religious people, yet their single-minded devotion to the gods of their own pantheon offered them no protection from the wrath of the one true God. Indeed, the plagues were not just judgments against the Egyptians, but against their false gods as well (“*and against all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments*”). Soon after, at Sinai, the very first commandment God gave to the Jews defined the narrow path they were to follow: “*I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me.*”⁵ *Ex. 20:2–3* In the book of Numbers, when God sent poisonous snakes sweeping through the camp as judgment for the Jews’ rebellion during their wanderings in the wilderness, God made a narrow provision for their escape: *Then the Lord said to Moses, ‘Make a fiery serpent, and set it on a standard; and it shall come about, that everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, he shall live.’*⁶ *Nu. 21:8* Note carefully that only those Jews who looked on the brazen serpent physically survived. Jesus likened this event to his crucifixion, the only means of mankind’s spiritual survival: “*As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; so that whoever believes will in him have eternal life.*”⁷ *Jn. 3:14–15* Jesus’ own claim towards the end of his life, “*I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through me,*”⁸ *Jn. 14:6* perfectly coincided with his teaching in the Sermon on the Mount at the outset of his ministry: *Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it. For the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it.*⁹ *Matt. 7:13–14* Those whom Jesus personally

trained to follow after him proclaimed the same narrow message. Early in Acts, Peter preached the necessity of faith in Christ to the Jews even though they were deeply and faithfully committed to their own religious traditions: *He is the stone which was rejected by you, the builders, but which became the chief corner stone. And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved.*^{Acts.4:11–12} Paul wrote that God desires all to be saved by means of God's singular solution, specifically that *"there is one God, and one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all."*^{1Tim.2:4–6} Regardless of where one reads, then—the Hebrew Scriptures, the Gospels, the book of Acts, or the Epistles—the message is the same: **When it comes to salvation, God's way has always been narrow.**

The Problem of Sincerity. Most people in the world worship something beyond themselves. Some kind of god is the object of their religious attentions and affections, and with complete sincerity, they pay him—or it, or them—genuine homage. Why assume, though, that this is enough? Has God revealed that mere sincerity is adequate? No. Scripture says just the opposite. In his sermon on Mars Hill,^{Acts.17:22–31} Paul acknowledged that the Athenians were *"very religious in all aspects."* Indeed, they had even erected an idol *"to an unknown God."* Worshiping in ignorance, however—even with Lewis's *"good intentions"*—was not adequate, Paul instructed them. The great Lord of heaven and earth was not made of gold or silver or stone, and he could not be contained by temples made with human hands. Yes, God could be found by them, Paul acknowledged—if they would seek him in truth—but the Athenians had not found him yet, and the profusion of their idols was proof. Paul chastised them for their false views of God then called them to repentance, warning that judgment in righteousness was coming and that Jesus of Nazareth, the resurrected one, would preside over it. There was no hint of pluralism in Paul's words on Mars Hill, and he gave no hope that the men of Athens would find any refuge in their sincerity. Later, Paul speaks explicitly to the question of sincerity when he pours out his heart in lament for his lost brothers, the Jews: *Brethren, my heart's desire and my prayer to God for them is for their salvation. For I testify about them that they have a zeal for God, but not in accordance with knowledge. For not knowing about God's righteousness and seeking to establish their own, they did not subject themselves to the righteousness of God. For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.*^{Rom.10:1–4} The Jews had zeal, no question. It was the same zeal that compelled Paul to vigorously pursue Christians from city to city, punishing them, imprisoning them, and even overseeing their executions.^{Acts.26:9–11} It was this misdirected zeal—this errant sincerity—that qualified Paul not as a righteous religious man but as the foremost of sinners.^{1Tim.1:13–15} Sincere zeal must be aligned with truth. This is the case in virtually every area of our lives, but it's especially vital in spiritual things. Canaanites worshiping Molech did so zealously, but Molech was a non-god, an idol. Zeal is not an adequate defence. In fact, it can have disastrous results if not wedded to right knowledge (faithful Canaanite "worship" included child sacrifice).

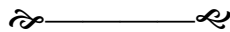
The Problem of Goodness. What of the good person, though? Surely, God will not reject him? Even the Scriptures seem to affirm as much, as we have seen (above). And what choice is there, anyway, for the decent non-believer who is geographically out of range of the gospel? If he is honest and follows his religion (Father Kidney), if his intentions are good (Lewis), if he keeps the great commandments (Jesus), will he not enjoy eternal life? Granted, if a man keeps God's law, he'll have no problem with God. Paul and Jesus both agree on this. The innocent *"beathen"* who has never heard the gospel goes straight to Heaven when he dies. Why shouldn't he, if he's innocent? The next question, however, is crucial: Where is such a person? Poll anyone on the definition of *"basically good,"* and you'll notice something interesting. Invariably, when we are the ones identifying real evil, we always come out fairly clean in the analysis. Our standards are generous because our self-interests are involved. The temptation to cover our own tracks is strong. The line dividing good folk from bad lies somewhere below us. We always seem to make the *"good person"* cut. Virtually everyone thinks himself in the winners' circle, more

or less, nothing like Dickens's "*squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous, old sinner*," Ebenezer Scrooge. Poll God, and measure by his standards, though, and the picture changes dramatically. Scrooges abound, and much worse. Even when the multitude of God's commands are reduced to two simple maxims—love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love your neighbour as yourself—our lives are still moral disasters. Think back on the lawyer in Luke 10 who asked Jesus, "*What shall I do to inherit eternal life?*" The lawyer understood the necessity of loving God, but the second commandment confused him. He needed clarification, but note his motivation: "*Wishing to justify himself, he said to Jesus, 'Who is my neighbour?'*" Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan follows, not principally as a morality tale—though that is how most understand it, unfortunately—but rather as an assault on any attempt at self-justification. Jesus uses the parable to eradicate any hope any of us might entertain that we can in any wise save ourselves. There is a fairly obvious reason that rigorous pursuit of obedience will do us no good: All law requires perfection. Note James: *For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all. For he who said, 'Do not commit adultery,' also said, 'Do not commit murder.'* Now if you do not commit adultery, but do commit murder, you have become a transgressor of the law.^{James 2:10–11} James confirms a common-sense notion. Laws are meant to be kept, and any violation deserves appropriate punishment. If you keep 99 laws but violate the 100th, you are a lawbreaker, nonetheless, and retribution awaits you. That is the reason why law-abiding citizens do not periodically get congratulatory letters from their district attorneys applauding them for their rectitude and inviting them to knock off a few gas stations since they now have credit on their accounts. Law does not work that way—man's law or God's law. Where is the good Buddhist, the good Hindu, or the good Muslim? The good Buddhist, Hindu, or Muslim is only "*good*" because he faithfully worships and obeys a false god, just like the Canaanites did—which can't be good, but bad, since it violates the true God's first commandment. Where is the good Christian, for that matter? He doesn't exist, not when measured by God's standards. Jesus made that clear: "*You are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*"^{Matt. 5:48} Put simply, the problem with goodness is that none of us—from the least to the greatest—can ever be good enough. God's perfect law puts us all under sin, as Paul writes, "*that every mouth may be closed and all the world may become accountable to God.*"^{Rom. 3:19} God's standards of moral perfection silence every claim to self-righteousness. Each of us stands guilty in the dock. Whenever I am tempted to weigh myself using the balance of good behaviour, I recall these words of the psalmist: *If you, Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand?*^{Psa. 130:3} If our moral scorecards are the standard for our acceptance by God, we are all doomed. The Scripture is clear: "*There is none righteous, not even one. . . . All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.*" Thus, "*by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in his sight.*"^{Rom. 3:10; 23; 3:20} The record destroys us all. "*Oh Lord, who can stand?*" None can. In the end, God's law breaks each one of us—Jew or Gentile, priest or pagan, evangelized or unevangelized—because goodness is not the real problem. Badness is.

The Central False Assumption. That evening on the radio, in my conversation with two religious Jews and a Roman Catholic priest, Rabbi Weiss voiced the concern at the heart of the problem of Christian exclusivism: *I would have to state very squarely...we don't accept that [people are lost without Christ] at all. We believe that the Almighty would have to be a very cruel, very unfeeling God that would make it necessary for so many millions of his children who are not in contact and who never have been in contact with anybody to spread the good news, to be damned eternally.* The rabbi, though, was making a mistake virtually everyone makes who balks at the demands of the gospel. It is a false assumption, a critical error made even by many Christians, a fundamental misunderstanding regarding those who have never heard the gospel. **No one goes to Hell for lack of belief in Christ**, whether they've heard of him or not. **Rather, they are punished for breaking God's law**—something everyone is guilty of. When the books are finally opened at the final reckoning, men will be judged by their deeds, not by their lack of belief, and everyone so judged perishes because each is guilty: *Then I saw a great white throne and him who sat upon it, from whose presence earth and heaven fled away, and no place was found for them. And I saw the dead, the great and*

the small, standing before the throne, and books were opened; and another book was opened, which is the book of life; and the dead were judged from the things which were written in the books, according to their deeds. . . . And they were judged, every one of them according to their deeds. . . . And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.^{Rev.20:11–15} That is the bad news, and the bad news is very, very bad. But bad news is what makes the good news good, the ray of hope revealed in the very next verse of the psalm I cited: *But there is forgiveness with you, That you might be feared.*

Is forgiveness available to everyone? Yes, I think it is, but it must be carefully—and biblically—qualified. Forgiveness from our narrow, holy God will not be on the basis of sincerity. It will not be on the basis of misplaced religious zeal. It will not be on the basis of personal goodness. That, the Scripture makes clear. Being convinced of these biblical truths is the first step to untying the tangle of the question of the fate of those who have never heard the gospel. It is the starting point, not the final word.



The public pressure to treat all religions as equally valid routes to God creates a tremendous emotional incentive to modify the Christian message. When people want to make Christianity kinder and gentler, they often tinker with the cross. To keep seekers from stumbling, they remove the stumbling block. They back down from the clear message Jesus entrusted to those he commissioned to take his teaching to the world. The impulse to soften the message is understandable. Out of tenderness and compassion, many want to suspend judgment on others' beliefs. Plus, there are a host of questions. "*What about those who have never heard the gospel?*" they ask. "*What about those who are 'basically good,' who sincerely worship God their own way? Who are we to say what's right for others? We can't read people's minds. We don't know the reasons they don't believe,*" they warn. "*Only God knows their hearts.*" True enough. Only God knows. Which is why the only way to know what God wants from us for salvation is for him to tell us. In order to give biblical answers to hard questions, we must trade on biblical truths and not on what seems to make sense to us based on mere human reflection. What God says about those who've never heard, though, does not help the cause of the all-roads-lead-to-Rome crowd.

Four Biblical Facts. **First,** Scripture teaches that from Passover to crucifixion God's requirements have always been narrow. The first commandment clearly states Yahweh's requirement of fidelity to the one, true God: "*You shall have no other gods before me.*"^{Ex.20:3} **Second,** Scripture teaches that no amount of sincerity—whether from Jews or from pagans—is adequate to sanitize false views of God. Indeed, Paul says, false religion is itself an expression of the wilful suppression of God's truth.^{Rom.1:18–25} Jesus alone is the "*true light,*"^{Jn.1:9} and the Father himself must be worshiped "*in truth.*"^{Jn.4:23} Paul and Peter both emphasize the necessity of "*true knowledge*" of God.^{Col.2:2; 2Pet.1:3;8} **Third,** Scripture teaches that all appeals to personal piety utterly fail since God's standard is moral perfection, leaving none righteous, not even one.^{Rom.3:10} In short, no one is "basically good." No moral behaviour can save us since no moral behaviour is adequate to cancel out immoral behaviour. Isaiah puts it bluntly: *For all of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment; and all of us wither like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.*^{Is.64:6} **Fourth,** Scripture teaches that men are not condemned for lack of belief in Christ, but for breaking God's law. They are judged for wrong behaviour, not for wrong belief about Jesus. True, unbelief keeps them from the antidote, the cross, thus sealing their doom.^{Jn.3:18} However, when the books are finally opened at the last judgment, men are judged by their deeds, and everyone so judged perishes, since each is guilty.^{Rev.20:13} Before we go further, though, I need to clear up a couple more misconceptions about those who have never heard the gospel. [By the way, there is no biblical reason to believe that anyone who rejects God's rescue in this life will have a second chance in the next. This verse seems decisive: "*It is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment.*"^{Heb.9:27} The urgency to communicate the gospel to perishing people on this side of the grave is also a strong

indicator that there is no hope for redemption on the other side of the grave. See also Jesus' parable of the rich man and Lazarus.^[Lk.16:19–31]

No Pardon Required. Forgive me for stating the obvious, but no criminal is ever entitled to a pardon. No offer of clemency is required before a judge can sentence a felon. Further, if a governor pardons one criminal, he has no obligation to pardon all. No, a pardon is an act of undeserved mercy and generosity. It is not an obligation. Obvious truths are not always obvious, though, especially when God gets in the picture. The same principle applies to him, however. God owes no man a pardon. Further, if God pardons one, he has no obligation to pardon others. Those who are guilty and condemned receive their just due. Those who are guilty and pardoned receive grace they did not deserve. God may show favor to whomever he wills. He is not unjust if he chooses to forgive some and not others, as Paul makes clear: *What shall we say then? There is no injustice with God, is there? May it never be! For he says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion."*^{Rom.9:14–15} Note, also, Jesus' point in his parable about workers who all received the same wage though some worked fewer hours: *But he answered and said to one of them, "Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what is yours and go, but I wish to give to this last man the same as to you. Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with what is my own? Or is your eye envious because I am generous?"*^{Matt.20:13–15} If God completely hid himself, providing no mercy at all, he would not be unjust to punish the guilty. In *What's Good about the Good News*, Neal Punt writes, "Every person finally lost receives justice. Every person finally saved receives mercy which is not deserved." (Neal Punt, *What's Good about the Good News?*). D.A. Carson concurs: *The Bible does not present us with a God who chances upon neutral men and women and arbitrarily consigns some to heaven and some to hell. He takes guilty men and women, all of whom deserve his wrath, and in his great mercy and love he saves vast numbers of them. Had he saved only one, it would have been an act of grace; that he saves a vast host affirms still more unmistakably the uncharted reaches of that grace.* (Carson, *How Long, O Lord?*) So let us be clear on this point. Forgiveness is never obligatory for God. His vast love does not require mercy. Rather, love arouses his mercy, motivating him to act above and beyond what his love demands. Hence, he may mete out justice to whomever he wills, and he may, according to the kind intention of his will, bestow grace to whomever he wishes.^{Eph.1:5} Another misunderstanding needs to be addressed, though, since it creates confusion for us regarding the question of the unevangelized.

Man on the Run. It is tempting to assume there are millions of spiritually naïve yet honourable unevangelized people—the religious version of Rousseau's "*noble savage*"—who desperately want to know God yet are left out simply because they are geographically isolated from the only message that can save them. Such an assumption raises the question, Is that just? There are no such people, though. Scripture makes it clear that man is not so noble or naïve. They may not have heard of the Son, true enough, but they have ample evidence of the Father. What is their response? They reject the limited light given them, not out of ignorance due to physical location, but out of wilful suppression of truth: *For even though they knew God, they did not honour him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened.... For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever.*^{Rom. 1:21;25} Do not miss the significance of Paul's teaching here. When left to himself, man runs from God, not towards him. Whether there's a wholesale rejection of the entire gospel in its clarity or a refusal on the more basic level of general revelation—God's witness in nature—man is equally at fault, "*without excuse*," in Paul's words.^{Rom.1:20} All humans, then—regardless of where they are located—are doubly guilty. First, they are under judgment for their lawlessness.^{Rom.1:28–32} Second, they have rejected the Father—who, according to Paul, is completely evident through general revelation—before they've even heard of the Son. Still, even while they are rebellious sinners, God loves them and desires for them to come to the truth.^{Rom.5:8;1Tim.2:4} Indeed, Peter counts the delay of Christ's return not as slowness, but as patience so

the guilty have time to repent rather than perish.^{2Pet.3:9} Note that man's persistent suppression of truth and wilful rebellion against God creates a serious problem that has only one solution. If sinful man does not seek God, but instead runs from him, then God must be the one who makes the first move to block man's retreat and turn his head toward the truth. Jesus said it clearly: *"No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him."*^{Jn.6:44} This means that no "heathen in Borneo" begins a genuine search for the true God unless the true God has first moved in him to do so. If God has to turn our heads, at least in some measure, before we can respond to the gospel, then God must also supply the specific information needed for salvation as part of that process. Since, in the New Testament period, active trust (faith) in Jesus is necessary for salvation.^{Gal.2:16; Jn.3:18;8:24;11:25-26; Acts.10:43;16:31} God will not supernaturally draw anyone to himself then deny him the information about Jesus that he needs to respond to God's movement in his heart. The act of God drawing us to himself for salvation and the revelation necessary for a response to that call are inseparable parts of God's rescue plan. If God does the first, then he provides the second—either through a human messenger or through direct supernatural communication—for any genuinely willing to respond.

Forming an Answer. So far, we've covered critical ground. **First**, God only punishes those who are guilty. **Second**, he owes no one a pardon. If he pardons some but not others, God is not unjust to punish those who are culpable. **Third**, guilty people don't seek God; they run from him. **Fourth**, God still takes the initiative to pursue rebellious human beings out of love. With all these elements in place, we can construct a response to our initial challenge. For anyone to come to God, he must come on God's terms, and only God can tell us what those terms are. The continuity of salvation, the common denominator through all ages, has been man's expression of active faith in the mercy and the promise of God. All past Old Testament believers—Abraham, Melchizedek, Rahab—demonstrated this redemptive trust. The specific content of this revelation, however, has grown through time. Abraham knew a little, David knew more, the prophets still more. The apostles (and you and I through their word) were the best informed of all. We don't know what the content was for Melchizedek, Job, or Jethro. We do know what God has revealed for us today, though: the atoning death of Christ. Jesus is the final statement, the perfect expression of God's mercy, the purest object of faith, the one and only adequate sacrifice for our sins. In fact, today, a person's response to Jesus is the acid test of what he really thinks of the Father. *"He who does not honour the Son,"* Jesus said, *"does not honour the Father who sent him.... He who hates me hates my Father also."*^{Jn.5:23;15:23} God can communicate this information to the seeking heart in two ways. It's certainly possible that in isolated situations he communicates directly as he did with Abraham. In that case, though, the God who will be revealed will be the true God, not Buddha, Allah, Krishna, Rah, Zeus, or Mother Earth. In short, the God the heathen discovers through direct revelation will be the Lord Jesus himself. Usually, however, the message of the true Saviour comes on the lips of a preacher bearing the good news.^{Rom.10:14-15} When God touches someone's heart to seek him, he will move heaven and earth to bring that person the message he needs to hear. Biblical examples abound. Rahab responded to her rudimentary knowledge of the God of Israel, and God brought the Jewish spies right to her door.^{Jos.2:1} Phillip *"preached Jesus"* to the Ethiopian eunuch who was reading Isaiah on the road to Gaza.^{Acts.8:26-39} Peter brought *"the words by which you will be saved"* to the household of Cornelius, the God-fearer.^{Acts.10:23-48;11:14} The Lord *"opened"* Lydia's heart *"to respond to the things spoken by Paul."*^{Acts.16:14} Each was given the specifics of Christ himself in response to their seeking.

In *Death of a Guru*, Rabindranath Maharaj tells of his life as a young yogi, a guru, and a member of the Brahman caste. He'd experienced astral travel to other planets, had psychedelic experiences, and received yogic visions. Deep meditation led to higher and higher states of consciousness. Rabi discovered, though, that each step closer to his Hindu gods was a step

farther from the true God he sought in his heart. When confronted with the utter emptiness of his life and the shallowness of his religion, he cried out, “*I want to know the true God, the Creator of the universe!*” (R. Maharaj, *Death of a Guru*.) God responded to the longing in his heart by bringing the gospel to him through the witness of a young woman named Molli.

On the Street. Christians can be confident of this: Anyone seeking God in truth will find him and be accepted by him. Even so, Scripture clearly teaches that, given human rebellion, the “*unevangelized*” of any land—even ours—will seek his Creator only if God has already moved in his heart to do so. When God calls, though, he always provides the content necessary for that person to respond with faith in Jesus, no matter how remote or isolated that seeker may be.

Here’s how you might sum things up for a challenger “*on the street*,” as it were: Assure them that **no one is lost for rejecting a Jesus he’s never heard of. God will judge each person by the light given him and the life he has lived.** Point out, though, that this is not good news. God’s fingerprints are evident everywhere, and we all know we consistently fail to live as we ought, so none of us has an excuse. We are all guilty. Men are held accountable for their own moral crimes against God, such as they are, and for rejecting the Father whose voice is heard everywhere. Further, God does not owe any person a pardon. God can reach any person in any circumstance. He is not limited by geography, technology, language, or culture. Anyone seeking the true God on God’s terms will find him. The God they find, though, will not be the false gods of competing religions, but Jesus himself.

Don’t let questions about the unevangelized distract you from the most important issue, which is: **What will each of us do with the message we’ve heard?** That last point is the real issue for the man on the street—when he faces God, there will be no discussion about the heathen who never heard. Instead, the question will be different. What about those who **have** heard? What about **him**? Did **he** bend his knee and ask Jesus for forgiveness?

Ultimately, that will be the only question that matters. Greg Koukl (www.str.org)

Questions

Please find Bible references to support your comments

- ✓ **What are your thoughts on Greg Koukl’s statement:** *I don’t believe he will be saved without the gospel of Jesus Christ.*
- ✓ **What are your thoughts on C.S.Lewis’ statement:** *If their intentions were as good as I suppose them to have been...I hope and believe that the skill and mercy of God will remedy the evils which their ignorance, left to itself, would naturally produce. (C.S. Lewis, God in the Dock)*
- ✓ **What are your thoughts on Weiss’ statement:** *all human beings, as long as they are decent, as long as they uphold the fundamental commandments...are promised a place in the world to come.*
- ✓ **Has God revealed that mere sincerity is adequate?**
- ✓ **Is forgiveness available to everyone?**
- ✓ **What are your thoughts on Greg K’s statement that the most important issue is:** *What will each of us do with the message we’ve heard?*

Puritan Prayers

Heavenly Father, 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. May we persevere in duty (even when we are not fully conscious of You), wait upon You and keep Your ways, living continually as on the brink of eternity. We are at Your disposal for the duties and events of life, submitting our preferences to Your wisdom and will. May we know the blessedness of people whose strength is in You and in whose hearts are the highways to heaven.

Sunday 22nd May. Ps.144:9-15 Lk.14

Food and Feasting. *Blessed is the one who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God.*^{Lk.14:15}

We all enjoy eating (unless we are ill) and with a such great variety of cultural food available to us now, we can take our pick—or enjoy them all! Of course, eating has the practical purpose of bringing nourishment to our bodies, but words like feast and banquet suggest there is pleasure and satisfaction in the eating food as well. *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.*^{Is.25:6}

And of course, every family gathering will always include food. All the Jewish holy-days were feast-days but the most enjoyable of all holy-days was supposed to be the Sabbath: *If you keep your feet from breaking the Sabbath and from doing as you please on my holy day, if you call the Sabbath a delight and the LORD's holy day honourable, and if you honour it by not going your own way and not doing as you please or speaking idle words, then you will find your joy in the LORD, and I will cause you to ride on the heights of the land and to feast on the inheritance of your father Jacob.*^{Is.58:13}

The Sabbath should have been a delight for the Jews and the Rabbis taught that *not only were fasting and mourning strictly prohibited [on the Sabbath], but food, dress, and every manner of enjoyment, not incompatible with abstinence from work, were prescribed to render the day pleasurable. All the days of the week, has God paired, except the Sabbath, which is alone, that it may be wedded to Israel. Israel was to welcome the Sabbath as a bride; its advent as that of a king. But in practice all this terribly degenerated. Readers of the New Testament know how entirely, and even cruelly, the spirit and object of the Sabbath were perverted by the traditions of the elders.*^{Edersheim, The Temple}

When Jesus healed people on the Sabbath, it made the Jewish leaders angry: *Jesus had healed the woman on the Sabbath day. This made the synagogue ruler angry.*^{Lk.13:14} *Jesus was doing these things on the Sabbath day. So the Jews began to oppose him. Jesus said to them, "My Father is always doing his work. He is working right up to this very day. I am working too." For this reason the Jews tried even harder to kill him. Jesus was not only breaking the Sabbath. He was even calling God his own Father. He was making himself equal with God.*^{Jn.5:16-18} The attitude of the Jewish rulers show how far they had turned from God—instead of rejoicing in Him, they rejected Him. Then Jesus said to them, *"The Sabbath was made to meet the needs of people, and not people to meet the requirements of the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord, even over the Sabbath!"*^{Mk.2:27-28}

But however much we enjoy eating, too much food is bad for us. Obesity puts a great strain on the body and actually affects our body, soul and mind (and ultimately our spirit as well). Gluttony is traditionally one of the deadly sins—Lust; Gluttony; Greed; Sloth; Wrath; Envy; Pride—and regardless of your size, it is greediness. *A discerning son heeds instruction, but a companion of gluttons disgraces his father.*^{Prov.28:7} *But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people. Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving. For of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person [glutton]—such a person is an idolater—has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God.*^{Eph.5:3-5} *Listen, my son and be wise and set your heart on the right path: Do not join those who drink too much wine or gorge themselves on meat, for drunkards and gluttons become poor, and drowsiness clothes them in rags.*^{Prov.23:19-21}

Under the New Covenant, God comes and resides within a Believer so that their character or personality is changed. Instead of living for themselves and displaying the excesses of their own desire or flesh, Believers are transformed from within, so that they develop the personality or character of Jesus. This is the called the Fruit of the Spirit: *But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.*^{Gal.5:22-25} *Do not be deceived: Neither ...thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And that is what some of you were. But you were washed,*

you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God. "Everything is permissible for me"—but not everything is beneficial. "Everything is permissible for me"—but I will not be mastered by anything. "Food for the stomach and the stomach for food"—but God will destroy them both.^{1Cor.6:9-13} While dining with a ruler, pay attention to what is put before you. If you are a big eater, put a knife to your throat; don't desire all the delicacies, for he might be trying to trick you.^{Psm.23:1-3} Living bad lives or displaying fruit of the flesh (including greed or lack of self-control) instead fruit of the Spirit, shows contempt for God and dishonours His Name: "But you ask, 'How have we ever shown contempt for your name?' 'You have shown contempt by offering defiled sacrifices on my altar... But my name is honoured by people of other nations from morning till night. All around the world they offer sweet incense and pure offerings in honour of my name. For my name is great among the nations,'" says the LORD of Heaven's Armies. "But you dishonour my name with your actions. By bringing contemptible food, you are saying it's all right to defile the Lord's table. You say, 'It's too hard to serve the LORD,' and you turn up your noses at my commands," says the LORD of Heaven's Armies.^{Mal.1:6-13} Now we know that God's judgment against those who do such things [greed, envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice, gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful, fidelity, no love, no mercy] is based on truth. So when you, a mere human being, pass judgment on them and yet do the same things, do you think you will escape God's judgment? 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?^{Rom.2:2-4}

The OT records many historical examples, so we can learn from their mistakes (both intentional sins and unintentional sins): The people went out all day and gathered quail. They gathered them all night and all the next day. No one gathered less than 60 bushels. Then they spread the quail out all around the camp. But while the meat was still in their mouths, the LORD acted. Before the people could swallow it, his anger burned against them. He struck them with a terrible plague. So the place was named Kibroth Hattaavah (which means "graves of gluttony"). That's where the bodies of the people who had longed for other food were buried.^{Nu.11:32-34} Brothers and sisters, here is what I want you to know about our people who lived long ago. They were all led by the cloud. They all walked through the Red Sea. They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. They all ate the same supernatural food. They all drank the same supernatural water. They drank from the supernatural rock that went with them. That rock was Christ. But God was not pleased with most of them. Their bodies were scattered all over the desert. Now those things happened as examples for us. They are supposed to keep us from longing for evil things, as the people of Israel did. So don't worship statues of gods, as some of them did. It is written, "As it is written, 'The people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play' ... Those things happened to them as examples for us. They were written down to warn us who are living at the time when God's work is being completed. So be careful. When you think you are standing firm, you might fall."^{1Cor.10:1-12}

Food in itself won't corrupt us because God has declared all food acceptable and ceremonially clean. Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification. Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food. [All food is good, but it can turn bad if you use it badly, if you use it to trip others up and send them sprawling.] All food is clean, but it is wrong for a person to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble. It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother or sister to fall.^{Rom.14:19-21} However, if we ignore God and His values (kingdom) we can easily slide into complacency and then find our good character corrupted. "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die." Do not be misled: "Bad company corrupts good character." Come back to your senses as you ought, and stop sinning; for there are some who are ignorant of God—I say this to your shame.^{1Cor.15:32-34} And good food with good company is enjoyable. A person can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in their own toil. This too, I see, is from the hand of God, for without him, who can eat or find enjoyment? To the person who pleases him, God gives wisdom, knowledge and happiness, but to the sinner he gives the task of gathering and storing up wealth to hand it over to the one who pleases God.^{Ecd.2:24-26} So I commend the enjoyment of life, because there is nothing better for a person under the sun than to eat and drink and be glad. Then joy will accompany them in their toil all the days of the life God has given them under the sun.^{Ecd.8:15}

But we should focus more on our spiritual diet than our natural diet and ensure that we feast on God's spiritual provisions: *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} God has given us spiritual food now—the Word of God: *The tempter came to him. He said, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread." Jesus answered, "It is written, 'Man doesn't live only on bread. He also lives on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'*"^{Matt.4:3-4} But God also has a future spiritual feast awaiting for us: *I tell you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it anew with you in my Father's kingdom.*^{Matt.26:29} *People will come from east and west and north and south, and will take their places at the feast in the kingdom of God. Indeed there are those who are last who will be first, and first who will be last.*^{Lk.13:29-30} We prepare ourselves by wearing the right clothes (actually clothes of righteousness): *"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 the saints.) *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."*^{Rev.19:6-9} This means being clothed in Jesus' righteous AND THEN LIVING AS RIGHTEOUS PEOPLE! If our faith means anything, we must strive for consistency in our living—saying what we mean, meaning what we say, and showing it by our actions. For instance: *We are sure that we know Christ if we obey his commandments. The person who says, "I know him," but doesn't obey his commandments is a liar. The truth isn't in that person. But whoever obeys what Christ says is the kind of person in whom God's love is perfected. That's how we know we are in Christ. Those who say that they live in him must live the same way he lived.*^{1Jn.2:3-6} *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. Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born again because of what God has done. And everyone who loves the Father loves his children as well. How do we know that we love God's children? We know it when we love God and obey his commands. Here is what it means to love God. It means that we obey his commands. And his commands are not hard to obey. That's because everyone who is a child of God has won the battle over the world. Our faith has won the battle for us.*^{1Jn.4:19-5:4}

Not all who have been invited to God's banquet will actually partake of that feast: *The servant came back and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and ordered his servant, 'Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame.'* '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 and country lanes and compel them to come in, so that my house will be full. I tell you, not one of those who were invited will get a taste of my banquet.'*^{Lk.14:21-24} Christianity is not a "take-it-or-leave-it" religion—it is credible, it is consistent with the facts and it has consequences: *I have the same hope in God as these men, that there will be a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked. So I strive always to keep my conscience clear before God and man.*^{Acts.24:15-16} And there are practical benefits of living the Christian life—benefits such as, peace with God, better health, a hope for the future: *Praise the LORD, O my soul; all my inmost being, praise his holy name. Praise the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits—who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit and crowns you with love and compassion, who satisfies your desires with good things so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.*^{Ps.103:1-5}

Of course, we expect to experience the benefits of living righteously in this life—but we may not! However, we will receive our reward in the next: *But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.*^{Lk.14:13-14} So let's persevere—especially our hope—because perseverance

produces character; and character, produces hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.^{Rom.5:3-5}

Questions

Is it unspiritual or wrong to socialise and enjoy physical food?

What is spiritual food?

How can we feast on spiritual food?

What sort of banquet do you think we will have in heaven?

What does perseverance mean?

How can we ensure that we truly respect God and not show contempt for Him?

What can we do to ensure that we do persevere?

Puritan Prayers

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 and 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, and the appetite of faith to feed upon Him, that we might find in Him, light, riches, honour and eternal life. You are the inviting One—may we hearken to You.

Sunday 29th May Ps.145:1-7 Lk.15

How to make God happy! *'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.'* In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents." I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God.^{Lk.15:9-10}

Last week we saw that the OT Sabbath should have been the happiest day of the week instead of the hardest day of the week. The Rabbis taught that fasting and mourning were strictly prohibited on the Sabbath and even people's clothes were to reflect the enjoyment of the day—but in reality, the spirit and purpose of the Sabbath had been perverted by the traditions of the elders. What should have been true spiritual rest and enjoyment had become religious bigotry and hypocrisy. If the tradition could pervert the most holy of all Jewish days—the Sabbath day—to a religious chore, then we should be careful that we don't allow traditions to pervert our relationship with God to a religious chore.

The three lost and found parables—the lost and found sheep, the lost and found silver and the lost and found son—all have the same theme: **there is great rejoicing when the lost is found!** Jesus used these stories to explain that God loves us very much, that He wants us to be united with Him, and that there is great rejoicing in heaven when someone repents. In each of these stories, Jesus emphasised that **repentance leads to rejoicing**. *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... I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents... The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'* But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate.'^{Lk.15:7;10;21-23}

Repentance was the theme of John the Baptist's preaching: *In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the Desert of Judea and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near."*^{Matt.3:1-2} Repentance was also the theme of Jesus' preaching: *Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. "The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!"*^{Mk.1:14-15} And so it not surprising that repentance is the basis of our salvation: *This is what the Sovereign LORD, the Holy One of Israel, says: "In repentance and rest is your salvation, in quietness and trust is your*

strength (but you would have none of it).^{Is.30:15} 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**. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything done in it will be laid bare. Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming.^{2Pet.3:9-12}

To repent means: *to change your mind*, and in Christian terms, this means: *to change your mind about God*. The Holy Spirit's ministry is to convict about wrong thinking and then enable people to change their minds about sin, righteousness and judgement: *Unless I go away, the Counsellor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. When he comes, he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment: in regard to sin, because men do not believe in me; in regard to righteousness, because I am going to the Father, where you can see me no longer; and in regard to judgment, because the prince of this world now stands condemned.*^{Jn.16:7-11} Although repentance doesn't require perfection, it does require an attitude of grace, gratitude and gentleness towards God and people and **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. Without repentance there can be no restoration and neither can there be any true rejoicing: *For the kind of sorrow God wants us to experience leads us away from sin and results in salvation. There's no regret for that kind of sorrow. But worldly sorrow, which lacks repentance, results in spiritual death.*^{2Cor.7:10} F.W.Boreham said: *there is an eternal difference that one or two letters make! The scholarly Philip Melancthon sought his burly friend Martin Luther and pointed out to him that the Greek word that had always been translated penance really meant repentance, a change of heart. Judas performed penance when he went out and hanged himself; Peter exhibited penitence when he went out and wept bitterly.*^{The Late Lark Singing}

When Peter asked about forgiving repeat offenders, Jesus' answer appears to be a soft touch: *Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?" Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times."*^{Mat.18:21-22} However, Jesus later explained that some crimes (especially crimes against children) are heinous and deserve the most severe penalty, but other sins (especially sins against yourself) should be confronted, and, if the offender repents, the perpetrator should be forgiven. No wonder the apostles responded: *"Increase our faith!": Jesus said to his disciples: "Things that cause people to stumble are bound to come, but woe to anyone through whom they come. It would be better for them to be thrown into the sea with a millstone tied around their neck than to cause one of these little ones to stumble. So watch yourselves. If your brother or sister sins against you, rebuke them; and if they repent, forgive them. Even if they sin against you seven times in a day and seven times come back to you saying 'I repent,' you must forgive them."* 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.17:1-6} God's standard is perfection—He isn't just "holy" but triply holy (three meaning perfection or absolute): *Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.*^{Is.6:3} *Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!*^{Rev.4:8} Because God is *holy, holy, holy*, what is directly associated with Him is also *holy*—including His redeemed people. To be a Christian is to be made *holy*—and without being made holy, a person cannot see God let alone enter Heaven after this life: *Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord.*^{Heb.12:14} But although we may never completely live up to God's perfect standard, including forgiving someone 70 x 7 (490) times a day—or even 70 + 7 (77) times a day—God does live up to His perfect standard! This should give us great comfort and assurance to know that no matter how

many times we offend God, there is forgiveness if we repent! But we should not take God for granted or abuse His kindness: *Do you have contempt for God, who is very kind to you, puts up with you, and deals patiently with you? Don't you realize that it is God's kindness that is trying to lead you to him and change the way you think and act? [God is kind, but he's not soft.TM] Since you are stubborn and don't want to change the way you think and act, you are adding to the anger that God will have against you on that day when God vents his anger. At that time God will reveal that his decisions are fair. He will pay all people back for what they have done. He will give everlasting life to those who search for glory, honour, and immortality by persisting in doing what is good. But he will bring anger and fury on those who, in selfish pride, refuse to believe the truth and who follow what is wrong.*^{Rom.2:4-8} We didn't deserve God's forgiveness, but He forgave us anyway—because that is His character! But you, Lord, are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness.^{Ps.86:15} And God's forgiveness is unconditional: *This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.*^{1Jn.4:9-10} But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! For if, while we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!^{Rom.5:8-10} However, restoration is conditional upon repentance: *But when John saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not think you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.'*^{Matt.3:7-9} The greatest blessing (and thus rejoicing) is to know that our sins are forgiven: *David says the same thing when he speaks of the blessedness of the one to whom God credits righteousness apart from works: "Blessed are those whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the one whose sin the Lord will never count against them." ...Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand.*^{Rom.4:6-8;5:1-2} Yes, when we repent, we make God really happy—and that happiness is contagious! So let's live in the joy of our salvation: *Surely God is my salvation; I will trust and not be afraid. The LORD, the LORD himself, is my strength and my defence; he has become my salvation." With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.*^{Is.12:2-3}

Questions—How to make God happy!

What does repent mean?

How is repentance linked with remission (forgiveness) of sins? (*Lk.24:47*)

Is there a difference between penance and penitence?

What does this mean: *there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God.*^{Lk.15:9-10}?

Is God's forgiveness conditional or unconditional?

Should the State forgive people unconditionally?

Should we forgive people unconditionally?

Puritan Prayers

You are the Almighty Instructor—teach us to live for 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 Your love and in the enjoyment of Your love, nothing can make us miserable. Preserve us from all hypocrisy and formality in religion. Enable us to remember what You are and what we are; to recall Your holiness and our unworthiness; to approach You boldly yet clothed with humility. Let us never forget Your patience, wisdom, power, faithfulness and care—and let us never cease to respond to Your invitations.

June

Thought for the Month: The chief danger that confronts the coming century will be religion without the Holy Ghost, Christianity without Christ, forgiveness without repentance, salvation without regeneration, politics without God, heaven without hell. *William Booth*

June's Theme: Goodness—For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all GOODNESS, righteousness and truth). *Eph. 5:8-9*

Sunday 5th June Ps.1

Diamond Jubilee Service

This week we are celebrating and commemorating Queen Elizabeth's Platinum Jubilee—the longest reign of any British Monarch—70 years, 120 days today! Queen Victoria reigned 63 years, 216 days (1837–1901). Louis XIV of France reigned 72 years, 110 days (1643–1715), King Rama IX of Thailand reigned 70 years, 126 days (1946–2016), and king Sobhuza II of Swaziland reigned for 82 years and 254 days (from 1899–1982 but he was only 4 months old when he became king! The Queen has brought stability to our country by her consistency and also her counsel to 14 different Prime Ministers. At her Coronation, the Queen was asked: *Will you to the utmost of your power maintain the Laws of God and the true profession of the Gospel?* to which she replied that she would. In her capacity as queen of the United Kingdom, Her Majesty is styled, "*Elizabeth the Second, by the Grace of God, of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and of Her other Realms and Territories Queen, Head of the Commonwealth, Defender of the Faith*". The title "*Defender of the Faith*" was granted to King Henry VIII in 1521 by Pope Leo X in recognition of Henry's book *Assertio Septem Sacramentorum* (Defence of the Seven Sacraments), which was a direct attack on Martin Luther and the growing Protestant influence in Europe. The Seven Sacraments of the Catholic Church that Henry was promoting are: *Baptism; The Lord's Supper; Chrismation/ Confirmation; Marriage; Anointing the sick; Confession; The Priesthood/ Ordination*. The word "*sacrament*" comes from Latin, meaning "*an oath*", which comes from "*to consecrate or sacred*". Thus, a sacrament is a rite or ritual that is believed to be a means of grace, *i.e.*, the ritual itself imparts some spiritual benefit. Our belief is that Baptism and the Lord's Supper are Ordinances—an ordinance is something we do because Jesus Christ commanded (ordered) us to do it. When Henry VIII broke with Rome in 1530 and established himself as head of the Church of England, the title was revoked by Pope Paul III (since Henry's act was regarded as an attack on "the Faith") and Henry was excommunicated. However, in 1544 Parliament conferred the title "*Defender of the Faith*" on Henry and his successors. The reigning Monarch is the Supreme Governor of the Church of England (formally above the Archbishop of York who is known as "*Primate of England*" and the Archbishop of Canterbury, who is known as "*Primate of all England*"). [During *The Protectorate* in the 1650's, the republican heads of state Oliver Cromwell and Richard Cromwell, although claiming divine sanction, did not adopt the style "*Defender of the Faith*". However, the style was reintroduced after the restoration of the monarchy on 1660.] The letters *F.D.* or *Fid. Def.* (abbreviation of *Fidei Defensor* meaning *Defender of the Faith*) were first added to British coins in 1714 during the reign of King George I but was omitted in 1849 and the so called "*Godless Florin*" caused so much criticism that the coin had to be replaced with the inscription *Fid. Def.*!

So, although the Pope did not originally intend the title *Defender of the Faith* to encourage a personal faith, our Queen has consistently promoted her personal faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and especially in her Christmas broadcasts. The late Dr Billy Graham said that by

having him preach on several occasions to the royal family at Windsor and Sandringham, Her Majesty had gone out of her way to be quietly supportive of his mission. He believed one reason for the Queen's spiritual interest was the warm faith of her mother!

But there is another Monarch whose kingdom will last for much longer than 70 years—and this Monarch's reign will never end:

He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High God. The Lord God will make him a king like his father David of long ago. He will rule forever over his people... His kingdom will never end.^{Lk.1:32-33}

His Kingdom will dominate every other kingdom, not in tyranny but in freedom, justice and liberty: *In the time of those kings, the God of heaven will set up a kingdom. It will never be destroyed. And no other nation will ever take it over. It will crush all of those other kingdoms. It will bring them to an end. But it will last forever... The great God has shown you what will take place in days to come... And you can trust the meaning I have given you for it.*^{Dan.2:44-}

⁴⁵ "The days are coming," declares the LORD, "when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land."^{Jer.23:5} **The name of this Monarch is**

Jesus. Although He was born a King,^{Matt.1:2} He had an ordinary upbringing until one day, as

He was being baptised, the Holy Spirit descended on Him and equipped Him for an extraordinary ministry of healing and helping people: *This is the message of Good News for the people of Israel—that there is peace with God through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all. You know what happened throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee, after John began preaching his message of baptism. And you know that God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. Then Jesus went around doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him.*^{Acts 10:36-38}

But the greatest part of His ministry was reconciling us to God—which He accomplished by dying on the Cross: *For [Jesus] himself is our peace... His purpose was ...to reconcile [us] to God through the cross... He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.*^{Eph.2:14-18}

At the insistence of the Jews, Jesus was executed by the Romans, but He could have avoided His death by calling on His Father for help: *Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels? But how then would the Scriptures be fulfilled that say it must happen in this way?*^{2Matt.26:53-54}

Then he went a short distance away from them. There he got down on his knees and prayed. He said, "Father, if you are willing, take this cup of suffering away from me. But do what you want, not what I want."^{Lk.22:41-42}

The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father.^{Jn.10:17-18}

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}

After 3 days Jesus rose from the grave and 40 days later He ascended physically to Heaven! As His friends were watching, an angel said: *why do you stand here looking at the sky? Jesus has been taken away from you into heaven. But he will come back in the same way you saw him go.*^{Acts.1:11}

And 10 days after His ascension—50 days after His death—Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to earth, to continue His work of reconciling people to God so they could become part of God's Kingdom.

God's Kingdom was the main theme of Jesus' teaching: *God blesses those who are poor and realize their need for him, for the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs. God blesses those who mourn, for they will be comforted. God blesses those who are humble, for they will inherit the whole earth. God blesses those who hunger and thirst for justice, for they will be satisfied. God blesses those who are merciful, for they will be shown mercy. God blesses those whose hearts are pure, for they will see God. God blesses those who work for peace, for they will be called the children of God. God blesses those who are persecuted for doing right,*

for the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs. God blesses you when people mock you and persecute you and lie about you and say all sorts of evil things against you because you are my followers. Be happy about it! Be very glad! For a great reward awaits you in heaven. And remember, the ancient prophets were persecuted in the same way.^{Matt.5:3-11} But we don't have to relinquish our UK citizenship in order to be a citizen in God's Kingdom! God's Kingdom of Heaven is a parallel kingdom to the UK and so we can be in both kingdoms at the same time without any conflict—mostly! We can be loyal to King Jesus as well as to our Queen. However, if there is a conflict (i.e. if we are expected to support something immoral or blasphemous) then we must do as our conscience permits and take the consequences, just as the early Apostles did: *But Peter and the apostles replied, "We must obey God rather than any human authority... [Then] they called in the apostles and had them flogged. Then they ordered them never again to speak in the name of Jesus, and they let them go. The apostles left the high council rejoicing that God had counted them worthy to suffer disgrace for the name of Jesus. And every day, in the Temple and from house to house, they continued to teach and preach this message: "Jesus is the Christ."*^{Acts.5:29-42}

Life in God's Kingdom under Jesus rule is described as blessed. In Psalm 1 that we read together, the **blessed** person is described as someone who doesn't make fun of God and His values, neither does he follow advice of bad people or make a habit of doing wrong. Instead, the blessed person takes delight in God and thinks a lot about His values. That person is like a tree planted near a stream of water—always bearing fruit at the right time, which results in everything turning out well in the end! Is that the kind of life you want to live—not having to look over your shoulder to see if someone will accuse you or worrying if someone is trying to harm you? God's Kingdom will eventually dominate the whole world: *In the time of those kings, the God of heaven will set up a kingdom. It will never be destroyed. And no other nation will ever take it over. It will crush all of those other kingdoms. It will bring them to an end. But it will last forever. That's what the vision of the rock cut out of a mountain means. Human hands didn't cut the rock out. It broke the statue to pieces. It smashed the iron, bronze, clay, silver and gold. "The great God has shown you what will take place in days to come. The dream is true. And you can trust the meaning I have given you for it."*^{Dan.2:44-45} **And so the big question is: Are you a citizen of God's Kingdom? If you are citizen of God's Kingdom, then live as a citizen of Heaven:** *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.3:20-21} *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}

If you are not yet of citizen of God's Kingdom, then listen to these words from God and if you take them to heart, they will change your life, because God always keeps His Word: *[Jesus] came into the very world he created, but the world didn't recognize him. He came to his own people, and even they rejected him. But to all who believed him and accepted him, he gave the right to become children of God. They are reborn—not with a physical birth resulting from human passion or plan, but a birth that comes from God. 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.1:10-14} *"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." There is no difference between those who are Jews and*

those who are not. The same Lord is Lord of all. He richly blesses everyone who calls on him. Scripture says, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." Rom.10:8-13

Diamond Jubilee Service

Questions

Can a ritual impart any spiritual benefit?

What does the Bible teach about the relationship between State and Church?

Should a person's position in the Church be linked to their social status or to their spiritual status?

Can we have a role in both the State Kingdom and God's Kingdom?

What are the basic values of God's Kingdom?

Puritan Prayer

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 us 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!

Sunday 12th June Ps.145: 8-14. Lk.16

Who are you trying to kid? *You try to make yourselves look good in the eyes of other people. But God knows your hearts. What is worth a great deal among people is hated by God.* Lk.16:15

The Queen's Platinum Jubilee last week was a celebration of the 70 years she has been Queen of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and of her other Realms and Territories. The Queen is also Head of the Commonwealth, which is a voluntary association of 54 independent and equal countries, whose member governments have agreed to shared goals like development, democracy and peace. However, our democracy did not just appear—it is based on the **Magna Carta** and has taken many centuries (and many mistakes) to get where we are today. In 1215 there was a revolt by the English barons against King John—and in order to bring peace, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Stephen Langton, drafted the **Magna Carta Libertatum** (Latin for "*Great Charter of Liberties*"), more commonly known as the **Magna Carta**. This *Great Charter of Liberties* promised the protection of church rights, protection for the barons from illegal imprisonment, access to swift justice, and limitations on feudal payments to the Crown. (Last weekend Margaret and I visited Salisbury Cathedral and saw one of the 4 extant Magna Carta manuscripts from 1215—it is written in heavily abbreviated medieval Latin without any divisions of paragraphs or numbered clauses.) Stephen Langton based the Magna Carta on the *Coronation Charter* (or *Charter of Liberties*), which was a written proclamation by Henry I upon his accession to the throne in 1100 and sought to redress the abuses of royal power by his predecessor and brother, William II but it was not enforceable. The *Coronation*

Charter incorporated the *Laws of Edward the Confessor*, which was a collection of English laws based on Alfred the Great's Bible-based *Saxon Codes* and ensured that kings were subject to the law and also that their subjects had rights which the State could not override. True to form, King John abrogated the Magna Carta almost immediately after he signed them—but he died a year later and the “*Great Charter*” was re-issued as part of the Coronation of his son, King Henry III. The Magna Carta was confirmed or re-issued on 40 other occasions (the last by Henry VI in 1423) and is described by Lord Denning as: ‘*The greatest constitutional document of all times—the foundation of the freedom of the individual against the arbitrary authority of the despot.*’ From the moment it was signed, the Magna Carta held out the promise of freedom—freedom from arbitrary rule, freedom from oppression, freedom from tyranny: *no free man being imprisoned except by the judgment of his peers or due process of law.* However, our democracy has taken a long time to mature—over 800 years since the original signing of the Magna Carta 1215. And it has been a costly journey too, with injustice, unrest, riots, rebellions (including the Monmouth Rebellion 1685 and the Glorious Revolution 1688) and even a Civil War in the 1640s, when Charles I usurped Parliament's authority! A major landmark in the evolution of our democracy was in 1772 (60 years before Wilberforce's *Slavery Abolition Act* of 1833) when the Lord Chief Justice, Lord Mansfield delivered a judgment pronouncing: “*Every man who comes to England is entitled to the protection of English law, whatever oppression he may heretofore have suffered, and whatever may be the colour of his skin, whether it is black or whether it is white.*”

And so, the basic values of our country are based on the Magna Carta, which had its roots in Alfred the Great's commitment to put God's law first and man's law second. King Alfred recognised that law is not simply what we choose to make it, but we are answerable to a higher moral standard—and he acknowledged that God has revealed this higher moral standard to us in the Bible. Jesus said: *You try to make yourselves look good in the eyes of other people. But God knows your hearts. What is worth a great deal among people is hated by God,*^{Lk.16:15} but obviously, our democracy is not hated by God when it is based on Bible values—which shows the importance of taking Scripture in context and not out of context—**exegesis** not **eisogesis**!

In our Bible Study last week, we asked the question: *What are the basic values of God's Kingdom?* and we saw the basic values of God's Kingdom are the same basic values (or characteristics) of God Himself—*i.e.* His character. God's character is the “*fruit of the Spirit*,” which includes *love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.*^{Gal.5:22-23} This “*fruit of the Spirit*” is actually the Holy Spirit being revealed in people—we call it maturity!!! Maturity means complete or perfect, lacking nothing (in character). Of course, we can be a mature person without being a Christian, but the characteristics of maturity are the characteristics of God. And so we should all aspire to become mature (complete or perfect), because we are made in God's image and He is mature (perfect or complete): *Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*^{Matt.5:48} Maturity is also called “*growing up*” and whilst we should remain innocent in matters of evil, we should do all we can to grow up into spiritual maturity: *Follow the way of love and eagerly desire gifts of the Spirit, especially prophecy...* (the word “*gifts*” is not in the Greek). *Dear brothers and sisters, don't be childish in your understanding of these things. Be innocent as babies when it comes to evil, but be mature in understanding matters of this kind.*^{1Cor.14:1;20} Maturity makes us confident and bold and is a direct consequence of fellowship with God: *When I called, you answered me; you made me bold and stouthearted.*^{Ps.138:3} But spiritual boldness brings humility not arrogance: *Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. All of us, then, who are mature should take such a view*

of things.^{Phil.3:12-15} God has given us “giftings” or “helps” to facilitate our maturity—they are people like you and me, people who are part of the Body of Christ and who take their role seriously within the Church: *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. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.*^{Eph.4:11-16} And so, our Church life should be focused on reverencing God and enabling each of us to become like Him (which is maturity): *He is the one we proclaim, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ. To this end I strenuously contend with all the energy Christ so powerfully works in me.*^{Col.1:28-29} But we will never mature without an understanding of sound doctrine: *You have been believers so long now that you ought to be teaching others. Instead, you need someone to teach you again the basic things about God's word. You are like babies who need milk and cannot eat solid food. For someone who lives on milk is still an infant and doesn't know how to do what is right. Solid food is for those who are mature, who through training have the skill to recognize the difference between right and wrong. So let us stop going over the basic teachings about Christ again and again. Let us go on instead and become mature in our understanding. Surely we don't need to start again with the fundamental importance of repenting from evil deeds and placing our faith in God. You don't need further instruction about baptisms, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. And so, God willing, we will move forward to further understanding.*^{Heb.5:12-6:3} If we are going to grow up in Christ, we have to have strong roots: *And now, just as you accepted Christ Jesus as your Lord, you must continue to follow him. Let your roots grow down into him, and let your lives be built on him. Then your faith will grow strong in the truth you were taught, and you will overflow with thankfulness. Don't let anyone capture you with empty philosophies and high-sounding nonsense that come from human thinking and from the spiritual powers of this world, rather than from Christ. For in Christ lives all the fullness of God in a human body. So you also are complete [mature] through your union with Christ, who is the head over every ruler and authority.*^{Col.2:6-10} Our roots are the unseen parts of our life—our private relationship with God, including our personal fellowship with Him of prayer and study. If our roots reach down into the river of the Holy Spirit, we will always bear fruit (manifest maturity). *But blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD, whose confidence is in him. He will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream. It does not fear when heat comes; its leaves are always green. It has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit.*^{Jer.17:7-8} We also need the experience of life's of trials and heartaches to bring us to maturity—without testing, our faith remains theory. But if we don't apply the principles of God's Kingdom (which is why we need sound doctrine), our disappointments will overwhelm us. *Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. 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.*^{Jas.1:2-5} Wisdom is applied knowledge—it is using what we know about God to be a blessing and to become a blessing. Actually, wisdom is personified in Jesus: *It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption.*^{1Cor.1:30} Without wisdom, we will be choked by life's worries, riches and pleasures and never mature: *The seed that fell among thorns stands for those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by life's worries, riches and pleasures, and they do not mature. But the seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop.*^{Lk.8:14-15} These illustrations of a tree that's

planted and a seed that's sown shows how important it is for us to have a stability in our faith and not be blown around by any old wind of doctrine (or new wind of doctrine either) or even our emotions but be firmly established.

God knows our heart and Christianity is a heart religion. Let's try to make ourselves look good in the eyes of God as we reverence Him and use all the resources that He has given to us. Then we will be mature and live a sound, balanced life that is pleasing to God and enjoyable for us.

And now, just as you accepted Christ Jesus as your Lord, you must continue to follow him. Let your roots grow down into him, and let your lives be built on him. Then your faith will grow strong in the truth you were taught, and you will overflow with thankfulness. ^{Col.2:6-7}

Questions

Can there be a truly Christian country?

What is maturity?

What can we do to help one another reach maturity?

Puritan Prayers

My God, I bless You that You have given me the eye of faith, to see You as Father, to know You as a Covenant God, to experience Your love planted in me. For faith is the grace of union by which I spell out my entitlement to You. Faith casts my anchor upwards where I trust in You and engage You to be my Lord. Be pleased to live and move within me, breathing in my prayers, inhabiting my praises, speaking in my words, moving in my actions, living in my life, causing me to grow in grace—Your bounteous goodness has helped me believe. Lord, fan this divine spark into glowing flame. Lord, awake faith to put forth its strength until all heaven fills my soul and all impurity is cast out.

Sunday 19th June Ps.145:15-21. Lk.17

The Last Days. *The Kingdom of God can't be detected by visible signs [by your speculations.] You won't be able to say, 'Here it is!' or 'It's over there!' For the Kingdom of God is already among you [is within you, or is in your grasp.]* ^{Lk.17:20-21}

The Kingdom of God is wherever God the King has His domain—the Kingdom of God is the dominion or rule of King Jesus. However, God's Kingdom is not a political kingdom but a spiritual kingdom, which is why it can't be detected by visible signs and it certainly can't be detected by people's speculation. When Jesus became human and in obedience completed His ministry at the cost of His life, God the Father gave Him the name "Lord" with the authority to reign—He was made King over His Kingdom: *You should think in the same way Christ Jesus does.*

In his very nature he was God. But he did not think that being equal with God was something he should hold on to. Instead, he made himself nothing. He took on the very nature of a servant. He was made in human form. He appeared as a man. He came down to the lowest level. He obeyed God completely, even though it led to his death. In fact, he died on a cross. So God lifted him up to the highest place. He gave him the name that is above every name. When the name of Jesus is spoken, everyone's knee will bow to worship him. Every knee in heaven and on earth and under the earth will bow to worship him. Everyone's mouth will say that Jesus Christ is Lord. And God the Father will receive the glory. ^{Phil.2:5-11}

And so the Kingdom of God is already among us (at least in part): *Truly I tell you, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.* ^{Matt.16:28} Jesus came to reconcile us to God: *For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.* ^{Col.1:19-20} *There is one God and one Mediator who can reconcile God and humanity—the man Christ Jesus. He gave his life to purchase freedom for everyone.* ^{1Tim.2:5-}

⁶ And Jesus has now given us the authority to continue His ministry of reconciliation: *Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make*

disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”¹*Matt.28:18-20* Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.²*Cor.5:17-21*

To come under Jesus' domain or authority, we must become citizens of God's Kingdom—which requires us to be born again (or born from above): Jesus answered, “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born from above... I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit.”³*Jn.3:3-5* And so God's Kingdom is already here in people's lives when they submit to the authority and rulership of Jesus, (no one can be a Christian unless they acknowledge that “Jesus is Lord”⁴*Rom.10:9-10*). However, there is a future dimension to God's Kingdom because it is an eternal Kingdom: *Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever.*⁵*Is.9:7* There is coming a time when Jesus' authority and dominion will be total and complete—and this will happen when Jesus returns: *Therefore, my brothers, be all the more eager to make your calling and election sure. For if you do these things, you will never fall, and you will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.*⁶*2Pet.1:10-11* Jesus made it very clear that He was going to back to His Father in order to prepare a place for us and then He will return for us and then take us to His prepared Home: *Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me. My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. You know the way to the place where I am going.*⁷*Jn.14:1-4* Each time we break bread together, we are reminded of Jesus' return: *For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.*⁸*1Cor.11:26* And Spafford's hymn summarises our hope succinctly: *But Lord it's for Thee, for Thy coming we wait, the sky not the grave is our goal. Oh, trump of the angel, oh, voice of the Lord; blessed hope, blessed rest of my soul.* But in the last days before Jesus' return there will be much trouble. Jesus taught that wheat and weeds would grow together and that both would ripen before the harvest—i.e. before Jesus returns, the good would get better and the bad would get worse! *Jesus told the crowd another story. “Here is what the kingdom of heaven is like,” he said. “A man planted good seed in his field. But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came. The enemy planted weeds among the wheat and then went away. The wheat began to grow and form grain. At the same time, weeds appeared. The owner's servants came to him. They said, ‘Sir, didn't you plant good seed in your field? Then where did the weeds come from?’ ‘An enemy did this,’ he replied. The servants asked him, ‘Do you want us to go and pull the weeds up?’ ‘No,’ the owner answered. ‘While you are pulling up the weeds, you might pull up the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the workers what to do. Here is what I will say to them. First collect the weeds. Tie them in bundles to be burned. Then gather the wheat. Bring it into my storeroom.*”⁹*Matt.13:24-30*

The teaching about Jesus' return has often produced fear instead of faith because people have focused on the negative instead of the positive, on the devil instead of Jesus, on the trouble instead of the glory. And too often this has robbed people of enjoying God and their relationship with Him and turned them into nervous wrecks. Sadly, some Christians put more trust in folklore and fiction than they do in the clear teaching of Scripture and so superstition is rife when it comes to the “last days” Many evangelical Christians have taken fictional stories

about so called “*last days*” and, ignoring the basic principles of exegesis, have incorporated them into their doctrine of “*end times*” without any serious analysis. To correctly interpret Scripture, we should always read the entire passage/chapter/book before trying to understand a single verse (remember, Bible chapters weren’t added until AD 1227 and Bible verses weren’t added until the AD 1555) and we should always interpret the text so that the interpretation agrees with the overall message of Scripture. No one wants trouble and difficulties and what Paul taught about the last days is very frightening: *But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God—having a form of godliness but denying its power. Have nothing to do with such people.*^{2Tim.3:1-5} However, Paul wasn’t writing about trouble that would come in 2000 years’ time but was warning Timothy of the terrible times that he would have to face within his own life time and so Paul gave him advice about how to deal with that trouble. Interestingly, when the phrase “*last days*” occurs OT, it is not about trouble but triumph! *In the last days the mountain of the LORD’s temple will be established as chief among the mountains; it will be raised above the hills, and all nations will stream to it. Many peoples will come and say, “Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths.” The law will go out from Zion, the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.*^{Is.2:2-3} *In the last days the mountain of the LORD’s temple will be established as chief among the mountains; it will be raised above the hills, and peoples will stream to it. Many nations will come and say, “Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths.” The law will go out from Zion, the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.*^{Mic.4:1-2} *For the Israelites will live many days without king or prince, without sacrifice or sacred stones, without ephod or idol. Afterward the Israelites will return and seek the LORD their God and David their king. They will come trembling to the LORD and to his blessings in the last days.*^{Hos.3:4-5} These Scriptures don’t focus on the trouble that would come but on the blessings that the New Covenant would bring! They emphasise that it is in the last days that God will teach us His ways from the mountain of His Temple, that the Word of the Lord will go out from Zion and that people will seek the Lord and David their King. Obviously, this is not referring to the original King David who was dead, but David’s Son, the Messiah (who we now know is Jesus). The “*last days*” means the time when the Holy Spirit will be poured out on the Day of Pentecost and the New Covenant takes effect. Peter confirms this by using the phrase “*last days*” when he quoted from the OT to explain that the blessings of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit: *Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say. These men are not drunk, as you suppose. It’s only nine in the morning! No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: ‘In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy. I will show wonders in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood and fire and billows of smoke. The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord. And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.’*^{Acts.2:14-21} Instead of being anxious about the “*last days*” we should focus on the blessings that Jesus has brought us—and especially the blessings of peace with God through the forgiveness of sins. *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}

And so, Yes! We are living in the “*last days*” (as were Paul and Peter), because they began with the introduction of the New Covenant. But God’s “*day*” is not a 24 hour period of time,

consisting of 1440 minutes or 86,400 seconds. God's time is linked to His calendar not our calendar—and He is never late (or early) but always right on time: *But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. 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. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare.*^{2Pet.3:8-10} The signs that the world is about to end are not environmental or political—they are not earthquakes, famines and wars. This world may appear to be getting out of control, but God is still in control—remember: *The earth is the LORD's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it; for he founded it on the seas and established it on the waters.*^{Ps.24:1-2} *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.*^{Dan.2:44}

But the end of the world will come when the Gospel has been preached to all the world: *As Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives, his disciples came to him privately and said, "Tell us, when will this happen? What will be the sign that you are coming again, and when will the world come to an end?" Jesus answered them, "Be careful not to let anyone deceive you. Many will come using my name. They will say, 'I am the Messiah,' and they will deceive many people. You will hear of wars and rumours of wars. Don't be alarmed! These things must happen, but they don't mean that the end has come. Nation will fight against nation and kingdom against kingdom. There will be famines and earthquakes in various places. All of these are only the beginning pains of the end. Then they will hand you over to those who will torture and kill you. All nations will hate you because you are committed to me. Then many will lose faith. They will betray and hate each other. Many false prophets will appear and deceive many people. And because there will be more and more lawlessness, most people's love will grow cold. But the person who endures to the end will be saved. This Good News about the kingdom will be spread throughout the world as a testimony to all nations. Then the end will come."*^{Matt.24:3-14}

¹⁴ The Kingdom of God (either present or future) can't be detected by visible signs or by speculations because it is a spiritual Kingdom—and neither should we speculate about when Jesus will return. 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."*^{Acts.1:7-8} However, when Jesus does return, no one will miss it: *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. "Look, he is coming with the clouds," and "every eye will see him, even those who pierced him"; and all peoples on earth "will mourn because of him." So shall it be! Amen.*^{Rev.1:5-7} Jesus' return will be very loud and very bright: *For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. According to the Lord's word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. 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.*^{1Thess.4:14-18}

So let's look forward to the day of God with anticipation and joy, living as true citizens of heaven who are ready and waiting for our completed home: *But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar. Fire will destroy everything in them. God will judge the earth and everything in it. So everything will be destroyed. And what kind of people should you be? You should lead holy and godly lives. Live like that as you look forward to the day of God. It will make the day come more quickly. On that day fire will destroy the heavens. Its heat will melt everything in them. But we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth. Godliness will make its home there. All of this is in keeping with God's promise.*

Dear friends, I know you are looking forward to that. So try your best to be found pure and without blame. Be at peace with God.^{2Pet.3:10-14}

Questions

What is the Kingdom of God (or heaven)?

What does the OT foretell of the “last days”?

What does the NT say about the “last days”?

Should we expect the world to get better or worse before Jesus returns?

Why will Jesus’ return?

When will Jesus’ return?

How should we prepare for Jesus’ return?

Puritan Prayers

O Lord, help me not to expect happiness from the world, but only in You. Let me not think that I shall be more happy by living to myself, for I can only be truly happy if employed for You and if I desire to live in this world only to do and suffer what You allot me. Teach me that if I do not live a life that satisfies You, I shall not live a life that will satisfy myself. Help me to desire the spirit and attitude of angels who willingly come down to this lower world to perform Your will, though their desires are heavenly and not set in the least upon earthly things—then I shall have the attitude that I ought to have. Help me not to think of living to You in my own strength, but always to look to You and rely on You for assistance

Sunday 26th June. Ps.145:15-21. Lk.18

Faith, Hope and Love. *And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.*^{1Cor.13:13}

Jesus was giving a sombre warning when He asked the question: *when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?*^{2Lk.18:8} This was obviously a rhetorical question because of course there will be Believers on the earth when Jesus comes. One of our core doctrines is that Jesus will return with the Believers who have already died and collect the Believers who are remaining on earth, when *our mortal bodies will be transformed into immortal bodies*,^{1Cor.15:53} and then all Believers (those who had already died and those who are still alive) will accompany Jesus to our eternal home. *For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. According to the Lord's word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. 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.*^{1Thess.4:14-18} However, we should take seriously Jesus’ question of “*will the Son of Man find faith on earth?*”? For instance, take the Church at Ephesus. The Believers at Ephesus had access to probably the best of all the spiritual resources available to the early Church. Apollos preached at Ephesus: *Meanwhile a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was a learned man, with a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures. He had been instructed in the way of the Lord, and he spoke with great fervour and taught about Jesus accurately, though he knew only the baptism of John.*^{Acts.18:24-25} Paul’s stayed at Ephesus for 27 months (A.D.54-57) and his preaching was accompanied by extraordinary miracles. *Paul took the road through the interior and arrived at Ephesus. There he found some disciples and asked them, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?” ... When Paul placed his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied... Paul entered the synagogue and spoke boldly there for three months, arguing persuasively about the kingdom of God. But some of them became obstinate; they refused to believe and publicly maligned the Way. So*

Paul left them. He took the disciples with him and had discussions daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus. This went on for two years, so that all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord. God did extraordinary miracles through Paul, so that even handkerchiefs and aprons that had touched him were taken to the sick, and their illnesses were cured and the evil spirits left them.^{Acts.19:1-12} Paul wrote his 1st letter to the Corinthians from Ephesus. But I will stay on at Ephesus until Pentecost, because a great door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many who oppose me.^{1Cor.16:8-9} And Paul continued to keep in close contact with the Church in Ephesus: Paul had decided to sail past Ephesus to avoid spending time in the province of Asia, for he was in a hurry to reach Jerusalem, if possible, by the day of Pentecost. From Miletus, Paul sent to Ephesus for the elders of the church. When they arrived, he said to them: "You know how I lived the whole time I was with you, from the first day I came into the province of Asia... When Paul had finished speaking, he knelt down with all of them and prayed. They all wept as they embraced him and kissed him. What grieved them most was his statement that they would never see his face again."^{Acts.20:16-38} Paul wrote to the Believers at Ephesus from his prison cell in Rome. Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, To God's holy people in Ephesus, the faithful in Christ Jesus... For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles... Pray also for me, that whenever I speak, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should.^{Eph.1:1;3:1;6:19-20} Timothy was living at Ephesus when Paul wrote to him: To Timothy my true son in the faith: Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord. As I urged you when I went into Macedonia, stay there in Ephesus so that you may command certain people not to teach false doctrines any longer or to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies.^{1Tim.1:1-4} Paul would have been preaching and teaching in person the same things that he was writing about—and he wrote this from Ephesus: If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing. Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonour others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.^{1Cor.13:3-8} John lived at Ephesus after his exile on Patmos and wrote his Gospel and 3 letters from there (and probably Revelation too). And John would also have been preaching and teaching in person the same things that he was writing about—and he wrote this from Ephesus (about 10 years after Paul had written from Ephesus): Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. 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.4:7-12} There is good reason to believe that John wrote Revelation before the besiege of Jerusalem and destruction of the Temple (A.D.65-70) but after 15 years of excellent preaching and even extraordinary miracles, the Believers at Ephesus were being reprimanded by Jesus because they had forsaken their first love: To the messenger of the church in Ephesus, write: The one who holds the seven stars in his right hand, the one who walks among the seven gold lamp stands, says: I know what you have done—how hard you have worked and how you have endured. I also know that you cannot tolerate wicked people. You have tested those who call themselves apostles but are not apostles. You have discovered that they are liars. You have endured, suffered trouble because of my name, and have not grown weary. However, I have this against you: The love you had at first is gone. Remember how far you have fallen. Return to me and change the way you think and act, and do what you did at first. I will come to you and take your lamp stand from its place if you don't change. But you have this in your favour—you hate what the Nicolaitans are doing. I also hate what they're doing. Let the person who has ears listen to what the

Spirit says to the churches. I will give the privilege of eating from the tree of life, which stands in the paradise of God, to everyone who wins the victory.^{Rev.2:1-7}

So what can we learn from this? Spiritual leaders, sound doctrine, good teaching and extraordinary miracles do not necessarily make people keep the faith, or make them have hope or make them keep to their first love! Faith, hope and love cannot be stored up for a rainy day like money or dried fruit. Faith, hope and love are the result of a relationship with God—they are living fruit not dried fruit! Jesus is like a Vine and if *we remain in Him and He in us, we will bear much fruit.*^{Jn.15:5} If we don't keep our passion for God, our faith will dry up, our hope will wilt, and our love will grow cold! As Yan reminded us last week, we need a passion that pursues the purpose of God and instead of stumbling along or slipping back, we need ensure that we strain towards our goal: *Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. All of us, then, who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you. Only let us live up to what we have already attained.*^{Phil.3:13-16}

Faith, hope and love are inseparably linked together: *And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love. Follow the way of love and eagerly desire the Spirit.*^{1Cor.13:13} We should remember that we don't need lots of faith (or hope, or love)—just living faith: *The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!" He replied, "If you have faith as small as a mustard seed..."*^{Lk.17:5-6} Because faith, hope and love are alive, they are for now—for today, not just for yesterday or for tomorrow: *Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.*^{Heb.11:1}

And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.^{Rom.5:2-5} Then you will know that I am the LORD; those who hope in me will not be disappointed.^{Is.49:23} This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters.^{1Jn.3:16}

The evidence of faith, hope and love is appreciation: Jesus asked, "Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? Has no one returned to give praise to God except this foreigner?" Then he said to him, "Rise and go; your faith has made you well."^{Lk.17:17} Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—as her great love has shown. But whoever has been forgiven little loves little.^{Lk.7:47} And the result of faith, hope and love is happiness: His master replied, 'Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness.'^{Matt.25:23} But Timothy has come to us from you just now. He has brought good news about your faith and love. He has told us that you always have happy memories of us. He has also said that you long to see us, just as we long to see you. Brothers and sisters, in all our trouble and suffering your faith cheered us up. Now we really live, because you are standing firm in the Lord. How can we thank God enough for you because of all the joy that comes only from our God?^{1Thess.3:6-9} Your love makes me happier than wine does. The lotion you have on pleases me. Your name is like perfume that is poured out.^{Sol.1:2-3}

Elders and Deacons must be able to understand doctrine and teach others: *Deacons must keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience.*^{1Tim.3:9} *And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others.*^{2Tim.2:2} However, all Christians should have a good understanding of doctrine because sound doctrine makes Christianity simple—it's just the standard for Elders and Deacons is enforceable! But doctrine alone will make us proud: *We know that "We all possess knowledge." But knowledge puffs up while love builds up. Those who think they know something do not yet know as they ought to know. But whoever loves God is known by God. [We sometimes tend to think we know all we need to know to answer these kinds of questions—but sometimes our humble*

hearts can help us more than our proud minds. We never really know enough until we recognize that God alone knows it all.]^{1Cor.8:1} We need faith and love as well as doctrine: *I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him until that day. What you heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching, with faith and love in Christ Jesus. Guard the good deposit that was entrusted to you—guard it with the help of the Holy Spirit who lives in us.*^{2Tim.1:12-14} And we need to build ourselves up in the faith as well keep ourselves in God's love: *But you, dear friends, build yourselves up in your most holy faith and pray in the Holy Spirit. Keep yourselves in God's love as you wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to bring you to eternal life.*^{Jude.20-21}

So, are people talking about your faith, hope and love or have you begun to despair and forsaken the love you had at first? We can't answer for others, but we can answer for our own self. Let's determine to make sure others have pleasant memories of us and are encouraged because of our faith: *But Timothy has just now come to us from you and has brought good news about your faith and love. He has told us that you always have pleasant memories of us and that you long to see us, just as we also long to see you. Therefore, brothers, in all our distress and persecution we were encouraged about you because of your faith.*^{1Thess.3:6-7} Then we can look forward to hearing Jesus say: *Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!*^{Matt.25:23}

Questions

Why do you think that Jesus asked if He would find faith on earth when He comes (Lk.18:8)?

Why do you think that the Ephesians forsook their first love (Rev.2:4)?

What can we do to ensure that we keep the faith?

What can we do to ensure that we maintain our hope?

What can we do to ensure that we keep our first love?

What is the evidence of faith, hope and love?

What is the result of faith, hope and love?

Puritan Prayers

Teach me that there is no greater truth than this: that I can do nothing of myself. Lord, this is the life that no unconverted man can live—yet it is an end that every godly soul presses after. Let it be my concern to devote myself and my all to You. Make me more fruitful and more spiritual. How precious is time, and how painful to see it fly with little done to good purpose—I need Your help! O may my soul sensibly depend upon You for all sanctification and every accomplishment of Your purposes for me, for the world, and for Your kingdom.

July

Thought for the Month: The perfect church service would be one we were almost unaware of—our attention would have been on God. *C.S. Lewis*

July's Theme: Love—This is how we know that we LOVE the children of God: by loving God and carrying out his commands. In fact, this is LOVE for God: to keep his commands. And his commands are not burdensome. ^{1Jn.5:2-3}

Sunday 3rd July. Ps.147:1-11. Lk.19:1-27

Is Jesus Lord or Lodger? *I must stay at your house today.* ^{Lk.19:5}

Jesus went to many people's homes and had a variety of receptions. and it is the same today. Of course, today, Jesus doesn't visit us physically, but He is here in the world through the Holy Spirit and Jesus is knocking at the door of people's hearts, waiting for their response. *Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me. [Look! I stand at the door and knock. If you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in, and we will share a meal together as friends.]* ^{Rev.3:20} Some people have no room for Jesus—like owner of the Inn: *While Joseph and Mary were there, the time came for the child to be born. She gave birth to her first baby. It was a boy. She wrapped him in large strips of cloth. Then she placed him in a manger. There was no room for them in the inn.* ^{Lk.2:6-7} Some people treat Jesus discourteously—like Simon the Pharisee: *I entered your house; you gave Me no water for My feet... You gave Me no kiss... You did not anoint My head with oil.* ^{Lk.7:44-46} Some people do not feel worthy enough to accept Jesus into their home—like the Centurion: *Lord, do not trouble Yourself, for I am not worthy that You should enter under my roof. Therefore I did not even think myself worthy to come to You. But say the word, and my servant will be healed.* ^{Lk.7:6-7} [Although Jesus commended the Centurion for his faith, the soldier had no relationship with Jesus at that time, which was not surprising as Jews and non-Jews did not mix—this what Peter said less than 10 years later: *You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with or visit a Gentile. But God has shown me that I should not call anyone impure or unclean.* ^{Acts.10:28}] But some people welcome Jesus gladly—like Zacchaeus: *Jesus reached the spot where Zacchaeus was. He looked up and said, "Zacchaeus, come down at once. I must stay at your house today." So Zacchaeus came down at once and welcomed him gladly... Jesus said "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost."* ^{Lk.19:5-10} These people who, like Zacchaeus, welcome Jesus, become children of God: *The Word was in the world that was made through him. But the world did not recognize him. He came to what was his own. But his own people did not accept him. Some people did accept him. They believed in his name. He gave them the right to become children of God. To be a child of God has nothing to do with human parents. Children of God are not born because of human choice or because a husband wants them to be born. They are born because of what God does. 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.* ^{Jn.1:10-14}

A Christian is much, much more than a person who follows a religion or a set of rituals. A Christian is someone who has welcomed Jesus Christ into their life as Lord by placing their trust in Him—and then, through the presence of the Holy Spirit, Jesus dwells within them: *Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you—unless, of course, you fail the test? And I trust that you will discover that we have not failed the test.* ^{2Cor.13:5-6} Until Jesus came, God had never lived within any person since the time of Adam. When God created Adam, He breathed His life and spirit into Adam. *Then the LORD God formed a 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} God is holy and cannot live with sin and so the moment Adam disobeyed God, Adam's spirit—his "God-life"—died and Adam was separated from 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."^{Gen.2:15-17}

During the time between Adam and when Mary conceived Jesus, God visited people but He was never able to live within in anyone because of their sin nature. The Old Testament religion never eradicated the sin nature or dealt with people's conscience. The sacrifices only "atoned" for sin ("atonement" means "covering") which meant that sin was still there in people and was always a barrier to God being with us. But when God the Word became flesh, the Man Jesus had no sin and so God was able to dwell in a human being again. Under the Old Covenant, the Jews had to sacrifice a lamb to atone for their sins. But when Jesus came, John the Baptist declared Him to be the "Lamb of God" who actually took away our sin (instead of "atoning" for them): *The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him. John said, "Look! The Lamb of God! He takes away the sin of the world! This is the One I was talking about. I said, 'A man who comes after me is more important than I am. That's because he existed before I was born.' I did not know him. But God wants to make it clear to Israel who this person is. That's the reason I came baptizing with water."*^{Jn.1:29-31} *And this is my covenant with them when I take away their sins.*^{Rom.11:27} *But you know that he appeared so that he might take away our sins.*^{1Jn.3:5} Because Jesus had no sin of His own, He was able to deal with our sin. *God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*^{2Cor.5:21} Jesus took away our sin when He died on the cross: *But he has appeared once for all at the culmination of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself. Just as people are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.*^{Heb.9:26-28} *You were once dead because of your failures and your uncircumcised corrupt nature. But God made you alive with Christ when he forgave all our failures. He did this by erasing the charges that were brought against us by the written laws God had established. He took the charges away by nailing them to the cross.*^{Col.2:13-14}

At our conversion, God took out our heart of stone (a cold unresponsive and dead heart) and gave us a heart of flesh (a living, responsive and pure heart). *I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them.*^{Ezek.36:26-27} The Holy Spirit also gives witness to us about this. First he says, *"This is the covenant I will make with them after that time, says the Lord. I will put my laws in their hearts. I will write my laws on their minds."* Then he adds, *"I will not remember their sins anymore. I will not remember the evil things they have done."* Where those have been forgiven, there is no longer any offering for sin.^{Heb.10:15-18} David longed for this time when he wrote: *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.*^{Ps.51:10-11} God has now removed our sins, not just covered them up as He did under the Old Covenant. Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, *"This is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high."*^{Lk.24:45-49} Forgiveness of sins means release from our sins, remission of our sins, expungement of our sins. What the Psalmist saw by faith, is now ours in reality: *as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us.*^{Ps.103:12} David says the same thing when he speaks of the blessedness of the one to whom God credits righteousness apart from works: *"Blessed are those whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the one whose sin the Lord will never count against them."*^{Rom.4:6-8}

Christians are justified (which means *just as if I had never sinned*) and righteous because our sin has been forgiven and remitted, so God can dwell in us like He did in Adam. Before Jesus ascended to heaven, He breathed His life and spirit into His Disciples: *Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit."*^{Jn.20:21-22} This breathing upon the Disciples was a symbolic act that would set the scene for the New Covenant where God puts His life into people. God in Christ in the Bible times becomes Christ in us today! Jesus is called Emmanuel because He is "God with us": *The angel said, "Joseph, son of David, don't be afraid to take Mary home as your wife. The baby inside her is from the Holy Spirit. She is going to have a son. You must give him the name Jesus. That is because he will save his people from their sins." All of this took place to bring about what the Lord had said would happen. He had said through the prophet, "The virgin is going to have a baby. She will give birth to a son. And he will be called Emmanuel." The name Emmanuel means "God with us."*^{Matt.1:20-23} *Why then do you accuse me of blasphemy because I said, 'I am God's Son'? Do not believe me unless I do the works of my Father. But if I do them, even though you do not believe me, believe the works, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me, and I in the Father.*^{Jn.10:36-38} Now under the New Covenant, God makes His home in us: *No one has ever seen God. But if we love one another, God lives in us. His love is made complete in us. We know that we belong to him and he belongs to us. He has given us his Holy Spirit. The Father has sent his Son to be the Saviour of the world. We have seen it. We give witness to it. God lives in anyone who agrees that Jesus is the Son of God. That kind of person remains joined to God. So we know that God loves us. We depend on it.*^{1Jn.4:12-16} *You, however, are not in the realm of the flesh but are in the realm of the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, they do not belong to Christ. But if Christ is in you, then even though your body is subject to death because of sin, the Spirit gives life because of righteousness. And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies because of his Spirit who lives in you.*^{Rom.8:9-11} And God will never leave us again: *God has said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you." So we say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can mere mortals do to me?"*^{Heb.13:5-6}

So, if God is now with us and remaining within us, how are you treating Him? Are you like the Inn keeper who had no room for Jesus? Or like Simon the Pharisee who treated Jesus discourteously? Or like the Centurion who didn't feel worthy to have Jesus into his home? Or are you like Zacchaeus who gladly welcomed Jesus into his home? Is Jesus Lord or lodger? When Jesus comes to us, He comes to stay and so let's enjoy His company daily. *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}

Remember, our chief end in life is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever. God has joined Himself to us so that we are now united with Him: *But whoever is united with the Lord is one with him in spirit.*^{1Cor.6:17} So now it is up to us to make Him welcome as Lord not just a lodger. Jesus is with us, not as an Unseen Guest, but as our Advocate, our great High Priest, our Righteousness, our Everlasting Peace, our Intercessor, our Mediator, our Saviour, our King, our Holiness, our Surety, our Counsellor—and our Friend too!

Is Lord or Lodger? *I must stay at your house today.* ^{Lk.19:5}

Questions

What was Adam's relationship with God before he sinned?

When Adam disobeyed God, what happened to him?

Why couldn't God live within a person until Jesus came?

What does "righteousness" mean for a Believer under the New Covenant?

What has happened to our sin?

In what way does God live within a Believer?

Puritan Prayers

My dear Lord, I depend wholly upon You—wean me from all other dependences. You are my all, You overrule all and You delight in me. You are the foundation of goodness; how can I distrust You? How can I be anxious about what happens to me? In the light of Your preciousness, the world and all its enjoyments are infinitely poor—I value the favour of men no more than pebbles. Amid the blessings I receive from You, may I never lose the thought of being a stranger here on earth. May I love You, my Benefactor, in all my benefits, not forgetting that my greatest danger arises from my advantages.

Sunday 10th July Ps.147:9-20. Lk.19:28-48

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace. *If you had only known today what would bring you peace!* ^{Lk.19:42}

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace. Where there is hatred, let me sow love. Where there is injury, pardon. Where there is discord, vision. Where there is doubt, faith. Where there is despair, hope. Where there is darkness, light. Where there is sadness, joy. *Francis of Assisi (1181-1226 AD)*

Dale Carnegie knew the techniques for "positive thinking" and "self confidence". He taught people to overcome worry with his techniques and was the author of the bestselling books "How to Win Friends and Influence People" (1936) and "How to Stop Worrying and Start Living" (1948). Carnegie's restlessness is common to all mankind and in his "Confessions" Augustine of Hippo (354–430 AD) explains why: "You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in You." Horatio Spafford (1828–1888) experienced financial ruin in 1871 when the Great Fire of Chicago reduced the city to ashes and destroyed most of his investments. Two years later, the family planned a trip to England where his friend D. L. Moody would be preaching. However, business demands prevented Spafford from leaving and so his wife and four daughters went on ahead. Whilst crossing the Atlantic on their steamship *Ville du Havre*, was struck by an iron sailing vessel, killing 226 people, including all four of Spafford's daughters. His wife survived the tragedy and upon arriving in Cardiff, she sent a telegram to Spafford that read "Saved alone." Shortly afterwards, Spafford travelled to meet his grieving wife and as his ship passed near where his daughters had died, he was inspired to write the hymn "It is well with my soul." The tune was written by Philip Bliss, who named after it the ship on which Spafford's daughters died, *Ville du Havre*. This hymn describes very succinctly the Christian expectation—and experience—of not being overwhelmed by life's circumstances. If we have the blessed assurance that our sins are forgiven, our future is secure. And regardless of whether we are flooded with peace or buffeted by sorrow, we can declare confidently that it is well with our soul. *When peace like a river, attendeth my way, when sorrows like sea billows roll; whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to know it is well, it is well, with my soul. Though satan should buffet, though trials should come, let this blest assurance control, that Christ has regarded my helpless estate, and hath shed His own blood for my soul.* The reason for our stability is that all our sin has been nailed to the Cross and we no longer

bear the guilt: *My sin, oh, the bliss of this glorious thought! My sin, not in part but the whole, is nailed to the cross, and I bear it no more, praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul.* God whispers His peace into our soul and so not even death will overwhelm us: *For me, be it Christ, be it Christ hence to live: If Jordan above me shall roll, no pang shall be mine, for in death as in life, Thou wilt whisper Thy peace to my soul.* This is the same conviction that David had about dying—because God is with us, we have no need to fear harm: *Even though I walk through the dark valley of death, because you are with me, I fear no harm. Your rod and your staff give me courage.*^{Ps.23:4} When David's new-born son died, David had the assurance that his child was safe and that one day he would be united with him: *David begged God to heal the child. David didn't eat anything. He spent his nights lying on the ground... David saw that his servants were whispering to each other. Then he realized the child was dead. "Has the child died?" he asked. "Yes," they replied. "He's dead." Then David got up from the ground. After he washed himself, he put on lotions. He changed his clothes. He went into the house of the LORD and worshiped him. Then he went to his own house. He asked for some food. They served it to him. And he ate it. His servants asked him, "Why are you acting like this? While the child was still alive, you wouldn't eat anything. You cried a lot. But now that the child is dead, you get up and eat!" He answered, "While the child was still alive, I didn't eat anything. And I cried a lot. I thought, 'Who knows? The LORD might show favour to me. He might let the child live.' But now he's dead. So why should I go without eating? Can I bring him back to life again? Someday I'll go to him. But he won't return to me."*^{2Sam.12:16-23} But God's peace is not just a preparation for death—God's peace is His provision for living! One generation will not have to face death and that generation maybe our generation—who knows! The hymn continues: *But Lord, 'tis for Thee, for Thy coming we wait, the sky, not the grave, is our goal; Oh, trump of the angel! Oh, voice of the Lord! Blessed hope, blessed rest of my soul. And Lord, haste the day when the faith shall be sight, the clouds be rolled back as a scroll; The trump shall resound, and the Lord shall descend, a song in the night, oh my soul!*

So how do we get God's peace? Of course, we can, and should, pray for peace and also work for peace: *Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: May those who love you be secure. May there be peace within your walls and security within your citadels.* For the sake of my family and friends, I will say, "Peace be within you." For the sake of the house of the LORD our God, I will seek your prosperity.^{Ps.122:6-9} Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.^{Jer.29:7} But prayer alone will not impart peace—if the foundations are faulty, the building falter! The New Testament is clear that peace comes from knowing God the Father, and also His Son, Jesus Christ: *Grace and peace be yours in abundance through the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord.*^{2Pet.1:2} This is because God Himself is peace: *So Gideon built an altar to the LORD there and called it The LORD Is Peace.*^{Jdg.6:24} For he himself is our peace.^{Eph.2:14} And those who don't know God, don't know true peace (or at least they don't know spiritual peace): *No one is righteous—not even one. No one is truly wise; no one is seeking God. All have turned away; all have become useless. No one does good, not a single one... They don't know where to find peace. They have no fear of God at all.*^{Rom.3:10-18} 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. Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal [passionate commitment] of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this.*^{Is.9:6-7} And Jesus brought us peace through His vicarious death on the cross: *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. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.*^{Is.53:5-6} But now through Christ Jesus you, who were once far away, have been brought near by the blood of Christ. So he is our peace. In his body he has made Jewish and non-Jewish people one by breaking down the wall of hostility that kept them apart. He brought an end to the commandments and demands found

in Moses' Teachings so that he could take Jewish and non-Jewish people and create one new humanity in himself. So he made peace. He also brought them back to God in one body by his cross, on which he killed the hostility. He came with the Good News of peace for you who were far away and for those who were near. So Jewish and non-Jewish people can go to the Father in one Spirit.^{Eph.2:13-18} When Jesus gives us peace, it is true peace—it is spiritual peace: Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid!^{Jn.14:27} And so, peace is a by-product of fellowship with God, His Word and His people—it is a “fruit of the spirit”: I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this [the fruit of the flesh] will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.^{Gal.5:21-25} What a contrast to the fruit to the flesh—one Bible paraphrase describes the fruit of the flesh like this: *It is obvious what kind of life develops out of trying to get your own way all the time: repetitive, loveless, cheap sex; a stinking accumulation of mental and emotional garbage; frenzied and joyless grabs for happiness; trinket gods; magic-show religion; paranoid loneliness; cutthroat competition; all-consuming-yet-never-satisfied wants; a brutal temper; an impotence to love or be loved; divided homes and divided lives; small-minded and lopsided pursuits; the vicious habit of depersonalizing everyone into a rival; uncontrolled and uncontrollable addictions; ugly parodies of community. I could go on.*^{Gal.5:19-21}

Just as a branch bears fruit by being connected to the tree, so Christians should automatically bear spiritual fruit but being connected to Jesus: *I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned.*^{Jn.15:1-6} *You will keep in perfect peace all who trust in you, all whose thoughts are fixed on you!*^{Jl.26:3} But ignoring God, His Word and His people will leave us unsettled, stressed and unwell—spiritually, mentally, emotionally and physically: *A heart at peace gives life to the body, but envy rots the bones.*^{Pron.14:30} *“If only you had paid attention to my commands, your peace would have been like a river, your well-being like the waves of the sea... There is no peace,” says the LORD, “for the wicked.”*^{Is.48:18-22} And if we isolate ourselves from other Believers, we oppose common-sense! *An unfriendly person [someone who isolates himself] looks out only for himself. He opposes all good sense. A foolish person doesn't want to understand. He takes delight in saying only what he thinks.*^{Pron.18:1-2} *Let us consider how we can stir up one another to love. Let us help one another to do good works. Let us not give up meeting together. Some are in the habit of doing this. Instead, let us cheer each other up with words of hope. Let us do it all the more as you see the day coming when Christ will return.*^{Heb.10:24-25}

Loving God, His Word and His people will automatically leave us settled and peaceful: *Great peace have those who love your law, and nothing can make them stumble.*^{Ps.119:165} *Who has ever heard of such things? Who has ever seen things like this? Can a country be born in a day or a nation be brought forth in a moment? ... Rejoice with Jerusalem and be glad for her, all you who love her... For this is what the LORD says: I will extend peace to her like a river, and the wealth of nations like a flooding stream.*^{Is.66:8-12} *My son, do not forget my teaching, but keep my commands in your heart, for they will prolong your life many years and bring you peace and prosperity.*^{Pron.3:1-2} *The mountains might shake. The hills might be removed. But my faithful love for you will never be shaken. And my covenant that promises peace to you will never be broken,” says the LORD. He shows you his loving concern... I will teach all of your children. And they will enjoy great peace. When you do what is right, you will be made secure.*^{Is.54:10-13}

God's peace is inseparable from His righteousness—when we are made right with God we have his peace and when we have God's peace, we will live righteous lives. *But the wisdom that comes*

from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.^{Jas.3:17-18} However, we need training or discipline. This word means correcting, channelling or chastisement but for the purpose of educating someone to conform to divine truth rather than punishment: *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.12:11} Our training and discipline is primarily through the Scriptures as we read them, hear them preached and then ponder and apply the Scripture: *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.3:15-17}

Sometimes God uses circumstances to train us but because Christianity is a heart religion, most of our training is our application of Scripture as the Holy Spirit's convicts, counsels and encourages us: **Let** the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. **Let** the word of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.^{Col.3:15-17} That is why we need to hear the Word of God and then put it into practise: Jesus replied, 'My mother and brothers are those who hear God's word and put it into practice.'^{Lk.8:21} Unlike the Jews of Jesus' day who did not know what would bring them peace, we do know what brings us peace, so let's be at peace—as far as it is possible—and let's live in God's peace! *Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord.*^{Heb.12:14} *If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.*^{Rom.12:18}

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace. *If you had only known today what would bring you peace!*^{Lk.19:42}

Questions

What is peace?

What brings peace?

What is the difference between mental peace and spiritual peace?

What does it mean that God is with us?

How can we grow the fruit of peace in our lives?

Can we have God's peace without God's Word?

Puritan Prayers

Produce in me a self-despair that will make Jesus precious to me, delightful in all His offices and pleasurable in all His ways—and may I love His commands as well as His promises. Help me to discern between true and false love—the one consisting of supreme love to You, the other not; the former uniting Your glory and man's happiness that they may become one common interest, the latter disjointing and separating them both. Teach me that genuine love is different in kind from that wrought by rational arguments or the motive of self-interest. Grant me grace to distinguish between the genuine and the false and to rest in You who are all love.

Sunday 17th July Ps.148. Lk.20:1-19

Between a rock and a hard place. *The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.*^{Lk.20:17}

The phrase "*between a rock and a hard place*" is used to mean that you're in a tough spot and the two available options are both bad. To put it another way, it's being in a dilemma where the only choices you have are unsatisfactory. However, when Jesus is that Rock, the choices we have to make don't have to be bad or unsatisfactory *In the time of those kings, the God of heaven will set up a kingdom. It will never be destroyed. And no other nation will ever take it over. It will crush all of those*

other kingdoms. It will bring them to an end. But it will last forever. That's what the vision of the rock cut out of a mountain means. Human hands didn't cut the rock out. It broke the statue to pieces. It smashed the iron, bronze, clay, silver and gold. The great God has shown you what will take place in days to come. The dream is true. And you can trust the meaning I have given you for it.^{Dan.2:44-45} We can choose life over death, and blessings over curses: I'm calling for heaven and earth to give witness against you this very day. I'm offering you the choice of life or death. You can choose either blessings or curses. But I want you to choose life. Then you and your children will live. And you will love the LORD your God. You will obey him. You will remain true to him. The LORD is your very life.^{Deut.30:19-20}

When Jesus was asked by what authority He was teaching, He didn't answer the question directly but instead asked them: *Did John's authority to baptize come from heaven, or was it merely human?* This placed the Jews between a rock and a hard place: *They talked it over among themselves. "If we say it was from heaven, he will ask why we didn't believe John. But if we say it was merely human, the people will stone us because they are convinced John was a prophet."* So they finally replied that they didn't know.^{Lk.20:5-7}

Jesus then went on to explain the consequences of rejecting John's preaching and also His own preaching—*He will destroy these workers and give the vineyard to others.*^{Lk.20:16} The Jews clearly understood what Jesus said because they said: *That's unthinkable!* For them it was unthinkable that God would take away the kingdom from Israel and give it to others! Then Jesus asked them to examine what God had said in the Scriptures: *Then Jesus looked straight at them and asked, "What, then, does this Scripture verse mean: 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone'? Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken. If that stone falls on anyone, it will crush that person."* The scribes and the chief priests wanted to arrest him right there, but they were afraid of the people. They knew that he had directed this illustration at them.^{Lk.20:17-19}

Although the Jews had rejected Jesus, God had made Him the chief cornerstone: *I will give you thanks, for you answered me; you have become my salvation. The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; the LORD has done this, and it is marvellous in our eyes. The LORD has done it this very day; let us rejoice today and be glad.*^{Ps.118:21-24} So the LORD and King speaks. He says, *"Look! I am laying a stone in Zion. It is a stone that has been tested. It is the most important stone for a firm foundation. The one who trusts in that stone will never be shaken. I will use a measuring line to prove that you have not been fair. I will use a plumb line to prove that you have not done what is right."*^{Is.28:16-17}

Jesus the point of reference to which everything else is measured and He is the "plumb-line" for our salvation. Jesus is *'the stone you builders rejected, which has become the cornerstone.'* Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved.^{Acts.4:11-12} This means that if we are out of line with Jesus, then we are out of line with everything else!

The illustration of a rock representing Jesus has different facets. For instance, when Moses hit the rock, water gushed forth: *Take in your hand the wooden staff you used when you struck the Nile River. Go. I will stand there in front of you by the rock at Mount Horeb. Hit the rock. Then water will come out of it for the people to drink.* So Moses hit the rock in the sight of the elders of Israel.^{Ex.17:5-6}

As well as giving water to thirsty people, this event was a practical prophecy that illustrated how Jesus would give us spiritual refreshment: *Brothers and sisters, here is what I want you to know about our people who lived long ago. They were all led by the cloud. They all walked through the Red Sea. They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. They all ate the same supernatural food. They all drank the same supernatural water. They drank from the supernatural rock that went with them. That rock was Christ. But God was not pleased with most of them. Their bodies were scattered all over the desert. Now those things happened as examples for us.*^{1Cor.10:1-6}

(The snake on a stick was another practical prophecy that illustrated how Jesus would heal us from sin: *In the same way that Moses lifted the serpent in the desert so people could have something to see and then believe, it is necessary for the Son of Man to be lifted up—and everyone who looks up to him, trusting and expectant, will gain a real life, eternal life. This is how much God loved the world: He gave his Son, his one and only Son. And this is why: so that no one need be destroyed; by believing in him, anyone*

can have a whole and lasting life.^{Jn.3:14-16} Actually, all the miraculous events of the Exodus were practical prophesies about the coming Messiah and which Jesus would re-enact as a statement of His heavenly credentials and also fulfil as part of our redemption.) Religion, including being baptised, attending Church, or eating the bread and wine of Communion, does not make someone a Believer—to have any spiritual value, these activities must be a demonstration of our faith! And knowing the Scriptures, or even just knowing about God, or does not make someone a Believer—we have to believe God (*i.e., look up to Him and trust Him*). But not all the people of Israel accepted the good news. Isaiah says, “Lord, who has believed our message?” So faith comes from hearing the message. And the message that is heard is the word of Christ. But I ask, “Didn’t the people of Israel hear?” Of course they did. It is written, “Their voice has gone out into the whole earth. Their words have gone out from one end of the world to the other.” Again I ask, “Didn’t Israel understand?” ... But Isaiah also speaks about what God says concerning Israel. God said, “All day long I have held out my hands. I have held them out to a stubborn people who do not obey me.”^{Rom.10:16-21} Our activities (even religious activities) don’t impress God unless we have faith (that simple, uncomplicated trust in God and what He has said): *Abel had faith. So he offered to God a better sacrifice than Cain did. Because of his faith Abel was praised as a godly man. God said good things about his offerings. Because of his faith Abel still speaks. He speaks even though he is dead... Without faith it isn’t possible to please God. Those who come to God must believe that he exists. And they must believe that he rewards those who look to him.*^{Heb.11:4-6}

There was a second time when the Israelites were thirsty and this time God told Moses to speak to the rock (not hit the rock). Moses was so frustrated with the people because of their unbelief, that he became angry and hit the rock with his stick! This highlighted Moses’ failure to really trust God: *Then the glory of the LORD appeared to them. The LORD spoke to Moses. He said, “Get your wooden staff. You and your brother Aaron gather the people together. Then speak to that rock while everyone is watching. It will pour out its water. You will bring water out of the rock for the community. Then they and their livestock can drink it.” So Moses took the wooden staff from the tent. He did just as the LORD had commanded him. He and Aaron gathered the people together in front of the rock. Moses said to them, “Listen, you who refuse to obey! Do we have to bring water out of this rock for you?” Then Moses raised his arm. He hit the rock twice with his staff. Water poured out. And the people and their livestock drank it. But the LORD spoke to Moses and Aaron. He said, “You did not trust in me enough to honour me. You did not honour me as the holy God in front of the people of Israel. So you will not bring this community into the land I am giving them.”*^{Nu.20:7-12}

¹² Because Moses hit the rock a second time, it gave a false prophesy or illustration about Jesus, who was to offer Himself on the Cross just once for our sins: *The high priest enters the Most Holy Room every year. He enters with blood that is not his own. But Christ did not enter heaven to offer himself again and again. If he had, he would have had to suffer many times since the world was created. But now he has appeared once and for all time. He has come at the end of the ages to do away with sin. He has done that by offering himself. People have to die once. After that, God will judge them. In the same way, Christ was offered up once. He took away the sins of many people. He will also come a second time. At that time he will not suffer for sin. Instead, he will come to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.*^{Heb.9:25-28}

The reality of Jesus just offering Himself once for our sins is such a fundamental truth that, that Moses forfeited the privilege of going into the Promised land when he broke the type! *Then the LORD spoke to Moses. He said, “Go up this mountain in the Abarim range. See the land I have given the people of Israel. After you have seen it, you too will join the members of your family who have already died. You will die, just as your brother Aaron did. The community refused to obey me at the waters of Meribah Kadesh. At that time, you and Aaron did not obey my command. You did not honour me in front of them as the holy God.”*^{Nu.27:12-14} In the ritual of the “Mass” (the Catholic version of the Lord’s Table), the substance of the bread and wine is believed to turn into Jesus’ real body and blood which as it is offered on an “altar”. Instead of being an “ordinance” (something that God has “ordained” or commanded) to remind us of Jesus’

once for all sacrifice, the bread and wine becomes a repeated sacrifice! *He isn't like the other high priests. They need to offer sacrifices day after day. First they bring offerings for their own sins. Then they do it for the sins of the people. But Jesus gave one sacrifice for the sins of the people. He gave it once and for all time. He did it by offering himself.*^{Heb.7:27} 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.10:9-10}

The water from the rock was prophetic of Jesus death: *But when they came to Jesus, they saw that he was already dead. So they did not break his legs. Instead, one of the soldiers stuck his spear into Jesus' side. Right away, blood and water flowed out. The man who saw it has given witness. And his witness is true. He knows that he tells the truth. He gives witness so that you also can believe.*^{Jn.19:33-35} But this water also symbolized the Holy Spirit who would be given after Jesus' death. After Jesus was glorified (i.e. after He had died, risen from the grave and ascended to heaven), the Holy Spirit would gush out of believers: *On the last and greatest day of the festival, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them." By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive. Up to that time the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified.*^{Jn.7:37-39} But now I am going to him who sent me. None of you asks me, "Where are you going?" Rather, you are filled with grief because I have said these things. But very truly I tell you, it is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you.^{Jn.16:5-7}

There was also another rock that was prophetic of Jesus death. Moses was able to hide in the "cleft of the rock" in order to see God's glory: *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} This "cleft of the rock" was prophetic or an illustration of Jesus' death where His side was pierced—it is only through "hiding" in the death of Jesus that we can experience the glory of God. *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}

Yes, Jesus is a Rock—but He is only a hard place for unbelievers: *How can we sum this up? All those people who didn't seem interested in what God was doing actually embraced what God was doing as he straightened out their lives. And Israel, who seemed so interested in reading and talking about what God was doing, missed it. How could they miss it? Because instead of trusting God, they took over. They were absorbed in what they themselves were doing. They were so absorbed in their "God projects" that they didn't notice God right in front of them, like a huge rock in the middle of the road. And so they stumbled into him and went sprawling. Isaiah (again!) gives us the metaphor for pulling this together: Careful! I've put a huge stone on the road to Mount Zion, a stone you can't get around. But the stone is me! If you're looking for me, you'll find me on the way, not in the way.*^{Rom.9:30-33} However, for Believers, Jesus is a Rock and a Refuge: *I will make known the name of the LORD. Praise God! How great he is! He is the Rock. His works are perfect. All of his ways are right. He is faithful. He doesn't do anything wrong. He is honest and fair.*^{Deut.32:3-4} The LORD is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer; my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold.^{Ps.18:2} In Scripture it says, "Look! I am placing a stone in Zion. It is a chosen and very

valuable stone. It is the most important stone in the building. The one who trusts in him will never be put to shame.” The stone is very valuable to you who believe. But to people who do not believe, “The stone the builders did not accept has become the most important stone of all.” And, It is a 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}

So, let’s continue to build our lives on Jesus: *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.2:19-22} And like Peter, let’s continue to stay true to the confession that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God *Simon Peter answered, “You are the Christ. You are the Son of the living God.” Jesus replied, “Blessed are you, Simon, son of Jonah! No mere man showed this to you. My Father in heaven showed it to you. Here is what I tell you. You are Peter. On this rock I will build my church.* ^{Matt.16:16-18}

Questions

In what way is Jesus like a rock?

Why is Jesus called a “chief cornerstone”?

Why did God ask Moses to hit the rock?

What was wrong with Moses hitting the rock a second time?

What is the relevance of the phrase “cleft of the rock”? (Ex.33:19-23)

What is the rock on which Jesus is building His Church? (Matt.16:16-18)

How do we build on the rock? (Matt.7:25-27)

Puritan Prayers

You are the great Three-in-One, the Author of all the blessings that I enjoy and of all that I hope for. You have taught me that the experience of present evils, the remembrances of former sins nor the remonstrances of friends, cannot nor will not, affect a sinner’s thought—unless You vouchsafe to reveal Your grace. You have shown me that the sensible effusions of divine love in the soul, are superior to, and distinct from, bodily health—and that oft-times spiritual comforts are at their highest when physical well-being is at its lowest. You have given me the ordinance of song as a means of grace—fit me to bear my part in that ever-new music which is being sung before Your throne by angels and the saints made perfect.

Sunday 24th July Ps.149. Lk.20:20-47

We have Donald Lugg preaching today, so I am using Montgomery’s book, **The Genuine Flow:** Again and again pastors tell me, “*I preach the Word and teach the Word. I love the Word, but I want the strong flow of the Holy Spirit also. Is there a way to have the Holy Spirit’s gifts manifesting in my church without the ‘weird’ stuff?*” I usually ask, “*Such as?*” The common reply is, “*People giving ‘words from the Lord’ that never seem to actually come to pass. Oddball manifestations that entertain people, but never bring much transformation. People acting spooky.*” My reply, “*Absolutely! The Holy Spirit is well able to manifest His gifts without the presence of ‘weird’ stuff. In fact, I’ve noticed over the years that the more of the ‘weird’ stuff Christians allow to manifest, the less of the ‘genuine’ flow is actually present.*” The next question is always, “*How do I have the genuine flow?*” This instruction manual is written in response to that question...

The Word of Wisdom. The word of wisdom is a word of God’s wisdom given to a person to direct him and to help him understand God’s mind and purpose for the future. When the Israelites were

besieged by the armies of Syria, there was a great famine was in the land and people were starving. The situation became so desperate some even resorted to cannibalism! The king was so appalled and so upset he “*tore his clothes*” and put on sackcloth a sign of mourning and deep humility. [*The putting on of sackcloth was an Old Testament tradition. If you and I were to wrap ourselves in sackcloth today—or any other unusual garb—it would amount to nothing. It would not add to our faith one degree. People who try to dress in a peculiar fashion to indicate they are especially dedicated to God are missing the mark. Holiness is from the heart. It is from the inner man. If we are holy on the inside, it will govern our outward actions. People will know that God reigns down on the inside without our having to call attention to ourselves through peculiar dress. The radiance of God’s presence will shine through and that will be all we need.*] The king blamed Elisha for the terrible disasters that had befallen Israel—somehow, he was responsible for the Syrian siege, somehow, he was to blame for the famine. (A lot of people are quick to lay the blame for their own failures on some righteous person). The king swore to have Elisha’s head before the day was over. As Elisha sat in his house, he was unaware of the King’s threats—that is, until the Lord revealed this to him through a word of knowledge that the king’s messenger was on his way to kill the prophet. (The word of knowledge reveals facts in the mind of God relating to things that are past or present. The word of wisdom reveals facts in the mind of God relating to things that are future.) What was Elisha’s reaction to imminent danger? Did he run? No, he calmly “*sat in his house.*” He knew that if God was with him, he was safe. If God had told him to run, then he would have run, but the person who runs without God’s telling him to run is looking for trouble. Once when the apostle Paul was in Jerusalem, the Lord appeared to him and told him to get out of the city, for the people would not receive his testimony. The Lord told him to go and he went. But in Elisha’s case, the Lord had a job for him to do there and he remained. Then the Lord gave a word of wisdom to Elisha. *Listen to a message from the LORD. He says, ‘About this time tomorrow, you will be able to buy seven quarts of flour for less than half of an ounce of silver. You will also be able to buy 13 quarts of barley for the same price. That’s all you will have to pay for those things at the gate of Samaria.’*^{2Kgs.7:1} Tomorrow the famine would end. Food would be plentiful again. Naturally, some were sceptical. Here they were starving, no food in sight, and the prophet was telling them that tomorrow they would have plenty to eat. How could this be? One man said, *Suppose the LORD opens the windows of the skies. Suppose he pours food down on us. Even if he does, could what you are saying really happen?*^{2Kgs.7:2} Elisha rebuked his unbelief and said, *You will see it with your own eyes, but you won’t eat any of it!* This was a word of wisdom. His prediction referred to a future event. So, this word of wisdom is just a portion of God’s wisdom given to a person for a particular purpose in his life, revealing what He is going to do in the future. I like this definition of the **word of wisdom: A supernatural revelation from God of His mind and purpose concerning a future event.** We see this gift in operation all through the scriptures. Moses used the gift of the word of wisdom (but he also possessed great general wisdom—there is a difference). On many occasions the Lord gave Paul the apostle a word of wisdom. God spoke to Paul telling him to go into Macedonia to preach the gospel. This word of wisdom came in the form of a vision. *During the night Paul had a vision. He saw a man from Macedonia standing and begging him. “Come over to Macedonia!” the man said. “Help us!”*^{Acts.16:9} Was Paul obedient unto the heavenly vision? *After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia. We decided that God had called us to preach the good news there.*^{Acts.16:10} Paul and his company wasted no time in answering God’s call. Paul was given another word of wisdom by the Lord. *The next night the Lord stood near Paul. He said, “Be brave! You have given witness about me in Jerusalem. You must do the same in Rome.”*^{Acts.13:11} The Lord didn’t tell Paul all that was going to happen to him in Rome. It was just a word of wisdom, not the whole thing. Paul evidently thought that he would travel to Rome just as any passenger on a ship would travel, and that he would minister there. At that time he had no idea of all the perils, which were to befall him before he ever reached Rome, and that he would be a prisoner in Rome. I have wondered many times just how many of us would be willing to go through

all the things Paul did in order to reach our destination for ministering the gospel. Quite possibly we would be tempted to say, “*Surely, the Lord is not in this or else I wouldn’t be having so much trouble!*” Too many things are going wrong—this couldn’t be the will of God? Yet perhaps we had received a real charge through the Spirit and even a revelation from God to do this. The fact that we meet opposition and hindrances does not justify our turning back and not going on for God. We must go on! We must give out the word of God regardless of obstacles along the way. *Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows. But take heart, because I have overcome the world.*^{1n.16:33} They encouraged them to continue in the faith, reminding them that we must suffer many hardships to enter the Kingdom of God.^{Acts.14:22} We cannot turn back because of hardships or even suffering. The word of wisdom is tremendous. It should be in every church—every assembly of believers should have all these spiritual workings in their church as well as their people producing the fruits of the Spirit. It was not meant for only an era in the beginning of the church age—it is meant for the churches right here in our country today. It is meant for all those churches that name the name of Jesus Christ. This word of wisdom is one of the outstanding powerful workings of the Holy Spirit that will help us in many difficult things as God gives us a glimpse into the things He has for us in the future.

Questions:

What is the ministry of the Holy Spirit?

How can we become more spiritual?

How can we know if something is genuinely of the Holy Spirit?

Can we know if something is not genuinely of the Holy Spirit?

Are there any “neutral” areas, where it is neither the Holy Spirit or the devil?

What is “wisdom”?

Puritan Prayers: You have given me the ordinance of song as a means of grace—fit me to bear my part in that ever-new music which is being sung before Your throne by angels and the saints made perfect. I bless You for tempering every distress with joy, because too much of the former might weigh me down—You are wise to give me a taste of both! Apart from You, I quickly die; bereft of You, I starve; far from You, I thirst and droop—but You are all I need. I love You for giving me clusters of grapes in the wilderness and drops of heavenly wine that set me longing to have my fill. Let me continually grasp the promise: ‘I will never leave You nor forsake You.’

Sunday 31st July. Ps.150. Lk.21

Christian Giving. *I tell you the truth, this poor widow gave more than all those rich people. For they gave only what they didn’t need.*^{1Lk.21:3-4}

“*Tithes and Offerings*” is a phrase that is used regularly in Evangelical Churches and can mean nearly anything, from a few pence that is put in the Church offering, to a carefully considered and planned regular giving to the Church. But as we asked last week in our Bible Study: What does God actually say? Is the Bible relevant for today or does it just record what happened 2000 years ago? When we encourage people to give to the Church, are we manipulating people by following Church tradition (or even through deceptive teaching), or are we promoting an important Christian truth? And why do we even collect money at Church? God doesn’t need our money! *I have no need of a bull from your stall or of goats from your pens, for every animal of the forest is mine, and the cattle on a thousand hills. I know every bird in the mountains, and the creatures of the field are mine. If I were hungry I would not tell you, for the world is mine, and all that is in it.*^{Ps.50:9-12}

Giving has always been associated with religion. In the Old Testament, people were instructed to give tithes and offerings (including animal sacrifices), but interestingly, after the New Covenant was introduced at the day of Pentecost, there is no reference to tithing! [A tithe is a tenth and traditionally people gave a tenth to the Church and this became a legal requirement with fines

and imprisonments imposed for non-payment. In the seventeenth century various dissenting groups objected to paying 'forced payments for the maintenance of a professional ministry' to Church of England. Germany still levies a church tax on everyone who declares themselves to be Christians, and the proceeds are shared among Catholic, Lutheran, and other Protestant Churches.] Tithing was an Old Covenant principle and was still in practice when Jesus was teaching. Jesus actually said that the religious leaders should pay tithes, but that the spirit of the Law was more important than the letter of the Law: *Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone.*^{Matt.23:23} In the Old Testament, God says that withholding tithes is actually stealing from Him—but paying tithes is the route to prosperity: *“Will a man dare to steal from me? But you rob me! “You ask, ‘How do we rob you?’ “By holding back your offerings. You also steal from me when you do not bring me a tenth of everything you produce. So you are under my curse. In fact, your whole nation is under it. That is because you are robbing me. “Bring the entire tenth to the storerooms in my temple. Then there will be plenty of food. Put me to the test,” says the LORD. “Then you will see that I will throw open the windows of heaven. I will pour out so many blessings that you will not have enough room for them. I will keep bugs from eating up your crops. And your grapes will not drop from the vines before they are ripe,” says the LORD. “Then all of the nations will call you blessed. Your land will be delightful,” says the LORD who rules over all.*^{Mal.3:8-12} However, we are under the New Covenant not the Old Covenant and although the Law was from Moses, we have the Law’s fulfilment in Jesus Christ: *you no longer live under the requirements of the law. Instead, you live under the freedom of God's grace.*^{Rom.6:14} *For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.*^{Jn.1:17}

So what is the New Covenant position on Christian Giving? Perhaps the clearest teaching is in Paul’s letter to the Believers in Corinth, where he encourages them to follow example of the Believers in Philippi. Although the Philippians were poor, they were passionate about supporting Paul’s ministry in a practical way: *Brothers and sisters, we want you to know about the grace that God has given to the churches in Macedonia. They have suffered a great deal. But their joy was more than full. Even though they were very poor, they gave very freely. I give witness that they gave as much as they could. In fact, they gave even more than they could. Completely on their own, they begged us for the chance to share in serving God's people in that way. They did more than we expected. First they gave themselves to the Lord. Then they gave themselves to us in keeping with what God wanted.*^{2Cor.8:1-5} Paul had learned to be content in any and every situation, and know God would provide for his needs—either through them or some other way. And so Paul never tried to manipulate them into giving—either by pleading poverty, or by promising prosperity: *At last you are concerned about me again. That makes me very happy. We belong to the Lord. I know that you have been concerned. But you had no chance to show it. I'm not saying that because I need anything. I have learned to be content no matter what happens to me. I know what it's like not to have what I need. I also know what it's like to have more than I need. I have learned the secret of being content no matter what happens. I am content whether I am well fed or hungry. I am content whether I have more than enough or not enough. I can do everything by the power of Christ. He gives me strength.*^{Phil.4:10-13} This is the same truth that Jesus taught: *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... 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.6:7-34} Like David, Paul had aligned himself to the Believers, rather than the unbelievers—the mockers and scoffers: *Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers, but whose delight is in the law of the LORD, and who meditates on his law day and night.*

That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither—whatever they do prospers.^{Ps.1:1-3} However, true prosperity is not an abundance of money or material assets. True prosperity is receiving the blessings of God—and we have abundance of 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} The greatest blessing is having our sins forgiven: *King David says the same thing. He tells us how blessed some people are. God makes those people right with himself. But they don't have to do anything in return. David says, "Blessed are those whose lawless acts are forgiven. Blessed are those whose sins are taken away. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord never counts against him."*^{Rom.4:6-8} And there is a great blessing in giving: *In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'*^{Acts.20:35} This is because God's economy is very different from this world's economy. In this world's economy, to get rich you need to keep what you can but in God's economy, you should give and let God put credit into our account: *But it was good of you to share in my troubles. And you believers at Philippi know what happened when I left Macedonia. Not one church helped me in the matter of giving and receiving. You were the only one that did. That was in the early days when you first heard the good news. Even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me help when I needed it. You did it again and again. Not that I am looking for a gift, but I am looking for what may be credited to your account. I have received my full pay, and even more than that. I have everything I need. That's because Epaphroditus brought me the gifts you sent. They are a sweet-smelling offering. They are a gift that God accepts. He is pleased with it. My God will meet all your needs. He will meet them in keeping with his wonderful riches that come to you because you belong to Christ Jesus. Give glory to our God and Father for ever and ever. Amen.*^{Phil.4:14-20}

"If you have a need, then sow a seed" makes a catchy saying but it is only a half-truth! We should sow our seeds all the time, whether we have a specific need or not! *Sow your seed in the morning, and at evening let not your hands be idle, for you do not know which will succeed, whether this or that, or whether both will do equally well.*^{Ecc.11:6} But when we sow our seeds, we are giving to God. Although we give to the Church (which is people), we are giving to God as an act of worship—a token of our love and respect. We give with no strings attached and expect no direct reward from what we have given. When we give God, it is a sacrifice that we kill and the gift becomes dead to us! *I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. The man who loves his life will lose it, while the man who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honour the one who serves me.*^{Jn.12:24-26} Nevertheless, God will repay us for our obedience and our faith: *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} But God's repayment is not guaranteed to be material blessings and we are not guaranteed to see any return in this life either! *When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or sisters, your relatives, or your rich neighbours; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.*^{Lk.14:12-14} Sadly the following story speaks for itself. In June 2016 Christianity Today headline was "When Tithing Comes With a Money-Back Guarantee." They reported that NewSpring Church in South Carolina was offering a 90-day tithing challenge, where participants could sign up with a commitment to give 10 percent of their income or more, and if "God doesn't hold true to his promises of blessings" after three months, they can request their money back—no questions asked. It's the church's version of "satisfaction guaranteed" and based on: *Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this," says the LORD Almighty, "and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it.*^{Mal.3:10} In July 2016, the Pastor was removed

as Senior Pastor, due to alcohol abuse and neglect of his family duties and in November 2017, the ex-Pastor divorced his wife!

When Churches overly emphasise tithing as a means of collecting money for themselves, they forget that the tithes and offerings in the OT were often goods rather than money and although the people brought their offerings to God, some of the sacrifices were eaten by the worshippers themselves. In other words, some of the tithes and offerings were gifts to facilitate fellowship and they were to be an expression of thankfulness! *These are the regulations for the fellowship offering a person may present to the LORD: If he offers it as an expression of thankfulness, then along with this thank offering he is to offer cakes of bread made without yeast and mixed with oil, wafers made without yeast and spread with oil, and cakes of fine flour well-kneaded and mixed with oil.*^{Lev.7:11-12} Jesus taught that our giving should never be an excuse for our avoiding our moral duty of looking after immediate family: *You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to human traditions. You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions! For Moses said, 'Honour your father and mother,' and, 'Anyone who curses their father or mother is to be put to death.' But you say that if anyone declares that what might have been used to help their father or mother is Corban (that is, devoted to God)—then you no longer let them do anything for their father or mother. Thus you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And you do many things like that.*^{Mk.7:8-13} *If anyone doesn't take care of his own relatives, especially his immediate family, he has denied the Christian faith and is worse than an unbeliever.*^{1Tim.5:8}

Although tithing is not specifically mentioned in the New Covenant, Paul was quite specific on how we should give—we should give cheerfully, willingly, generously and proportionally: *Here is something to remember. The one who plants only a little will gather only a little. And the one who plants a lot will gather a lot. You should each give what you have decided in your heart to give. You shouldn't give if you don't want to. You shouldn't give because you are forced to. God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to shower all kinds of blessings on you. In all things and at all times you will have everything you need. You will do more and more good works. It is written, "They have spread their gifts around to poor people. Their good works continue forever." God supplies seed to the planter. He supplies bread for food. God will also supply and increase the amount of your seed. He will increase the results of your good works. You will be made rich in every way. Then you can always give freely. We will take your many gifts to the people who need them. And they will give thanks to God. Your gifts meet the needs of God's people. And that's not all. Your gifts also cause many people to thank God. You have shown yourselves to be worthy by what you have given. So people will praise God because you obey him. That proves that you really believe the good news about Christ. They will also praise God because you share freely with them and with everyone else. Their hearts will be filled with longing for you when they pray for you. God has given you grace that is better than anything. Let us give thanks to God for his gift. It is so great that no one can tell how wonderful it really is!*^{2Cor.9:6-15}

To sum up, we should give:

As a Privilege—to give is to be like God: *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.*^{John 3:16} *For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.*^{2Cor.8:9} *Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints.*^{2Cor.8:3-4} God should be honoured with our finances: *Honour the LORD with your wealth, with the firstfruits of all your crops; then your barns will be filled to overflowing, and your vats will brim over with new wine.*^{Pron.3:9-10}

As a Percentage: (Although tithing isn't mentioned in the Epistles, giving 10% is really easy to calculate and was the OT practice.) *On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with your income, saving it up, so that when I come no collections will have to be made.*^{1Cor.16:2} *No man should appear before the LORD empty-handed: Each of you must bring a gift in proportion to the way the LORD your God has blessed you.*^{Deut.16:16-17}

As a Partner: *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.*^{Phil.1:4-5} Moreover, as you Philippians know, in the early days of your acquaintance with the gospel, when I set out from Macedonia, not one church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you only;^{Phil.4:15} Anyone who receives instruction in the word must share all good things with his instructor.^{Gal.6:6}

Fully Persuaded: *Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.*^{2Cor.9:7} Give generously to him and do so without a grudging heart; then because of this the LORD your God will bless you in all your work and in everything you put your hand to.^{Dent.15:10} The people rejoiced at the willing response of their leaders, for they had given freely and wholeheartedly to the LORD.^{1Chron.29:9}

With a conviction of God's provision: *In vain you rise early and stay up late, toiling for food to eat—for he grants sleep to those he loves.*^{Ps.127:2} Do not set your heart on what you will eat or drink; do not worry about it. For the pagan world runs after all such things and your Father knows that you need them. But seek his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well.^{Lk.12:29-31} Do not wear yourself out to get rich; have the wisdom to show restraint.^{Pron.23:4} My God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus.^{Phil.4:19}

Questions

Why do we give at Church?

Why is good stewardship important for Christians?

How important is our attitude when we give?

What are the principles of Christian Giving?

Should the Church ask non-Christians for money?

Puritan Prayers

Gracious God, I praise You for the wonder of Your love in Jesus. He is heaven's darling, but for me, He is the incarnate, despised, rejected, crucified sin-bearer. In Him Your grace has almost out-graced itself; in Him Your love to rebels has reached its height—O to love You with a love like this! My thoughts are locked—let Your love be the master key to open them. O Father, I adore You for Your great love in the gift of Jesus. O Jesus, I bless You for resigning Your life for me. O Holy Spirit, I thank You for revealing to me this mystery. Great God, let Your Son see in me the travail of His soul! Bring me away from my false trusts to rest in Him and Him alone. Let me not be so callous to His merit as not to love Him or be so indifferent to His blood as to not desire cleansing. Lord Jesus, Master, Redeemer, Saviour, come and take entire possession of me—this is Your right by purchase.

August

Thought for the Month: Hope is the picture of all that Jesus provided through His death, burial and resurrection. Faith is being sure of what we have viewed/seen/perceived. Our voice paints the picture of our hope—if we don't have a good picture, we won't have good words. T.L.Osborn

August's Theme: Righteousness—It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our **RIGHTEOUSNESS**, holiness and redemption.^{1Cor.1:30}

Prayer for Ukraine: Heavenly Father, destroy the works of the enemies, divide their tongues, frustrate their efforts, and bring their counsels to naught; cause the enemy to fight within their own ranks, weaken their cause, force them to abandon the war and return home in shame, never to return! In Jesus' Name, Amen

Sunday 7th August Ps.1. Lk.22:1-38

Is your faith secure? *Those of us who have taken refuge in him hold on to the confidence we have been given. We have this confidence as a sure and strong anchor for our lives.*^{Heb.6:18-19,2}

Our relationship with God (including our salvation) is based on **FAITH**: *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God.*^{Eph.2:8} Faith is sometimes described as **Forsaking All I Trust Him** because it is essential—*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} There is an invisible spiritual world that the world knows nothing about (or if they do have an inkling about the spiritual world, their ideas are warped and twisted) and faith gives us an right understanding of this spiritual world. *Faith means being sure of the things we hope for and knowing that something is real even if we do not see it. Faith is the reason we remember great people who lived in the past. It is by faith we understand that the whole world was made by God's command so what we see was made by something that cannot be seen.*^{Heb.11:1-3} But the world (society) is opposed to God and tries it's hardest to break our relationship with God This is because the world (society) is under the influence (and sadly often the control) of satan. *We know that we are children of God, and that the whole world is under the control of the evil one. We know also that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true. And we are in him who is true by being in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life.*^{1Jn.5:19-20} However, although we may be sometimes influenced by the evil one, or even attacked and bruised, Christians have no need to be afraid: *All wrongdoing is sin, and there is sin that does not lead to death. We know that anyone born of God does not continue to sin; the One who was born of God keeps them safe, and the evil one cannot harm them.*^{1Jn.5:17-18} If Jesus prayed for Simon, then we can be sure that He is praying for us too: *Simon, stay on your toes. Satan has tried his best to separate all of you from me, like chaff from wheat. Simon, I've prayed for you in particular that you not give in or give out [that your faith may not fail]. When you have come through the time of testing, turn to your companions and give them a fresh start. [Help your brothers be stronger when you come back to me.]*^{Lk.22:32} But the Bible must be our point of reference for everything connected with the spiritual world and also our relationship with God. Any other source of information must be treated with suspicion and discarded if it contradicts the clear teaching of Scripture—God's Word is God's revelation and the true light by which we can see our way through life. *Your word is a lamp to guide my feet and a light for my path. I've promised it once, and I'll promise it again: I will obey your righteous regulations.*^{Ps.119:105-106} *Consult God's instruction and the testimony of warning. If anyone does not speak according to this word, they have no light of dawn... Then they will look toward the earth and see only distress and darkness and fearful gloom, and they will be thrust into utter darkness. Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress. In the past he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land*

of Naphtali, but in the future he will honour Galilee of the nations, by the Way of the Sea, beyond the Jordan—The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned.^{Is.8:20-9:2}

“Revelation” literally means “unveiling” or making known truth that has been hidden—hence the beginning of the Book of Revelation. *This is the revelation that God gave to Jesus Christ. Jesus shows those who serve God what will happen soon. God made it known by sending his angel to his servant John. John gives witness to everything he saw. The things he gives witness to are God's word and what Jesus Christ has said. Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy. Blessed are those who hear it and think everything it says is important. The time when these things will come true is near.*^{Rev.1:1-3} Revelation about God comes from God: Simon Peter answered, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Jesus replied, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven.”^{Matt.16:16-17} But we don’t have to wait for some mystical experience from God for revelation—we receive revelation from God by meditating on what God has already spoken to us: *Reflect on what I am saying, for the Lord will give you insight into all this.*^{2Tim.2:7} God speaks to us today through His Son: *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. Then he sat down at the right hand of the King, the Majesty in heaven.*^{Heb.1:1-3} And we hear Jesus speaking to us through the Scriptures: *And the Father who sent me has himself testified concerning me. You have never heard his voice nor seen his form, nor does his word dwell in you, for you do not believe the one he sent. You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life.*^{Jn.5:37-40} He said to them, “How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?” And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.^{Lk.24:25-27} Because God speaks to us through the Scriptures, we should also speak to God through the Scriptures. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote: *We learn to speak to God because God has spoken to us and speaks to us. God's speech in Jesus Christ meets us in the Holy Scriptures. If we wish to pray with confidence and gladness, then the words of Holy Scripture will have to be the solid basis of our prayer... Christian prayer takes its stand on the solid ground of the revealed Word and has nothing to do with vague, self-seeking vagaries. We pray on the basis of the prayer of the true Man Jesus Christ. We can pray aright to God only in the name of Jesus Christ.*

When we use the Scriptures as the foundation for prayer, we are already in tune with God and our prayer becomes, what the Ancients called, *ascensus mentis ad Deum*—“a climbing up of the heart unto God”—or “answering speech” (as Eugene Peterson describes prayer): *Prayer is never the first word; it is always the second word. God has the first word. Prayer is answering speech; it is not primarily ‘address’ but ‘response.’ Essential to the practice of prayer is to fully realize this secondary quality.* Kristen Deede Johnson said that “*praying with the borrowed words of the Bible*” was the way God rebuilt her life of prayer: *When suffering and grief make it difficult to pray, we can rest in the reality that the Holy Spirit and Jesus Christ will continue to intercede on our behalf. When we go through seasons of dryness, we can persevere in faith, remembering that our experience of prayer is not foundational. Jesus Christ himself is the foundation, the Word of God, who always lives to intercede for us. Praying with the borrowed words of the Bible was one way God rebuilt my life of prayer on a more solid basis, reminding me that prayer is answering God, not generating my relationship with God.*

But if we fail to see Jesus Christ as God’s Son and our Saviour in the Scriptures, then the Bible becomes just another religious book alongside the LDS’s *Book of Mormon*, the Moslem’s *Quran*, the Hindu’s *Vedas*, and the Buddhist’s *sutras*. And we so we should study the Scriptures—but

also get God's approval of our study: *Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth [Study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, dividing the word of truth aright.* ^{Geneva Bible} 2Tim.2:15 And if we don't understand the basics of reading and interpreting the Bible, we will be easily distracted from the purpose of God's Word—which is to reveal God's plan of salvation through Jesus. *But I want you to continue to follow what you have learned. Don't give up what you are sure of. You know the people you learned it from. You have known the Holy Scriptures ever since you were a little child. They are able to teach you how to be saved by believing in Christ Jesus. God has breathed life into all of Scripture. It is useful for teaching us what is true. It is useful for correcting our mistakes. It is useful for making our lives whole again. It is useful for training us to do what is right. By using Scripture, a man of God can be completely prepared to do every good thing.* ^{2Tim.3:14-17} We have covered **exegesis** and **eisogesis** before but **exegesis** is the process of getting "out" ('ex') of the text what is truly there in the first place and **eisegesis** is the process of putting "into" ('eis') the text something that wasn't intended by the author (which makes it a "blank cheque" to make the Bible say whatever you want it to!). The first principle of **exegesis** is **context**—always read the entire passage or chapter (and sometimes the book) before trying to understand a single verse. The second principle is of **exegesis** is **consistency**—never interpret a text so that your interpretation contradicts the overall message of Scripture. Nevertheless, some Christians have strange views about the spiritual world—they often accept traditions (including Church traditions), myths and fiction as reality. For instance, to believe that anyone can have power over demons through water (even "holy water"), garlic or crucifixes shows a complete ignorance of Scripture and a lack of common-sense! Material has no effect on spiritual—which is why baptism cannot make anyone a Christian and neither can water make anyone (or anything) holy. *Now about eating food that was offered to false gods: We know that the false gods in this world don't really exist and that no god exists except the one God. People may say that there are gods in heaven and on earth—many gods and many lords, as they would call them. But for us, "There is only one God, the Father. Everything came from him, and we live for him. There is only one Lord, Jesus Christ. Everything came into being through him, and we live because of him." But not everyone knows this. Some people are so used to worshiping false gods that they believe they are eating food offered to a false god. So they feel guilty because their conscience is weak. Food will not affect our relationship with God. We are no worse off if we eat that food and no better off if we don't.* ^{1Cor.8:4-8}

When Jesus told Simon that satan has tried to separate us all from Him, Jesus also said He was praying that his faith would not fail—that he would not give in or give out! When circumstances seem hard, we are never really sure if satan is directly or indirectly involved but we can always be sure that Jesus is praying for us—and we know that God always hears Jesus' prayers! *Then Jesus looked up and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me."* ^{Jn.11:41-42} But because Jesus lives forever, his priesthood lasts forever. Therefore he is able, once and forever, to save those who come to God through him. He lives forever to intercede with God on their behalf. ^{Heb.7:24-25}

Whether we have "lots of faith" or "little faith" we have a duty to help others in their faith—actually it is a privilege to help others in their faith! This is what Jesus told Simon to do: *Simon, stay on your toes. Satan has tried his best to separate all of you from me, like chaff from wheat. Simon, I've prayed for you in particular that you not give in or give out. When you have come through the time of testing, turn to your companions and give them a fresh start. [Help your brothers be stronger when you come back to me.]* ^{Lk.22:32} We encourage others in their faith by what we do—by being an example of Jesus: *Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ.* ^{1Cor.11:1} Brothers and sisters, here is a command we give you in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. Keep away from every believer who doesn't want to work. Keep away from anyone who doesn't live up to the teaching you received from us. You know how you should follow our

example.^{2Thess.3:6-7} 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.4:9} We also encourage others in their faith by what we say—by speaking words of faith, of courage and of love. We sent Timothy, who is our brother and co-worker in God's service in spreading the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you in your faith, so that no one would be unsettled by these trials.^{1Thess.3:2-3} For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him. Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.^{1Thess.5:9-11} Command and teach these things. Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith and in purity.^{1Tim.4:11-12} Similarly, encourage the young men to be self-controlled. In everything set them an example by doing what is good. In your teaching show integrity, seriousness and soundness of speech that cannot be condemned, so that those who oppose you may be ashamed because they have nothing bad to say about us.^{Tit.2:6-8}

However, faith doesn't guarantee that we receive everything God promises us in this life: All these great people died in faith. They did not get the things that God promised his people, but they saw them coming far in the future and were glad.^{Heb.11:13} But there is a future reward that will outshine everything we have known here on earth: When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or sisters, your relatives, or your rich neighbours; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.^{Lk.14:12-14} These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised, since God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect.^{Heb.11:39-40} I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem. It was coming down out of heaven from God. It was prepared like a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. I heard a loud voice from the throne. It said, 'Now God makes his home with people. He will live with them. They will be his people. And God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or sadness. There will be no more crying or pain. Things are no longer the way they used to be.' He who was sitting on the throne said, 'I am making everything new!' Then he said, 'Write this down. You can trust these words. They are true.'^{Rev.21:2-5} Until that time, we must be patient and persevere, not looking back but up! The Holy Spirit and the bride say, 'Come!' Let those who hear say, 'Come!' Anyone who is thirsty should come. Anyone who wants to take the free gift of the water of life should do so... He who gives witness to these things says, 'Yes. I am coming soon.' Amen. Come, Lord Jesus! May the grace of the Lord Jesus be with God's people. Amen.^{Rev.22:17-21}

Questions

What is faith?

Why is faith so important?

How do we get faith?

Can we lose our faith?

What is the evidence of faith?

What can we do to grow our faith?

Puritan Prayers

In the arms of love, enfold and subdue my wilful spirit. Take, sanctify and use my every faculty. I am not ashamed of my hope, nor has my confidence led me into confusion. I trusted in You regarding my innumerable sins and You have cast them behind Your back. I trusted in You when evils encompassed me, and You brought me out into a beautiful place. I trusted in You in an hour of distress and You did not fail me, though faith trembled. O God of the eternal choice; O God of the restored possession purchased on the tree; O God of the effectual call—Father, Son, Holy Spirit—I adore Your glory, honour, majesty, power and dominion for ever.

Sunday 14th August Ps.46 Lk.22:39-71

Let Your will be done. *I want your will to be done, not mine.* ^{1Jn.22:42}

William Shakespeare is arguably the most influential writer in the English language and his works have been translated into every major living language. His use of language helped shape modern English and what is not generally known about him is that he was one of the translators of the KJV of the Bible—and he left his “signature” in the Bible! When the KJV was completed in 1610, he was 46 years old and the 46th word of the 46th Psalm is "*shake*," and the 46th word from the end of the Psalm is "*spear*" (ignoring the final "*selah*")! *Though the mountains shake with its swelling.*^{Ps.46:3} *He breaks the bow and cuts the spear in two,*^{Ps.46:9}

Also in the first publication of the KJV Bible (1611), John 3.16 reads “God so loued y̅ world”. The letter “þ” (thorn) was used for “th” and was interchangeable with the letter “ð” (eth) When printed, “þ” (thorn) looked very similar to “y” and printers (especially in France where “thorn” did not exist in their alphabet) would substitute the letter “y”. When they needed to make the words better fit on a line, the e would be placed above the y like this y̅ (“thou” was also shortened to y̅). And so “Ye Olde Book Shoppe” should be pronounced “The olde Book Shoppe”! Although we find it easy to pronounce “th”, some people find it impossible—and for them the spoken words “*fate*” and “*faith*” sound identical! But even if they sound the same word, the spelling is different—and the meaning is even more different. Fate means “*what will be, will be*” but faith means “*God’s will, will be. (full stop)*”!!! Christian faith is about trusting God and know that we can trust God because He is Omnipotent, Omnipresent, Omniscient and Omnibenevolent—and He is Sovereign. God is all powerful, all present, all knowing and all good—and He can do anything He chooses to do! These characteristics apply to God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit because they are essentially one God and yet they are three distinct Persons—it wasn’t God the Father or God the Holy Spirit who died on the Cross but God the Son who became human. Until Jesus was conceived within Mary, God the Son was of the same substance as God the Father and God the Holy Spirit. They are uncreated Spirit not created flesh, and they are immortal, not mortal. When we try to picture God without a body, our minds automatically think of “ghosts” that are portrayed in films or cartoons! But “ghosts” (either angels, demons or spirits of people who have died) are all created beings—they are not God Himself. In order for us to grasp what God what like we had to see Him in human form: *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. John gives witness about him. He cries out and says, “This was the one I was talking about. I said, ‘He who comes after me is more important than I am. He is more important because he existed before I was born.’”*^{Jn.1:14-15} And so when Jesus came to us in a human being, He came to show us God—God the Father. *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} *Very truly I tell you, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does.*^{Jn.5:19} Jesus answered: “Don’t you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? Don’t you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? The words I say to you I do not speak on my own authority. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work. Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; or at least believe on the evidence of the works themselves.”^{Jn.14:9-11}

When Jesus received His human body, He came to do God's will: *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, my God.'"* ^{Heb. 10:5-7} Another way of saying "doing God's will" is obedience and

Jesus was obedient to His Father—even to the point of death: *You should think in the same way Christ Jesus does. In his very nature he was God. But he did not think that being equal with God was something he should hold on to. Instead, he made himself nothing. He took on the very nature of a servant. He was made in human form. He appeared as a man. He came down to the lowest level. He obeyed God completely, even though it led to his death. In fact, he died on a cross. So God lifted him up to the highest place. He gave him the name that is above every name. When the name of Jesus is spoken, everyone's knee will bow to worship him. Every knee in heaven and on earth and under the earth will bow to worship him. Everyone's mouth will say that Jesus Christ is Lord. And God the Father will receive the glory.*^{Phil.2:5-11} Jesus was holy, innocent and sinless and yet obedience was not automatic—although Jesus was God's Son, He still had to learn obedience through life's experiences, which includes hurtful and hateful opposition of people: *During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him and was designated by God to be high priest in the order of Melchizedek.*^{Heb.5:7-10} If Jesus had to learn obedience through suffering, then we can expect to have to learn obedience through hardships and difficulties of life—including the unfair opposition of others. Even after we are born-again into God's family (that is, become a Christian), obedience is not automatic—it takes maturity. God's plan for us is that we become mature: *Now these are the gifts Christ gave to the church: the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, and the pastors and teachers. Their responsibility is to equip God's people to do his work and build up the church, the body of Christ. This will continue until we all come to such unity in our faith and knowledge of God's Son that we will be mature in the Lord, measuring up to the full and complete standard of Christ. Then we will no longer be immature like children. We won't be tossed and blown about by every wind of new teaching. We will not be influenced when people try to trick us with lies so clever they sound like the truth. Instead, we will speak the truth in love, growing in every way more and more like Christ, who is the head of his body, the church.*^{Eph.4:11-15}

Questions

What are the similarities and differences between fate and faith?

Why can we place our trust in God?

How was Jesus an example for us?

Can we be a Christian and not behave like one?

Puritan Prayer

O Lord God, teach me to know that your grace precedes, accompanies and follows my salvation; that your grace sustains the redeemed soul; that not one link in the chain of Your grace can ever break. From Calvary's cross, wave upon wave of Your grace reaches me; Your grace deals with my sin; Your grace washes me clean; Your grace renews my thoughts; Your grace strengthens my will; Your grace draws out my affection; Your grace kindles a flame in my soul. Your grace rules throughout my inner man; Your grace consecrates my every thought, word and work; Your grace teaches me Your immeasurable love. How great are my privileges in Christ Jesus!

21st August Ps.2:1-6 Matt.13

Spiritual Maturity

“Amen” literally means “I agree, may it be so” or “this is true” as in: *Very truly [Amen] I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.*^{John.3:3} “Amen” at the end of a prayer is a way of personally affirming that prayer. Our prayers don't have to always be impromptu or spontaneous—we can pray someone else's prayer, or we can read a prayer, or we can even borrow a prayer from the Scriptures—like the “Lord's Prayer”: *Our Father in heaven, may your name*

be kept holy. May your Kingdom come soon. May your will be done on earth, as it is in heaven. Give us today the food we need, and forgive us our sins, as we have forgiven those who sin against us. And don't let us yield to temptation, but rescue us from the evil one. For yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.^{Matt.6:9-13}

By saying “Amen” to this prayer, we are making that prayer ours, and asking God for His will be done right here and now—starting in our own life; we are saying that we intend to align our thoughts with God’s thoughts, behave like Him and support His values. But however good our intentions are, we can easily be distracted from God and from doing His will—which is what the parable of the Sower is about. In that story, the good seed of God’s Word is sown in different people. For various reasons some of the seeds never even germinated and some that did germinate never matured—but some did mature and produce a good harvest. *This is what the story illustrates: The seed is God's word. Some people are like seeds that were planted along the road. They hear the word, but then the devil comes. He takes the word away from them so that they don't believe and become saved. Some people are like seeds on rocky soil. They welcome the word with joy whenever they hear it, but they don't develop any roots. They believe for a while, but when their faith is tested, they abandon it. The seeds that were planted among thornbushes are people who hear the word, but as life goes on the worries, riches, and pleasures of life choke them. So they don't produce anything good and so they never grow into maturity. The seeds that were planted on good ground are people who also hear the word. But they keep it in their good and honest hearts and produce what is good despite what life may bring.*^{Lk.8:11-15}

Maturity in plants is seen by the fruit—and immaturity is seen by the lack of fruit. Our maturity is also seen by our fruit and our immaturity is seen by our lack of fruit. Are we sweet or sour, stable or unstable, reliable or unreliable, God-like or devil-like? However, maturity is not the same as nature! When we became a Christian, we were born again with an incorruptible seed: *Love one another fervently with a pure heart, having been born again, not of corruptible seed but incorruptible, through the word of God which lives and abides forever.*^{1Pet.1:22-23} We became a spiritual child—and as a child, we were immature. *Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.*^{Lk.18:17} But our nature was changed—our sinful nature inherited from Adam (through our parents) was exchanged for a righteousness nature inherited through the Last Adam—we were given Jesus’ righteousness: *The Scriptures tell us, "The first man, Adam, became a living person." But the last Adam—that is, Christ—is a life-giving Spirit. What comes first is the natural body, then the spiritual body comes later. Adam, the first man, was made from the dust of the earth, while Christ, the second man, came from heaven. Earthly people are like the earthly man, and heavenly people are like the heavenly man. Just as we are now like the earthly man, we will someday be like the heavenly man.*^{1Cor.15:45-49} *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} *For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed—a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: “The righteous will live by faith.”*^{Rom.1:17} After we were born-again, our spiritual nature is clean (righteous and holy) and we remain God’s child, regardless how much fruit we have (how mature or immature we are). But if we get dirty again (i.e. if we sin), we have a Saviour who cleanses us from all unrighteousness! *If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness... 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.*^{1Jn1:9-2:2}

However, we have an obligation to keep ourself spiritually clean and tidy, like a beautifully manicured garden—and if we keep our spiritual life clean and tidy, the rest of our life will be beautiful too! To keep a garden in tip-top condition, a gardener must go into warfare against the weeds and destroy any plant that will stop the cultivated plants from growing. And for us to stay in a tip-top spiritual condition (to be spiritually mature), we have to go into warfare against the distractions that will choke our faith—we must demolish any mindset or thinking

that opposes God and replace those thoughts with thoughts that honour God—that is true spiritual warfare: *For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ. [I keep every thought under control in order to make it obey Christ.]*^{2Cor.10:3-5} As F.F.Bosworth puts it: *Make your lips do their duty; fill them with the Word. Make them say what God says about your situation. Don't allow them to say anything to the contrary.* Then we will clearly and brightly reflect Jesus Christ: *You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.*^{Matt.5:14-16} *Do everything without grumbling or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, "children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation." Then you will shine among them like stars in the sky as you hold firmly to the word of life.*^{Phil.2:14-16}

We use a bit and bridle (and sometimes a whip and spurs as well!) to make horses obey us—but we should do what God wants us to do without any artificial aids. Obeying God cheerfully, willingly and promptly is called spiritual maturity! *I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you with my loving eye on you. Do not be like the horse or the mule, which have no understanding but must be controlled by bit and bridle or they will not come to you.*^{Ps.32:8-9} But if we are to obey God cheerfully willingly and promptly, we need to know what God wants us to do—and we also need to know what God doesn't want us to do! In other words, we must know what is right and what is wrong and then do what is right! *For someone who lives on milk is still an infant and doesn't know how to do what is right. Solid food is for those who are mature, who through training have the skill to recognize the difference between right and wrong. So let us stop going over the basic teachings about Christ again and again. Let us go on instead and become mature in our understanding.*^{Heb.5:13-6:1} Although in general terms, God's will for us is obey Him and be like Jesus, there are some specific things that are defined as God's will for us:

To be sanctified (i.e. to live a holy life). *It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; that each of you should learn to control your own body in a way that is holy and honourable.*^{1Thess.4:3-4}

To rejoice, pray and give thanks in every circumstance. *Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.*^{1Thess.5:15-18}

To do good. *For it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish people.*^{1Pet.2:15}

To be rescued from this present evil age: *Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.*^{Gal.1:3-5}

See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven. What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off? And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off. In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should perish.^{Matt.18:11-14} Dear friends, here is one thing you must not forget. With the Lord a day is like a thousand years. And a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow to keep his promise. He is not slow in the way some people understand it. He is patient with you. He doesn't want anyone to be destroyed [not willing that any should perish]. Instead, he wants all people to turn away from their sins.^{2Pet.3:8-9}

Now we know God's will, let's make Jesus' prayer, our own prayer: *I want your will to be done, not mine.*^{Lk.22:42} **Amen!**

Questions

What is Christian maturity?

How can we develop our Christian maturity?

What is God's will for us?

Puritan Prayer How great are my privileges in Christ Jesus! Without Him I stand far off, a stranger, an outcast; but in Him I draw near and touch His kingly sceptre. Without Him I dare not lift up my guilty eyes; but in Him I gaze upon my Father-God and my Friend. Without Him I hide my lips in trembling shame; but in Him I open my mouth in petition and praise. Without Him all is wrath and consuming fire; but in Him all is love and He is the repose of my soul. Without Him is gaping hell below me and eternal anguish; but in Him its gates are barred to me by His precious blood. Without Him darkness spreads its horrors in front; but in Him an eternity of glory is my boundless horizon. Without Him all within me is terror and dismay; but in Him every accusation is charmed into joy and peace. Without Him all things external call for my condemnation; but in Him they minister to my comfort and are to be enjoyed with thanksgiving. Praise be to You for Your grace and for the unspeakable gift of Jesus.

Sunday 28th August Ps.2:7-12 Philemon

What are you talking about? *It is written in the Scriptures, "I believed, so I spoke." Our faith is like this, too. We believe, and so we speak.*^{2Cor.4:13}

At our Bible Study recently, we talked about "*memorials*" and saw how that Joshua and Samuel made memorials so that people would remember what God had done for them—and then reflect on God's goodness. *When you have crossed the Jordan into the land the LORD your God is giving you, set up some large stones and coat them with plaster. Write on them all the words of this law when you have crossed over to enter the land the LORD your God is giving you, a land flowing with milk and honey, just as the LORD, the God of your ancestors, promised you.*^{Dent.27:2-3} *So the Israelites did as Joshua commanded them. They took twelve stones from the middle of the Jordan, according to the number of the tribes of the Israelites, as the LORD had told Joshua; and they carried them over with them to their camp, where they put them down. Joshua set up the twelve stones that had been in the middle of the Jordan at the spot where the priests who carried the ark of the covenant had stood. And they are there to this day.*^{Josh.4:8-9}

War graves are memorials and at the end of WW1, Sir Edwin Lutyens designed the Stone of Remembrance for the Imperial (now Commonwealth) war cemeteries. Rudyard Kipling suggested a verse from the Apocrypha in the King James Version of the Bible: (the Apocrypha was a part of the KJV for 274 years until being removed in 1885 A.D.) *Their bodies are buried in peace; but their name liveth for evermore*" but this was rejected in case anyone graffitied an "s" after peace—"Their bodies are buried in peaces"! Eventually it was agreed to use "*Their name liveth for evermore*". The context of that verse is: *Their seed shall remain for ever, and their glory shall not be blotted out. Their bodies are buried in peace; but their name liveth for evermore. The people will tell of their wisdom, and the congregation will shew forth their praise. Ecclesiasticus 44:13-15* Kipling also suggested the memorial phrase "*Known unto God*" for gravestones marking the resting place of unidentified or unknown soldiers, taken from "*Known unto God are all his works from the beginning of the world.*"^{Acts.15:18} The memorial phrase "*lest we forget*" is taken from Kipling's poem "*Recessional*"—"Lord God of Hosts, be with us yet; Lest we forget—lest we forget!"

Remembering what God has done in the past gives us the confidence to trust God for the future and so, when we share our testimony, it should be a memorial to God's goodness. As we remember what God has done for us, it will encourage us in our own faith but it will also inspire others to trust God for themselves—as Stuart Hamblin wrote: *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.*

The historical events in Scripture remind us of what God has done for others and are life lessons for us: *For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope.*^{Rom.15:4} Peter wanted his readers to keep the Christian truths fresh in their minds and thoughts. *So I will always remind you of these things, even though you know them and are firmly established in the truth you now have. I think it is right to refresh your memory as long as I live in the tent of this body.*^{2Pet.1:12-13} Dear friends, this is now my second letter to you. I have written both of them 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} All of the Scriptures are inspiring giving us illumination to life: *How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth! I gain understanding from your precepts; therefore I hate every wrong path. Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path.*^{Ps.119:103-15} And all of the Scriptures are also inspired by God and were written for our benefit and instruction: *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} Because God has breathed His life (or Spirit) into Scripture, the very words of the Scripture have intrinsic power. *For nothing is impossible with God.*^{Lk.1:37} The literal translation of this verse is: *No word of God is void of power.* In other words, every Word of God has the intrinsic power of God within it—the power is not in the written words on the page (as some sort of magical talisman) but in the spoken words as they are read (either out loud or silently). (If God's life was in the written words, then we would need to have the Bible in the original languages and translations would be void of God's power—as Muslims treat the Quran!) It is in the speaking out of God's Word that life is imparted. The world was created when God spoke: *God said, "Let there be light." And there was light... God said, "Let the water under the sky be gathered into one place. Let dry ground appear." And that's exactly what happened.*^{Gen.1:3-9} Jesus said that the words that He spoke are life: *The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life.*^{Jn.6:63} Spiritual life (faith) comes when we hear the Word of God: *Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ.*^{Rom.10:17} And we can hear the Word of God through our ears or through our mind, but however we hear the Word of God, we must learn to hear the Holy Spirit in the words. *He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.*^{Rev.2:7} The world (non-Christians) may hear the same words, yet they don't hear the Holy Spirit, but Believers are different—our eyes and ears have been opened! *You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving. For this people's heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them.' But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear. For truly I tell you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it.*^{Matt.13:14-17} *Some people don't have the Holy Spirit. They don't accept the things that come from the Spirit of God. Things like that are foolish to them. They can't understand them. In fact, such things can't be understood without the Spirit's help... But we have the mind of Christ.*^{1Cor.2:14-16} The Scriptures are called "*The Holy Bible*" not because we worship the Book but because God's Spirit (His life) is activated in the actual words of the Bible when they are read, recited or remembered. And when we re-tell what God has done for us, we re-live that encounter with God—and we re-live that "*anointing*" of the Holy Spirit (*i.e.* the awareness of the presence of the Holy Spirit is renewed again). The anointing is in the speaking! That's why we should regularly revisit our "*memorials*" and re-tell our "*testimonies*" of what God has done for us. *Then Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Shen. He named it Ebenezer [Ebenezer means stone of help], saying, "Thus far the LORD has helped us."*^{1Sam.7:12} Examine yourselves to see whether

you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you—unless, of course, you fail the test?^{2Cor.13:5} When we trust God (believe) we will begin to speak (talk) about what God has done for us: *It is written: "I believed; therefore I have spoken." With that same spirit of faith we also believe and therefore speak. [Just like the psalmist who wrote, "I believed it, so I said it," we say what we believe. And what we believe is that the One who raised up the Master Jesus will just as certainly raise us up with you, alive. Every detail works to your advantage and to God's glory: more and more grace, more and more people, more and more praise.]*^{2Cor.4:13}

Onesimus had been a slave in Philemon's household at Colossae (in Turkey) and he apparently ran away but ended up in Rome. Paul was also in Rome in prison, awaiting trial and at some time Onesimus met Paul and became a "spiritual son" to him: *I make an appeal to you for my son Onesimus. He became a son to me while I was being held by chains. Before that, he was useless to you. But now he has become useful to you and to me.*^{Phile.1:10-11} When Onesimus ran away, he was a slave and a fugitive—but when he had an encounter with the Jesus, he became spiritually emancipated and a citizen of God's kingdom. The name "Onesimus" means "useful" and what was once useless had become useful—Onesimus the runaway slave had become a born-again Believer. This is the Gospel in a nutshell—when someone has an encounter with Jesus, they are completely changed from the inside out! Paul sent Onesimus back to Colossae with a letter to the Church there and also a personal letter to Philemon who was his master—however, Onesimus was no longer a useless slave but a faithful Christian brother: *This letter is from Paul, a prisoner for preaching the Good News about Christ Jesus, and from our brother Timothy. I am writing to Philemon, our beloved co-worker, and to our sister Apphia, and to our fellow soldier Archippus, and to the church that meets in your house.*^{Phile.1:1-2} *Tychicus will tell you all the news about me. He is a dear brother. He is a faithful worker. He serves the Lord together with us. I am sending him to you for one reason. I want you to know what is happening here. I want him to cheer you up and make your hearts strong. He is coming with Onesimus, our faithful and dear brother. He is one of you. They will tell you everything that is happening here.*^{Col.4:7-9}

In both the letter Philemon and also the letter to the Church at Colossae, Paul encourages his readers to talk about their faith: *And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains. Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should. Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.*^{Col.4:3-6} *I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith, so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ. Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the saints.*^{Phile.1:6-7} Other translations have a slightly different reading which are quite helpful: *And I am praying that you will put into action the generosity that comes from your faith as you understand and experience all the good things we have in Christ. Your love has given me much joy and comfort, my brother, for your kindness has often refreshed the hearts of God's people.*^{NLT} *As you share the faith you have in common with others, I pray that you may come to have a complete knowledge of every blessing we have in Christ. Your love for God's people gives me a lot of joy and encouragement. You, brother, have comforted God's people.*^{GWT} *I pray that you will be active in sharing what you believe. Then you will completely understand every good thing we have in Christ. Your love has given me great joy. It has cheered me up. My brother, you have renewed the hearts of God's people.*^{NIV} *That the sharing of your faith may become effective by the acknowledgment of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus. For we have great joy and consolation in your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed by you, brother.*^{NKJV} *I pray the partnership that springs from your faith may effectively lead you to recognize all the good things at work in us, leading us into the Messiah.*

The words we speak aren't just a means of communication but they carry Holy Spirit power which can bring life and light to those to whom we speak. We should never underestimate our influence—not because we are important but because Christ lives within us and the Holy Spirit

empowers the words we speak. *Do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say, for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.*^{Matt.10:19-20} *When I came to you, I was weak and afraid and trembling all over. I didn't preach my message with clever and compelling words. As I preached, the Holy Spirit showed his power. That was so you would believe not because of human wisdom but because of God's power.*^{1Cor.2:3-5} Although we should not worry about what we are going to say, we should be prepared: *But make sure in your hearts that Christ is Lord. Always be ready to give an answer to anyone who asks you about the hope you have. Be ready to give the reason for it. But do it gently and with respect. Live so that you don't have to feel you've done anything wrong. Some people may say evil things about your good conduct as believers in Christ. If they do, they will be put to shame for speaking like that about you. It is better to suffer for doing good than for doing evil if that's what God wants.*^{1Pet.3:15-17} Remember, good theology makes easy Christianity—in other words, if we have a clear understanding about the good things God has given us through Jesus' death, burial and resurrection, then our walk with God will be enjoyable and every day will be a blessed day! Let's take the opportunities God gives us and trust Him to use us: *Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.*^{Gal.6:9-10}

Questions

What "Memorials" do you reflect on?

Why is the Bible called God's Word?

In what ways are Christians changed from being spiritually useless to spiritually useful?

Does being spiritually useful make any practical difference to a person?

Why is it important that our words are wholesome?

What practical things can we do to ensure we don't lose our enthusiasm for representing God?

Puritan Prayer

Heavenly Father, my faith is in You, my expectation is from You, my love goes out toward You. I believe You, I accept Your Word, I acquiesce to Your will, I rely on Your promises and I trust Your providence—I bless You that the court of conscience proves me to be Yours! I do not need signs and wonders to believe, for Your Word is sure truth. I have cast my anchor in the port of peace, knowing that my past, present and future are in Jesus' nail-pierced hands. You are so good, wise, just and holy, that no mistake is possible to You. You are the fountain and source of all law—and Your commands are mine to obey. I yield to Your sovereignty with all that I am and all that I have—do with me as You will. You have given me silence in my thoughts in place of murmurings and complaints. Keep my wishes from growing into willings, and my willings from becoming fault-finding with Your providences. Lord, have mercy on me! And if I sin and am rebellious, help me to repent—then take away my mourning and give me music; remove my sackcloth and adorn me with beauty; take away my sighs and fill my mouth with songs. And when I am restored and rest in You, give me summer weather in my thoughts.

September

Thought for the Month: The first day of the week, is the day Resurrection, the day of creation and the day of new-creation. It is not a day to spend with the family but a day to spend with the Lord as a family! *Andrew Corbett*

September's Theme: Repentance—Godly sorrow brings REPENTANCE that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death.^{2Cor.7:10}

Sunday 11th September (on Zoom due to Covid) Ps.4

Prayer for our Country

Heavenly Father, we pray for our king Charles. We pray for all who are in authority. We pray that we will live peaceful and quiet lives. And we pray that we will be godly and holy. This is good. It pleases God our Saviour. He wants everyone to be saved. He wants them to come to know the truth. For there is one God and one Mediator who can reconcile God and humanity—the man Christ Jesus. He gave his life to purchase freedom for everyone. This is the message God gave to the world at just the right time.^{1Tim.2:2-6}

Let the light of your face shine on us.^{Ps.4:6}

Our new king, Charles III, has inherited the title “*Defender of the Faith*”, which is a title given by Pope Leo X to Henry VIII in 1521 for his defence of the 7 Sacraments of the Catholic tradition: Baptism; Reconciliation or Penance; Eucharist; Confirmation; Matrimony; Anointing of the Sick; Holy Orders. Actually, Henry’s essay was a direct attack on the emerging Protestantism and in particular, of Martin Luther—a point mostly overlooked by Protestants today! (A “*sacrament*” is an object or ritual that can impart some spiritual benefit—and so the only true sacrament is faith!) But regardless of the origin of the title and its use, it is important that we defend the faith, even fight for it: *Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made your good confession in the presence of many witnesses.*^{1Tim.6:12} It’s not just any old faith that we are to fight for, but the original authentic gospel message: *Dear friends, although I was very eager to write to you about the salvation we share, I felt compelled to write and urge you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to God’s holy people. [I have to write insisting—begging!—that you fight with everything you have in you for this faith entrusted to us as a gift to guard and cherish.]*^{Jude.1:3} To do this, we need to know God’s precepts and God’s power: *You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God.*^{Matt.22:29}

The Bible is not complicated and yet for many people it is still a closed book because it takes the Holy Spirit to illuminate it. *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} God is light and He brought light into the world: *And 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.*^{Gen.1:3-4} This light was not the sun (which was created on the 4th day) but God’s presence—His glory—and it is God’s presence that illuminates heaven: *The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever.*^{Rev.22:3-5} The account of Creation in Genesis is not only historical, but it is also an allegory to illustrate God’s new creation—conversion. *For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God’s glory displayed in the face of Christ.*^{2Cor.4:6} Therefore, *if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people’s sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We*

implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God.^{2Cor.5:17-20} We are reconciled to God through the death of Jesus: *But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation—if you continue in your faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel.*^{Col.1:22-23} And being reconciled through Jesus' death brings us life—true life: *For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! Not only is this so, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.*^{Rom.5:10-11} I have come so they can have life. I want them to have it in the fullest possible way.^{Jn.10:10} Once we become part of God's family, God becomes our Father and Jesus is our Elder Brother. *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. Both the one who makes men holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers.*^{Heb.2:10-11} And because we are reconciled to God, we enjoy His favour—His 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. For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight.*^{Eph.1:3-4} Although God's blessings start in our spirit, they permeate every part of our life and if our relationship with God is good, then the rest of our life will be good. *Dear friend, I pray that you may enjoy good health and that all may go well with you, even as your soul is getting along well. It gave me great joy when some believers came and testified about your faithfulness to the truth, telling how you continue to walk in it.*^{3Jn.1:2-3} The person who rests in the shadow of the Most High God will be kept safe by the Mighty One. I will say about the LORD, "He is my place of safety. He is like a fort to me. He is my God. I trust in him." He will certainly save you from hidden traps and from deadly sickness. He will cover you with his wings. Under the feathers of his wings you will find safety. He is faithful. He will keep you safe like a shield or a tower.^{Ps.91:1-4} Note, God doesn't promise us a trouble-free life, but He does promise that our life will not be a "disaster": *If you say, "The LORD is my refuge," and you make the Most High your dwelling, no harm will overtake you, no disaster will come near your tent.*^{Ps.91:10} God has promised to be with us through every moment of our life: *Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will not be afraid. You are with me.*^{Ps.23:4} I have told you all this so that you may have peace in me. Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows. But take heart, because I have overcome the world.^{Jn.16:33} When God is in control of our life, He makes something good out of our life—regardless of how messy or bad it looks! When God's light and life impacts our heart (our spirit), it always affects the rest of our life—our attitude, our thoughts, and even our physical health—because there is an awareness of God with us.

We were redeemed to live in God's Kingdom of light: *But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. 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 God has qualified us to live in to live in His Kingdom of light: *and giving joyful thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of his holy people in the kingdom of light. For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.*^{Col.1:12-}

¹⁴ So now it is up to us to live in that Kingdom of light—which is His glory: *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.1:5-7} For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) and find out what pleases the Lord. Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them. It is shameful even to mention what the disobedient do in secret. But everything exposed by the light becomes visible—and everything that is

illuminated becomes a light. This is why it is said: "Wake up, sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you." Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is.^{Eph.5:8-17} *But you, brothers, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief. You are all sons of the light and sons of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness. So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be alert and self-controlled.*^{1Thess.5:4-6}

Yes: *Let the light of your face shine on us. Fill my heart with joy when their grain and new wine abound. In peace I will lie down and sleep, for you alone, LORD, make me dwell in safety.*^{Ps.4:6-8}

Questions

Why should we defend the faith?

How can we contend for the faith?

What faith should we contend for?

Why do people find the Bible difficult?

What is God's light?

What difference should it make when God's light has shone in our hearts?

How do we walk in the light?

Puritan Prayer

In prayer may I know You as the path in which my feet tread; as the latch upon the door of my lips; as the light that shines through my eyes; as the music of my ears; as the marrow of my understanding; as the strength of my will; as the power of my affection; and as the sweetness of my memory. May the matter of my prayer be always wise, humble, submissive, obedient, scriptural, and Christ-like. Give me unwavering faith so that my supplications are never in vain—and if I seem not to obtain my petitions, that I shall have larger and richer answers that surpass all I ask or think. Thank You that You have given me the greatest Gift of all—the Person of Your Son—and it is in Him You will give me all I need.

Sunday 18th September Ps.37:21-31 Jude

Safe Eternally. *To him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy.*^{Jude.1:24}

Whilst Amsterdam is renowned for growing tulips, they are not native to Europe. Tulips were first cultivated in Persia around 1000 years ago and literature from that period mention them growing in the gardens of Baghdad. Our word "*tulip*" is the latinized version of the Turkish word for turban, "*Tülbend*" which the flower resembled. However, besides being a flower, **TULIP**, is also an acronym for the 5 main points of Calvinism: **T**otal depravity of mankind; **U**nconditional election; **L**imited atonement; **I**rrresistible grace; **P**erseverance of the saints. And these doctrines were collated as a rebuttal to the 5 main teachings of Jacob Arminius (who was influenced by the heretic Pelagius): 1) free will/human ability (that man can choose God on his own) 2) conditional election (God's predestination is based on His looking down the portal of time to see who would on their own choose Him) 3) universal redemption 4) the Holy Spirit can be effectually resisted and 5) falling from grace is possible. (Actually, most heresies are sound doctrines taken to the extreme or just taken out of context.) Although the TULIP tenets are called "*Calvinism*" after the Reformer John Calvin (A.D. 1509–1564), they are much older than the C16th and they are also known as *Augustinianism* from Augustine of Hippo (A.D. 354–430) but have been historically accepted by the church as far back as the apostles. John Newton (who wrote the hymn "*Amazing Grace*" 240 years ago) said: "*As to myself, if I were not a Calvinist, I think I should have no more hope of success in preaching to men, than to horses or cows.*" At the Dutch Reformed Church's Synod of Dort in 1619 (which included delegates from the Church of

England and the Church of Scotland), the Five Points of Calvinism were affirmed by the church and the teachings of Jacob Arminius were rejected.

Nevertheless, the Calvin/Arminian debate continues and theologians still can't completely agree about them—which is not surprising really because if we could understand God, then we probably wouldn't need Him! However, if we don't grasp the basics of “**Perseverance of the saints**”, we will never have any real confidence that we are truly saved. When we were spiritually helpless and hopeless, God saved us by His Grace. *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.*^{Eph.2:8-9} *But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*^{Rom.8:8} If we could have saved ourselves then Jesus didn't need to die for our sins! But if God saved us when we were still sinners, then we can rest assured that He will keep us saved if things go wrong in our life: *And if he rescued Lot, a righteous man, who was distressed by the depraved conduct of the lawless (for that righteous man, living among them day after day, was tormented in his righteous soul by the lawless deeds he saw and heard)—if this is so, then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trials*^{2Pet.2:7-9} Our redemption is too valuable to be lost by our mistakes! *At just the right time Christ died for ungodly people. He died for us when we had no power of our own. It is unusual for anyone to die for a godly person. Maybe someone would be willing to die for a good person. But here is how God has shown his love for us. While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. The blood of Christ has made us right with God. So we are even more sure that Jesus will save us from God's anger. Once we were God's enemies. But we have been brought back to him because his Son has died for us. Now that God has brought us back, we are even more secure. We know that we will be saved because Christ lives.*^{Rom.5:6-10}

In the Prologue to his book “*Safe Eternally*” (available to download from our Church website under [What we teach, resources](#)), W.F.P. Burton (1886-1971) writes: What use is a SALVATION which does not make me SAFE, or an ASSURANCE of which I cannot be SURE? We used to hold meetings in the cottage of old Mrs. B. Over her fireplace was a picture entitled ‘Rock of Ages’ representing a white-robed girl with hair hanging down her back. She was soaked with water, and clinging to a rock in the shape of a cross, while her feet still dangled beneath her in the wild waves. There was a threatening background of rough sea and stormy sky. The old lady was very proud of this picture and would refer to it as she exhorted her hearers to cling to the Cross. Much of her Christian life was directed to keeping herself saved—“*hanging on*”—as she expressed it. One evening, we went for the weekly cottage meeting in her house and found the picture gone. The faded wallpaper round the spot from which it had been taken showed that something was missing. “What has happened to your picture, Mrs. B?” we asked. “I’ve smashed it” she said most emphatically. “Many’s the time I’ve looked at that poor girl hanging on, till it fairly made my arms ache for her. One slip and she would have been back beneath the waves, worse off than when she first fell into the sea. I’ve often wished there were something more secure than this ‘*hanging on*’ business. It seemed so risky with all those rocks, slippery with seaweed. I’d like to have got the girl home and given her a change of clothes and a good hot cup o’ tea. Today I was reading in First Peter chapter one, and when I came to the fifth verse: ‘*Kept by the power of God, through faith*’ I thought to myself, ‘*The Lord Jesus is the Author and Finisher of my faith.*’^{Heb.12:2} Even the believing is ‘*Not for yourselves, lest any man should boast.*’^{Eph.2:8} It’s the gift of God. I felt so safe with those Everlasting Arms underneath me, that when I looked up at the poor girl clinging there, it dawned on me suddenly—that picture is untrue. I’m not half in and half out. I’m saved with an everlasting salvation—saved from head to foot, seven days a week, from now on and for evermore. I’m not hanging to slippery rocks. I’m **TWENTY MILES INLAND!** So I pulled down the old picture, smashed it over my knee and shouted **Hallelujah!**”

The certainty of our salvation depends on God keeping us safe not on us trying to stay safe. *There is no one like the God of Jeshurun, who rides across the heavens to help you and on the clouds in his majesty. The eternal God is your refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms.*^{Deut.33:26-27} The assurance of our salvation comes from knowing that God is **able** to keep us safe, that He is **willing** to keep us safe and that He **will** keep us safe. *If the LORD delights in a man's way, he makes his steps firm; though he stumble, he will not fall, for the LORD upholds him with his hand.*^{Ps.37:23-24} Because God holds our hand through life's journey, if we do fall, we will not be utterly cast down. *Though he fall, he shall not be utterly cast down; for the LORD upholds him with His hand.* We may graze our knees, but God won't leave us in despair—He will pick us up again and we will go “on the heights”: *The Sovereign LORD is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer; he enables me to go on the heights.*^{Hab.3:19} We are all capable of stumbling. *We all stumble in many ways. Anyone who is never at fault in what they say is perfect, able to keep their whole body in check. When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal... Likewise, the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one's life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.*^{Jas.3:2-6} So, how can we ensure that we don't stumble—or if we do trip, that we don't graze our knees too much?

First of all, we should make every effort to keep our hope in God alive and living. *The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom. He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.*^{Is.40:28-31} Faith, hope and love are all important and are also inseparable: *The three most important things to have are faith, hope and love. But the greatest of them is love. Follow the way of love.*^{1Cor.13:13} Hope is the picture of all that Jesus provided through His death, burial and resurrection. Faith is being sure of what we have viewed/seen/perceived. Our voice paints the picture of our hope—if we don't have a good picture, we won't have good words. (T.L.Osborn) Our hope is not a wishful-thinking-hope but a certainty-hope that fills us with peace: *May the God who gives hope fill you with great joy. May you have perfect peace as you trust in him. May the power of the Holy Spirit fill you with hope.*^{Rom.15:13} Our hope inspires us to be holy so we will look forward to seeing Jesus, without any sense of shame, guilt or dishonour. *Dear friends, now we are children of God. He still hasn't let us know what we will be. But we know that when Christ appears, we will be like him. We will see him as he really is. He is pure. All who hope to be like him make themselves pure.*^{1Jn.3:2-3} When we live in the light (in holiness and purity), there is nothing within us to make us stumble! *Anyone who loves their brother and sister lives in the light, and there is nothing in them to make them stumble. But anyone who hates a brother or sister is in the darkness and walks around in the darkness. They do not know where they are going, because the darkness has blinded them.*^{1Jn.2:10-11} Jesus answered, “Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Anyone who walks in the daytime will not stumble, for they see by this world's light. It is when a person walks at night that they stumble, for they have no light.”^{1Jn.11:9-10}

Then we should have a love for God's Word: *Great peace have those who love your law, and nothing can make them stumble.*^{Ps.119:165} The light of God's Word illuminates our path so we see where we are going, so we avoid the dangers: *The path of the righteous is like the morning sun, shining ever brighter till the full light of day. But the way of the wicked is like deep darkness; they do not know what makes them stumble. My son, pay attention to what I say; turn your ear to my words. Do not let them out of your sight, keep them within your heart; for they are life to those who find them and health to one's whole body.*^{Prov.4:18-22} People who disobey God's Word (who ignore God's values and live by their own standards) have no light. *Look to God's instructions and teachings! People who contradict his word are completely in the dark.*

They will go from one place to another, weary and hungry.^{Is.8:20} They will stumble, fall and eventually end up in a pit of despair that will lead to eternal death. *As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him—you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For in Scripture it says: “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 cornerstone,” and, “A stone that causes people to stumble and a rock that makes them fall.” 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.2:4-10} It is a dreadful thing to stumble over God’s Rock, Jesus Christ. *It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.*^{Heb.10:31} But the time of darkness has come to an end for those who recognise Jesus as God’s Rock: *Nevertheless, that time of darkness and despair will not go on forever... The people who walk in darkness will see a great light. For those who live in a land of deep darkness, a light will shine.*^{Is.9:1-2} We are blessed: *Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me.*^{Matt.11:6} When we keep our hope in God alive and living and who live in the light of God’s Word, we won’t stumble in the dark. Our journey through life has a purpose and goal—and if we do trip, we know God will lift us up. We can say with the Psalmist: *My steps have held to your paths; my feet have not stumbled. I call on you, my God, for you will answer me; turn your ear to me and hear my prayer.*^{Ps.17:5-6} *Like a horse in open country, they did not stumble; like cattle that go down to the plain, they were given rest by the Spirit of the LORD. This is how you guided your people to make for yourself a glorious name.*^{Is.63:13-14}

Let’s send up a Hallelujah! to the Saviour Who has not only lifted us from the waves, but has carried us twenty miles inland, so that the storms of life will not drown us or drag us down. “We are secure, not because we hold tightly to Jesus, but because He holds tightly to us.” Yes! When God saves us, we are saved for all eternity!

Questions

How can we ensure that we keep to sound doctrine and not fall into heresy?

How can we be sure that God won’t hold our sin against us?

How can we live in God’s light?

Why do people stumble over Jesus?

We are all capable of stumbling^{Jas.3:2} so if we do fall, what can we do to get up again?

What practical steps can we take to keep us from falling?

Puritan Prayer

O You who hear prayers, teach me to pray. I confess that in religious exercises, the language of my lips and the feelings of my thoughts have not always agreed; that I have often desired things which would have injured me; that I have depreciated some of my chief mercies; that I have erred both on the side of my hopes and also of my fears. Let Your Spirit help my infirmities, so that I will pray as I should. Let Him produce in me wise desires by which I may ask right things—then I shall know You hear me. May I never be importunate for temporal blessings but always refer them to Your Fatherly goodness—for You know what I need before I ask.

Sunday 25th September Ps.5. Jude

Build yourselves up in your most holy faith.^{Jude.1:20}

Two weeks ago we looked at defending the faith and saw that the faith we contending for is not just any old faith but the original faith that was delivered to the first believers. The monarch’s title of “Defender of the Faith” was not given to defend the original faith but as a

reward for defending the Roman Catholic faith by attacking the Protestant faith! There has only ever been one true faith and only one group of Believers: *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.4:4-6} The “Heroes of Faith” mentioned in Hebrews 11 were OT saints who lived and died before the Church began and so they never actually lived in the blessings of sins forgiven or God living within them—they had to wait for Jesus to take away our sins before they could be complete: *All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth... These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised, since God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect.*^{Heb.11:13;39-40} However, their faith—their belief and trust in God—was real and now Jesus has become the “Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world”, they are joint-heirs together with us through the common faith in Jesus Christ that we share. Abraham is called the “Father of all who believe” because he believed God. *We have been saying that Abraham's faith was credited to him as righteousness... So then, he is the father of all who believe... 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. As it is written: “I have made you a father of many nations.” He is our father in the sight of God, in whom he believed—the God who gives life to the dead and calls into being things that were not.*^{Rom.4:9-17} We are to look to Abraham and reflect on his faith: *Listen to me, you who pursue righteousness and who seek the LORD: Look to the rock from which you were cut and to the quarry from which you were hewn; look to Abraham, your father, and to Sarah, who gave you birth. When I called him he was but one, and I blessed him and made him many.*^{Is.51:1-2} Last week we looked at persevering in our faith. What is the use of a faith that is always foundering? What use is a salvation which does not make us safe, or an assurance of which we cannot be sure? If we know that we are “twenty miles inland” we won’t be worried about being dashed upon the rocks of life’s storms! We can shout “Hallelujah” in the toughest of circumstances because we know that God will keep us spiritually safe: *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} And this week we are looking at building ourself up in the faith—the most holy faith. *Dear friends, build yourselves up in your most holy faith. Let the Holy Spirit guide and help you when you pray. The mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ will bring you eternal life. As you wait for his mercy, remain in God's love.*^{Jude.1:20-21} Faith is a gift from God: *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.*^{Eph.2:8-9} And faith is a spirit (or an attribute of the Holy Spirit): *It is written: “I believed; therefore I have spoken.” Since we have that same spirit of faith, we also believe and therefore speak, because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you to himself.*^{2Cor.4:13-14} Christians live by faith: *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} And because faith is spiritual and living, we don’t need lots of faith because living faith will grow: *The apostles said to the Lord, “Give us more faith!” He replied, “Suppose you have faith as small as a mustard seed. Then you can say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be pulled up. Be planted in the sea.’ And it will obey you.”*^{Lk.17:5-6} The Disciples’ request for more faith was in the context of forgiving others—not having an easier life or accumulating more possessions, or even “doing” things for God (such as praying for people to be healed or blessed). *Jesus spoke to his disciples. “Things that make people sin are sure to come,” he said. “But how terrible it will be for the person who brings them! Suppose people lead one of these little ones to sin. It would be better for those people to be thrown into the sea with a millstone tied around their neck. So watch what you do. “If your brother sins, tell him he is wrong. Then if he turns away from his sins, forgive him. Suppose he sins against you*

seven times in one day. And suppose he comes back to you each time and says, 'I'm sorry.' Forgive him." The apostles said to the Lord, "Give us more faith!" He replied, "Suppose you have faith as small as a mustard seed. Then you can say to this mulberry tree, 'Be pulled up. Be planted in the sea.' And it will obey you."¹*Lk. 17:1-6*

Faith is the absolute trust in God, based on His character and His Word (i.e. who God is and what He has said in the Scriptures). But faith will always leads to action—it has legs! *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. 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. We love because he first loved us. Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. And he has given us this command: Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister.*¹*Jn. 4:16-21*

Words are cheap but action can be costly. Loving others is easy to talk about but not so easy to live! But Christianity is a heart religion and integrity is important. Billy Graham said: *Integrity means that if our private life was suddenly made public, we would have no reason to be ashamed or embarrassed. Integrity means that our outward life is consistent with our inner convictions.* Maturity puts integrity before our own comforts or needs. Maturity is growing up in our faith—in our relationship with God—and we can't do that if we unless we have a good grasp of the basic Christian doctrines. If we are going to build ourselves up in the most holy faith, we need to know about our faith, who God is, what He is like and what He has said. *We have a lot to explain about this. But since you have become too lazy to pay attention, explaining it to you is hard. By now you should be teachers. Instead, you still need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word. You need milk, not solid food. All those who live on milk lack the experience to talk about what is right. They are still babies. However, solid food is for mature people, whose minds are trained by practice to know the difference between good and evil. With this in mind, we should stop going over the elementary truths about Christ and move on to topics for more mature people. We shouldn't repeat the basics about turning away from the useless things we did and the basics about faith in God. We shouldn't repeat the basic teachings about such things as baptisms, setting people apart for holy tasks, dead people coming back to life, and eternal judgment. If God permits, we will do this.*¹*Heb. 5:11-6:3*

Faith speaks: *It is written: "I believed; therefore I have spoken." Since we have that same spirit of faith, we also believe and therefore speak, because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you to himself.*²*Cor. 4:13-14* Believers talk about what is right and our minds are trained by practice to know the difference between good and evil. Evil can also mean cowardly, harmful, an imposter—and so we need to know the difference between good theology and harmful or false theology (theology is the study about God—*theos*=God and *logos*=word or study). We learnt to speak English by growing up in a family who spoke English. For instance, *Have you thought this through thoroughly enough?* The letters "ough" have 7 different sounds: *through; cough; rough; though; bough; thorough; thought!!!* Most of us don't care about the intricacies of English grammar and neither do we need to. We didn't learn pronunciation of words as an academic exercise but picked them up as a child at home subconsciously—and then later when we went to school we learnt how to spell them!

So it is with our faith—after we are born-again, we need to grow in our new faith. If we belong to a Church family that is Bible literate—that is, Bible-believing and Bible-teaching—we will know what is right about God and what is "evil" about God (i.e. what is harmful, false or an imposter faith)—without having to learn all the complicated theological labels or phrases. R. C. Sproul's teaches that everyone's a theologian (i.e. they all believe something about God) but is quick to add that not everyone is a good theologian! Although we should have a basic grasp of the fundamentals of our faith, we don't need to learn all the intricacies of theology or their fancy names! Literacy is normally summed up by the 3 "Rs"—**R**eadings, **wR**iting and

a**R**ithmetic. In May 2010 The Daily Mail had this headline: **GCSEs aren't fit for purpose because school-leavers don't master the three Rs, says CBI.** *The importance of GCSEs may need to be downgraded because tens of thousands of school-leavers haven't mastered the three Rs, business leaders have warned.*^{Daily Mail 02/05/2012} (These **3Rs** are actually mentioned in “The Confessions of Saint Augustine” AD401: “For those first lessons, reading, writing and arithmetic, I thought as great a burden and penalty as any Greek.”) The educationalist Louis P. Bénèzet preferred “**read**”, “**reason**”, “**recite**”, adding, “by reciting I did not mean giving back, verbatim, the words of the teacher or of the textbook. I meant speaking the English language.”

If we can master the 3 “Rs” of Faith then we will be Bible literate and able to live a blessed and effective life. The **3Rs** of faith are: **Repentance**, **Remission** of sins (or we could have **Reconciliation**) and **Righteousness**. To be **Bible Literate** is much more than just learning Bible stories—it is being able to understand and communicate the meaning of the Bible stories and we should all aspire to have an accurate knowledge of God and the Scriptures: *Don't imagine us leaders to be something we aren't. We are servants of Christ, not his masters. We are guides into God's most sublime secrets, not security guards posted to protect them. The requirements for a good guide are reliability and accurate knowledge.*^{1Cor.4:1-2}

Repentance. The Greek word is *metanoia* which means a *change of mind*. We should be convinced of our own beliefs: *If you need wisdom, ask our generous God, and he will give it to you. He will not rebuke you for asking. But when you ask him, be sure that your faith is in God alone. Do not waver, for a person with divided loyalty is as unsettled as a wave of the sea that is blown and tossed by the wind. Such people should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. Their loyalty is divided between God and the world, and they are unstable in everything they do.*^{Jas.1:5-8} But we should also be prepared to look at the Truth and align our views to God's view. Contrast this with a bigot who is intolerant of any ideas other than their own. **Repentance** from sin is different from **remorse** (which is feeling sorry for being found out!) True repentance changes lives, but leaves no scars: *Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.*^{Matt.3:8} *Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death.*^{2Cor.7:10} **True repentance from sin will always include: Acknowledgement** of the wrong. **Apology** for the wrong. **Action** of determination to change. **Appreciation** of God's forgiveness. **Attitude** of grace, gratitude and gentleness towards God and people. Our repentance (change of mind) should also include our view of God: God is love;^{1Jn.4:16} He loves the world,^{1Jn.3:16} He loves the Church^{Eph.5:25} and He also loves us individually.^{Gal.2:20} He is not angry with us anymore^{Is.54:9} because He has forgiven our sins: *LORD, who is a God like you? You forgive sin. You forgive your people when they do what is wrong. You don't stay angry forever. Instead, you take delight in showing your faithful love to them.*^{Micah 7:18} So let's change our minds to believe what God believes—and then say what God says: *You should think in the same way Christ Jesus does.*^{Phil.2:5} *Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind (or let your way of thinking be completely changed). Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.*^{Rom.12:2}

Remission of Sins. Then opened he their mind, that they might understand the scriptures; and he said unto them, Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer, and rise again from the dead the third day; and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name unto all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem.^{Lk.24:25-47} **Remission** means *dismissal* or *release* and is also translated *forgiveness* or *freedom*: *The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.*^{Lk.4:18-19} **God has dismissed our sins from us and we are no longer joined to them.** For his unfailing love toward those who fear him is as great as the height of the heavens above the earth. He has removed our sins as far from us as the east is from the west.^{Ps.103:111-112} **Yes those of**

us who believe in Jesus Christ are free from our sins! *Therefore, my friends, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. Through him everyone who believes is set free from every sin, a justification you were not able to obtain under the law of Moses.*^{Acts 13:38-39}

Righteousness. The English word means “**right-wise-ness**”—we are right with God and wise about it (wisdom is applied knowledge and so we know we are right with God and we are acting upon that information). **How are we right with God?** *Christ didn't have any sin. But God made him become sin for us. So we can be made right with God because of what Christ has done for us.*^{2Cor. 5:21} *But now God has shown us how to become right with him. The Law and the Prophets give witness to this. It has nothing to do with obeying the law. We are made right with God by putting our faith in Jesus Christ. That happens to all who believe. It is no different for the Jews than for anyone else. Everyone has sinned. No one measures up to God's glory. The free gift of God's grace makes all of us right with him. Christ Jesus paid the price to set us free. God gave him as a sacrifice to pay for sins. So he forgives the sins of those who have faith in his blood.*^{Rom. 3:21-25}

Let's continue to grow in grace and build ourselves up in the most holy faith as we fellowship together with God, His Word and His people, letting the Holy Spirit guide and help us as we pray.

Questions

What is faith?

What are the characteristics of faith? (What is the result of faith?)

There is only one faith, so what is the difference between OT and NT Believers?

How much interaction should we have with people from other faiths?

Explain simply: **Repentance**, **Remission** of sins and **Righteousness**

How can we build ourselves up the faith?

Puritan Prayer

May I never think I prosper unless my soul prospers; or that I am rich, unless rich toward You; or that I am wise, unless wise unto salvation. May I seek first Your kingdom and its righteousness. May I value things in relation to eternity. May my spiritual welfare be my chief solicitude. I would rather be poor, afflicted and despised—and have Your blessing, than be successful in enterprise, or have more than my thought can wish, or be admired by my fellow-men—if thereby these things make me forget You. May I regard the world as dreams, lies, vanities, vexation of spirit and desire to depart from it. And may I seek my happiness in Your favour, image, presence, service.

October

Thought for the Month: Faith is obeying God. It's irrelevant what you believe if God hasn't said it! Presumption is telling God what to do and then expecting that He will fall in line with what you say (c.f. Nu.14). Faith is when you are sick and everything seems to be going wrong—and yet you are trusting God, enjoying Him and still in fellowship with Him. *Andrew Corbett*

October's Theme: RECONCILIATION—And he has committed to us the message of RECONCILIATION. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. ^{2Cor.5:19-20}

Sunday 2nd October Ps.7:9-17. Dave Smethurst

As Dave Smethurst is with us today, I have used this article from Greg Koukl (www.str.org)

Credo: The Story of Reality. If someone were to ask you, “*What is Christianity?*”, what would you say? Answering this question correctly will make all the difference in our ability to be able to communicate God's message correctly in a world thick with competing religious options. The correct answer to the question “*What is Christianity?*” is this: **Christianity is a picture of reality.** If you don't know what the big picture looks like beforehand, it will be much harder to assemble it from the part. Every worldview has these four elements: 1. **Creation:** How things began—ultimate reality. 2. **Fall:** How things went wrong. 3. **Redemption:** How to fix what went wrong. 4. **Restoration:** How things get worked out. You can assess every worldview by asking how it addresses each of these issues. But if your Christian worldview is not accurate, you will not be able to navigate well, even if you call yourself a believer. The Christian story starts a long, long time ago, long before Jesus. But it is different from other stories in a significant way—it does not start with the words “*Once upon a time*” because this story is not meant to be understood as a fairy tale or a myth. It is a true story and can be summarised in these 5 words: **God, Man, Jesus, the cross, and the final resurrection**—and there is a logical order to these 5 elements. Our story starts with **God**. He created everything, including the most valuable thing in all creation: **man**. But something went wrong, so God set up a rescue plan and in this plan, God entered into the world that He created by becoming a man: **Jesus**. Jesus did something very special to rescue man from his problem and this happened on the **cross**. How people respond to this solution will determine what will happen to them at the final event of history: the **resurrection**. Notice, you have all the parts of a good story and you also have all the pieces of a complete worldview.

God. The story starts with God—the main theme of the Bible is Rulership because God is distinct from creation.

Man. Man is special—we are created with a physical body; we are a non-physical soul or spirit; we are noble, created in the image of God. This likeness between man and God makes it possible for man to have a unique relationship with God—a friendship—but man is desperately fallen and needs God Himself to take action.

Jesus. There are two very critical issues regarding Jesus: who Jesus was and what Jesus came to do. Jesus was a real human being but Jesus is fully God. This is called the *Hypostatic Union* (which basically means that humanity is added to God)—in the one person of Jesus the Messiah there were two natures: undiminished deity and true humanity. Isaiah 9:6 intimates the dual nature of Jesus: *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.* The *Kenosis* is the term given when God stepped down to become a man (Philippians 2:5-8) Note: Jesus never ceased being God; the Son laid aside only His privileges of deity, not His divine nature. So the answer to our first question: Who is Jesus: **Jesus is the God/man**. Why did Jesus come and what did He come

to do? **Jesus mainly came to solve the problem: to rescue, to save.** What did Jesus ultimately do to rescue us? He lived the life we should have lived and He made a trade of His life for ours. **The Cross.** Only Jesus of Nazareth could save the world. Without him, we are crushed under our overwhelming debt. Without him, every single one of us would have to pay for our own crimes, and that would take eternity. Jesus alone, the perfect Son of God, paid the debt for those who trust in him so they would not perish under God's punishment, but have life with him fully and forever. And that is only the beginning, since fixing man is the first part of fixing the world. Nailed to the top of Jesus' cross was an official notice called a *titulus*. It was a public declaration of Jesus' purported crime of sedition. It said, "*This is Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews.*" But being King of the Jews was not the real crime Jesus paid for. Hidden to all but the Father is another certificate "*nailed,*" so to speak, to that same cross. The Story says it is a record not of Jesus' debt, but a rap sheet, of sorts, "*consisting of decrees against us,*" that is, against you and me. When a debt was owed in the first century, a "*certificate*" of the debt was made, much like the notice placed above Jesus' head. When the obligation was settled, it was officially resolved with a single Greek word placed upon the parchment's face: *tetelestai* which means "*completed, paid, finished, done*". This is what Jesus declared when He died: *When he had received the drink, Jesus said, "It is finished." With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.*^{Jn.19:30}

The Resurrection. At the final resurrection all human beings will be raised from the dead, all those who have received mercy in Christ will go on to eternal reward but all those who have rejected God's mercy in Christ will be judged by their works and punished.

Conclusion: The Christian story of reality has five elements: God, man, Jesus, the cross, the resurrection. It's a story that can be told in single a sentence: **God is the creator of the universe and in order to rescue man from punishment for his rebellion, He took on humanity in Jesus, the Saviour, to die on a cross and rise from the dead, so that in the final resurrection, we could enjoy a wonderful friendship with our sovereign Lord, in the kind of perfect world our hearts have always yearned for.** But this is not just a story, it's a true story—it's the story of reality.

Puritan Prayers: O Lord, we commune with You every day, but sometimes secular concerns reduce heavenly impressions. We bless You therefore, that today is sacred to our souls and we can wait upon You and be refreshed. We thank You for the institutions of religion, by use of which we draw near to You and You to us. We rejoice that today, without distractions (or even with distractions), we can attend upon You. Let our fellowship be devout, our conversation edifying, our reading pious and our hearing profitable. We are the House of Prayer—pour upon us the Spirit of Grace and Supplication. We are the House of Praise—awaken in us every grateful and cheerful emotion so that our souls are quickened and elevated

Sunday 9th October Ps.8. Five Pillars of Biblical Christianity. Sola Scriptura

A Summary of the Five Pillars of Biblical Christianity

Sola Scriptura – Scripture Alone	The Revelation of Salvation <i>Not the writings of a man</i>
Solo Christo – Christ Alone	The Provider of Salvation <i>Not any human "Vicar"</i>
Sola Gratia – Grace Alone	The Basis for Salvation <i>Not because we can earn it</i>
Sola Fide – Faith Alone	The Means of Salvation <i>Grace is received by the gift of faith</i>
Soli Deo Gloria – Only for God's Glory!	The Reason for Salvation

SOLA SCRIPTURA — Scripture Alone

This is my Bible; I am what it says I am. I have what it says I have. I can do what it says I can do. Today, I will be taught the Word of God. I boldly confess that my mind is alert, my heart is receptive, I am about to receive the Incorruptible, Indestructible, Ever-living seed of the Word of God. I will never, never be the same. In Jesus Name. Amen

Biblical Christianity commences with the authority of Scripture. Some might say that it commences with Christ—but without the revelation of Scripture, we wouldn't know that! Although the Bible has been translated into 719 languages and the NT into 1593 languages, there are 3852 languages that the Scripture has not yet been translated into and whilst 7.1 billion people have some scripture in their own language there are still 219 million people who don't have any Scripture in their first language!

The Reformers of the C16th protested against the Church's usurped authority to lord it over those who would follow Christ, saying it was contrary to what the Scriptures permitted. And like the early Church, when confronted with the option of obeying God's Word or the contradictory commands of people, said: *"We must obey God rather than men."*^{Acts.5:29} William Tyndale (1494 – 1536) was one of the first early English reformers to teach that the Bible was a higher authority than the Church—and like many other reformers, it cost him his life. Tyndale was appalled by the clergy's ignorance of the Bible. When one clergyman told him: *"We are better to be without God's laws than the Pope's"* Tyndale responded: *"I defy the Pope and all his laws. If God spare my life ere many years, I will cause the boy that drives the plough to know more of the Scriptures than you!"* Not only did Tyndale teach the doctrine of *Sola Scriptura*, but he worked on translating the Scriptures into the common language of the people and published his English Bible by means of the newly invented printing press. One hundred years earlier, Wycliffe had translated the Bible from the Latin Vulgate into Middle English, but Tyndale was the first to translate the New Testament into Modern English from Hebrew and Greek—the original languages of the Bible. When Tyndale sought permission from the bishop of London to translate the Bible into English it was refused, so he sailed for Europe never to set foot on English soil again. Interestingly, in 1531 King Henry VIII invited Tyndale to return to England to help him in his campaign to replace the pope as the leader of the church in England, but Tyndale refused. Tyndale took his English translation of the New Testament to Cologne to have it printed but was forced to halt the printing and flee to Worms, Germany where he joined up with Martin Luther. Some copies of Tyndale's English New Testament were smuggled into England and sold, even though owning a copy of the Bible in the English language was illegal and punishable by death. Tyndale had to go into hiding but was eventually arrested in Antwerp in 1535, convicted as a heretic and strangled before being burnt at the stake in October 1536. By the time of Tyndale's death, 18,000 copies of his New Testament had been printed. Tyndale's last words were, *"Lord open the King of England's eyes"* and God quickly answered his prayer. In 1538, Thomas Cromwell, chief minister to Henry VIII, directed the clergy to provide *"one book of the Bible of the largest volume in English, and the same set up in some convenient place within the said church that ye have care of, whereas your parishioners may most commodiously resort to the same and read it."* And in 1539 the Great Bible was the first authorised edition of the Bible in English to be read aloud in the church services of the Church of England. (The *Great Bible* is sometimes called the *Cromwell Bible*, since Thomas Cromwell directed its publication, or *Whitchurch's Bible* after its first English printer or the *Chained Bible* as it was chained to the pulpit.)

An old Italian proverb goes: *"a translator is a traitor"* because any language translation inevitably involves interpretation and a choice between a **formal equivalence** (a literal word-for-word translation that gives priority to what the original language says and how it says it) or a **dynamic equivalence** (a thought-for-thought translation that gives priority to what the text means to

make the text as readable for a modern audience as possible). In other words, do you translate the literal words in the text or the meaning that the original readers would have understood. For instance, Ephesians 1:1-2—**NKJV** (formal equivalence): *Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, To the saints who are in Ephesus, and faithful in Christ Jesus: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.* **NLT** (dynamic equivalence): *This letter is from Paul, chosen by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus. I am writing to God's holy people in Ephesus, who are faithful followers of Christ Jesus. May God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ give you grace and peace.* **NIV** (combination): *Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, To God's holy people in Ephesus, the faithful in Christ Jesus: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.* Tyndale deliberately used new terms for words that had a long legacy among Catholicism. For example, he used “congregation” instead of “church,” “elder” instead of “priest,” “repentance” instead of “do penance,” and “love” instead of “charity.” Although these were more accurate translations of the Greek, they differed from the familiar Vulgate upon which much Christian theology had been based. In several cases Tyndale solved translation problems by coining new English words, such as: *Beautiful, Fisherman, Landlady, Seashore, Stumbling block, Taskmaster, Zealous, Jehovah, Passover, Scapegoat, Atonement, Modesty, Mediocrity, Industrious, Long-suffering, Peacemakers.*

Sola Scriptura means that God has given us no higher revelation of His Will, His Ways and His Word than the Bible. We don't worship the Bible, but we do heed its message. However, *Sola Scriptura* does not mean that God hasn't given us other reliable revelations of His truth. The Scriptures make it plain that God has revealed His righteousness through His creation: *The heavens proclaim his righteousness, and all peoples see his glory.*^{Ps.97:6} *The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they reveal knowledge.*^{Ps.19:1-2} *For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse.*^{Rom.1:20} *Sola Scriptura* is not saying that Scripture is the only way of knowing the truth, but it is saying that Scripture is the highest authority of the truth and the point of reference for all things pertaining to spiritual matters. The **ELIM** Statement of Faith puts it this way: *We believe the Bible, as originally given, to be without error, the fully inspired and infallible Word of God and the supreme and final authority in all matters of faith and conduct.* Clement of Alexandria (c.160–215A.D.) is credited with saying: *All truth is God's truth—wherever it may be found.* But *Sola Scriptura* declares that Scripture has a unique authority for the truth. Therefore, while Scriptural revelation does not need to be established by the testimony of nature, its authority is most certainly confirmed by it. This means that archaeology does not “prove” Scripture's authority, it merely confirms it. The same can be said for physical science. For example, cosmologists observe that the universe is moving (expanding) from a central starting point. The Scripture spoke of God doing this when He created the universe by “stretching out the heavens,” which is precisely what cosmologists now observe: *The LORD wraps himself in light as with a garment; he stretches out the heavens like a tent.*^{Ps.104:2} *He speaks to the sun and it does not shine; he seals off the light of the stars. He alone stretches out the heavens and treads on the waves of the sea. He is the Maker of the Bear and Orion, the Pleiades and the constellations of the south. He performs wonders that cannot be fathomed, miracles that cannot be counted. When he passes me, I cannot see him; when he goes by, I cannot perceive him.*^{Job 9:7-11}

Whilst we readily acknowledge *Sola Scriptura* in name and that *the Bible, as originally given, to be without error, the fully inspired and infallible Word of God and the supreme and final authority in all matters of faith and conduct*, we should not fall into the trap of accepting prophecy as the authoritative word of God and elevate it to the status of Scripture. Prophecy is a vital gift of the Holy Spirit: *Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. To one there is given through the Spirit a message of wisdom, to another a message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to*

another gifts of healing by that one Spirit, to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another distinguishing between spirits, to another speaking in different kinds of tongues, and to still another the interpretation of tongues. All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he distributes them to each one, just as he determines.^{1Cor.12:7-11} And Scripture tells us not to despise prophecy: *Do not quench the Spirit.*

Do not treat prophecies with contempt but test them all; hold on to what is good, reject every kind of evil.^{1Thess.5:1-22}

But Paul warns us that even if an angel were to speak to us, it must agree with the true gospel—the faith that was originally given to the saints: *I am amazed. You are so quickly deserting the One who chose you because of the grace that Christ has provided. You are turning to a different “good news.” What you are accepting is really not the good news at all. It seems that some people have gotten you all mixed up. They are trying to twist the good news about Christ. But suppose even we should preach a different “good news.” Suppose even an angel from heaven should preach it. I’m talking about a different one than the good news we gave you. Let anyone who does that be judged by God forever. I have already said it. Now I will say it again. Anyone who preaches a “good news” that is different from the one you accepted should be judged by God forever.*^{Gal.1:6-9} We have no dominion over other people’s faith and neither are we obliged to obey what other people say—even as a prophecy: *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} Instead we are to judge it by checking with the Scriptures and other mature and credible Believers plus the “inner witness” of the Holy Spirit within us.

Scripture was written by people but inspired by the Holy Spirit. *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} Because Scripture is **divinely inspired** and God’s

revelation of salvation, it is logic to believe Scripture being **divinely preserved**—not only in an academic sense but most especially in a spiritually relevant sense. *Your statutes are wonderful; therefore I obey them. The unfolding of your words gives light; it gives understanding to the simple. [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.]*^{Psa.119:129-130} In the same that God guided the original authors of the Bible, He continues to guide us as we read the translated editions of the Bible. *Concerning this*

salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow. It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves but you, when they spoke of the things that have now been told you by those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven. Even angels long to look into these things.^{1Pet.1:10-12}

The Scriptures are “perfect” (i.e. complete and without defect) but they are more than just unblemished—they give life to those who receive them: *The law of the LORD is perfect, refreshing the soul. The statutes of the LORD are trustworthy, making wise the simple. The precepts of the LORD are right, giving joy to the heart. The commands of the LORD are radiant, giving light to the eyes.*^{Psa.19:7-8} When

the prophets wrote the Scriptures, they were moved by the Holy Spirit to speak and write exactly what God intended them to write: *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} However, no language

can be translated exactly to another language and so of course some of the nuances of the original Scriptures are lost in translation—but because God’s life is in the very words of Scripture, that life flows out and faith released when they are received through hearing or reading! *Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ.*^{Rom.10:17} God’s life is not in the printed word but in the received word. *He has made us*

competent as ministers of a new covenant—not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.^{2Cor.3:6} And so instead of worrying about the academic accuracy of a translation, we can trust God to show us wonderful things from whichever Bible we use: *Be good to your servant while I live, that I may obey your word. Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law.*^{Ps.119:17-18} Considering the price that the Reformers paid to champion this position, it is perhaps remarkable how little it is read or heeded today. May God grant us a greater passion for His Word—to read it and heed it. **Sola Scriptura — Scripture alone.**

Questions

What is the purpose of Scripture?

Why is it important that we can read the Bible in our own language?

Why do we believe that the Bible without error?

In what way is the Bible our final authority in all matters of faith and conduct?

How can each translation of the Bible be the Word of God when they use different words?

Can a “*word from God*” (*i.e.* prophecy) be inspired (*i.e.* have God’s breath or life)?

Are there other reliable revelations of God’s truth than in the Bible?

How do we discern what is of God and what is of human origin?

Puritan Prayers

Let our fellowship be devout, our conversation edifying, our reading pious and our hearing profitable. We are the House of Prayer—pour upon us the Spirit of Grace and Supplication. We are the House of Praise—awaken in us every grateful and cheerful emotion so that our souls are quickened and elevated. As we receive instruction, give testimony to the Word preached and glorify it in the hearts of all who hear. May Your Word enlighten the ignorant, awaken the careless, reclaim the wandering, establish the weak, comfort the feeble-minded and make ready a people for their Lord. Be a Sanctuary to all who cannot come and forget not those who never come. Bestow upon us benevolence towards our dependants, forgiveness towards our enemies, peaceableness towards our neighbours and openness towards our fellow-Christians.

Sunday 16th October Ps.9:1-10

Solo Christo – Christ Alone

It should be obvious that Christianity is about Christ and that Christians are actually followers of Christ and yet for many people Christianity seems to have little to actually do with Jesus Christ. Just as going to a stable doesn’t make you a horse—even if you eat oats—so going to Church doesn’t make any one a Christian—even if they are “christened” or eat the bread and wone of communion! Christianity is much more than a religion. Christianity is a view of the world—not just one of many views but a view that is based on reality and backed up by the resurrection of Jesus Christ. When Jesus came back to life, He wasn’t resuscitated but had an immortal body and confirmed everything that He had taught before His death.

"Solo Christo!" was the cry of the Reformers that declared that salvation is based on the work of Christ alone. When we say, *'Christ alone'*, we are emphatically stating that Scripture reveals salvation in and through no one other than Jesus Christ. *And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.*^{Acts.4:12} But without the Bible as a point of reference, we could never be sure that what people told us was real. But when our eternal destiny depends whether something is true or false, we need to know what is real. Last week we talked about the importance of **Sola Scriptura**—that Scripture alone is the revelation of Salvation—not the writings of a man or even Church traditions. Salvation is not possible through anyone other than Jesus Christ. Jesus Himself said that eternal life was only possible

by knowing God the Father and Jesus Christ: *And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.*^{Jn.17:3} Jesus is altogether unique and unlike any other, so let's answer these simple questions: Who? Why? How? When?

Who? Jesus is the **Son of God** and the **Saviour of the world**. *Then those who were in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."*^{Matt.14:33} *Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus. At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God.*^{Acts.9:19-20} *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} *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 Him.*^{1Jn.4:14-15} *Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved.*^{Acts.4:12} Everyone is unique but Jesus is completely unique! He eternally existed together with God the Father and the Holy Spirit, but He also had a human birth when God the Father declared that a Father/Son relationship had begun: *For to which of the angels did God ever say, "You are my Son; today I have become your Father"? Or again, "I will be his Father, and he will be my Son"? And again, when God brings his firstborn into the world, he says, "Let all God's angels worship him."*^{Heb.1:5-6} James Allan Francis (1864–1928) wrote this in "One Solitary Life": *Here is a man who was born in an obscure village, the child of a peasant woman. He grew up in another obscure village, where He worked in a carpenter shop until He was thirty, and then for three years He was an itinerant preacher. He never wrote a book. He never held an office. He never owned a home. He never had a family. He never went to college. He never put his foot inside a big city. He never travelled two hundred miles from the place where He was born. He never did one of the things that usually accompany greatness. He had no credentials but Himself. He had nothing to do with this world except the naked power of His divine manhood. While still a young man, the tide of public opinion turned against Him. His friends ran away. One of them denied Him. He was turned over to His enemies. He went through the mockery of a trial. He was nailed to a cross between two thieves. His executioners gambled for the only piece of property He had on earth while He was dying—and that was his coat. When he was dead, He was taken down and laid in a borrowed grave through the pity of a friend. Nineteen wide centuries have come and gone and today He is the centrepiece of the human race and the leader of the column of progress. I am far within the mark when I say that all the armies that ever marched, and all the navies that ever were built, and all the parliaments that ever sat, all the kings that ever reigned, put together have not affected the life of man upon this earth as powerfully as has that One Solitary Life. Napoleon Bonaparte (1769–1821) said: I know men and I tell you that Jesus is not a man! The religion of Christ is a mystery which subsists by its own force and proceeds from a mind which is not a human mind. We find in it, a marked individuality which originated a train of words and maxims unknown before—Jesus borrowed nothing from our knowledge. He exhibited in Himself the perfect example of His precepts. Jesus is not a philosopher; for His proofs are miracles and from the first, His disciples adored Him. In fact, learning and philosophy are of no use for salvation—Jesus came into the world to reveal the mysteries of heaven and the laws of the Spirit... I die before my time, and my body will be given back to the earth to become food for worms. Such is the fate which so soon awaits him who has been called the great Napoleon. What an abyss between my deep misery and the eternal Kingdom of Christ, which is proclaimed, loved and adored, and which is extending over time whole earth!*

Why? Jesus came to **save us from our sin**: *Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.*^{Matt.1:20-21} The hymn "There is a green hill far away" has this line: *"There was no other good enough to pay the price of sin; He only could unlock the gate of heav'n, and let us in."* Jesus was the only one who was able to save us—there is no other that can save and no other who can mediate for us: *For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.*^{Lk.19:10} *For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all people.*^{1Tim.2:5-6} The Reformers could have simply echoed the message of their day which

nearly offered salvation through membership with, and obedience to, the Church. This would have been *sola ecclesia*. But this is not the message that Christ, the apostles, or the New Testament proclaimed and is not the “*salvation we share*” or the “*faith that was once for all entrusted to God's holy people*.”^{Jude.3} When we say *Solo Christo* we are stating our belief that salvation (the forgiveness of our sins and a new and right relationship with God) is possible only by the work of Christ being merited to us. Salvation is not through the Church, Mary, the Saints, or our own efforts. *God our Saviour, who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all people.*^{1Tim.2:3-6} *But in fact the ministry Jesus has received is as superior to theirs as the covenant of which he is mediator is superior to the old one, since the new covenant is established on better promises. For if there had been nothing wrong with that first covenant, no place would have been sought for another.*^{Heb.8:6-7} Christ alone is the mediator between God and man and so we do not need an earthly priest to mediate on our behalf. We can't go through a pope, priest, or pastor to meet with God—but we can (and must) go directly through Jesus. *Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.*^{Heb.4:14-1}

How? Jesus saved us though **His death on the cross:** *God was pleased to have his whole nature living in Christ. God was pleased to bring all things back to himself because of what Christ has done. That includes all things on earth and in heaven. God made peace through Christ's blood, through his death on the cross. At one time you were separated from God. You were enemies in your minds because of your evil ways. But because Christ died, God has brought you back to himself. Christ's death has made you holy in God's sight. So now you don't have any flaw. You are free from blame.*^{Col.1:19-22} But there are some who teach that in order to maintain your salvation, you have to follow the traditions of the Church—but the Bible clearly teaches that we have done nothing, and can do nothing, to deserve salvation: *But the kindness and love of God our Saviour appeared. He saved us. It wasn't because of the good things we had done. It was because of his mercy. He saved us by washing away our sins. We were born again. The Holy Spirit gave us new life. God poured out the Spirit on us freely because of what Jesus Christ our Saviour has done. His grace made us right with God. So now we have received the hope of eternal life as God's children. You can trust that saying. Those things are important. Treat them that way. Then those who have trusted in God will be careful to commit themselves to doing what is good. Those things are excellent. They are for the good of everyone.*^{Tit.3:4-8} The New Testament writers warned again and again against adding law or rules to obtain salvation. Paul uses circumcision as a specific example of attaining righteousness or salvation through our works: *Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all. Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law. You who are trying to be justified by the law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace.*^{Gal.5:2-4} If we try to gain our salvation through works, even a little bit, we have to gain all of it that way. We cannot try to partially fulfil the law and partially rely on Christ for salvation: *I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose. [I don't reject God's kindness. If we receive God's approval by obeying laws, then Christ's death was pointless.]*^{Gal.2:21} The Jews are not benefitted by following the Law and neither is the Gentile benefitted by following Gentile-placed laws: *For we have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under the power of sin... But now God has shown us how to become right with him. The Law and the Prophets give witness to this. It has nothing to do with obeying the law. We are made right with God by putting our faith in Jesus Christ. That happens to all who believe. It is no different for the Jews than for anyone else. Everyone has sinned. No one measures up to God's glory. The free gift of God's grace makes all of us right with him. Christ Jesus paid the price to set us free. God gave him as a sacrifice to pay for*

sins. So he forgives the sins of those who have faith in his blood.^{Rom.3:9-25} In other words, Christ is all or nothing—and woe to anyone who brings a different message than the one that originally delivered to the first Believers: *I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you to live in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let them be under God's curse! As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let them be under God's curse!*^{Gal.1:6-9}

When? Our salvation was procured when Jesus died on the cross, but we were saved when we were born again and believed on Him (or received Him): *If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved. As Scripture says, "Anyone who believes in him will never be put to shame." For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile—the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, for, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."*^{Rom.10:9-13} *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}

It is only through Christ that we are saved and our salvation includes the composite of all God's grace towards us—His healing, deliverance, provision and protection. Salvation is not just about spiritual new birth but spiritual new life—and this spiritual new life is ours because of Jesus' death on the Cross (and of course, His resurrection). Without the Cross, there is no means of salvation and there would be no redemption. Before the Cross, Christ healed the sick but did not regenerate anyone. We can never earn our salvation through our own achievement—but neither do have to try to because Christ has already procured and secured our salvation for us. It is Christ alone who hears our prayers and knows our hearts fully, and it is Christ alone who loves us unconditionally whilst knowing our hearts completely. *But Jesus lives forever. So he always holds the office of priest. People now come to God through him. And he is able to save them completely and for all time. Jesus lives forever. He prays for them. A high priest like that meets our need. He is holy, pure and without blame. He isn't like other people. He does not sin. He is lifted high above the heavens.*^{Heb.7:24-26} When the Reformers cried *Solo Christo*, they not only declared that it was His exclusive work of atonement (redemption) on the Cross that provides the basis of our spiritual regeneration, but also that it had to be Christ who died to provide that atonement—not an angel and not a created being, but Christ alone. *He alone is worthy.*^{Rev.5:12} **Solo Christo!**

Questions

In what way is Jesus unique?

What does "salvation" mean?

What role does the Church have in our salvation?

What did Jesus do to save us?

What can we do to be saved?

Do we have to do anything for our salvation after we are saved?

Puritan Prayers

You great and only Potentate, You have made summer and winter, day and night—each of these revolutions serves our welfare and is full of Your care and kindness. Your bounty is seen in the relations that train us, the laws that defend us, the homes that shelter us, the food that builds us, the raiment that comforts us, and the continuance of our health, senses, understanding, memory, affection and will. But as stars fade before the rising sun, You have eclipsed all these benefits in the wisdom and grace that purposed redemption by Jesus Your

Son. Blessed be Your mercy through that One who is mighty, willing and able to save to the uttermost. Make us deeply sensible of our need of His saving grace, of His blood that cleanses and of the rest He has promised—and imputes to us His righteousness which justifies the guilty, giving them a title to eternal life and possession of the Spirit.

Sunday 23rd October Ps.9:11-20

Sola Gratia – Grace Alone

When it comes to the **revelation of salvation** it is *Sola Scriptura* (Scriptures alone). When it comes to the **identity of the Saviour** it is *Solo Christo* (Christ alone). But when it comes to the **basis for salvation** it is *Sola Gratia* (Grace alone). The Greek word for Grace is *charis* and means rejoice—and grace causes joy, pleasure, gratification and favour. Grace is God's favour and it is unearned and unmerited—the direct opposite of works. And so when God pours out His grace, it is an absolutely free expression of His loving kindness. God's grace affects a person's sinfulness and not only forgives the repentant sinner, but brings joy and thankfulness to them, changing the individual to a new creature but without destroying his individuality. *Anyone who believes in Christ is a new creation. The old is gone! The new has come! It is all from God. He brought us back to himself through Christ's death on the cross.*^{2Cor.5:17} *God's grace has saved you because of your faith in Christ. Your salvation doesn't come from anything you do. It is God's gift. It is not based on anything you have done. No one can brag about earning it. God made us. He created us to belong to Christ Jesus. Now we can do good things. Long ago God prepared them for us to do.*^{Eph.2:8-10}

We are conditioned to earn every merit or reward that comes our way and so it is difficult for us to accept the idea of someone else paying our debt with no thought of seeking any form of payment. The attitude of “*I got myself into this mess and I'll get myself out of it!*” is so entrenched in most people's thinking that the notion of another exhausting all their resources to rescue us—and then making no demand for any kind of repayment can be humiliating! Yet that which most find difficult and humiliating is the core of the Gospel: **God's grace**. So alien is the genuine concept of God's grace that there is no analogy to compare it to. We are so used to thinking that gifts are given to procure to some favour from the recipient, that when sincere Christians began to teach that if God has saved us, we should repay Him by serving Him, no one ever challenged it for several centuries. Not until this teaching was carried through to its logical conclusion—that we are saved by what Christ has done for us and how we respond to that gift determines whether we are saved or not (this is known as “*Semi-Pelagianism*”—Christ+our works=our salvation).

Pelagianism holds that the original sin did not taint human nature and that humans by divine grace have free will to achieve human perfection. Pelagius (c.355 – c.420 AD), was an ascetic and philosopher from the British Isles who taught that God could not command believers to do the impossible, and therefore it must be possible to satisfy all divine commandments. He also taught that it was unjust to punish one person for the sins of another; therefore, infants are born blameless. Pelagius accepted no excuse for sinful behaviour and taught that all Christians, regardless of their station in life, should live unimpeachable, sinless lives.

Last month we mentioned that the teachings of Calvin and Arminius were debated at the Dutch Reformed Church's Synod of Dort in 1619 (which included delegates from the Church of England and the Church of Scotland), and the teachings of Arminius were rejected. But a similar debate about mankind's spiritual nature had been held 1200 year before then—then it was Augustine and Pelagius. Although most Christians believed that people were sinners, the nature of sin and how it affects us, had not been thoroughly thought out and defined. But this sin question should be thought through by every Christian and the answers settled from a sound

and balanced reading of the Scriptures. Does Adam's sin and guilt corrupt us from conception, or are we inherently good, in complete possession of our moral faculties, and able to save ourselves through self-effort? If Adam's Fall affected us, how far and to what extent did it affect us? Did it cause spiritual death, rendering us unable to respond to God, or does it merely cripple us, leaving our capacities and desires to seek God intact? Did Jesus go to the cross to help us help ourselves? Or, did Jesus die because people were utterly bound by sin, unable to help themselves, and in desperate need of a divinely wrought salvation? And what about grace? What does it accomplish? How much grace do we need? How dependent are we upon the grace of God? Does God give grace to make us good (holy), or does our goodness (holiness) qualify us to receive divine grace? The answers to these questions are important because they affect our understanding of God, His grace and our relationship with Him—how we relate to God.

Augustine refuted Pelagius from Paul's letters. Adam's sin was no private affair and, as the father of the human race, he represented all people. When Adam fell, all fell in him and so we enter the world guilty with Adam's guilt—we are imputed with Adam's sin and guilt. Therefore, we are born dead in sin, unable to believe the gospel or respond to God. *Sin entered the world because one man sinned. And death came because of sin. Everyone sinned, so death came to all people... Death ruled even over those who did not sin as Adam did. He broke God's command. But he also became a pattern of the One who was going to come. 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. One man sinned, and death ruled because of his sin. But we are even more sure of what will happen because of what the one man, Jesus Christ, has done. Those who receive the rich supply of God's grace will rule with Christ in his kingdom. They have received God's gift and have been made right with him. One man's sin brought guilt to all people. So also one right act made all people right with God. And all who are right with God will live. 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}

To Augustine, we are like a man dead on the bottom of the Ocean. To Pelagius, man was treading water and able to climb into the boat by himself. To Semi-Pelagians, man is overboard and drowning—he just needs God to throw him a lifeline. God is sovereign but man is also fully responsible. Augustine generated a profound dependence upon God's glorious grace. His personal experience of indwelling sin convinced him that what he saw in the Bible was right. He was utterly dependent upon God and his prayer "*Command what you will, and give what you command,*" expressed the heart and soul of his piety. Augustine understood his dependence upon God for salvation, sanctification, and every other good thing. It was only when the church taught Original Sin, humanity's helplessness, and God's free grace that the moral transformation actually occurs. The doctrines of grace go deep, touching the human heart, transforming it by grace, evoking a life surrendered to God in joyful gratitude. Only as we see our bankruptcy, our need of grace, and our dependence upon God, do we lavishly give ourselves to Christ and His Kingdom. The attitude of "*I got myself into this mess and I'll get myself out of it!*" is shown up for what it is—works! **God has saved us by His grace and whilst serving Him can never repay Him, serving Him is the only appropriate response.** The difference is seen when we get things wrong—if we are **repaying** God, we will always be in debt and feel guilty for not doing enough. But if we are **responding** to God's grace, we will have a clear conscience and be blessed. Yes, doctrine matters! Churches rise and fall on their doctrinal clarity or their lack of clarity—clarity about the depth, power, and debility of human sin makes churches humble, needy, and fruitful but lack of clarity renders them lukewarm. The more we understand and abhor sin the less it will

control us but failure to emphasize the doctrine of sin usually amplifies evil. The better we feel about ourselves the worse we usually become. In the twentieth century, Pelagian ideals have unleashed untold horrors. All the utopian movements of the last 100 years—Communism, Fascism, and Nazism—started and built upon Pelagian assumptions about human nature. In a recent survey, 77% of professing evangelicals said that they believe that human beings are basically good and 84% believe that in salvation ‘*God helps those who help themselves.*’ It would be a mistake to assume that this is not the case in our churches today.

Amazing Grace—consider the parable that Christ taught in Matthew 18:23-35 and how it relates to grace. Jesus told this parable who forgave one of his debtors. The King showed grace but even though the debtor seemingly was thankful for such grace, he never truly received the impact of it. He demonstrated that he was not a recipient of grace because he immediately went out and behaved mercilessly toward one of his petty debtors! In the same way. Although our Heavenly Father has shown grace toward to the whole world, it is clear that not everyone has received that grace: *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.*^{Jn.1:11-12} **Benefiting** from God’s grace is not necessarily the same as **experiencing** God’s grace. An experience of God’s grace will grip your soul in total wonder and amazement and leave you in perfect restful peace that causes you to relate differently to people—especially those who have offended (indebted themselves to) you. **Gracious living is the hallmark trait of someone who has experienced God’s grace of salvation.** Someone has said that ‘religion’ is spelt: **D – O, Do**; while Christianity is spelt: **D – O - N – E, Done!** There is a difference between God’s **general grace** and God’s **saving grace**. God’s general grace allows us the awesome privilege of living on this planet, enjoying the pleasures of life, giving and receiving, working, playing, and expressing ourselves. Everybody benefits from this grace, but only a few go on to experience God’s **saving grace**. God’s saving grace is found only in Jesus Christ: *For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.*^{Jn.1:17} But it is also important to distinguish between what saves us and what happens when we are saved. One is the reason we are saved and the other is the result of our salvation—and so, two people can be living out the commands of Scripture for totally different reasons. This understanding of grace has caused some to think that God doesn’t care how we live after we’ve accepted His grace because we are already forgiven. *So what do we do? Keep on sinning so God can keep on forgiving? I should hope not! If we’ve left the country where sin is sovereign, how can we still live in our old house there?*^{Rom.6:1-2} We are not saved by belonging to, or attending a church, being water-baptised (‘*baptismal-regeneration*’), or making “a decision” for Christ (‘*decisional-regeneration*’). Salvation by grace is something that the New Testament consistently says we must simply “accept” or “receive”. Others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop.^{Mk.4:20} Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.^{Mk.10:15} The person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God but considers them foolishness, and cannot understand them because they are discerned only through the Spirit.^{1Cor.2:14} When C.S.Lewis was confronted with the grace of God to save His soul, he looked for any other way to find peace for his soul. But none was to be found in what would in reality be derived from his own mental, physical, material, or spiritual efforts. He said: “I was left with no other option but to simply fall into the hands of God’s grace.” But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace.^{Rom.11:6} When the Reformers cried *sola gratia*, they were countering the Papal teaching that salvation was achieved by Christ’s work combined with our work. But there is another aspect to God’s grace that will enrich our life and sustain our passion and zeal for the cause of Christ—we are also kept by God’s grace! So let’s continue in the grace of God. *And after the meeting of the synagogue broke up, many Jews and*

devout converts to Judaism followed Paul and Barnabas, who, as they spoke with them, urged them to continue in the grace of God.^{Acts.13:43} It is only by this grace that we can stand. Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand.^{Rom.5:1-2} Yes, Amazing grace—it saved a wretch like me! The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with us all. Amen.^{Rev.22:21} **Sola Gratia!**

Questions

How does Adam's sin and guilt corrupt us?

We are made in God's image but in what way is the human race like God?

Does spiritual death render us unable to respond to God?

How dependent are we upon the grace of God?

How dependent are we upon the grace of God?

What is the difference between God's **general grace** and God's **saving grace**?

How can we keep ourselves in the grace of God?

Puritan Prayers: Blessed be Your mercy through that One who is mighty, willing and able to save to the uttermost. Make us deeply sensible of our need of His saving grace, of His blood that cleanses and of the rest He has promised—and imputes to us His righteousness which justifies the guilty, giving them a title to eternal life and possession of the Spirit. May we love the freeness of salvation and joy in its holiness. Give us faith to grasp Your promises that are our hope, that provide for every exigency and that prevent every evil. Keep our hearts from straying after forbidden pleasures and may Your will bind all our wishes. Let us live out of the world as to its spirit, maxim and manners, but live in it as the sphere of our action and usefulness. May we be alive to every call of duty, accepting without question Your determination of our circumstances and our service.

Sunday 30th October Ps.11

Sola Fide – Faith Alone. Faith is the Means of Salvation—*Grace is received by the gift of faith*

When it comes to the revelation of salvation: **Sola Scriptura** (Scriptures Alone). When it comes to the identity of the Saviour: **Solo Christo** (Christ Alone!) When it comes to the cause of salvation: **Sola Gratia** (Grace Alone!). And now: **Sola Fide** (Faith Alone!). Against the backdrop of a State Church, which taught that salvation was earned by a person's righteous efforts and attending the Church's rituals, the Reformers reaffirmed the Biblical position that salvation was received by faith, not works. There appears to be two kinds of "belief" in Scripture. There's the kind of belief that is merely based on facts. With this kind of belief, a person can believe a fact without that belief necessarily changing who they are. I believe that Nero was Emperor of Rome in 64AD when he launched an intense 42 month persecution of the Christians. That 'belief' is based on known facts. This is the kind of 'belief' that James refers to: *You say you have faith, for you believe that there is one God. Good for you! Even the demons believe this, and they tremble in terror. How foolish! Can't you see that faith without good deeds is useless?*^{Jas.2:19-20} But there is clearly another kind of belief which seems to be more akin to trust. This kind of belief is much, much more than just giving assent to the facts—this kind of belief is based on the gift of God. Last week we said that there is a vast difference between God's **general grace** and God's **saving grace**. God's general grace allows us the awesome privilege of living on this planet, enjoying the pleasures of life, giving and receiving, working, playing, and expressing ourselves. Everybody benefits from this grace, but only a few go on to experience God's **saving grace**. God's saving grace is found only in Jesus Christ: *For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.*^{Jn.1:17} And there is also a vast difference between a general belief in God and a saving belief in God—and a saving belief in God comes through Jesus Christ: *This*

righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.^{Rom.3:22} Many people claim to 'believe' in God, yet they have never received the gift of faith from God. Therefore, simply believing certain facts does not give us the means of being regenerated. After all, even demons believe in God and they are not regenerated! In Old Covenant times the word "*faith*" rarely (if ever) occurs in the same way that it does in the New Covenant because New Covenant faith is a personal faith in Jesus Christ. Nevertheless, the Old Covenant believers did have a faith in Jesus Christ because there is only one faith, just as there is only one body, one God, one Lord and one Spirit: *There is one body. There is one Spirit. You were appointed to one hope when you were chosen. There is one Lord. There is one faith and one baptism. There is one God and Father of all. He is over everything. He is through everything. He is in everything. But each one of us has received a gift of grace, just as Christ wanted us to have it.*^{Eph.4:4-7} Of course the Old Covenant believers did not personally know Jesus Christ because He had not yet been born, but they did believe in the coming Messiah—and Jesus affirmed that their faith (belief) was genuine: *Even after Jesus had done all these miraculous signs in their presence, they still would not believe in him. This was to fulfil the word of Isaiah the prophet: "Lord, who has believed our message and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?" 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.12:37-41} In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord, high and exalted, seated on a throne; and the train of his robe filled the temple.^{Is.6:1} Jesus replied, "If I glorify myself, my glory means nothing. My Father, whom you claim as your God, is the one who glorifies me. Though you do not know him, I know him. If I said I did not, I would be a liar like you, but I do know him and obey his word. Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad."^{Jn.8:54-56} Although the Old Covenant believers had real faith, they could only see the spiritual realities from afar. *But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear. For truly I tell you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it.*^{Matt.13:16-17} Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of the Messiah and the glories that would follow. It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves but you, when they spoke of the things that have now been told you by those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven. Even angels long to look into these things.^{1Pet.1:10-12} May God receive glory. He is able to strengthen your faith because of the good news I preach. It is the message about Jesus Christ. It is in keeping with the mystery that was hidden for a very long time. The mystery has now been made known through the writings of the prophets. The eternal God commanded that it be made known. He wanted all nations to believe and obey him. May the only wise God receive glory forever through Jesus Christ. Amen.^{Rom.16:25-27} Those Old Covenant saints had to wait until Jesus was born and paid the price for their redemption by His death before they could receive the reality of God's promises: *All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them... By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh's daughter. He 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... These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised, since God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect.*^{Heb.11:13-40} Nevertheless many of the prophets had a clear understanding of what the Messiah

would do when He came: *Fellow Israelites, I can tell you confidently that the patriarch David died and was buried, and his tomb is here to this day. But he was a prophet and knew that God had promised him on oath that he would place one of his descendants on his throne. Seeing what was to come, he spoke of the resurrection of the Messiah, that he was not abandoned to the realm of the dead, nor did his body see decay. God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of it. Exalted to the right hand of God, he has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear.*^{Acts.2:29-33} *I know that my Redeemer lives. In the end he will stand on the earth. After my skin has been destroyed, in my body I'll still see God. I myself will see him with my own eyes. I'll see him, and he won't be a stranger to me. How my heart longs for that day!*^{Job.19:25-27}

“Faith” in the New Testament is really about *trust*—a personal trust in Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour. *After Jesus said this, he looked toward heaven and prayed: 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.*^{Jn.17:1-3} This kind of faith is given from God and involves knowing God and Jesus Christ. *Simon Peter answered, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Jesus answered, “You are blessed, Simon son of Jonah, because no person taught you that. My Father in heaven showed you who I am.*^{Matt.16:16-17}

Whilst we can distinguish ‘belief’ (agreeing with certain facts) from ‘faith’ (the gift of God), there is an important connection between them. For faith to become acceptable, the Gospel of Christ first becomes believable—and Jesus’ resurrection gives the Gospel credibility. *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. He appeared to Cephas. Next he appeared to the twelve apostles. Then he appeared to more than 500 believers at one time. (Most of these people are still living, but some have died.) Next he appeared to James. Then he appeared to all the apostles. Last of all, he also appeared to me.*^{1Cor.15:3-8}

Belief (understanding and acknowledging certain facts, in particular the Gospel) therefore **precedes**

Christian faith. That is why the preaching and demonstration of the Gospel is imperative. Christ's righteousness is imputed on the basis of God's gift of faith—which comes after believing: *But the righteousness based on faith...*^{Rom.10:6}

The heart cannot accept as true what the head declares to be false. Removing obstacles to belief and giving reasons to believe does not necessarily save a person. But doing this is important for someone to accept Christ and His saving faith. Until we come to a point of surrendering to Christ, confessing our sin, and putting our trust in Christ, can we experience conversion and truly say: *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}

Faith and grace are both gifts from God: *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do. [God saved you through faith as an act of kindness. You had nothing to do with it. Being saved is a gift from God. It's not the result of anything you've done, so no one can brag about it. God has made us what we are. He has created us in Christ Jesus to live lives filled with good works that he has prepared for us to do.]*^{Eph.2:8—10}

We saw last week that grace involves joy, pleasure and favour—but these characteristics are also integral to faith. When we realise what God has done for us we will be truly grateful and happy—our sins have been expunged and we have peace with God! *The Spirit of the LORD and King is on me. The LORD has anointed me to tell the good news to poor people. He has sent me to comfort those whose hearts have been broken. He has sent me to announce freedom for those who have been captured. He wants me to set prisoners free from their dark prisons. He has sent me to announce the year when he will set his people free. He wants me to announce the day when he will pay his enemies back. Our God has sent me to*

comfort all those who are sad. He wants me to help those in Zion who are filled with sorrow. I will put beautiful crowns on their heads in place of ashes. I will anoint them with oil to give them gladness instead of sorrow. I will give them a spirit of praise in place of a spirit of sadness. They will be like oak trees that are strong and straight. The LORD himself will plant them in the land. That will show how glorious he is. ^{Is.61:1-3}

When God calls us by His all-conquering grace, He gives us the gift of faith to be saved through Jesus Christ and because this faith is supernatural—it has God’s “hallmark” on it! And so the size of our faith is of not important—living faith from God will “work”, even if it is the size of a mustard seed! *And the apostles said to the Lord, “Increase our faith.” So the Lord said, “If you have faith as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be pulled up by the roots and be planted in the sea,’ and it would obey you.* ^{Lk.17:5-6} This kind of faith will cause us to obey God (just as the Old Covenant believers obeyed God): *Faith assures us of things we expect and convinces us of the existence of things we cannot see. God accepted our ancestors because of their faith. Faith convinces us that God created the world through his word. This means what can be seen was made by something that could not be seen. Faith led Abel to offer God a better sacrifice than Cain’s sacrifice... No one can please God without faith. Whoever goes to God must believe that God exists and that he rewards those who seek him. Faith led Noah to listen when God warned him about the things in the future that he could not see. He obeyed God and built a ship to save his family... Faith led Abraham to obey when God called him to go to a place that he would receive as an inheritance.* ^{Heb.11:1-8} Faith will save our souls (i.e. will sanctify our personality and mature us): *You are receiving the salvation of your souls. It is the result of your faith.* ^{1Pet.1:9} And so faith is important enough to fight for it: *The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.* ^{Gal.5:6} *But you, man of God, flee from all this, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made your good confession in the presence of many witnesses.* ^{1Tim.6:11-12} Yes, faith is the means of our salvation—both in the future (to enter heaven when we die) and in the present (maturing us and making us holy) because it is Jesus dwelling within us that changes us: *I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.* ^{Eph.3:16-17} **Sola**

Fide!

Questions

What is the difference between a belief and saving faith?

What is salvation?

How are we saved?

Can our faith be measured?

How much faith do we need?

What is the result of our faith? (see 1Pet.1:9)

Puritan Prayer: Creator, Upholder and Proprietor of all things, we cannot escape from Your presence and control, nor do we desire to do so. Our privilege is to be under the agency of Your Omnipotence, Righteousness, Wisdom, Patience, Mercy and Grace, for You are Love with more than parental affection. We admire Your Goodness and we stand in awe of Your Power and Your Purity. It is the discovery of Your Goodness alone that can banish our fear and allure us into Your Presence. We review our past guilt and are conscious of unworthiness. We bless You that Your steadfast Love and Attributes are essential to our happiness and hope. You have witnessed to us Your Grace and Mercy in the bounties of nature, in the fullness of Your Providence, in the revelations of Scripture, in the gift of Your Son, in the proclamation of the Gospel. Help us not only to receive Jesus but to walk in Him, to depend upon Him, to commune with Him and to follow Him as dear children—not yet perfect, but still pressing forward; not complaining of labour, but valuing rest; not murmuring under trials, but thankful for our state. And by so doing, let us silence the ignorance of foolish people.

November

Thought for the Month: Relying on God has to begin all over again every day, as if nothing had yet been done. *C.S. Lewis*

November's Theme: HUMILITY—All of you, clothe yourselves with **HUMILITY** toward one another, because, “God opposes the proud but shows favour to the humble.” *1Pet. 5:5*

Sunday 6th November Ps.12

A Summary of the Five Pillars of Biblical Christianity

Sola Scriptura – Scripture Alone	The Revelation of Salvation <i>Not the writings of a man</i>
Solo Christo – Christ Alone	The Provider of Salvation <i>Not any human “Vicar”</i>
Sola Gratia – Grace Alone	The Basis for Salvation <i>Not because we can earn it</i>
Sola Fide – Faith Alone	The Means of Salvation <i>Grace is received by the gift of faith</i>
Soli Deo Gloria – Only for God's Glory!	The Reason for Salvation

Soli Deo Gloria – Only for God's Glory! The Reason for Salvation

The final statement in The Five Pillars of Biblical Christianity is *Soli Deo Gloria*—for the glory of God alone! To God be the glory: *I am the LORD; that is my name! I will not yield my glory to another or my praise to idols.* *Is. 42:8* The reason we are saved is so that we can glorify God. It is true that reason Christ died for us was to save us from our sins—and also from the just wrath of God for our sin—but the main reason Christ redeem us, was for the glory of God. *Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory!* *Rev. 19:6-7* How can you believe, when you receive glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the only God? *Jn. 5:44* One of the main Greek words for “glory” is “*doxa*” (from where we get *doxology*) and it means to *recognize, honour, praise, invest with dignity, give anyone esteem or honour by putting them into an honourable position*. When we give glory to Jesus, we are recognizing Jesus as God, we are honouring Him, praising Him, investing Him with dignity—we are giving Him esteem and honour by putting Him into an honourable position (*i.e.* by calling Him “*Lord*”). Adam was created in glory—he was clothed in glory until he sinned—and God has crowned us with glory and honour: *What is mankind that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them? You have made them a little lower than the angels and crowned them with glory and honour.* *Ps. 8:4-5* And God expects us to glorify Him: *I will extol the LORD at all times; his praise will always be on my lips. I will glory in the LORD; let the afflicted hear and rejoice. Glorify the LORD with me; let us exalt his name together.* *Ps. 34:1-3* Nebuchadnezzar came to a place where he gave glory to God: *Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and exalt and glorify the King of heaven, because everything he does is right and all his ways are just. And those who walk in pride he is able to humble.* *Dan. 4:37* The first article in the Westminster Shorter Catechism is: *What is the chief end of man? – The chief end of man is to enjoy God and glorify Him forever.* The purpose of our life is to enjoy God and glorify Him! *God is most glorified in me when I am most satisfied in Him.* *J. Piper* Enjoyment and glorifying God are inseparable—we will never have true lasting enjoyment without honouring God, praising Him, investing Him with dignity, giving Him esteem and honour by calling Him “*Lord*”. Creation has so many wonders, but God created them all for our enjoyment and told Adam (and his descendants) to have dominion (in a good way) over all of creation: *God blessed them. He said to them, “Have children and increase your numbers. Fill the earth and bring it under your control. Rule over the fish in the waters and the birds of the air. Rule over every living creature that moves on the ground.” Then God said, “I am giving you every plant on the face of the whole earth that bears its own seeds. I am giving you every tree that has fruit with seeds in it...And that's exactly what happened. God saw everything he had made. And it was very good.* *Gen. 1:28-31*

However, there is much more to life than just God's natural creation—there is also God's recreation (which is the ultimate expression of His love). We should enjoy God's redemption stories and marvel at His love, rejoice in His gifts toward us, rest in His grace, celebrate His provision of family and church, enjoy God—and whilst we do these things, we are to glorify Him! We were born-again in order that we might to live—live to honour Him, live to please Him, live to let others see and know Him, live to worship Him boldly, live to praise Him passionately, live to explore the gifts He has given us. The clearest (and easiest) way to please God and to honour His Lordship over our lives is to thank Him! Thank Him for the big things and also the little things, the majestic things and also the (apparently) mundane things. Salvation is the doorway to being able to glorify God, because the “*unsaved*”—those who are not interested in God or who belittle Him—will never glorify Him. *Jesus came near the place where the road goes down the Mount of Olives. There the whole crowd of disciples began to praise God with joy. In loud voices they praised him for all the miracles they had seen. They shouted, “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!” “May there be peace and glory in the highest heaven!” Some of the Pharisees in the crowd spoke to Jesus. “Teacher,” they said, “tell your disciples to stop!” “I tell you,” he replied, “if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out.”*^{Lk.19:37-40} We were saved to give glory to God—and so even the “*mundane*” parts of our life are holy and should glorify (honour) God: *Therefore receive one another, just as Christ also received us, to the glory of God.*^{Rom.15:7} *So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.*^{1Cor.10:31} [Actually for the Christian, nothing in our life is mundane because: *Everything you say or do should be done in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.*^{Col.3:17} *For in him we live and move and have our being.*^{Acts.17:28}] And our collective life (which is what the Church is—the people, not the organisation) is described as “*the glory of God*”: *as for our brothers, they are the messengers of the churches, the glory of Christ.*^{2Cor.8:23} And when we are together in the name of Jesus Christ, we are the glory of God!!! *Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.*^{Eph.3:20-21} Who we are and what we do, is glorious because we give honour to God, acknowledging that Jesus is Lord. Ministry is whatever we do in service to God, and our ministry is glorious—actually far more glorious than the ministry that Moses had: *Now if the ministry that brought death, which was engraved in letters on stone, came with glory, so that the Israelites could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of its glory, transitory though it was, will not the ministry of the Spirit be even more glorious? If the ministry that brought condemnation was glorious, how much more glorious is the ministry that brings righteousness! For what was glorious has no glory now in comparison with the surpassing glory. And if what was transitory came with glory, how much greater is the glory of that which lasts!*^{2Cor.3:7-11} This is because, unlike Moses who lived before Jesus was born, we are living in the benefits of Jesus’ death, resurrection and ascension: *Therefore, since through God's mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart. Rather, we have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God. And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel that displays the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. For what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ.*^{2Cor.4:1-6} Because Jesus is now glorified, we have received the Holy Spirit: *On the last and greatest day of the festival, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them.” By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive. Up to that time the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified.*^{Jn.7:37-39}

One of Christ's last prayers was that His disciples would see His glory, which means that God's glory (His radiant magnificence) is visible and tangible: *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} But God's glory is inseparable from His holiness and love—and without holiness we will never see God's glory. *Work at living in peace with everyone, and work at living a holy life, for those who are not holy will not see the Lord.*^{Heb.12:14} Moses reached a place where he wanted to see God's glory above anything else: *Then Moses said to him, "If you don't go with us, don't send us up from here. How will anyone know that you are pleased with me and your people? You must go with us. How else will we be different from all of the other people on the face of the earth?" The LORD said to Moses, "I will do exactly what you have asked. I am pleased with you. And I know your name. I know all about you." Then Moses said, "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. But you can't see my face," he said. "No one can see me and stay alive."*^{Ex.33:15-20} God's glory is a noun, because it is a visible reality and was often seen as a cloud and/or fire. *To the Israelites the glory of the LORD looked like a consuming fire on top of the mountain. Then Moses entered the cloud as he went on up the mountain.*^{Ex.24:17-18} *When Solomon finished praying, fire came down from heaven and consumed the burnt offering and the sacrifices, and the glory of the LORD filled the temple. The priests could not enter the temple of the LORD because the glory of the LORD filled it.*^{2Chron.7:1-2} *The cherubim were standing on the south side of the temple when the man went in. A cloud filled the inner courtyard. Then the glory of the LORD rose from above the cherubim. It moved to the doorway of the temple. The cloud filled the temple. And the courtyard was full of the brightness of the glory of the LORD. The sound the wings of the cherubim made could be heard as far away as the outer courtyard. It was like the voice of the Mighty God when he speaks.*^{Ez.10:3-5} But God's glory is also a verb because it is what we should give God—living for the glory of God is something we do! The real purpose of our salvation is not merely to avoid hell, but to give God glory! God has saved us for His glory: *so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be to the praise of his glory.*^{Eph.1:12} God is glorified in the Church (the people, not the organisation!): *Glory belongs to God, whose power is at work in us. By this power he can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine. Glory belongs to God in the church and in Christ Jesus for all time and eternity! Amen.*^{Eph.3:20-21} *Surely his salvation is near those who fear him, that his glory may dwell in our land. Love and faithfulness meet together; righteousness and peace kiss each other.*^{Psa.85:9-10} When God's grace is received by people, it results in thanksgiving to the glory of God. *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. All of that is for your benefit. God's grace is reaching more and more people. So they will become more and more thankful. They will give glory to God. 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.*^{2Cor.4:13-17} Christian maturity is learning to be content in God, regardless of our natural circumstances. *He said to me, "My grace is enough to cover and sustain you. My power is made perfect in weakness." I would rather stake my claim in these weaknesses and have the power of the Anointed One at home within me. I am at peace and even take pleasure in any weaknesses, and afflictions for the sake of the Anointed because when I am at my weakest, He makes me strong.*^{2Cor.12:8-10} *I have learned to be content no matter what happens to me. I know what it's like not to have what I need. I also know what it's like to have more than I need. I have learned the secret of being content no matter what happens. I am content whether I am*

well fed or hungry. I am content whether I have more than enough or not enough. I can do everything by the power of Christ. He gives me strength. ^{Phil.4:11-13}

Many people spend a great proportion of their lives searching for life's purpose but until we have peace with God, we will always be restless. Augustine wrote: "*You stir man to take pleasure in praising You, because You have made us for Yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in You.*" No matter what our status or ability is, our true purpose in life is to glorify God! *I will praise you, Lord my God, with all my heart; I will glorify your name forever. For great is your love toward me.* ^{Ps.86:12}

Deo Gloria!

Questions

Why has God saved us?

How can we enjoy God?

How can we show our gratitude to God?

How is our ministry more glorious than Moses' ministry?

What is God's glory like?

In what way is God's glory tangible?

Can we experience God's glory here on earth?

Puritan Prayer: Supreme Ruler of the visible and invisible worlds, my thought is drawn out to You for Your amazing grace and condescension. You have kept my conversion fresh before me—that season of my first spiritual comfort when I passed through the Red Sea by a way I did not expect. I rejoiced then, for that unthought-of passage, that delivered me from the fear of the Egyptian when I had almost despaired of life. I rejoice now, as these things are fresh and lively in my mind. You are my divine treasury in whom all fullness dwells, my life, hope, joy, peace, glory, end. May I be daily more and more conformed to You, with the meekness and calmness of the Lamb in my soul, and a sense of the felicity of heaven, so that I may be fit for His enjoyments and His employments. I am not afraid to look the king of terrors in the face, for I know I shall be drawn, not driven, out of this world. Until then let me continually glow and burn for You, and when the last great change shall come, let me awake in Your likeness, leaving behind an example that will glorify You, while my spirit rejoices in heaven, and my memory is blessed upon earth with those who follow me—praising You for my life.

Remembrance Sunday 13th November Ps.13

Three things that God remembers.

Last weekend we remembered Guy Fawkes: *Remember, remember, the 5th of November, Gunpowder, treason and plot. I see no reason Why gunpowder treason Should ever be forgot.* Today is Remembrance Sunday when we remember and honour members of our armed forces who died in the line of duty. It is honourable and patriotic to spend a little time to appreciate those who gave their lives for our freedom—and it is especially poignant now, when so many people are suffering the horrors of war in Ukraine. One of the reasons we have memorial events is to stimulate our thoughts and bring to our remembrance what happened in the past. As we recall past events, we can learn from the examples of others—and also (hopefully) learn from their mistakes! That is why the historical events of God's people were recorded: *The words "God accepted Abraham's faith" were written not only for Abraham. They were written also for us. We believe in the God who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. So God will accept our faith and make us right with himself. Jesus was handed over to die for our sins. He was raised to life in order to make us right with God.* ^{Rom.4:23-25} *Everything written long ago was written to teach us so that we would have confidence through the endurance and encouragement which the Scriptures give us. May God, who gives you this endurance and encouragement, allow you to live in harmony with each other by following the example of Christ Jesus. Then, having the same goal, you will praise the God*

and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.^{Rom.15:4-6} Peter wanted his readers to remember the important truths of the Christian faith, and for them to constantly think about them, even after he had died: *So I will always remind you of these things, even though you know them and are firmly established in the truth you now have. I think it is right to refresh your memory as long as I live in the tent of this body, because I know that I will soon put it aside, as our Lord Jesus Christ has made clear to me. And I will make every effort to see that after my departure you will always be able to remember these things.*^{2Pet.1:12-15} **This week we are going look at 3 important things that God remembers**—God remembers His Covenant, God remembers our sins no more and God remembers us. Next week we will look at 3 important things that we should remember.

God remembers His Covenant. *Yet I will remember the covenant I made with you in the days of your youth, and I will establish an everlasting covenant with you.*^{Ezek.16:60} A covenant is an agreement or alliance between 2 parties. God made a covenant with Adam, another one with Noah, another one with Abraham and of course the covenant with Israel given through Moses. Actually, each of these covenants progressively revealed God's redemptive plan—which is to bring people together in unity with Himself. *But now through Christ Jesus you, who were once far away, have been brought near by the blood of Christ. So he is our peace. In his body he has made Jewish and non-Jewish people one by breaking down the wall of hostility that kept them apart. He brought an end to the commandments and demands found in Moses' Teachings so that he could take Jewish and non-Jewish people and create one new humanity in himself. So he made peace. He also brought them back to God in one body by his cross, on which he killed the hostility. He came with the Good News of peace for you who were far away and for those who were near. So Jewish and non-Jewish people can go to the Father in one Spirit. That is why you are no longer foreigners and outsiders but citizens together with God's people and members of God's family. You are built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets. Christ Jesus himself is the cornerstone. In him all the parts of the building fit together and grow into a holy temple in the Lord. Through him you, also, are being built in the Spirit together with others into a place where God lives.*^{Eph.2:13-22} Another meaning of a “covenant” is a “will” or “testament” and just as a person's last will and testament does not take effect until that person dies, so God's Covenant could only take effect once Jesus had died: *In the case of a will, it is necessary to prove the death of the one who made it, because a will is in force only when somebody has died; it never takes effect while the one who made it is living. This is why even the first covenant was not put into effect without blood. When Moses had proclaimed every command of the law to all the people, he took the blood of calves, together with water, scarlet wool and branches of hyssop, and sprinkled the scroll and all the people. He said, “This is the blood of the covenant, which God has commanded you to keep.” In the same way, he sprinkled with the blood both the tabernacle and everything used in its ceremonies. In fact, the law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness. It was necessary, then, for the copies of the heavenly things to be purified with these sacrifices, but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these.*^{Heb.9:16-23} Jesus introduced God's New Covenant with His death: *And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, “This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me.” In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you.*^{Lk.22:19-20} And this New Covenant brought an end to the commandments and demands found in Moses' Teachings by making that old covenant obsolete. *This is the covenant I will establish with the people of Israel after that time, declares the Lord. I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people... 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.”* By calling this covenant “new,” he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and outdated will soon disappear.^{Heb.8:10-13} In this new covenant, God forgives our sins and writes His laws on our heart—we know God personally and have a God-awareness that prompts our

conscience. **Yes! God remembers His Covenant!** Yet *I will remember the covenant I made with you in the days of your youth, and I will establish an everlasting covenant with you.* ^{Ezek.16:60}

God remembers our sins no more: For I will forgive their wickedness and **I will remember their sins no more.** ^{Heb.8:12}

The reason the New Covenant is greater than any of the previous covenants is that this new covenant actually works and our sins are forgiven—our sins are expunged, remised and sent away from us and from God! *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.* ^{Heb.8:6-10}

God doesn’t “forget” our sins in a lapse of memory—only to remember them again sometime in the future! No! God consciously and deliberately “remembers them no more” because they are no more—they are gone. 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. ^{Psa.103:11-12} I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions, for my own sake, and remembers your sins no more. ^{Is.43:25}

“Come now, let us reason together,” says the LORD. “Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool.” ^{Is.1:18} These statements were prophecies written under the Old Covenant, but they are fulfilled in the New Covenant—the covenant that Jesus implemented and the covenant that God remembers. *God has rescued us from the power of darkness and has brought us into the kingdom of his Son, whom he loves. His Son paid the price to free us, which means that our sins are forgiven.* ^{Col.1:13-14} All the prophets testify that people who believe in the one named Jesus receive forgiveness for their sins through him. ^{Acts.10:43} I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins. ^{Mk.2:10}

Yes! God remembers our sins no more: For I will forgive their wickedness and **I will remember their sins no more.** ^{Heb.8:12}

God remembers us. Give thanks to the One who **remembered us** when things were going badly for us. His faithful love continues forever. ^{Psa.136:23}

We are never alone—even when things are going badly for us—because God is with us. God is with us in a very personal and tangible way, because God the Holy Spirit indwells every Believer. *Those who are in the realm of the flesh cannot please God. You, however, are not in the realm of the flesh but are in the realm of the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, they do not belong to Christ. But if Christ is in you, then even though your body is subject to death because of sin, the Spirit gives life because of righteousness. And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies because of his Spirit who lives in you.* ^{Rom.8:8-11}

Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? ^{1Cor.6:19} In a very real yet mystical way, we are united with God (mystical means a mystery—we don’t understand how it works). *But anyone who is joined to the Lord becomes one with him in spirit.* ^{1Cor.1:17} Wesley puts it this way in his carol “Hark the herald angels sing”:

*Come, Desire of Nations, come, Fix in us Thy humble home,
Rise, the woman's Conquering Seed, Bruise in us the serpent's head.
Now display Thy saving power, Ruined nature now restore,
Now in mystic union join, Thine to ours and ours to Thine.*

Adam's Likeness, LORD, efface, Stamp Thy image in its place,

*Second Adam from above, Reinstate us in Thy love.
Let us Thee, though lost, regain, Thee, the life, the inner man:
Oh to all Thyself impart, Formed in each believing heart.*

The Bible takes the analogy of a mother's compassion for her baby and says that God's compassion is far, far greater than a mother's compassion and God will never forget us: *Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you! See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands;*^{Is.49:15-16} God has engraved our names on the palms of His hands very dramatically at Calvary—the nails that the Romans used to pin Jesus to the cross also engraved our names on His hands! Jesus has our names imprinted on His hand and His heart. God will never forget us or forsake us! *Remember these things, O Jacob, for you are my servant, O Israel. I have made you, you are my servant; O Israel, I will not forget you. I have swept away your offenses like a cloud, your sins like the morning mist. Return to me, for I have redeemed you.*^{Is.44:21-22} *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?"*^{Heb13:3-6} When the thief asked Jesus to remember him, Jesus gave him the assurance that He would not only remember him but that he would be with Him forever: *Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your Kingdom." And Jesus replied, "I assure you, today you will be with me in paradise."*^{Lk.23:42-43} **Yes! God remembers us.** *Give thanks to the One who **remembered us** when things were going badly for us. His faithful love continues forever.*^{Ps.136:23}

Three important things that God remembers—God remembers His Covenant; God remembers our sins no more; God remembers us.

Questions

What practical things can we do to help ourselves remember what God remembers?

What is a covenant?

What makes the New Covenant different from the other Covenants that God has made?

What does it mean that God "*remembers our sins no more*"?

Does God remember all our faults and failings when He remembers us?

Puritan Prayers: Glorious God, It is the flame of my life to worship You, the crown and glory of my soul to adore You, my heavenly pleasure to approach You. Give me power by Your Spirit to help me worship now, that I may forget the world, be brought into fullness of life, be refreshed, comforted and blessed. Give me knowledge of Your goodness that I might not be over-awed by Your greatness. Give me Jesus, Son of Man, Son of God, that I might not be terrified but be drawn near with filial love and holy boldness. He is my Mediator, Brother, Interpreter, Branch, Daysman, Lamb—Him I glorify and in Him I am set on high. Crowns to give, I have none—but what You have given, I return, content to feel that everything is mine when it is Yours, and the more fully mine when I have yielded it to You. Let me live wholly to my Saviour, free from distractions, from carking [*distressing*] care and from hindrances to the pursuit of the narrow way. I am pardoned through the blood of Jesus—give me a new sense of it and continue to pardon me by it. May I come every day to the fountain and every day be washed anew, that I may worship You always in spirit and truth.

Sunday 20th November Ps.14

Three things we should Remember—Jesus; our Conversion; others in Prayer.

Last week we saw that one of the reasons we have memorial events is to stimulate our thoughts and bring to our remembrance what happened in the past. As we recall past events, we can learn from the examples of others—and also (hopefully) learn from their mistakes! That is why the historical events of God's people were recorded in the Scriptures: *The words "God accepted*

Abraham's faith" were written not only for Abraham. They were written also for us. We believe in the God who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. So God will accept our faith and make us right with himself. Jesus was handed over to die for our sins. He was raised to life in order to make us right with God.^{Rom.4:23-25} Everything written long ago was written to teach us so that we would have confidence through the endurance and encouragement which the Scriptures give us. May God, who gives you this endurance and encouragement, allow you to live in harmony with each other by following the example of Christ Jesus. Then, having the same goal, you will praise the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.^{Rom.15:4-6} Peter wanted his readers to remember the important truths of the Christian faith, and for them to constantly think about them, even after he had died: So I will always remind you of these things, even though you know them and are firmly established in the truth you now have. I think it is right to refresh your memory as long as I live in the tent of this body, because I know that I will soon put it aside, as our Lord Jesus Christ has made clear to me. And I will make every effort to see that after my departure you will always be able to remember these things.^{2Pet.1:12-15}

In 1946, Edgar Dale introduced the *Cone of Experience* concept (later known as the *Cone of Learning* or the *Pyramid of Learning*), which says that we remember 10% of what we read, 20% of what we hear, 30% of what we see, 50% of what we see and hear, 75% of what we see, hear and talk about, and 90% what we see, hear, talk about and do. In other words, the more we can interact with all of our senses, the more likely we are to retain what we have been taught. However, this principle was known to Moses nearly 3500 years earlier—and this is how Moses explained it: *Listen, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. And you must love the LORD your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your strength. And you must commit yourselves wholeheartedly to these commands that I am giving you today. Repeat them again and again to your children. Talk about them when you are at home and when you are on the road, when you are going to bed and when you are getting up. Tie them to your hands and wear them on your forehead as reminders. Write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.^{Deut.6:4-9}* That is why we read God's Word together out loud, we preach God's Word, we watch God's Word on video, we sing God's Word, we pray God's Word, we discuss God's Word and we encourage one another to put God's Word into practice! Last week we looked at 3 important things that God remembers: God remembers His Covenant, God remembers our sins no more and God remembers us—actually God's Covenant is to forgive our sins, write His laws on our heart and stay with us. This week we are looking at 3 important things that we should remember: **Remember Jesus; Remember our Conversion; Remember others in Prayer.**

Remember Jesus: *Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel.^{2Tim.2:8}* Just as believing the facts about God is not enough, so remembering Jesus as a person from history alone, is not enough—we need to remember Jesus, the God who became human and who was raised from the dead. This is our gospel (good news) and it is the only gospel; anything different from this is a false gospel—which is no gospel at all. *For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ.^{1Cor.3:11}* I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you to live in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let them be under God's curse! As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let them be under God's curse!^{Gal.1:6-9} We are coming up to Christmas—5 weeks today—when the whole of the Western world focuses on the celebrations of Christmas. Sadly very few remember reason for the season and Christmas-sacred becomes Christ-massacred. But these secular excesses are not new—Bishop Hugh Latimer (who was burnt at the stake for his faith at Oxford in 1555) said: *Men dishonour Christ more in the 12 days of Christmas than in all the 12 months besides.* We can only honour Jesus Christ if we believe in the

real Jesus Christ—the God who became human, who died and rose again. *In the beginning, the Word was already there. The Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning.*^{Jn.1:1-2} You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, announcing the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all. You know what has happened throughout the province of Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached—how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him.^{Acts.10:36-38} The 1991 Elim Conference discussed the place of signs and wonders in evangelism and church life. They concluded that: *We must recognise that while God does confirm His Word through miracles, signs and wonders, these carry their own limitations. Signs are given to encourage but never to replace faith. Signs always point away from themselves to Christ. They are not to be sought as an end in themselves. We need to assert that miracles in and of themselves do not validate a person or his teaching. We must also be careful to discern true and false miracles. The hallmark of the miraculous is its redemptive purpose. But in all of this we need to be in the place with God where we can be used to cast out demons, heal the sick and even raise the dead. Deep repentance is necessary as the Holy Spirit is frequently grieved by our scepticism and unbelief. We need both sound doctrine and effective biblical practice of the miraculous.* There is today a desperate need for "Spirit-filled thinking". We need to re-assert the primacy of Biblical study. **'Doctrine' and 'Theology', must not be dirty words among us.** We must **learn to study with the Mind of Christ**, with our intellect bowing to the revelation of the Holy Spirit. Our distinctive Pentecostal contribution to the Body of Christ in Britain and the world can be sound theology together with warm-hearted experience—**worship with the mind and the spirit**. If we don't believe it in our heads, we will never believe it in our hearts! But the true Gospel has a clear doctrine and a sound theology—plus a warm experience! *Their eyes were opened, and they recognized him. But then he disappeared from their sight. They said to each other, "He talked with us on the road. He opened the Scriptures to us. Weren't our hearts burning inside us during that time?"*^{Lk.24:31-32} **Let's remember Jesus**—the real historical Jesus—who, although He was always God, became human, died for our sins and rose from the dead for our justification. *What I received I passed on to you. And it is the most important of all. Here is what it is. Christ died for our sins, just as Scripture said he would. He was buried. He was raised from the dead on the third day, just as Scripture said he would be.*^{1Cor.15:3-4} Jesus was handed over to die for our sins. He was raised to life in order to make us right with God.^{Rom.4:25}

Remember our conversion: Remember those earlier days after you had received the light.^{Heb.10:32} Because God deals with us as individuals, our conversion is a very personal experience which is unique to us. God organised world events to dovetail into our life and He planned the right people to be at the right place at the right time to say the right things in order for us to hear and understand enough of the gospel for us to reach out to Him and ask Him to save us. Paul recognised that God had had His hand upon him—even whilst he was persecuting the Church: *You have heard of my earlier way of life as a Jew. With all my strength I attacked the church of God. I tried to destroy it. I was moving ahead in my Jewish way of life. I went beyond many Jews who were my own age. I held firmly to the teachings passed down by my people. But God set me apart from the time I was born. He showed me his grace by appointing me. He was pleased to show his Son in my life. He wanted me to preach about Jesus among those who aren't Jews.*^{Gal.1:13-16} Although Jesus has paid for the sins of the world, God's salvation only becomes effective when we agree with Him and say "yes Lord". Brothers and sisters, you are loved by God. We know that he has chosen you. Our good news didn't come to you only in words. It came with power. It came with the Holy Spirit's help... You welcomed our message with the joy the Holy Spirit gives... Your faith in God has also become known everywhere. So we don't have to say anything about it. The believers themselves report the kind of welcome you gave us. They tell about how you turned away from statues of gods to serve the living and true God. They tell about how you are waiting for his Son to come from heaven. God raised him from the dead. He is Jesus. He saves us from God's anger, and his anger is sure to come.^{1Thess.1:4-10} We all should

regularly do a “*health check*” on our faith. This is not to doubt our salvation but to affirm our salvation—to boost our confidence (which is what faith is): *Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you—unless, of course, you fail the test?*^{2Cor.13:5} Let’s **remember our conversion**, think about it and reflect on that experience—in our minds re-live our conversion and keep the memory of the experience fresh and alive. *For if, while we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! Not only is this so, but we also boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.*^{Rom.5:10-11} *What should we say then? Since God is on our side, who can be against us? God did not spare his own Son. He gave him up for us all. Then won’t he also freely give us everything else?*^{2Rom.8:31-32}

Remember others in prayer: *I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers.*^{Eph.1:16} Prayer is much, much, more than a shopping list of needs that we tell God about—in fact, Jesus says that our natural needs are already taken care of: *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... 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.6:7-34} T.L.Osborn says that prayer is a hallowed season: *As you approach your season of prayer, project the honour of being at one with your Lord. Anticipate fellowship, inspiration, rapport with God and communication with the Holy Spirit. It is time to absorb His love, to discuss with the Father His plans and how you are to be involved; a time to express your confidence in Him and your gratitude for the high honour of being a partner with Him. He goes on to say: Prayer is aligning our spirituality, our meditations, our concepts with the facts of Christ’s redemption—with what and who He has made us to be and with what He has sent us to do as His representatives. Prayer is bi-directional fellowship with the Father aligning our thoughts and dreams with His then listening to the response and guidance of His Word and of His Spirit. Prayer is interceding for the needs of fellow-believers and ministers, then listening for His ideas of what we can do about them—of ways we can be part of the answer. We can, and should, pray at all times with all sorts of prayers: First, I want all of you to pray for everyone. Ask God to bless them. Give thanks for them. Pray for kings. Pray for all who are in authority. Pray that we will live peaceful and quiet lives. And pray that we will be godly and holy. That is good. It pleases God our Saviour. He wants everyone to be saved. He wants them to come to know the truth. There is only one God. And there is only one go-between for God and human beings. He is the man Christ Jesus. He gave himself to pay for the sins of everyone. That was a witness given by God at just the right time.*^{1Tim.2:1-6} And we should regularly pray for other Believers: *constantly I remember you in my prayers at all times.*^{Rom.1:9-10} Our prayers for them should be that they will know God better and utilise the wisdom and understanding that the Holy Spirit gives (or to put this simply: we should pray that they become spiritually mature): *I have not stopped thanking God for you. I always remember you in my prayers. I pray to the God of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is the glorious Father. I keep asking him to give you the wisdom and understanding that come from the Holy Spirit. I want you to know God better. I also pray that your mind might see more clearly. Then you will know the hope God has chosen you to receive. You will know that the things God’s people will receive are rich and glorious. And you will know his great power. It can’t be compared with anything else. It is at work for us who believe. It is like the mighty strength God showed when he raised Christ from the dead.*^{Eph.2:16-20} However, we should not treat prayer as a formulæ or as an talisman that we must do to prevent something bad from happening. We should pray for others when we remember them—and then give thanks to God for their partnership—their fellowship in the Holy Spirit. *I thank my God every time I remember you. 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.1:3-6}

Let's remember these 3 things: **Jesus; our Conversion; others in Prayer**—then we will become established in our faith and remain unshaken, staying on course to the very end, whatever happens. *We who have fled to him for refuge can have great confidence as we hold to the hope that lies before us. This hope is a strong and trustworthy anchor for our souls. It leads us through the curtain into God's inner sanctuary. Jesus has already gone in there for us. He has become our eternal High Priest.*^{Heb.6:18-20}

Questions

Why is it important that we learn the facts about Jesus?

How can we ensure that we have heart knowledge about Jesus as well as head knowledge?

What is so important about conversion?

What do you remember most about your conversion?

Why should we pray for others?

How should we pray for others?

What happens when we pray for others?

What happens if we don't pray for others?

Puritan Prayer: O my Saviour, help me. I am so slow to learn, so prone to forget, so weak to climb—I am in the foothills when I should be on the heights. I am pained by my graceless thought, my prayerless days, my poverty of love, my sloth in the heavenly race, my sullied conscience, my wasted hours, my unspent opportunities. I am blind while light shines around me—take the scales from my eyes and grind to dust the evil thoughts of unbelief. Make it my chief joy to study You, to meditate on You and to gaze on You; to sit at Your feet like Mary; to lean against You like John; to appeal to Your love like Peter; to count all things as loss like Paul. Give me increase and progress in grace, so that there may be more decision in my character, more vigour in my purposes, more elevation in my life, more fervour in my devotion and more constancy in my zeal. As I have position in the world, keep me from making the world my position. May I never seek in the creature what can be found only in the Creator. Let not faith cease from seeking You until it vanishes into sight. Ride forth in me, O King of kings and Lord of lords, that I may live victoriously—and in victory, attain my end.

Sunday 27th November Ps.15 Lk.1:57-80

The true Christmas message: *And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High God. You will go ahead of the Lord to prepare the way for him. You will tell his people how they can be saved. You will tell them that their sins can be forgiven.*^{Lk.1:76-77}

The true message of Christmas is found in the name—Christ! Christ (or Messiah) means “Anointed One” and refers to God's promised Deliverer or Saviour. God had promised that a Ruler would come from Bethlehem who would bring peace. *The LORD says, “Bethlehem, you might not be an important town in the nation of Judah. But out of you will come a ruler over Israel for me. His family line goes back to the early years of your nation. It goes all the way back to days of long ago.” The LORD will hand his people over to their enemies. That will last until the promised ruler is born. Then his relatives in Judah will return to their land. The LORD will rule over them and the people of Israel. The promised ruler will stand firm and take care of his flock. The LORD will give him the strength to do it. The LORD his God will give him the authority to rule. His people will live safely. His greatness will reach from one end of the earth to the other. And he will bring them peace.*^{Mic.5:2-5} The Jewish priests knew that this ruler prophesied by Micah was not just any ruler but God's Deliverer, the Christ: *So Herod called together all the chief*

priests of the people. He also called the teachers of the law. He asked them where the Christ was going to be born. "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied. "This is what the prophet has written. He said, "But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are certainly not the least important among the towns of Judah. A ruler will come out of you. He will be the shepherd of my people Israel." ^{Matt.2:4-6} Both Herod and the priests rejected the promised Christ—but by rejecting Christ, they rejected God Himself. However, God's plan of salvation could not be thwarted by mere humans! God had planned our salvation before He created the world. *The Lamb who was slain from the creation of the world.* ^{Rev.13:8} And so, at just the right time, Jesus was born: *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.* ^{Gal.4:4-5} But God hadn't just planned the Deliverer before He created the world—He had also planned our deliverance before He created the world: *For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight.* ^{Eph.1:4} *For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your ancestors, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect. He was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake. Through him you believe in God, who raised him from the dead and glorified him, and so your faith and hope are in God.* ^{1Pet.1:18-21} *Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.'* ^{Matt.25:34}

Since Adam's rebellion against God, human nature is naturally opposed to God, and so most people rejected God's Deliverer—but some received Him: *The Word was in the world that was made through him. But the world did not recognize him. He came to what was his own. But his own people did not accept him. Some people did accept him. They believed in his name. He gave them the right to become children of God. To be a child of God has nothing to do with human parents. Children of God are not born because of human choice or because a husband wants them to be born. They are born because of what God does.* ^{Jn.1:10-13} God sent John (the Baptist) to prepare the people for Jesus: *A man came who was sent from God. His name was John. He came to give witness about that light. He gave witness so that all people could believe. John himself was not the light. He came only as a witness to the light. The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world.* ^{Jn.1:6-9} People thought that John was the Messiah, but he denied this, saying that he was a prophet sent by God to prepare the way for the real Messiah. *Now this was John's testimony when the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him who he was. He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, "I am not the Messiah." They asked him, "Then who are you? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" He answered, "No." Finally they said, "Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, "I am the voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way for the Lord.'* ^{Jn.1:19-23} Later John clearly stated that Jesus was the Messiah—and Jesus would take 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! This is the one I meant when I said, 'A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.' I myself did not know him, but the reason I came baptizing with water was that he might be revealed to Israel."* ^{Jn.1:29-31}

John's "job description" was to prepare people to receive the Christ and tell them that their sins can be forgiven: *He wants us to be holy and godly as long as we live. And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High God. You will go ahead of the Lord to prepare the way for him. You will tell his people how they can be saved. You will tell them that their sins can be forgiven. All of that will happen because our God is tender and caring. His kindness will bring the rising sun to us from heaven. It will shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death. It will guide our feet on the path of peace.* ^{Lk.1:75-79} The "job description" of Christians is to: *Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation. Whoever believes*

and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.^{Mk.16:15-16} So as we look at the John's "job description" we can apply those principles to our life.

Be holy and godly as long as we live. We can't minister effectively if we are spiritually dirty. *Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one falls short of the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many.*^{Heb.12:14-15} When we are born again, we become spiritually brand new—which means we are spiritually clean. But we should make every effort to be mentally clean, emotionally clean and morally clean—and also physically clean too! *If you have heard Jesus and have been taught by Him according to the truth that is in Him, then you know to take off your former way of life, your crumpled old self—that dark blot of a soul corrupted by deceitful desire and lust—to take a fresh breath and to let God renew your attitude and spirit. Then you are ready to put on your new self, modelled after the very likeness of God: truthful, righteous, and holy. So put away your lies and speak the truth to one another because we are all part of one another. When you are angry, don't let it carry you into sin. Don't let the sun set with anger in your heart or Give the devil room to work. If you have been stealing, stop. Thieves must go to work like everyone else and work honestly with their hands so that they can share with anyone who has a need. Don't let even one rotten word seep out of your mouths. Instead, offer only fresh words that build others up when they need it most. That way your good words will communicate grace to those who hear them. It's time to stop bringing grief to God's Holy Spirit; you have been sealed with the Spirit, marked as His own for the day of rescue. Banish bitterness, rage and anger, shouting and slander, and any and all malicious thoughts—these are poison. Instead, be kind and compassionate. Graciously forgive one another just as God has forgiven you through the Anointed, our Liberating King.*^{Eph.4:21-}

³² [The Voice] Knowing the facts of the Bible is important but if we are to grow up in our faith—if we are to become mature—we need to be Bible-literate. This means understanding the Bible and living by the principles of God's Kingdom. Our faith must affect our whole person—our spirit, soul and body—and our whole life *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}

And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High God. Then we need be "prophets"—a prophet is some who testifies about Jesus: *For the essence of prophecy is to give a clear witness for Jesus.*^{Rev.19:10} Prophecy is as much forthtelling as foretelling—but Christian prophecy always gives a clear message of Jesus and His teaching: *What Jesus taught is the very heart of prophecy.*^{NIV} Hence the need to be Bible-literate.

You will go ahead of the Lord to prepare the way for him. We also need to prepare the way for the Lord, and we do this by making God accessible. John said he would make straight and level paths to God. *At that time God's word came to John, son of Zechariah, in the desert. He went into all the countryside around the Jordan River. There he preached that people should be baptized and turn away from their sins. Then God would forgive them. Here is what is written in the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. It says, "A messenger is calling out in the desert, Prepare the way for the Lord. Make straight paths for him. Every valley will be filled in. Every mountain and hill will be made level. The crooked roads will become straight. The rough ways will become smooth. And everyone will see God's salvation."*^{Lk.3:2-6} We make God accessible by removing the obstacles of religion and hypocrisy. We don't need a priest or a pastor to come to God—we need Jesus: *We come to the Father through Jesus the Son.* Rituals can be really helpful to bring routine, order and discipline to our life—but rituals are only an external scaffolding to bring support, not the internal skeleton that keeps us upright. We stand firm by our faith (our trust in God), not by following a ritual: *Be on your guard. Stand firm in the faith. Be brave. Be strong. Be loving in everything you do.*^{1Cor.16:13-14} *Your faith is not under our control. You stand firm in your own faith. But we work together with you for your joy.*^{2Cor.1:24} *If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all.*^{Is.7:9} *So put on all of God's armour. 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. So stand firm. Put the belt of truth around*

your waist. Put the armour of godliness on your chest. Wear on your feet what will prepare you to tell the good news of peace. Also, pick up the shield of faith. With it you can put out all of the flaming arrows of the evil one. Put on the helmet of salvation. And take the sword of the Holy Spirit. The sword is God's word.^{Eph.6:13-17}

You will tell his people how they can be saved. You will tell them that their sins can be forgiven. We should be able to tell people how they can be saved—to be able to explain how they can know that their sins have been forgiven. We don't need to be academic theologians but we do need to be able to communicate the Christian message simply and effectively—and to do that we must have a clear understanding of the Gospel ourselves and also a credible testimony: *But make sure in your hearts that Christ is Lord. Always be ready to give an answer to anyone who asks you about the hope you have. Be ready to give the reason for it. But do it gently and with respect. Live so that you don't have to feel you've done anything wrong. Some people may say evil things about your good conduct as believers in Christ. If they do, they will be put to shame for speaking like that about you.* Other translations put it this way: *Be ready to speak up and tell anyone who asks why you're living the way you are, and always with the utmost courtesy.*TM *Always be ready to defend your confidence in God when anyone asks you to explain it. However, make your defence with gentleness and respect.*^{GW} *And if anyone asks about the hope living within you, always be ready to explain your faith with gentleness and respect.*^{TPT} *And if someone asks about your hope as a believer, always be ready to explain it. But do this in a gentle and respectful way. Keep your conscience clear.*^{NLT}

All of that will happen because our God is tender and caring. Goodness, graciousness and love is God's character: *You are good, and what you do is good; teach me your decrees.*^{Ps.119:68} *The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love.*^{Ps.103:8} God is a God of grace, and grace is God's love and compassion in reaching out to us—and He takes the initiative. *For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.*^{2Cor.8:9}

His kindness will bring the rising sun to us from heaven. It will shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death. It will guide our feet on the path of peace. The result of God's love and compassion is our salvation—which brings us peace. *But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings. And you will go out and leap like calves released from the stall. Then you will trample down the wicked; they will be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day when I do these things," says the LORD Almighty.*^{Mal.4:2-3}

The true Christmas message is that God's promised Deliverer—the Christ—has come. However, we still need to prepare people to receive Him. To prepare people to receive the Christ, we need to be prophetic (have a clear testimony of Jesus) and present a clear message of how people's sins can be forgiven. Then we will not only be following in John's footsteps, but according to Jesus, we will have an even greater status than John (because we are New Covenant believers): *I tell you, no one more important than John has ever been born. But the least important person in God's kingdom is more important than he is.*^{Lk.7:28}

Questions

What does "Christ?" mean?

What should our attitude be to the festival of Christmas?

How did John prepare people to receive Jesus?

How can we prepare people to receive Jesus?

Why aren't people interested in the Gospel?

How can we be more effective in sharing the Gospel?

What can we do to be better prepared to share the Gospel?

Puritan Prayers. Heavenly Father, save me entirely from sin. I know that I am righteous through the righteousness of Another—but I pant and pine for likeness to Yourself. I am Your child and should bear Your image. Enable me to recognize my death unto sin and when it tempts me, may I be deaf unto its voice. Deliver me from the invasion of sin as well as the dominion of sin. Grant me to walk as Christ walked and to live in the newness of His life—the life of love, the life of faith and the life of holiness. When Your blessings come—children, friends, wealth, honour—if I should idolize them, then cleanse this spiritual adultery; give me spiritual chastity and close my spiritual affection to all but You. Sin is my greatest curse—let Your victory be apparent to my consciousness and displayed in my life. Help me to be always devoted, confident, obedient, resigned and childlike in my trust of You; to love You with my soul, body, mind and strength; to love my fellow-man as I love myself; to be saved from unregenerate temper, hard thoughts, slanderous words, meanness and unkind manners; to master my tongue and keep the door of my lips. Fill me with grace daily, that my life may be a fountain of sweet water.

December

Thought for the Month: Don't get so bogged down in the details of doctrine that you miss the point of salvation, or so absorbed in the trees of history that you miss the forest of faith. We need to keep focused on Jesus. *Eugene Peterson*

December's Theme: Contentment—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}

Sunday 4th December Ps.16 Lk.1:26-56

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

As we journey through the Christmas story, we see God's plan of salvation unveiling. Ever since God had promised that Eve's Seed would crush the serpent's head at the cost of a "bruised heel", the Coming Deliverer or Messiah had been the hope of all sincere Believers: *I will put hostility between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed. He will strike your head, and you will strike his heel.* ^{Gen.2:15} When Jesus was born, He was declared to be that Deliverer Messiah, the Christ:

"Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy. It is for all the people. Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you. He is Christ the Lord. Here is how you will know I am telling you the truth. You will find a baby wrapped in strips of cloth and lying in a manger." ^{Lk.2:10-12} Jesus became our Saviour by destroying the devil's work: *Dear children, don't let anyone lead you down the wrong path. Those who do what is right are holy, just as Christ is holy. Those who do what is sinful belong to the devil. They are just like him. He has been sinning from the beginning. But the Son of God came to destroy the devil's work.* ^{1Jn.3:7-8} Last week we saw that God used John the Baptist to prepare the way for Jesus by

telling his people how they can be saved and that their sins can be forgiven. ^{Lk.1:76-77} And this prophetic role of preparing people to receive their King wasn't limited to John but is our role today: *Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.* ^{Mk.16:15-16} However, peaching is not limited to Pastors in the

pulpit—every Christian has been commissioned to talk about their faith and part of the Church's role is to equip every member to be able to give a credible explanation for their faith. *And if someone asks about your hope as a believer, always be ready to explain it. But do this in a gentle and respectful way. Keep your conscience clear.* ^{1Pet.3:15-16} And our hope as a Believer is a real hope, a certain

hope—not a wishful hope or a might-be hope. Our hope is based on God Himself—on who He is, on what He has said and what He has done—and this is affirmed by Jesus' resurrection. Some years ago, our Sunday School children made a picture of a cross out of Christmas cards to illustrate that the reason Jesus was born was to die for our sins. Wesley puts it this way in his Carol, *Hark the herald angels sing:* 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. *Joseph, son of David, don't be afraid to take Mary home as your wife. The baby inside her is from the Holy Spirit. She is going to have a son. You must give him the name Jesus. That is because he will save his people from their sins.* ^{Matt.1:20-21}

Our "hope" is also backed up by God's oath. God made a clear and definite statement about His promise and recorded it in Scripture for our encouragement. The writer of Hebrews takes the example of Abraham and explains that we too have a guaranteed promise that God will keep His word to us. God's Word backed up with an oath puts an end to all arguing and disputes about Himself and His purpose for us. God's does not change and He wants us to know that we can trust Him, so we won't give up. *God made a promise to Abraham. Since he had no one greater on whom to base his oath, he based it on himself. He said, "I will certainly bless you and give you many descendants." So Abraham received what God promised because he waited patiently for it. People take oaths by someone greater than themselves. An oath makes a promise certain. It puts an end to all arguing. So God took*

an oath when he made his promise. He wanted to make it very clear that his purpose does not change. He wanted those who would receive what was promised to know that. God took an oath so we would have good reason not to give up. We have run away from everything else to take hold of the hope offered to us in God's promise. So God gave his promise and his oath. Those two things can't change. He couldn't lie about them. Our hope is certain. It is something for the soul to hold on to. It is strong and secure. It goes all the way into the Most Holy Room behind the curtain. That is where Jesus has gone. He went there to open the way ahead of us. He has become a high priest forever, just like Melchizedek.^{Heb.6:13-20}

God said to He would bless Abraham: *I will make you into a great nation. I will bless you. I will make your name great. You will be a blessing to others. I will bless those who bless you. I will put a curse on anyone who calls down a curse on you. All nations on earth will be blessed because of you.*^{Gen.12:2-3} But the greatest blessing that Abraham received was being justified—of having sins forgiven: *What does Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness." ...David says the same thing when he speaks of the blessedness of the one to whom God credits righteousness apart from works: "Blessed are those whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the one whose sin the Lord will never count against them." ...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.*

Every Believer has been blessed with the blessing of their sins forgiven and their conscience cleansed: *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} *How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!*^{Heb.9:14} *As I urged you when I went into Macedonia, stay there in Ephesus so that you may command certain people not to teach false doctrines any longer or to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies. Such things promote controversial speculations rather than advancing God's work—which is by faith. The goal of this command is love, which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith. Some have departed from these and have turned to meaningless talk. They want to be teachers of the law, but they do not know what they are talking about or what they so confidently affirm.*^{1Tim.1:3-7} However, just because every Christian is blessed with every spiritual blessing doesn't mean that we are all exactly the same or even that we understand the main Christian doctrines in the same way (doctrine is what we understand about God). But the words that Elizabeth said to Mary are still true today: *You are blessed because you believed that the Lord would do what he said.*^{Lk.1:45} Yes, we are truly blessed when we believe that God will do what He has said He would do! Jesus said to Thomas *"Stop doubting and believe."* Thomas said to him, *"My Lord and my God!"* Then Jesus told him, *"Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."*^{Jn.20:27-29} God has always has a few people who remain faithful—a "remnant" who are full of faith and continue to trust God. When Elijah felt dejected and thought that he was the only true Believer left alive, God explained that there were still many more believers besides him who trusted God: *Elijah said "I have zealously served the LORD God Almighty. But the people of Israel have broken their covenant with you, torn down your altars, and killed every one of your prophets. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me, too." ...The LORD said to him, "I still have left in Israel seven thousand followers who have not bowed their knees to Baal or kissed the images of him."*^{1Kg.19:10-18} Paul takes this story and applies it to his situation (and also to us today) by saying: *So too, at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace.*^{Rom.11:5} Even in the days of Jesus' ministry there were more Believers than those who were part of Jesus' "inner circle". The Disciples didn't seem to know about them but Jesus said they were for Him (and therefore belonged to Him): *John said to Jesus, "Teacher, we saw someone using your name to cast out demons, but we told him to stop because he wasn't in our group." "Don't stop him!" Jesus said. "No one who performs a miracle*

in my name will soon be able to speak evil of me. Anyone who is not against us is for us. If anyone gives you even a cup of water because you belong to the Messiah, I tell you the truth, that person will surely be rewarded.^{Mk.9:38-41}

Faith (believing) is a gift from God (even though we are responsible for building ourselves up in the faith). And as with all gifts from God, there is a cycle—God gives to us, we give to Him and He gives us more: *“In that day I will respond,” declares the LORD—“I will respond to the skies, and they will respond to the earth; and the earth will respond to the grain, the new wine and the olive oil, and they will respond to Jezreel. [Jezreel means God plants.] I will plant her for myself in the land; I will show my love to the one I called ‘Not my loved one.’ I will say to those called ‘Not my people,’ ‘You are my people’; and they will say, ‘You are my God.’”*^{Hos.2:21-23} *Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.*^{Lk.6:38} When Paul, Barnabas, Judas and Silas brought a letter from Jerusalem to the Church at Antioch, the Believers were blessed, encouraged and strengthened—and then they in turn blessed Judas and Silas with a blessing of peace: *Judas and Silas, who themselves were prophets, said much to encourage and strengthen the believers. After spending some time there, they were sent off by the believers with the blessing of peace to return to those who had sent them.*^{Acts.15:32-33} When we are blessed, we are expected to sow that blessing into other people and keep the cycle going: *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} And in any case it is more blessed to give than to receive! *In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’”*^{Acts.20:35}

So let’s live the faith, share the faith and keep the faith. There is a great blessing in believing—not least the blessing and joy of peace with God, the blessing of knowing that life is worth living, the blessing of anticipating heaven and especially the blessing of fellowship with God and His people. The Christmas message is the God would dwell with us in Jesus Christ and He would be our God and we would be His people. *You are blessed because you believed that the Lord would do what he said.*^{Lk.1:45}

Questions

Why can we be certain of our hope in God?

What does “blessed” mean?

How are we blessed?

Are God’s blessings dependant on what we do?

Are all Bible verses promises or are some just possibilities?

How can we be sure of what God has actually promised?

Puritan Prayers: Blessed God, defend me—ten thousand snares are mine without and within. When sloth and indolence seize me, give me views of heaven. When sinners entice me, give me disrelish of their ways. When sensual pleasures tempt me, purify and refine me. When I desire worldly possessions, help me to be rich toward You. When the vanities of this world ensnare me, let me not plunge into new guilt and ruin. May I remember the dignity of my spiritual release and never be too busy to attend to my soul or so engrossed with time that I neglect the things of eternity—and thus may I not only live for You, but also grow towards You. Form my mind to the right notions of religion, that I may not measure my spiritual advances by the efforts of my natural being. May I seek after an increase of divine love to You; an unreserved resignation to Your will; an extensive benevolence to my fellow creatures; a patience and fortitude of soul; a heavenly disposition; a concern to please You in public and in private. As You draw the contours of Christ on my soul, take delight in every trace and feature, for I am

Your workmanship, created in Christ Jesus; I am Your letter written with the Holy Spirit's pen; I am Your tilled soil ready for the sowing and the harvest.

Sunday 11th December Lk.1:-46-55. Lk.2:1-40

This child is going to cause many people in Israel to fall and to rise. God has sent him. But many will speak against him. Lk.2:34

Marmite is advertised with the slogan: *love it or hate it!* And there are lots of things in life that polarise people—but whilst it is good to have convictions, most matters are not important enough to fall out over. We can disagree without being disagreeable! However, there are some things that are non-negotiable and Paul wrote to the Church at Corinth explaining that sometimes there must be divisions: *But in the following instructions, I cannot praise you. For it sounds as if more harm than good is done when you meet together. First, I hear that there are divisions among you when you meet as a church, and to some extent I believe it. But, of course, there must be divisions among you so that you who have God's approval will be recognized! When you meet together, you are not really interested in the Lord's Supper. For some of you hurry to eat your own meal without sharing with others. As a result, some go hungry while others get drunk. What? Don't you have your own homes for eating and drinking? Or do you really want to disgrace God's church and shame the poor? What am I supposed to say? Do you want me to praise you? Well, I certainly will not praise you for this!*^{1Cor.11:17-22} Some of the people were behaving selfishly and ignoring the other members of the Church—which is Christ's Body. By dishonouring other Believers, we dishonour Jesus Himself. *We love because he first loved us. If anyone says, "I love God," yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother.*^{1Jn.4:19-21} The Master, Jesus, on the night of his betrayal, took bread. Having given thanks, he broke it and said, *This is my body, broken for you. Do this to remember me. After supper, he did the same thing with the cup: This cup is my blood, my new covenant with you. Each time you drink this cup, remember me. What you must solemnly realize is that every time you eat this bread and every time you drink this cup, you re-enact in your words and actions the death of the Master. You will be drawn back to this meal again and again until the Master returns. You must never let familiarity breed contempt. If you give no thought (or worse, don't care) about the broken body of the Master when you eat and drink, you're running the risk of serious consequences. That's why so many of you even now are listless and sick, and others have gone to an early grave. If we get this straight now, we won't have to be straightened out later on. Better to be confronted by the Master now than to face a fiery confrontation later. So, my friends, when you come together to the Lord's Table, be reverent and courteous with one another. If you're so hungry that you can't wait to be served, go home and get a sandwich. But by no means risk turning this Meal into an eating and drinking binge or a family squabble. It is a spiritual meal—a love feast.*^{1Cor.11:23-34} We gave our allegiance to Jesus by confessing Him as Lord and any defamation of the character of Jesus Christ is hurtful. To some Jesus is the aroma of life and is precious but to others, Jesus is the aroma of death—He has become offensive. *In Christ, God leads us from place to place in one perpetual victory parade. Through us, he brings knowledge of Christ. Everywhere we go, people breathe in the exquisite fragrance. Because of Christ, we give off a sweet scent rising to God, which is recognized by those on the way of salvation—an aroma redolent with life. But those on the way to destruction treat us more like the stench from a rotting corpse. This is a terrific responsibility. Is anyone competent to take it on?*^{2Cor.2:14-16} For us, Jesus' is the highest authority and His Name is above all names; it is like anointment poured forth; it is like honey from the comb—Scripture and many of the songs we sing in Church remind of this. But for many other people, Jesus is just a swear word and instead of being the Way, He gets in the way; instead of being a Rock in which to take refuge, He is a stumbling stone over which they trip. *Christ is the living Stone. People did not accept him. But God chose him. God places the highest value on him. You also are like living stones. As you*

come to him you are being built into a house for worship. There you will be holy priests. You will offer spiritual sacrifices. God will accept them because of what Jesus Christ has done. In Scripture it says, "Look! I am placing a stone in Zion. It is a chosen and very valuable stone. It is the most important stone in the building. The one who trusts in him will never be put to shame." The stone is very precious 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.2:4-10}

When Jesus was just over a month old, practically everyone who saw Him, saw a young baby. But when Simeon saw Jesus, he saw the promised Messiah that he had been waiting for—and so he broke into a hymn of praise to God: *Lord, now You are letting Your servant depart in peace, according to Your word; for my eyes have seen Your salvation which You have prepared before the face of all peoples, a light to bring revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of Your people Israel.*^{Lk.2:28-32} Simeon was described as *righteous and devout... and waiting for the consolation of Israel.* He was also someone who knew the Holy Spirit: *the Holy Spirit was on him and it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Messiah.* What a reputation to have! The Holy Spirit's presence with Simeon was tangible and real. The Holy Spirit didn't just make Simeon "nice" or even wise, but gave him spiritual insight into what was happening and a prophetic word to those he met! Because he recognised Jesus as the Messiah, the promised Saviour, Simeon was ready to meet his Creator—and the Holy Spirit gave him peace and contentment. What is more impractical than working hard all your life and getting paid with nothing more than an expensively framed death certificate? *As long as you did what you felt like doing, ignoring God, you didn't have to bother with right thinking or right living, or right anything for that matter. But do you call that a free life? What did you get out of it? Nothing you're proud of now. Where did it get you? A dead end. But now that you've found you don't have to listen to sin tell you what to do, and have discovered the delight of listening to God telling you, what a surprise! A whole, healed, put-together life right now, with more and more of life on the way! Work hard for sin your whole life and your pension is death. But God's gift is real life, eternal life, delivered by Jesus, our Master.*^{Rom.6:20-23} All life has to end sometime, but if we are at peace with God, the date and time is not important. *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} Simeon had a relationship with God that included a 2 way dialogue—God spoke to Simeon and Simeon spoke to God. Simeon's relationship was built on trust and so, like Mary, he was blessed *because he believed that the Lord would do what he said.*^{Lk.1:45}

Simeon was speaking about spiritual death and spiritual life when he prophesied: *"This child is going to cause many people in Israel to fall and to rise. God has sent him. But many will speak against him."* (Actually, the Greek word for "to rise" is "anastasis" which means "resurrection".) Jesus would cause many to people to rise again in newness of life but first they have to recognise that they are dead! The Christian life begins with dying because we have to be dead before we can rise to new life: *By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection. For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin—because anyone who has died has been freed from sin.*^{Rom.6:2-7}

Jesus said there were 2 kinds of deaths and 2 kinds of resurrections—a spiritual death and resurrection (which is conversion) and a physical death followed by the final resurrection: *What I'm about to tell you is true. Anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He will not be found guilty. He has crossed over from death to life. What I'm about to tell you is true. A time is coming for me to give life. In fact, it has already begun. The dead will hear the voice of the Son of God. Those who hear it will live. The Father has life in himself. He has also allowed the Son to have life in himself. And the Father has given him the authority to judge. This is because he is the Son of Man. Do not be amazed at this. A time is coming when all who are in the grave will hear his voice. They will all come out of their graves. Those who have done good will rise and live again. Those who have done evil will rise and be found guilty.*^{Jn.5:24-29} The spiritual death and resurrection of conversion happens now—when People hear Jesus' call: *A time is coming for me to give life. In fact, it has already begun. The dead will hear the voice of the Son of God. Those who hear it will live.* The physical death followed by the final resurrection happens later: *A time is coming when all who are in the grave will hear his voice. They will all come out of their graves. Those who have done good will rise and live again. Those who have done evil will rise and be found guilty.* In the Book of Revelation, Jesus also refers to the 1st resurrection (of spiritual new-birth) and the 2nd second death (of eternal damnation): *He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death.*^{Rev.2:11} *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... Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death. If anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.*^{Rev.20:6-15}

Jesus said that His own physical death was a like a Seed planted in the ground that would produce many more seeds: *Jesus replied, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to receive glory. What I'm about to tell you is true. Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only one seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. 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."*^{Jn.12:23-26} It is only through Jesus' death that we live!

However, as Simeon said, *many will speak against him.* The very people who should have received Jesus as the true Messiah, rejected Him—including the priests in Jerusalem. Although they knew the Scriptures, they did not know God. But for those who do receive Jesus, He has become the most important building block in their lives: *Christ is the living Stone. People did not accept him. But God chose him. God places the highest value on him. You also are like living stones. As you come to him you are being built into a house for worship. There you will be holy priests. You will offer spiritual sacrifices.*^{1Pet.2:4-6}

Jesus is a Rock, a huge stone that is either in the way or becomes the way! *How can we sum this up? All those people who didn't seem interested in what God was doing actually embraced what God was doing as he straightened out their lives. And Israel, who seemed so interested in reading and talking about what God was doing, missed it. How could they miss it? Because instead of trusting God, they took over. They were absorbed in what they themselves were doing. They were so absorbed in their "God projects" that they didn't notice God right in front of them, like a huge rock in the middle of the road. And so they stumbled into him and went sprawling. Isaiah (again!) gives us the metaphor for pulling this together: Careful! I've put a huge stone on the road to Mount Zion, a stone you can't get around. But the stone is me! If you're looking for me, you'll find me on the way, not in the way.*^{Rom.9:30-33} When we see Jesus as the Stone who is the Way, He becomes a Rock of refuge from which comes the life-giving water of the Holy Spirit: *See, a king will reign in righteousness and rulers will rule with justice. Each one will be like a shelter from the wind and a refuge from the storm, like streams of water in the desert and the shadow of a great rock in a thirsty land.*^{Is.32:1-2} But [Joseph's] bow remained steady, his strong arms stayed limber, because of the hand of the Mighty One of Jacob, because of the Shepherd, the Rock of Israel.^{Gen.49:24} But the LORD has become my fortress, and my God the rock in whom

I take refuge.^{Ps.94:22} *Do not tremble, do not be afraid. Did I not proclaim this and foretell it long ago? You are my witnesses. Is there any God besides me? No, there is no other Rock; I know not one.*^{Is.44:8}

For I do not want you to be ignorant of the fact, brothers and sisters, that our ancestors were all under the cloud and that they all passed through the sea. 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.10:1-4} *It is only in Jesus that we can see God's glory: 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.33:21-23} *The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth... 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.1:14-18}

So, the question is, who is Jesus to you? Do you love Him or hate Him? Is He a Child in a Christmas manger or Christ the Lord? Is He a stone that's in the way or a Stone who has become The Way? Let's make Jesus the Rock of our Salvation and then, like Simeon, having seen God's salvation, we too can depart in peace.

Questions

Can we be different without being divisive?

When should we have divisions?

How does Jesus cause people to fall and how does He cause them to rise?

Puritan Prayer: O Spirit of God help my infirmities. When I am pressed down with a load of sorrow, perplexed and knowing not what to do, slandered and persecuted, made to feel the weight of the cross—help me, I pray. If You see in me any wrong thing encouraged, any evil desire cherished, any delight that is not Your delight, any habit that grieves You, any nest of sin in my thought—then grant me the kiss of Your forgiveness and teach my feet to walk the way of Your commandments. Deliver me from carking [*distressing*] care and make me a happy, holy person. Help me to walk the consecrated life with firm and brave step and to wrestle successfully against weakness. Teach me to laud, adore and magnify You with the music of heaven and make me a perfume of praiseful gratitude to You. I do not crouch at Your feet as a slave before a tyrant but exult before You as a son with a Father. Give me power to live as Your child in all my actions and to exercise sonship by conquering self. Preserve me from the intoxication that comes of prosperity. Sober me when I am glad with a joy that does not come from You. Lead me safely on to the eternal kingdom, not asking whether the road be rough or smooth. I request only to see the face of Him I love, to be content with bread to eat, with raiment to put on and that I am brought to Your house in peace.

Sunday 18th December Carol Service

Gold, frankincense and myrrh

Although the Carol: "*We three kings of Orient are; bearing gifts we traverse afar, field and fountain, moor and mountain, following yonder star*", does not keep strictly to the Biblical Christmas story, it does explain the relevance of the gifts that the Magi brought: gold and King; frankincense and God; myrrh and sacrifice. Everything in the Bible was written down to teach us about God and His plan of salvation: *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} And so the story of gold, frankincense and myrrh has a greater purpose than just recording history—it is there to help us better understand God and His plan for our salvation. We are not told how many Magi came to worship Jesus, where they came from or how long they journeyed but we are told about the

gifts they brought, which means that they have some spiritual significance for us today. Joseph and Mary were not wealthy as they only offered doves as a sacrifice. *So Joseph and Mary took Jesus to Jerusalem. There they presented him to the Lord. In the Law of the Lord it says, "The first boy born in every family must be set apart for the Lord." They also offered a sacrifice. They did it in keeping with the Law, which says, "a pair of doves or two young pigeons."*^{1Lev.2:22-24} *These are the regulations for the woman who gives birth to a boy or a girl. But if she cannot afford a lamb, she is to bring two doves or two young pigeons, one for a burnt offering and the other for a sin offering. In this way the priest will make atonement for her, and she will be clean.*^{1Lev.12:7-8} And so we can assume that the gifts that the Magi gave them would have been used to support them during their exile in Egypt. However, it is their spiritual relevance that we are looking at today.

Gold and King: *Born a King on Bethlehem's plain, gold I bring to crown him again, King forever, ceasing never, over us all to reign.* Gold is often linked to kings but in scripture is a symbol of deity as seen in the Temple. *Solomon covered the inside of the temple with pure gold, and he extended gold chains across the front of the inner sanctuary, which was overlaid with gold. So he overlaid the whole interior with gold. He also overlaid with gold the altar that belonged to the inner sanctuary.*^{1Kg.6:21-22} Jesus is a king: *After Jesus' birth, Wise Men from the east came to Jerusalem. They asked, "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."*^{1Matt.2:1-2} *Jesus was standing in front of the governor. The governor asked him, "Are you the king of the Jews?" "Yes. It is just as you say," Jesus replied.*^{1Matt.27:11} *When they had nailed him to the cross, they divided up his clothes by casting lots. They sat down and kept watch over him there. Above his head they placed the written charge against him. It read, THIS IS JESUS, THE KING OF THE JEWS.*^{1Matt.27:35-37} But Jesus is also the King of kings and He alone is to be worshipped. *But the Lamb will triumph over them because he is Lord of lords and King of kings.*^{1Rev.17:14}

Frankincense and God: *Frankincense to offer have I; incense owns a Deity nigh; prayer and praising, voices raising, worshipping God on high.* Frankincense was an integral ingredient of Incense that was burnt in OT worship to represent praises and prayers ascending to God: *Then the LORD said to Moses, "Take fragrant spices—gum resin, onycha and galbanum—and pure frankincense, all in equal amounts, and make a fragrant blend of incense, the work of a perfumer. It is to be salted and pure and sacred. Grind some of it to powder and place it in front of the ark of the covenant law in the tent of meeting, where I will meet with you. It shall be most holy to you. Do not make any incense with this formula for yourselves; consider it holy to the LORD. Whoever makes incense like it to enjoy its fragrance must be cut off from their people."*^{1Ex.30:34-38} *May my prayer be set before you like incense; may the lifting up of my hands be like the evening sacrifice.*^{1Ps.141:2} *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 God's people. And they sang a new song, saying: "You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased for God persons 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."*^{1Rev.5:8-10} Jesus is the only way to come to God—He alone can make our prayers acceptable.

Myrrh and sacrifice: *Myrrh is mine; its bitter perfume breathes a life of gathering gloom; sorrowing, sighing, bleeding, dying, sealed in the stone-cold tomb.* Myrrh was an essential ingredient in Anointing oil which was used to represent the Holy Spirit's authority on kings, priests and prophets. *Then the LORD spoke to Moses: Get some fine spices. Get 12 pounds eight ounces of liquid myrrh. Get six pounds four ounces of sweet-smelling cinnamon and the same amount of sweet-smelling cane. Also get 12 pounds eight ounces of cassia. All of the spices must be weighed out in keeping with the standard weights that are used in the sacred tent. Get four quarts of olive oil. Have a person who makes perfume mix everything into a sacred anointing oil. It will smell sweet.*^{1Ex.30:22-25} Myrrh was also used for burials and so also can signify pain and suffering. *They brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha (which means "the place of the skull"). Then they offered him wine mixed with myrrh, but he did not take it. And they crucified him.*^{1Mk.15:22-24} Later, Joseph of

Arimathea asked Pilate for the body of Jesus. Now Joseph was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly because he feared the Jewish leaders. With Pilate's permission, he came and took the body away. He was accompanied by Nicodemus, the man who earlier had visited Jesus at night. Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds. Taking Jesus' body, the two of them wrapped it, with the spices, in strips of linen.^{Jn.19:38-}

⁴⁰ Jesus has all authority and power but He also became a man who suffered in our place so we could have peace: *Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed.*^{Is.53:4-5}

Jesus is the worthy recipient of those gifts of gold frankincense and myrrh: *Glorious now behold him arise; King and God and sacrifice: Alleluia, Alleluia, sounds through the earth and skies. Jesus is no longer a Babe in Bethlehem but our God, King, Prophet, Priest and Mediator who is reigning in glory: Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders. In a loud voice they were saying: "Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honour and glory and praise!" Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, saying: "To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honour and glory and power, for ever and ever!" The four living creatures said, "Amen," and the elders fell down and worshiped.*^{Rev.5:11-14}

Puritan Prayers. Heavenly Father, You have placed me in the Church which Your Son purchased by His own blood. Add grace to grace that I may live worthy of my vocation. I am a voyager across life's ocean; safe in heaven's ark, may I pass through a troubled world into the harbour of eternal rest. I am a tree of the vineyard that You have planted—grant me not to be barren with worthless leaves and wild grapes; prune me of useless branches and water me with dew of blessing. I am part of the Lamb's Bride, the Church—help me to be true, faithful, chaste, loving, pure and devoted; let no strong affection of mine wantonly dally with the world. May I live high above a love of things temporal, sanctified, cleansed, unblemished and hallowed by grace—Your love, my fullness; Your glory, my joy; Your precepts, my pathway; Your cross, my resting place. My thought is not always a flame of adoring love, but resting in Your Son's redemption, I look forward to the days of heaven, where no languor [*laziness or indolence*] shall oppress, no iniquities chill, no mists of unbelief dim the eye and no zeal ever tires. Father, these thoughts are the stay, support and comfort of my soul.

Sunday 25th December Lk.2:29-32

I saw three ships come sailing in on Christmas Day in the morning!

Lots of popular Christmas Carols (like the this one) have little or no connection with the Christian message of: *"Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy. It is for all the people. Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you. He is Christ the Lord. Here is how you will know I am telling you the truth. You will find a baby wrapped in strips of cloth and lying in a manger."*^{Lk.2:10-12} This is because our modern Western Christmas culture is the creation of American Unitarians, Episcopalians and other liberal Protestants who had little interest in several key tenets of the evangelical understanding of the gospel. The Evangelical Puritans who first populated America had banned Christmas altogether—predominately because Christmas reminded them of Catholic superstitions and also because of secular celebrations excesses (especially the drunkenness and immorality). The Baptist, Methodist and especially Presbyterian churches of the early 19th century shunned the idea of Christmas services and it was left to the Episcopalians or Unitarians to celebrate Christmas—which they proudly did, seeing the holiday as an antidote to the allegedly dour Congregationalism. The blessings of Christmas, they thought, must be

universal, just as they believed God's offer of salvation was. And Christmas must be a time of joy, not a moment to reflect on the sinful condition of humanity.

Some American promoters of Christmas were influenced by the popular British author Charles Dickens, whose story *A Christmas Carol* portrayed the holiday as a time when the cantankerous, miserly Ebenezer Scrooge discovered the joy of generosity. Dickens, who was raised a nominal Anglican but joined a Unitarian chapel as an adult, believed in the humanitarian teachings of Jesus. He used his fiction to promote the idea of Christmas as a day for all people to follow their better impulses, become a little less selfish and adopt a charitable disposition toward all. Unitarians were optimists about the possibility of moral reform through human effort. They envisioned Christmas as a day that would unite Christians across the theological spectrum and encourage loving attitudes that would improve society. In Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*, Scrooge experiences what amounts to a Unitarian Christmas conversion: He becomes a better man. If Jesus is necessary for such a conversion, he's needed only as an inspiring moral example of human possibility, not as an atoning saviour. Unitarians, after all, didn't accept the idea of substitutionary atonement, and they likewise rejected the idea of Jesus' divinity and all aspects of Trinitarian theology. Yet many became passionate advocates of Christmas in the mid-19th century because they saw in the holiday a story of God's love for the world and the optimistic hope of universal human brotherhood.

The best-known 19th century Christmas hymns penned by Unitarians have become beloved classics because they appeal to our longing for a world of love, beauty, peace, and justice. "*O Holy Night*," translated from the French into English by the liberal Massachusetts Unitarian and antislavery advocate John Sullivan Dwight in 1855, honours Jesus as a great teacher of social ethics and emancipation—a popular theme among New England abolitionists in the years leading up to the Civil War. Likewise, another 19th century New England Unitarian Christmas hymn, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's "*I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day*," expresses optimism in the midst of the Civil War that God's peace and righteousness will eventually prevail. Christmas hymns penned by 19th century Episcopalians gave much greater recognition to Jesus' divinity and saving power than Unitarian carols did. But rather than highlight Jesus's saving work on the cross (as evangelicals wanted), they presented a more peaceful, quiet image of the sleeping Jesus who could be encountered through tranquil contemplation. This was the message of "*O Little Town of Bethlehem*," written by Boston Episcopal rector Phillips Brooks in 1868, and "*Silent Night*," which was translated into English by a New York Episcopal minister in 1859. By contrast, the evangelical Protestant hymnals had focused far more attention on the atoning death of Jesus than on his birth. And the few hymns that did touch on his birth—such as Charles Wesley's "*Hark the Herald Angels Sing*"—gave extensive treatment to Christ's saving mission, his kingship, and the "*second birth*" that he would bring to humanity. Yet in the late 19th century, many evangelicals who had not celebrated Christmas in their churches began singing the Episcopal Christmas hymns as eagerly as anyone else.

Without realizing it, then, many evangelicals absorbed much of the theology of the 19th century Unitarians and Episcopalians because it pervaded most of the traditional hymns and Christmas readings they had come to adore. Yet over the course of the 20th century, the "*Christmas spirit*" became increasingly separated from the historical Jesus in American public life. In the mid-19th century, even the Unitarians affirmed the teachings of the historical Jesus and believed they would lead to a happier, more emancipated society. But by the mid-20th century, some public figures who welcomed the chance to talk about the "*Christmas spirit*" shied away from any specific invocation of Jesus. In the numerous Christmas messages that echo the phrase "*peace on earth and good will to men*" very few ever mention Jesus Christ and public expressions of "*Merry*

Christmas” are grounded in nothing more substantive than a vaguely Unitarian wish for a universal “*Christmas spirit*” of peace and goodwill.

We need a recovery of wonder at the incarnate God coming to earth in the form of a baby in order to save humanity. The 19th century Unitarians who wanted Christmas because they longed for better social relations were right to earnestly desire this aspect of the kingdom of God. But as evangelicals know, for this to work, people need a Jesus who was just as divine as He was human—and they need His atoning death. The Victorian Episcopalians who became sentimental in their reflection on the sleeping Christ child were right to bow their knee to the baby in the manger. But maybe the night when he entered a world of pain and sin was a lot less silent than they imagined. And the 20th century liberal Protestants who tried to appeal to a universal “*Christmas spirit*” were right about the invisible power at work on that day. But maybe it could be better identified as the Holy Spirit rather than as some universal human beneficence that could save the world apart from Jesus. Those of us who are evangelical in our faith can still have a merry Christmas. But if we want to do so in a way that foregrounds the gospel, we may have to discover a new approach to the holiday that does more than simply preserve the old. This Christmas, believers in the gospel will gather together. They’ll marvel at the incarnate Son of God, whose entry into the world made possible the “*Christmas spirit*” that numerous people across the theological spectrum have longed for. But Christ’s birth marks more than a humanitarian project or a sentimental story. It’s about the ultimate divine gift to a sinful world—a world that in the 19th century, as in the 1st and the 21st centuries, comprehended it not! (*Adapted from an article in Christianity Today*)

Puritan Prayers. O Lord God, You are our Preserver, Governor, Saviour and coming Judge. Quieten our souls to call upon Your Name. Detach us from the influence of the flesh and the senses. Impress us with the power of faith. Promote in us spirituality of mind that will render our services acceptable to You—and be delightful and profitable to ourselves! Bring us into that state which attracts Your eye and prepare us to receive the proofs of Your love. Show us our danger that we may fly to You for refuge. Make us sensible of our sin’s disease that we may value the good Physician. Placard to us the cross that it may slay the enmity of our hearts. Help us to be watchful over our ways, jealous over our tempers and diligent over our hearts. When we droop, revive us; when we loiter, quicken us; when we go astray, restore us. Possess us with that faith which is the principle of all vital godliness—that we may be rich in faith, strong in faith, live by faith, walk by faith, experience the joy of faith, hope through faith and do the work of faith. Perceiving nothing in ourselves, may we find our wisdom, righteousness, sanctification and redemption in the Saviour.

Theme for the year

January

Thought for the Month: Faith is the deliberate confidence in the character of God whose ways you may not understand at the time. *Oswald Chambers*

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

February

Thought for the Month: Our prayers can go where we cannot go—there are no borders, no prison walls and no doors that are closed to us when we pray. *Brother Andrew*

Goodness— 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. Ex.33:19

March

Thought for the Month: Biblical meditation, is filling the mind with Scripture and then loading the heart with it until it affects not only the emotions but the entire life. *John Owen*

Knowledge—The fear of the LORD is the beginning of KNOWLEDGE, but fools despise wisdom and instruction. Prov.1:7

April

Thought for the Month: Stepping on the accelerator doesn't get us to our destination any faster if we are on the wrong road. If we are doing the wrong thing or doing something in the wrong way, increased zeal only makes it worse. *Eugene Peterson*

Self-discipline—For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and SELF-DISCIPLINE. 2Tim.1:7

May

Thought for the Month: It is a sad thing when you hear Christians with a groan. The secret of Christianity is the secret of Christ possessing the heart of a person, a person being yielded to Him so that His victory, His consciousness and His power possesses your spirit and mind. *John G Lake*

Perseverance—We know that suffering produces PERSEVERANCE; PERSEVERANCE, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us. Rom.5:3-5

June

Thought for the Month: The chief danger that confronts the coming century will be religion without the Holy Ghost, Christianity without Christ, forgiveness without repentance, salvation without regeneration, politics without God, heaven without hell. *William Booth*

Goodness—For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all GOODNESS, righteousness and truth). Eph.5:8-9

July

Thought for the Month: The perfect church service would be one we were almost unaware of; our attention would have been on God. *C.S. Lewis*

Love—This is how we know that we LOVE the children of God: by loving God and carrying out his commands. In fact, this is LOVE for God: to keep his commands. And his commands are not burdensome. 1Jn.5:2-3

August

Thought for the Month: Hope is the picture of all that Jesus provided through His death, burial and resurrection. Faith is being sure of what we have viewed/seen/perceived. Our voice

paints the picture of our hope—if we don't have a good picture we won't have good words.
T.L. Osborn

Righteousness—It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our RIGHTEOUSNESS, holiness and redemption. 1Cor.1:30

September

Thought for the Month: The first day of the week, is the day Resurrection, the day of creation and the day of new-creation. It is not a day to spend with the family but a day to spend with the Lord as a family! *Andrew Corbett*

Repentance—Godly sorrow brings REPENTANCE that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death. 2Cor.7:10

October

Thought for the Month: Faith is obeying God. It's irrelevant what you believe if God hasn't said it! Presumption is telling God what to do and then expecting that He will fall in line with what you say (c.f. Nu.14). Faith is when you are sick and everything seems to be going wrong—and yet you are trusting God, enjoying Him and still in fellowship with Him. *Andrew Corbett*

Reconciliation—And he has committed to us the message of RECONCILIATION. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. 2Cor.5:19-20

November

Thought for the Month: Relying on God has to begin all over again every day as if nothing had yet been done. *C.S. Lewis*

Humility—All of you, clothe yourselves with HUMILITY toward one another, because, “God opposes the proud but shows favour to the humble.” 1Pet.5:5

December

Thought for the Month: Don't get so bogged down in the details of doctrine that you miss the point of salvation, or so absorbed in the trees of history that you miss the forest of faith. We need to keep focused on Jesus. *Eugene Peterson*

Contentment—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

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.	Zachariah 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 Acts 9
<A.D.37	<i>Christianity came to Britain. ***</i>
A.D.37-41	<i>Reign of Caligula</i>
A.D.41-54	<i>Reign of Claudius</i>
c A.D.44	<i>Death of Herod Agrippa 1</i>
< A.D.50	Letter of James
A.D.48-49	Paul's 1 st missionary journey
A.D.49/50	Jerusalem Conference Acts.15
A.D.50	Paul's 2 nd missionary journey
A.D.50-52	Paul at Corinth
A.D.51	1 & 2 Thessalonians from Corinth
A.D.52	Galatians from Corinth
A.D.54	Paul's 3 rd missionary journey
A.D.54 -68	<i>Reign of Nero</i>
A.D.54-57	Paul at Ephesus
A.D.57	1Corinthians from Ephesus
A.D.57	2Corinthians from Macedonia
A.D.57/58	Romans from Corinth
A.D.58	Paul's arrest at Jerusalem
A.D.58-60	Paul's imprisonment at Caesarea
A.D.60-61	Paul winters at Malta
A.D.61	Paul arrives at Rome
A.D.61-63	Paul's imprisonment at Rome
A.D.62	Colossians, Ephesians, Philemon from Rome

A.D.63	Philippians from Rome
A.D.63-65	Paul's release & further ministry
A.D.63	1 Timothy & Titus
A.D.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	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.65	Gospel John, 1, 2, & 3 John
A.D.65/66	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.98/100	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*). Also: *They replied, “It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?”* Jn.2:20

******* Gildas (A.D.516-570) a British Historian, states, *Meanwhile, these islands ... received the beams of light that is, the Holy precepts of Christ, the true Sun at the latter part, as we know, of the reign of Tiberius Caesar* Roman Emperor A.D. 14-37

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

External evidence:

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

Cerinthus was a C1st author who wrote *The Pseudo-Apocalypse*. He died well before John, i.e.

well before A.D.95, but his Pseudo-Apocalypse contains many references to John's Apocalypse (the Book of Revelation).

Internal evidence:

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

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

The "*temple*" in the "*holy city*" is still standing as John writes, though it is being threatened with devastation (Rev.11:1-2). We know as a matter of historical fact that the Jewish temple was destroyed in A.D.70, and has never been rebuilt. (2) The sixth "*king*" is presently ruling from the "*seven mountains*" and will do so until a king comes who will reign a "*short time*" (Rev.17:9-10). The preterist takes this to be a clear enough allusion to Nero Caesar. According to the enumeration found in Josephus' *Antiquities* (18:2:2,6, 10) and Suetonius' *Lives of the Twelve Caesars*, Nero is Rome's sixth emperor, following Julius Caesar, Augustus, Tiberius, Gaius, and Claudius. "...the cryptic number 666 (Rev.13:18) designates Nero. The number involves the use of *gemetria* (assigning numerical values to letters of the alphabet and thus determining the numerical value of words). Nero Caesar written in Hebrew letters has the numerical value of 666. That explanation becomes all the more probable when you realize that in Hebrew, *Nero* can also be spelled *Neron*. With the second "*n*" the numerical value is 666. Without it, 616 (a well-attested reading in some New Testament manuscripts)." J. Stewart Russell, *The Parousia*

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

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

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

We expect Christians to take their responsibilities and privileges seriously

- by taking an active part in the work and worship of the Church according to their ability and circumstances
- by relating into the Church's system of Pastoral care
- by prayerfully contribute to the unity, encouragement and fellowship of the Church
- by showing a Scriptural regard for those in positions of leadership
- by supporting the Church through regular attendance at services of worship, regular prayer and considered giving

We also expect Christians to live by the accepted rules of Christian conduct—which includes being a loyal citizen of our Country: *We render loyalty to Her Majesty's Government as far as conscience and morality permit*; and a commitment to Christian marriage: *We uphold the Biblical standard of monogamous, heterosexual marriage between a biological man and biological woman as the only acceptable union.*

Christian Guidelines (*especially throughout the Covid Pandemic*)

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.^{2Pet.2:13-17[TM]}

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.

A “*covenant*” is an agreement between two parties—either individuals or an individual and group, or a monarch and their subjects. The '*Abrahamic Covenant*' was established by Yahweh (YHWH, that is, God) with Abram and involved a covenantal exchange of their names. Thus, Abram's name became Abr'*ah*'am, and God became known as the God of Abraham. Abraham's wife Sarai became known as Sar'*ah*



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