

Deal Pentecostal Church Sermon Outlines 2024

Daily Prayer for 2024

Father, may we clearly know Your will and achieve the height and depth of spiritual wisdom and understanding. May our lives be a credit to You, Lord; and what's more, may we continue to delight You by doing every good work and growing in the true knowledge that comes from being close to You. Strengthen us with Your infinite power, according to Your glorious might, so that we will have everything we need to hold on and endure hardship patiently and joyfully. Thank You, Father, that You have made us eligible to receive our portion of the inheritance given to all those set apart by the light. You have rescued us from dark powers and brought us safely into the kingdom of Your Son, whom You love and in whom we are redeemed and forgiven of our sins through His blood. [*Colossians 1:9-14 The Voice*]

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! But may all who seek You rejoice and be glad in You—may those who love Your salvation always say, “Let God be exalted!” In Jesus’ Name, Amen!

January 2024	2
February 2024.....	18
March 2024	35
April 2024	55
May 2024.....	71
June 2024	84
July 2024.....	104
August 2024.....	120
September 2024.....	132
October 2024.....	151
November 2024	164
December 2024	179
Theme for the year: In God we trust!	194
Bible Time Chart.....	196

January 2024

In God we trust: *In You, LORD my God, I put my trust. I trust in You; do not let me be put to shame, nor let my enemies triumph over me. No one who hopes in You will ever be put to shame.* Ps.25:1-3

Thought for the Month: Worrying is carrying tomorrow's load with today's strength-carrying two days at once. It is moving into tomorrow ahead of time. Worrying does not empty tomorrow of its sorrow; worrying empties today of its strength! *Corrie ten Boom*

Sunday 7th January Ps.43

We ended last year with the thought of **Striving for the best**—*Good, better, best, let us never rest, till our good is better and our better, best!* And although the difference between good, better and best in our natural life probably won't make much difference, we should always strive for the best when it comes to spiritual matters. Our physical life will always be dogged with trouble and difficulties but our spiritual life is meant to be different—our spiritual life should be enjoyable and invigorating, never tiresome or wearisome. Jesus said: *"Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you. Let me teach you, because I am humble and gentle at heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy to bear, and the burden I give you is light."* Matt.11:28-30 If our soul is at rest, then we can expect a good journey through 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. It gave me great joy to have some brothers come and tell about your faithfulness to the truth and how you continue to walk in the truth.* ³Jn.2-3 A more literal translation is "I pray that in all respects you may prosper and be in good health, just as your soul prospers." And the word "prosper" means "have a good journey". So John's prayer was that we may have a good journey through life but that it would depend on our soul's health! That is why we need to take care of our soul and as our reading from the Psalms today reminds us, if we feel despondent, we should tell our soul to praise God and put our hope in Him: *Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God.* Ps.42:5;11;43:5 God's purposes (His Will) for us are Encompassing (for everyone) and Eternal (for ever)—and this should affect our attitudes and actions. God will fulfill His purposes for us: *Though I walk in the midst of trouble, you preserve my life; you stretch out your hand against the anger of my foes, with your right hand you save me. The LORD will fulfill his purpose for me; your love, O LORD, endures forever.* Ps.138:7-8 However, we should remind ourselves of what God's purposes are and how they apply to us. **God's primary purpose is our salvation**—that we should not perish but have everlasting life: *He has saved us and called us to a holy life—not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace.* ²Tim.1:9 *Your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should perish.* Matt.18:14 *He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.* ²Pet.3:9

As we start this new year, I am encouraging you to apply God's purposes with **enthusiasm**! If we really know God and what He has done for us, we will treat God's purposes for us with enthusiasm because we want to be the very best for God. When we became a Christian, we confessed Jesus as Lord—which meant that we transferred the ownership of our life to Jesus Christ. We chose life over death, light over darkness, God's Kingdom over this world's kingdom, hope over despair. Those who have been forgiven much, love much—and **we have been forgiven everything!** *"Two people owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he forgave the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?" Simon replied, "I suppose the one who had the bigger debt forgiven." "You have judged correctly," Jesus said. . . "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.7:41-47 And because we belong to God, we should live our whole life for His glory—whatever we do, we should do it for God. *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 message 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... Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for people. ^{Col.3:15-23} So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God. ^{1Cor.10:31} Worship is not a Sunday activity but the dedication of our whole life to God's service. Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. ^{Rom.12:1} Do not offer any part of yourself to sin as an instrument of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer every part of yourself to him as an instrument of righteousness. ^{Rom.6:13} Instead of having a formal religion with a mediocre love for God, we are to love God with all of our heart. One of the teachers of the law came and heard the Sadducees arguing. He noticed that Jesus had given the Sadducees a good answer. So he asked him, "Which is the most important of all the commandments?" Jesus answered, "Here is the most important one. Moses said, 'Israel, listen to me. The Lord is our God. The Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul. Love him with all your mind and with all your strength.' And here is the second one. 'Love your neighbour as you love yourself.' There is no commandment more important than these." ^{Mk.12:28-31} Jesus had strong words for the Church members at Laodicea who were only lukewarm: Here is what I command you to write to the church in Laodicea. Here are the words of the One who is the Amen. What he gives witness to is faithful and true. He rules over what God has created. He says, 'I know what you are doing. I know you aren't cold or hot. I wish you were either one or the other! But you are lukewarm. You aren't hot or cold. So I am going to spit you out of my mouth.' ^{Rev.3:14-16} Our new life is an abundant life: I have come so that they may have life, and may have it abundantly. ^{Jn.10:10} This means we should have enthusiasm in our endeavours, passion in our praise, persistence in our prayers, fervour in our faith. So I have reason to be enthusiastic about all Christ Jesus has done through me in my service to God. ^{Rom.15:17} Don't just pretend to love others. Really love them. Hate what is wrong. Hold tightly to what is good. Love each other with genuine affection, and take delight in honouring each other. Never be lazy, but work hard and serve the Lord enthusiastically. Rejoice in our confident hope. Be patient in trouble, and keep on praying. When God's people are in need, be ready to help them. Always be eager to practice hospitality. ^{Rom.12:9-13} Even before he knew the full story of redemption, Apollos taught others enthusiastically: Apollos had been taught the way of the Lord, and he taught others about Jesus with an enthusiastic spirit and with accuracy. ^{Acts.18:25} But if we don't serve God with enthusiasm we will end up oppressed, suppressed and depressed! If you do not serve the LORD your God with joy and enthusiasm for the abundant benefits you have received, you will serve your enemies whom the LORD will send against you. You will be left hungry, thirsty, naked, and lacking in everything. ^{Deut.28:47-48} However, we must make sure our enthusiasm and zeal is based on knowledge (truth) and not just on emotion or determination: Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for the Israelites is that they may be saved. For I can testify about them that they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge. Since they did not know the righteousness that comes from God and sought to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness. Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes. ^{Rom.10:1-4} If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless. But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith. ^{Phil.3:4-9}

Enthusiasm in our Christian faith is more than some people can cope with because it shows passion, life, commitment and involvement. In July 1909 there was a Pentecostal Conference at Mülheim, Germany when the joy of the Lord filled many at a Prayer meeting as this article from Confidence Magazine records:

On the Saturday after the Conference we had given notice of an hour of prayer at 10 a.m. and were joined by 150 brethren. While much praise and prayer arose to the Lord, the Holy Ghost fell upon us so mightily that many began to praise the Lord in new Tongues. It was so wonderful to notice how the Holy Ghost took possession of one soul after another, giving them the Gift of Tongues. One sister gave messages in Tongues which Brother Friemel interpreted. The Lord said, amongst other things: *"I have much trouble and work with you. Believe in My call, and I will come to you with all the Signs."* Again the Holy Ghost fell upon many brethren, and they spoke in Tongues praising God. After this the Lord poured the oil of joy over the assembly in such measure that a holy laughter came over us all without exception, and tears of joy flowed. Many received an anointing with the Holy Ghost. The faithful Lord has filled our mouth with laughter. Simultaneously and as if by a definite leading, the jubilation ceased and the Tongues were started again by other Brethren. *"When the Lord filled their mouth with laughter, He filled also their tongues with singing"*. ^{Ps.126:1-3}

Interestingly in September 1909 the German Evangelicals produced the Berlin Declaration denouncing the Pentecostal movement, declaring that it was not of God and warning that *"evil spirits' primary entry point are prophecies, which gradually seek to replace scripture. What makes matters worse: the spiritual media consist of mainly women, who usurp leadership over men."* This must be as near as anyone can get to blaspheming against the Holy Spirit and was indisputably a spiritual factor in the two World Wars! *He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters. And so I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but anyone who speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.* ^{Matt.12:30-32} This Berlin Declaration was printed in the English religious papers and caused quite a lot of confusion, so some Pentecostal leaders met in London in the November and put together called *"The London Declaration"* as an encouragement and help to the Pentecostal Believers. The London Declaration was a short, scriptural statement about the evidence and results of the Holy Spirit baptism and explained that the "Promise of the Father" was, and is, evidenced by the Speaking in "Tongues" as the Spirit gives to utter. It also included these seven results of the baptism of the Holy Spirit: The Consciousness of the Deity of our Lord Jesus Christ; The Consciousness of our Dwelling in Him and He in us; Divine Illumination concerning His Word and Will; The Testimony of Jesus; The Three-fold Conviction of the World by the Spirit in us; Our continual guidance into the deep things of God; The continual glorification of Christ (to the exclusion of self). It also stated that it is clear from Scripture that God bears witness both with signs and wonders and these gifts have not ceased—there is no hint in Holy Scripture that signs and miracles were to cease, or that gifts were to be withdrawn from the Body of Christ. However, manifestations must be for profit—the gifts are for the building up of the Body of Christ. It ended with the statement that it should be clearly understood that the Baptism of the Holy Ghost is the Gate into, and not the Goal of, a true and full Christian Life.

So this year, let's determine that we will be renowned for our enthusiasm in both our spiritual life and also our natural life. That means we will put our heart and soul into everything we do—our praising, praying, giving, sharing, serving and even our listening! *Be devoted to one another with mutual love, showing eagerness in honouring one another. Do not lag in zeal, be enthusiastic in spirit, serve the*

Lord. Rejoice in hope, endure in suffering, persist in prayer.^{Rom.12:10-12} And let's keep our minds on heavenly things, viewing everything in the mirror of eternity, waiting for the coming of our Lord, listening for that last trumpet call, havening unto the new heaven and earth. Let's speak each word as if our last word and walk each step as if our final one—and if our life should end this year, let this be our best year!

Questions

How can we have a good journey through life?

Can a Christian love God half-heartedly?

How can we be sure we are zealous for the right things?

Is there a difference between happy and joy?

How can we “view everything in the mirror of eternity”?

Puritan Prayer: Almighty God, as we cross the threshold of this year, we commit ourselves—our souls, our bodies, our affairs and our friends—into Your care. Watch over us, keep us, guide us, direct us, sanctify us and bless us. Incline our hearts to Your ways. As a potter forms clay, mould us wholly into the image of Jesus. May our lips be a well-tuned harp to sound Your praise. Let those around, see us living by Your Spirit, trampling the world underfoot, unconformed to lying vanities, transformed by a renewed mind, clad in the entire armour of God, shining as a never-dimmed light and showing holiness in all our doings. Let no evil this year soil our thoughts, words or hands. May we travel the miry paths of life, free from spot or stain. In needful transactions let our affection be in heaven and our love soar upwards in flames of fire. May our gaze be fixed on unseen things, and our eyes open to the emptiness, fragility, mockery and vanities of this world. May we view all things in the mirror of eternity, waiting for the coming of our Lord, listening for the last trumpet call, havening unto the new heaven and earth. Order this year all our communications according to Your wisdom and to the gain of mutual good. May we speak each word as if our last word and walk each step as if our final one—and if our life should end this year, let this be our best year!

Sunday 14th January Ps.44:1-8 Matt.6

Pray like Jesus taught us: *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. This is how you should pray: Our Father in heaven...*^{Matt:5:7-9}

Last week we saw that John prayed for prosperity “*I pray that in all respects you may prosper and be in good health, just as your soul prospers.*” But the word “*prosper*” literally means “*have a good journey*”. So John's prayer was for us to have a good journey through life. When journeys take us through unknown territories, we need a set of instructions or a map so we don't get lost—but if the map is inaccurate we are likely to lose our way. Some maps are inaccurate because they are out of date but some are inaccurate because they were drawn up by people who had never been there or seen the area. Many cartographers invent fictitious places called “*paper towns*” and include them on their maps to prevent people plagiarising their work. Google invented a town in Lancashire called Argleton and included it in their Maps, but because data from Google is used by other online information services, Argleton was treated as a real settlement within the L39 postcode area. As a result, Argleton also appeared in numerous listings for things such as estate and letting agents, employment agencies and weather! But if we use an inaccurate map for our journey through life, we will live a wasted life and miss out on Gpd's purpose for us—and end up at the wrong final destination! And if we invent “*paper-towns*” of superstition, we will live in a fantasy world. So we need to ensure that our map for life is genuine, up-to-date and accurate! Sir John Franklin (1786 – 1847) was a Royal Navy officer and Arctic explorer.

When attempting to traverse the Northwest Passage in 1845, his ships became icebound and he and his crew perished. F.W.Boreham in his **A Bunch of Everlastings** writes:

Lying on my desk is an ancient map of the world which an old pilot showed to Henry VII in the year 1500. One or two continents are missing, but there are ample compensations! For, all over the unexplored territory, I find written: *'Here be dragons!' 'Here be demons!' 'Here be sirens!' 'Here be savages that worship devils!' and so on.* But, on his map of the world, Franklin wrote across all the unknown lands and all the uncharted seas, *'Here is God! When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee!'* And he always found Him there. Who shall doubt that when, at last, he set out upon that strange voyage on unknown seas which, sooner or later, we must all undertake, he still found the promise true? When Lord Tennyson was asked to write an inscription for the monument in Westminster Abbey, he composed the lines that are recognized as one of the real adornments of the Abbey— *Not here! the White North hath thy bones, and thou, Heroic Sailor Soul! Art passing on thy happier voyage now Towards no earthly Pole! 'Passing!' 'Passing on thy happier voyage!' When thou Passest . . . I will be with thee!* Who, I say, can doubt the Presence Divine on those uncharted waters? When, in 1875, at the age of eighty-three, Lady Franklin passed away, Dean Stanley added a postscript to Lord Tennyson's inscription. It declared that the monument in the Abbey was *'Erected by his widow, who, after long waiting and sending many in search of him, herself departed to seek and to find him in the realms of light.'* Thus, He who is with each of His voyagers when they sail upon strange waters brings them safely home and safely together; and, in the bliss of arrival and reunion, the fierce storms and the long separations are alike forgotten.

Although Franklin did not have an accurate map of the North West Passage, he was not intimidated by the unknown because he knew God was with him: *Family of Jacob, the LORD created you. People of Israel, he formed you. He says, "Do not be afraid. I will set you free. I will send for you by name. You belong to me. You will pass through deep waters. But I will be with you. You will pass through the rivers. But their waters will not sweep over you. You will walk through fire. But you will not be burned. The flames will not harm you. I am the LORD your God. I am the Holy One of Israel. I am the one who saves you."* ^{Is.43:1-3} We base our information about all spiritual matters, including God, on the Scriptures alone and so we should heed Paul's advice to Timothy to study God's Word: *Keep reminding God's people of these things. Warn them before God against quarrelling about words; it is of no value, and only ruins those who listen. 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 yourself approved unto God, a workman that needs not to be ashamed, dividing the word of truth aright.] Avoid godless chatter, because those who indulge in it will become more and more ungodly. Their teaching will spread like gangrene.* ^{2Tim.2:14-17}

After the books included in our NT were originally written they were in general use throughout the churches, as were other books (similar to books of sermons, testimonies, etc. of today.) *After this letter has been read to you, see that it is also read in the church of the Laodiceans and that you in turn read the letter from Laodicea.* ^{Col.4:16} *When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, and my scrolls, especially the parchments.* ^{2Tim.4:13} But soon an accepted standard needed to be recognised—a **CANON** (from Greek κανών kanōn, meaning "rule" or "measuring stick"). The standard or "measuring stick" used to measure or accept writing as Scripture, was **Inspiration**. *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.3:16-17}

Inspiration was evaluated and demonstrated by these 3 ways:

1. **Intrinsic Content:** *All have the work and person of Jesus Christ as their central subject and are historically correct.*
 2. **Moral Effect:** *Transforms people for the good.*
 3. **Testimony:** *The Church had accepted them (this merely recognised inspiration, it did not determine it).*
- a) **Internal Testimony:** *And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is indeed at work in you who believe.*^{1Thes.2:13} *Take special note of anyone who does not obey our instruction in this letter. Do not associate with them, in order that they may feel ashamed. Yet do not regard them as an enemy, but warn them as you would a fellow believer.*^{2Thes.3:14-15} *Bear in mind that our Lord's patience means salvation, just as our dear brother Paul also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him. He writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction.*^{2Pet.3:15-16}
- b) **External Testimony:** Early Church Fathers: *Clement* cAD95 makes allusions to 1Corinthians, Romans & Matthew; *Ignatius* cAD116 knew of all Paul's letters & quoted Matthew; *Polycarp* cAD150 knew Paul's letters, Matthew & Acts and quoted from 1Peter and 1John.

Note: Christianity does not start by defining God, or Jesus Christ, or salvation—the basis of Christianity is found in the authority of Scripture and the writings of Scripture were canonical at the moment they were written. If we cannot identify what Scripture is, then we cannot properly distinguish any theological truth from error.

So, having accepted that the Scriptures are our road-map for life, how do we read them and what do we do with what we read? First of all, we should never make a doctrine from the Old Testament because Jesus has changed everything—even the significance of places and promises! Jesus has changed the way we come to God, the way we live, the way we eat, the way we worship—and even the way we pray. Of course, the Old Testament part of the Bible is integral to our faith and our understanding of God, but we look to the New Testament for principles and practice. The Old Testament illustrates our doctrines but we get them from the New Testament! *Whoever is a believer in Christ is a new creation. The old way of living has disappeared. A new way of living has come into existence. God has done all this. He has restored our relationship with him through Christ, and has given us this ministry of restoring relationships. In other words, God was using Christ to restore his relationship with humanity.*^{2Cor.5:17-19} This doesn't just mean that our pre-Christian life is past but also the pre-Christ life as well—Judaism is outdated. We don't have a human priest or a geographical place or a special performance but we come straight to God Himself through Jesus our Mediator and Priest. *Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess... Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.*^{Heb.4:14-16} *In that day you will no longer ask me anything. Very truly I tell you, my Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete.*^{Jn.16:23-24} That is why it is important that we base our principles and practices on what Jesus taught and also what the early Church taught. For instance, what we call the Lord's Supper or Communion, was never meant to be the religious ceremony that some Churches have made it with "holy" bread and "holy wine with a "holy" priest to administer it. The Lord's Supper in the early Church was a love feast that was shared by the Believers.

And the Church's teaching and expectation on Prayer has also deviated so far from the teaching of Jesus and the practice of the early Church. Even in Evangelical Churches, the philosophy

and theory of prayer has become vastly different from Jesus simple teaching. *When you pray, do not be like those who only pretend to be holy. They love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners. They want to be seen by others. What I'm about to tell you is true. They have received their complete reward. When you pray, go into your room. Close the door and pray to your Father, who can't be seen. He will reward you. Your Father sees what is done secretly. 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. This 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.*^{Matt.6:5-13} Although there isn't a formula for effective prayer, there are some simple principles for approaching God (which includes prayer). *The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*^{Phil.4:5-7} *Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise; give thanks to him and praise his name.*^{Ps.100:4} Just as the Jews of the Old Testament had to come happily and thankfully when they came to God in the Temple, so we come happily and thankfully to God whenever we commune with Him—including our praying—and every Believer can and should be part of this. **If we don't do it God's way it won't work!** Madame Guyon (1648–1717) wrote the *Short and Very Easy Method of Prayer* in which she laid out some very simple principles under the heading: *The Prayer of the Heart* (available from our Church website under Resources:

<http://www.dealpentecostal.co.uk/Madamme%20Guyon%20Short%20and%20Easy%20Method%20of%20Prayer.pdf>

All are capable of prayer, and it is a dreadful misfortune that almost all the world have conceived the idea that they are not called to prayer. We are all called to prayer, as we are all called to salvation. Prayer is nothing but the application of the heart to God, and the internal exercise of love. St. Paul has enjoined us to "*pray without ceasing;*" (1Thess.5:17) and our Lord bids us *watch and pray* (Mk.13:33,37): all therefore may, and all ought to practise prayer. I grant that meditation is attainable but by few, for few are capable of it; and therefore, my beloved brethren who are athirst for salvation, meditative prayer is not the prayer which God requires of you, nor which we would recommend... All who are desirous of prayer, may easily pray, enabled by those ordinary graces and gifts of the Holy Spirit which are common to all men... You must, then, learn a species of prayer which may be exercised at all times; which does not obstruct outward employments; which may be equally practised by princes, kings, prelates, priests and magistrates, soldiers and children, tradesmen, labourers, women, and sick persons; it is not the prayer of the head, but OF THE HEART... It is not a prayer of the understanding alone, for the mind of man is so limited in its operations that it can have but one object at a time; but it is the PRAYER OF THE HEART which is not interrupted by the exercises of reason. Nothing can interrupt this prayer but disordered affections; and when once we have enjoyed God, and the sweetness of his love, we shall find it impossible to relish aught but himself... Nothing is so easily obtained as the possession and enjoyment of God. He is more present to us than we are to ourselves. He is more desirous of giving Himself to us than we are to possess Him; we only need to know how to seek Him, and the way is easier and more natural to us than breathing.

Prayer can never be reduced to a formula because Prayer is fellowship with the Father through Jesus Christ. *Prayer is communion with the Father; it is pondering what His Word says about our ideas and*

conforming our concepts to His. Never contemplate that sacred season with demons on your mind. Never project a war with darkness or anticipate a battle with evil forces. Christ did all of that for us, in our name.^{Col.1:13; 2:15} (T.L.Osborn) *The thought of God stirs a person so deeply that he cannot be content unless he praises Him, because He made us for Himself and our hearts find no peace until they rest in Him (Augustine of Hippo).* When we use the Scriptures as the basis of our prayers, prayer becomes easy and effective: *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 (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible).* And in fact, the Bible states that it only takes one prayer from one person who is righteous to be effective: *The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.*^{Jas.5:16} And yet, when Believers come together to prayer heaven shakes the earth! *When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting.*^{Acts.2:1-2} *When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God. "Sovereign Lord," they said, "you made the heavens and the earth and the sea, and everything in them... After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly.*^{Acts.4:24-31} What would happen if we prayed like that when we come together? As we continue to base our Christian principles and practices on New Testament Scripture rather than tradition, *we will find rest for our souls. For Jesus' yoke is easy to bear, and the burden He gives us is light.*^{Matt.11:29-30}

Questions:

- How can we be sure that the Bible is trustworthy?
- Why is it important to read the Bible correctly?
- How can we be sure that we are interpreting the Bible correctly?
- Why should we take Jesus' teaching on prayer seriously?
- How can we apply Jesus' teaching on prayer to ourself?
- How can we apply Jesus' teaching on prayer to our Church?

Puritan Prayer: 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. 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 14th January Ps.44:1-8 Matt.6

Pray like Jesus taught us (continued): *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. This is how you should pray: Our Father in heaven...*^{Matt.5:7-9}

Last week we introduced the theme of praying like Jesus taught us and talked about making sure that we had a map for our life-journey—a map that was both up-to-date and accurate—and that when we traverse unknown territories, we don't declare "*here be dragons*" or "*here be*

demons” but rather, declare “*here be God!*” *Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze. For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour.* ^{Is.43:1-3} Because we accept the Scriptures as God’s Word, we can expect God to speak through them to us today. But our main problem is not in reading the Bible (because we now have it in our own language) but in rightly dividing the word of Truth. *Keep reminding God’s people of these things. Warn them before God against quarrelling about words; it is of no value, and only ruins those who listen. 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 yourself approved unto God, a workman that needs not to be ashamed, dividing the word of truth aright.] Avoid godless chatter, because those who indulge in it will become more and more ungodly. Their teaching will spread like gangrene.* ^{2Tim.2:14-17} We need to know what is Old Covenant and what is New Covenant; what is a possibility and what is a promise; what is a parable and what is a prophesy; what is a figure of speech and what is fact; what is past, what is present and what is future. If we get confused about what we are reading in God’s Word, we will miss out on God’s purposes for our life and spend our time and energy on “*chasing after the wind*” ^{Ecc.1:14} instead of being established in our faith like a “*firmly embedded nail*”. ^{Ecc.12:11}

We also saw last week that the early Church came to an agreement about which writings were inspired by God and were Scripture, and which writings were inspirational but were not Scripture. For instance, Paul’s letter to the Colossians was accepted as Scripture but his letter to the Laodiceans was not accepted as Scripture: *After this letter has been read to you, see that it is also read in the church of the Laodiceans and that you in turn read the letter from Laodicea.* ^{Col.4:16} The early Church agreed that the inspiration of Scripture was demonstrated by its Intrinsic Content (they it had the work and person of Jesus Christ as its central subject and was historically correct); by its Moral Effect (that it had transformed people for the good) and by its internal and external Testimony (that it fitted in with rest of Scripture and that the early Church Fathers accepted it as Scripture). Because God entrusted our salvation and our faith to the 1st generation Christians of the very early Church, we can be sure of our salvation or of our faith, and that there is now no new revelation of God: *Dear friends, I had intended to write to you about the salvation we share. But something has come up. It demands that I write to you and encourage you to continue your fight for the Christian faith that was entrusted to God’s holy people once for all time. Some people have slipped in among you unnoticed. Not long ago they were condemned in writing for the following reason: They are people to whom God means nothing. They use God’s kindness as an excuse for sexual freedom and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ.* ^{Jude.3-4} Any discovery of other “*scriptures*” or revelation of a “*new doctrine*” shows a lack of common sense and is a denial of Jesus Christ.

If we are to pray with our mind as well as our spirit, then it goes without saying that we should be able to read with our mind and understand what we have read: *So Philip ran up to the chariot. He heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. “Do you understand what you’re reading?” Philip asked. “How can I?” he said. “I need someone to explain it to me.” So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. Here is the part of Scripture the official was reading. It says, “He was led like a sheep to be killed. Just as lambs are silent while their wool is being cut off, he did not open his mouth. When he was treated badly, he was refused a fair trial. Who can say anything about his children? His life was cut off from the earth.” The official said to Philip, “Tell me, please. Who is the prophet talking about? Himself, or someone else?” Then Philip began with that same part of Scripture. He told him the good news about Jesus.* ^{Acts.8:30-35}

We have full confidence in the Scripture that have been passed down to us—we have full confidence in their completion, in their inspiration and in their effectiveness. The Scriptures that were accepted by the early Church and have been passed down through the centuries are

as relevant now as when they were first written. But as language changes every 40 years or so, new translations of the Bible are necessary to keep their original meaning accessible to those who are not academics.

For instance, the King James Version of the Bible was printed in A.D.1611 and included the Apocrypha (which wasn't removed until 1885). But it was a quite a basic work and contained many errors because the translators' knowledge of Hebrew was limited and they used the *Textus Receptus* (Received Text) which was the work of Erasmus (who Martin Luther dismissed as "*the vilest miscreant that ever disgraced the earth*"). Luther wrote *Erasmus is very pitiful with his prefaces, though he tries to smooth them over; he appears to see no difference between Jesus Christ our Saviour, and the wise pagan legislator Solon. He sneers at St. Paul and St. John; and ventures to say, that the Epistle to the Romans, whatever it might have been at a former period, is not applicable to the present state of things.* Nevertheless, regardless of the human work of translation, the Bible is the Word of God and the very words are impregnated with spiritual life and contain intrinsic power which does not abate in the translation.

So what should we do about Jesus' teaching on prayer? The simple answer is just do it! *When you pray, do not be like those who only pretend to be holy. They love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners. They want to be seen by others. What I'm about to tell you is true. They have received their complete reward. When you pray, go into your room. Close the door and pray to your Father, who can't be seen. He will reward you. Your Father sees what is done secretly. 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. This 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.*^{Matt.6:5-13}

God alone is worthy of our spiritual focus and attention and He alone can answer our prayers. And so we pray to an audience of One—we pray to God not to those around us. We pray to an audience of One even in the congregation, because prayer is personal even if we are all praying at the same time: *When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God. "Sovereign Lord," they said, "you made the heavens and the earth and the sea, and everything in them... After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly.*^{Acts.4:24-31}

We can also pray personally in the congregation when we hear someone else pray and we say "Amen" to it. ("Amen" means "This is true, I believe it, I'm making this prayer mine!") *For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful. So what shall I do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will also pray with my mind; I will sing with my spirit, but I will also sing with my mind. If you are praising God with your spirit, how can one who finds himself among those who do not understand say "Amen" to your thanksgiving, since he does not know what you are saying? You may be giving thanks well enough, but the other man is not edified.*^{1Cor.14:14-17}

But whenever we pray, we pray to God not to the congregation. And it is not how long we pray or how loud we pray that matters—it is whether we are righteous or not! *The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.*^{Jas.5:16} Our righteousness does not come from what we do but from who we are: *What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, discovered in this matter? If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about—but not before God. What does Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness."*^{Rom.4:1-3} Righteousness is given to us by God's grace and received by faith which results in the forgiveness of our sins: *Now to the one who works, wages are not credited as a gift but as an obligation. However, to the one who does not work but trusts God who justifies the ungodly, their faith is credited as righteousness. David says the same thing when he speaks of the blessedness of the one to whom God credits righteousness apart from works: "Blessed are those whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are*

covered. Blessed is the one whose sin the Lord will never count against them.” ...Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring—not only to those who are of the law but also to those who have the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all... [Abraham] 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.4:4-25} Those who are not righteous—those who are not right with God and have not been freed from the penalty of their sins—cannot pray effectively, and actually, their prayers are detestable to God. If anyone turns a deaf ear to [God's] instruction, even their prayers are detestable.^{Prov.28:9} The LORD detests the sacrifice of the wicked, but the prayer of the upright pleases him... The LORD is far from the wicked, but he hears the prayer of the righteous.^{Prov.15:8;29} There is always value in people coming together in the name of Jesus—even for unbelievers coming together in the name of Jesus—but to ask unbelievers to intercede for us (or for anything, even our nation) is not only a waste of time but, according to Scripture, detestable to God! The same applies to so called “inter-faith” prayers. If we don't come to God the Father through Jesus His Son, then we don't come to God at all and if we invoke the names of other “gods” we blaspheme. “Be careful to do everything I have said to you. Do not invoke the names of other gods; do not let them be heard on your lips.”^{Ex.23:13} “Be very strong; be careful to obey all that is written in the Book of the Law of Moses, without turning aside to the right or to the left. Do not associate with these nations that remain among you; do not invoke the names of their gods or swear by them. You must not serve them or bow down to them. But you are to hold fast to the LORD your God, as you have until now.”^{Josh.23:6-8} I say to the LORD, “You are my Lord; apart from you I have no good thing.” I say of the holy people who are in the land, “They are the noble ones in whom is all my delight.” Those who run after other gods will suffer more and more. I will not pour out libations of blood to such gods or take up their names on my lips. LORD, you alone are my portion and my cup; you make my lot secure. The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; surely I have a delightful inheritance.^{Ps.16:2-6}

God doesn't respond to prayer—God responds to faith: Jesus said to the woman, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.”^{Lk7:50} 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} God is not moved by the volume or length of our prayers: 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.^{Matt.6:7} But God is moved by our faith: When Jesus heard this, he was astonished and said to those following him, “I tell you the truth, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith. I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven.”^{Matt.8:10-11} We need faith to please God: 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} **And God does answer prayer:** I

write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life. This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us—whatever we ask—we know that we have what we asked of him.^{1Jn.5:13-}

¹⁵ Our prayers do not inform God of anything He doesn't already know, so we don't have to worry about including all the information about our needs in our prayers! Your Father knows what you need even before you ask him.^{Matt.6:7-8} God says that He will answer us before we call: Before they call I will answer; while they are still speaking I will hear.^{Is.65:24} But we still need to pray because God can't answer prayers that have never been prayed! So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks

finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened.^{Lk.11:9-10} *People of Zion, who live in Jerusalem, you will weep no more. How gracious he will be when you cry for help! As soon as he hears, he will answer you.*^{Is.30:19}

I like Greg Koukl's principle of praying according to the acronym **SIP**: **S**pecifically, **I**ntelligibly, **P**ersuasively. Prayer is harder when it is rambling—it is harder for the person praying, and it is harder for those listening when prayer is in a group. Prayer is conversation and we should simply talk normally when speaking to God. If we were speaking to someone of importance and making request for help or provision, we would explain our need, why we need it, and why our request should be granted. We should do the same with God—we should pray in full sentences, intelligibly, with complete thoughts. Our prayers should include clear, specific requests, and straightforward, genuine expressions of feeling and thanks. We should also give reasons why God ought to respond to our appeals. Sometimes it is helpful to write out our prayers as it forces us to put more clarity and substance into them. We don't need to be pious, just clear, genuine, meaningful and relevant. But the overriding principle of Christian prayer is thankfulness, gratitude and reverence.

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}

Questions

What are the main differences between the Old Covenant and the New Covenant?

How can we know what parts of the Bible are potentials (aspirations) and what are promises?

What is faith?

How can we develop our faith?

How do we pray in faith?

Puritan Prayer: 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.

Sunday 28th January Ps.138 Matt.6

Pray like Jesus taught us (continued): *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. This is how you should pray: Our Father in heaven...*^{Matt.5:7-9}

The wonderful thing about praying is that you leave a world of not being able to do something, and enter God's realm where everything is possible—He specializes in the impossible; nothing is too great for His almighty power; nothing is too small for His love.*Corrie ten Boom*

God is Spirit and only spirit beings can have a meaningful relationship with God, and so prayer is unique to the human race—animals don't and can't pray because they don't have a spirit. But whilst many people may say that they pray to God, they usually ignore God's instructions. God has made it easy for us to come to Him and told us how to do it! As we saw last week, the prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective: *The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and*

effective.^{Jas.5:16} But God detests the prayer of the wicked: *If anyone turns a deaf ear to [God's] instruction, even their prayers are detestable.*^{Prov.28:9} The LORD is far from the wicked, but he hears the prayer of the righteous.^{Prov.15:29} Jesus said that we cannot come to God any other way than through Him—and if we try to come to God any other way, we are deceived or dishonest—and dangerous! Jesus answered, *‘I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you really know me, you will know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him.’*^{Jn.14:6-7} Therefore Jesus said again, *‘I tell you the truth, I am the gate for the sheep. All who ever came before me were thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. He will come in and go out, and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.’*^{Jn.10:7-10} Because Jesus is the Truth, what He says is true and those who dispute what Jesus says are liars—which makes them an antichrist! *I do not write to you because you do not know the truth, but because you do know it and because no lie comes from the truth. Who is the liar? It is whoever denies that Jesus is the Christ. Such a person is the antichrist—denying the Father and the Son. No one who denies the Son has the Father; whoever acknowledges the Son has the Father also.*^{1Jn.2:21-23} If we disagree with God, we are wrong! *God is true, even though every human being is a liar. It is written, ‘You are right when you sentence me. You are fair when you judge me.’*^{Rom.3:4} How terrible it will be for anyone who argues with his Maker! *He is like a broken piece of pottery lying on the ground. Does clay say to a potter, ‘What are you making?’*^{Is.45:9} Prayer is primarily about fellowship—about being part of God’s family, about sharing, partaking, participating, about communion—and so we should pray differently from the people who make a show of their religion. God already knows what we need and so we should never reduce prayer to a shopping list. Of course, there is a time for asking, but we should ask from dependence not despair, from faith not frenzy, from reverence not rebellion or resentment! *You want what you don't have, so you scheme and kill to get it. You are jealous of what others have, but you can't get it, so you fight and wage war to take it away from them. Yet you don't have what you want because you don't ask God for it. And even when you ask, you don't get it because your motives are all wrong—you want only what will give you pleasure.*^{Jas.4:2-3} 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} Jesus said we can receive anything from God if we only believe: *Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.*^{Mk.11:24} But John clarifies what Jesus meant by explaining that we must ask according to God’s Will: *I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life. This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us—whatever we ask—we know that we have what we asked of him.*^{1Jn.5:13-15}

This is how Jesus said we should pray:-

Our Father in heaven: When we come to God, our priority is to relate to God as our Father. Jesus regularly referred to God as His Father, and after His resurrection, Jesus affirmed that God was our Father too: *Jesus said, ‘Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’*^{Jn.20:17} Being a child of God is not a generational relationship or even a racial relationship but a spiritual relationship: *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} For those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God. *The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the*

Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father." The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.^{Rom.8:14-17} Jesus said to them, "If God were your Father, you would love me, for I have come here from God. I have not come on my own; God sent me. Why is my language not clear to you? Because you are unable to hear what I say. You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies. Yet because I tell the truth, you do not believe me! Can any of you prove me guilty of sin? If I am telling the truth, why don't you believe me? Whoever belongs to God hears what God says. The reason you do not hear is that you do not belong to God."^{Jn.8:42-47} God's title of "Father" should be respected, hallowed and honoured because it is holy: Don't let anyone call you 'Rabbi,' for you have only one teacher, and all of you are equal as brothers and sisters. And don't address anyone here on earth as 'Father,' for only God in heaven is your spiritual Father. And don't let anyone call you 'Teacher,' for you have only one teacher, the Messiah. The greatest among you must be a servant. But those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.^{Matt.23:8-12} Jesus certainly didn't mean that we shouldn't call our Dad "Father"—and in both the Old and New Testaments we are told to honour our parents: *Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. "Honour your father and mother"—which is the first commandment with a promise— "so that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth."*^{Eph.6:1-3} Paul said that he was a spiritual father to the Believers in Corinth and that Timothy was his spiritual son (making Paul a spiritual father to him!). *Even if you had ten thousand guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers, for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel. Therefore I urge you to imitate me. For this reason I have sent to you Timothy, my son whom I love, who is faithful in the Lord. He will remind you of my way of life in Christ Jesus, which agrees with what I teach everywhere in every church.*^{1Cor.4:15-17} But Paul never used his calling of apostle to pull rank on people—he did not say "Paul the Apostle" but addressed his letters like this: *Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God.*^{Rom.1:1} So, Jesus did not mean that we should not respect our natural parents or even our spiritual parents but rather that we should acknowledge God as our true Father and give Him the respect that He deserves: *See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. All who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.*^{1Jn.3:1-3} Although God is in heaven, He is also very near—God most high and God most nigh: *For this is what the high and lofty One says—he who lives forever, whose name is holy: "I live in a high and holy place, but also with him who is contrite and lowly in spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite."*^{Is.57:15}

Hallowed be Your Name. God's Name and God's Word are equally important and we respect both as holy. *I will bow down toward your holy temple and will praise your name for your love and your faithfulness, for you have exalted above all things your name and your word. When I called, you answered me; you made me bold and stouthearted.*^{Ps.138:2-3} *Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*^{Phil.2:9-11} God the Father and God the Son are One: *My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand. I and the Father are one.*^{Jn.10:27-30} And both God the Father's Name and Jesus' Name share the same wonder and awe: *For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called*

Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.^{Is.9:6} The angel of GOD said, “What’s this? You ask for my name? You wouldn’t understand—it’s sheer wonder.”^{1Jdg.13:18} All this also comes from the LORD Almighty, whose plan is wonderful, whose wisdom is magnificent.^{Is.28:29} Great is the LORD in Zion. He is honoured over all of the nations. Let them praise his great and wonderful name [glorious and awesome name]. He is holy. The King is mighty. He loves what is fair. He has set up the rules for fairness. He has done what is right and fair for the people of Jacob. Honour the LORD our God. Worship at his feet. He is holy.^{Ps.99:2-}

⁵ We honour God’s Name because He is worthy: *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} And we also honour God’s Name because we love Him and want to honour Him—His Name is precious *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.*^{1Pet.1:4-7} And He is worthy of our adoration: *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!”*^{Rev.5:11-12}

Your kingdom come. Some Christians have still not understood the difference between the Old Covenant and New Covenant (we looked at the main differences at our Bible Study on Wednesday). The Old Covenant Kingdom of God was a nationalistic, political kingdom based in the Middle East with the city of Jerusalem at its centre and the Temple as the focal point because that is where God met with people. In the New Covenant, the Kingdom of God is the fulfilment of that type or illustration and it is far superior to the old. *But the ministry Jesus has received is as superior to theirs as the covenant of which he is mediator is superior to the old one, and it is founded 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} The New Covenant kingdom of God is a spiritual Kingdom based in heaven with the New Jerusalem at its centre and the Throne of God as its focal point [the New Jerusalem is people not a place: *I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.*^{Rev.21:2-3}]. The Kingdom of God is often called the Kingdom of Heaven. In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea and saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah: “A voice of one calling in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.’”^{1Matt.3:1-3} As you go, proclaim this message: ‘The kingdom of heaven has come near.’^{1Matt.10:7} The disciples came to him and asked, “Why do you speak to the people in parables?” He replied, “Because the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them.”^{1Matt.13:10-11} Then I heard a loud voice in heaven say: “Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God, and the authority of his Christ. For the accuser of our brothers, who accuses them before our God day and night, has been hurled down. They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death. Therefore rejoice, you heavens and you who dwell in them.”^{1Rev.12:10-12} Jesus said, “My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another

place.” “You are a king, then!” said Pilate. Jesus answered, “You are right in saying I am a king. In fact, for this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.”^{Jn.18:36-37} The New Covenant Kingdom of God is the rule of Christ in people’s hearts—it is where people willingly submit to Jesus authority and confess Him as “Lord”. Jesus said that we should pray that His rule and reign should come here on earth, now (not just in the future). Christianity is not just “pie is the sky when we die”—it is also “steak on the plate while wait”!! Although the Kingdom of God is spiritual, it affects our daily physical life and elevates us out of the dirt, despair, dishonour, distress, dis-ease and disaster, and into the “heavenly places” where Jesus Christ lives and reigns. *Since you have been raised to new life with Christ, set your sights on the realities of heaven, where Christ sits in the place of honour at God's right hand. Think about the things of heaven, not the things of earth. For you died to this life, and your real life is hidden with Christ in God. And when Christ, who is your life, is revealed to the whole world, you will share in all his glory.*^{Col.3:1-4} No wonder Jesus taught us to pray “Your Kingdom come”!

So let’s keep praying—with thanksgiving—asking God our heavenly Father, to help us honour His Name and to take full control of our lives as we seek His Kingdom. *But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own. [Steep your life in God-reality, God-initiative, God-provisions. Don't worry about missing out. You'll find all your everyday human concerns will be met. Give your entire attention to what God is doing right now, and don't get worked up about what may or may not happen tomorrow. God will help you deal with whatever hard things come up when the time comes.]*^{Matt.6:33-34}

Questions

What is prayer?

What does “don't address anyone here on earth as 'Father,’” mean?

How can we honour God’s Name?

Where is God’s Kingdom?

What is God’s Will?

How is God’s Will done on earth?

Puritan Prayer: Lord Jesus, Master, Redeemer, Saviour, come and take entire possession of me—this is Your right by purchase. 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.

February 2024

In God we trust: *Do not let your hearts be troubled. You trust in God; trust 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?* Jn.14:1-2

Thought for the Month: If you are born again, you are a child of God. Never tear yourself out of that relationship and the righteousness of God by saying that you are dirty or unclean—Jesus' blood has cleansed you and His life has been delivered to you! It is alright to sing that as an unregenerate but it is not the experience of the sons and daughters of God. *John G Lake*

Sunday 4th February Ps.46 Matt.6

Praying as Jesus taught us to pray.

Your Kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

God's Kingdom is a spiritual Kingdom and the values and ethics of God's Kingdom are in total harmony with God's character. That is why Paul writes: *The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.* Gal.3:19-21 There are two spiritual kingdoms—the kingdom of God and the kingdom of this world: *As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath. But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus.* Eph.2:1-6 Under the Old Covenant God's spiritual Kingdom was often prophesied about in the same context as political kingdoms: *In the time of those kings, the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed, nor will it be left to another people. It will crush all those kingdoms and bring them to an end, but it will itself endure forever. This is the meaning of the vision of the rock cut out of a mountain, but not by human hands—a rock that broke the iron, the bronze, the clay, the silver and the gold to pieces. The great God has shown the king what will take place in the future. The dream is true and its interpretation is trustworthy.* Dan.2:44-45 But the people of faith understood the difference between the kingdoms of this world and God's heavenly Kingdom: *All these people died still believing what God had promised them. They did not receive what was promised, but they saw it all from a distance and welcomed it. They agreed that they were foreigners and nomads here on earth. Obviously people who say such things are looking forward to a country they can call their own. If they had longed for the country they came from, they could have gone back. But they were looking for a better place, a heavenly homeland. That is why God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.* Heb.11:13-16 And when Jesus came, He explained that His Kingdom was not political: *Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place."* Jn.18:36 Jesus explained that we are to live by the values and ethics of God's Kingdom not by the values and ethics of this world's kingdom: *Jesus said to them, "The kings of nations have power over their people, and those in authority call themselves friends of the people. But you're not going to be that way! Rather, the greatest among you must be like the youngest, and your leader must be like a servant. Who's the greatest, the person who sits at the table or the servant? Isn't it really the person who sits at the table? But I'm among you as a servant. You have stood by me in the troubles that have tested me. So as my Father has given me a kingdom, I'm giving it to you. You will eat and drink at my table in my kingdom. You will also sit on thrones and judge the twelve tribes of Israel."* Lk.22:25-30 God's values are inseparable from His Will and are recorded in the Scriptures for us so we can know His Will and align our values

to His values. Of course, we live in this world and so we should function as citizens of political kingdoms but we “*march to a different tune*”—we have different standards and different ethics from those who are not in God’s Kingdom. *Dear friends, you are outsiders and strangers in this world. So I’m asking you not to give in to your sinful longings. They fight against your soul. People who don’t believe might say you are doing wrong. But lead good lives among them. Then they will see your good works. And they will give glory to God on the day he comes to judge.*^{1Pet.2:11-12} *Make the Master proud of you by being good citizens. Respect the authorities, whatever their level; they are God’s emissaries for keeping order. It is God’s will that by doing good, you might cure the ignorance of the fools who think you’re a danger to society. Exercise your freedom by serving God, not by breaking the rules. Treat everyone you meet with dignity. Love your spiritual family. Revere God. Respect the government.*^{1Pet.2:13-17} When Jesus said we should pray for God’s Kingdom and His Will to be done on earth as it is in heaven, it was because God wants us involved in His Kingdom, not because He can’t manage without us! Prayer is expressing our dependence on God—it is communing with the Father, pondering what His Word says about our ideas and then conforming our concepts to His! That is why we must get to know God through His Word.

When we pray, we can rely on Jesus Christ, who is always praying for us and with us. Christ’s praying on our behalf is what makes our prayers true prayer. Prayer is not fundamentally about us pouring out our words, our hearts, or our emotions to God... 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... 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. *Kristen Deede Johnson, “Our Theology of Prayer Matters More than Our Feelings.”*

Give us today our daily bread. To ask God for our daily food is not being lazy—we are not asking God to put our food on in our cupboard or on our plate! To ask God for our daily food means that we recognize that we depend on God for everything—our food and even our breath: *God who gives you the breath of life and controls your destiny!*^{Dan.5:23} *Don’t be deceived, my dear brothers and sisters. Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.*^{Jas.1:16-17} We still need to sow the seed to grow the wheat to make the bread: *Sow your seed in the morning, and at evening let your hands not be idle, for you do not know which will succeed, whether this or that, or whether both will do equally well.*^{Ecd.11:6} *Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work. As it is written: “They have freely scattered their gifts to the poor; their righteousness endures forever.” Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness. You will be enriched in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God.*^{2Cor.9:6-11} However, we should remember that it is God who enables us to work—especially when our own hard work is productive! You may say to yourself, “My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me.” But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth, and so confirms his covenant, which he swore to your ancestors, as it is today.^{Deut.8:17-18} *LORD, you establish peace for us; all that we have accomplished you have done for us.*^{Is.26:12} Of course, we must do our part but we rely on God to meet our daily needs: *For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: “The one who is unwilling to work shall not eat.” We hear that some among you are idle and disruptive. They are not busy; they are busybodies. Such people we command and urge in the Lord Jesus Christ to settle down and earn the food they eat.*^{2Thess.3:10-12} And following Jesus’ example, we should always thank God for His

provision: *And he directed the people to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves.*^{Matt.14:19} *While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples.*^{Matt.26:26} Because God's Kingdom is a spiritual Kingdom, our priority is our spiritual welfare but we still need to eat and drink. God has given us a body that needs regular nourishment but we should never make our physical needs a priority: *Every word of God is perfect. He is like a shield to those who trust in him. He keeps them safe. Don't add to his words. If you do, he will correct you. He will prove that you are a liar. LORD, I ask you for two things. Don't refuse me before I die. Keep lies far away from me. Don't make me either poor or rich, but give me only the bread I need each day. If you don't, I might have too much. Then I might say I don't know you. I might say, 'Who is the LORD?' Or I might become poor and steal. Then I would bring shame to the name of my God.*^{Prov.30:5-9} Physical food is not the same as spiritual food and we can't get more spiritual by eating or not eating physical food! *But food does not bring us near to God; we are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do.*^{1Cor.8:8} *But you were cleansed; you were made holy; you were made right with God by calling on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God. You say, "I am allowed to do anything"—but not everything is good for you. And even though "I am allowed to do anything," I must not become a slave to anything. You say, "Food was made for the stomach, and the stomach for food." (This is true, though someday God will do away with both of them.)*^{1Cor.6:11-13} *If you have died with Christ to the world's way of doing things, why do you let others tell you how to live? It's as though you were still under the world's influence. People will tell you, "Don't handle this! Don't taste or touch that!" All of these things deal with objects that are only used up anyway. These things look like wisdom with their self-imposed worship, false humility, and harsh treatment of the body. But they have no value for holding back the constant desires of your corrupt nature.*^{Col.2:20-23} But "give us today" also reminds us to live in the present and not to take on tomorrow's cares: *Steep your life in God-reality, God-initiative, God-provisions. Don't worry about missing out. You'll find all your everyday human concerns will be met. Give your entire attention to what God is doing right now, and don't get worked up about what may or may not happen tomorrow. God will help you deal with whatever hard things come up when the time comes.*^{Matt.6:33-34} Faith is about now—it is about relating to God in the present: *Now faith is...*^{Heb.11:1} *But I trust in you, LORD; I say, "You are my God." My times are in your hands.*^{Psa.41:14-15}

And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. Our relationship with God is based on the forgiveness of our sin which is a work of grace (i.e. God freely forgives our sin by the merit of Jesus' death alone—and His forgiveness of our sin is unconditional). *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} But in this prayer Jesus is explaining that if we hold a grudge against someone else, we will disconnect with God and never experience the peace that God has promised us. The New Covenant deals with our conscience in a way that the Old Covenant never could: *The Holy Spirit was showing by this that the way into the Most Holy Place had not yet been disclosed as long as the first tabernacle was still functioning. This is an illustration for the present time, indicating that the gifts and sacrifices being offered were not able to clear the conscience of the worshiper. They are only a matter of food and drink and various ceremonial washings—external regulations applying until the time of the new order. But when Christ came as high priest of the good things that are now already here, he went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle that is not made with human hands, that is to say, is not a part of this creation. He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption... 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! or this reason Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance—now that he has died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant.*^{Heb.9:8-15} Although grace (or love) and peace are gifts from God, they are also

fruit of the Spirit: *The fruit of that righteousness will be peace; its effect will be quietness and confidence forever.*^{Is.32:7} But the spiritual nature produces love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There are no laws against things like that. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified their corrupt nature along with its passions and desires. If we live by our spiritual nature, then our lives need to conform to our spiritual nature. We can't allow ourselves to act arrogantly and to provoke or envy each other.^{Gal.5:22-26} But the meek will inherit the land and enjoy peace and prosperity.^{Ps.37:11} We cannot buy spiritual fruit with money or anything else from the natural world because it is a by-product of living in Christ: *Live in me, and I will live in you. A branch cannot produce any fruit by itself. It has to stay attached to the vine. In the same way, you cannot produce fruit unless you live in me. I am the vine. You are the branches. Those who live in me while I live in them will produce a lot of fruit. But you can't produce anything without me.*^{Jn.15:4-5} Both grace and peace come from knowing God the Father and God the Son (who is the Prince of peace): *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 through the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace.^{Eph.2:13-14} 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 increase of his government and peace there will be no end.^{Is.9:6-7} Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.^{Rom.5:1} When we know God and pray with gratitude and gentleness, peace will fill our heart: *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} Loving God's Word produces peace: *Great peace have those who love your law, and nothing can make them stumble. I wait for your salvation, LORD, and I follow your commands. I obey your statutes, for I love them greatly. I obey your precepts and your statutes, for all my ways are known to you.*^{Ps.119:165-168} And keeping our minds on spiritual matters produces peace: *You will keep in perfect peace those whose minds are steadfast, because they trust in you. Trust in the LORD forever, for the LORD, the LORD himself, is the Rock eternal.*^{Is.26:3-4} But if we hold a grudge against anyone, the peace that should control us and rule our hearts will be disrupted! *As holy people whom God has chosen and loved, be sympathetic, kind, humble, gentle, and patient. Put up with each other, and forgive each other if anyone has a complaint. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. Above all, be loving. This ties everything together perfectly. Also, let Christ's peace control you. God has called you into this peace by bringing you into one body. Be thankful. Let Christ's word with all its wisdom and richness live in you. Use psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to teach and instruct yourselves about God's kindness. Sing to God in your hearts. Everything you say or do should be done in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.*^{Col.3:12-17} No wonder Jesus said: *For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.*^{Matt.6:14-15} (The word "forgive" here, literally means "to send away" or "expire" and so if we don't forgive others we will still carry the guilt of our own sins!)

So, as we pray like Jesus taught us to pray, let us continue to make God's spiritual Kingdom our priority without worrying unduly about tomorrow, showing our dependence on God by asking Him for our daily provision—but still making provision and preparation for the future! And let's make every effort to live in harmony with the Holy Spirit so that God's peace will fill our hearts and minds. Then we will not only pray as Jesus taught us, but we will also live as He expects us to live!

Questions

What are the main differences between the *Kingdom of God* and the *kingdom of this world*?

Can we be citizens of God's Kingdom and be good citizens in our country?

Why should we pray for our daily bread?

On what basis does God forgive our sins?

Explain: *forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.*

What is peace?

How do we get God's peace?

Puritan Prayer:

O Lord God, help me to remember 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! 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 is all love and 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 11th February 10. Ps.47 Matt.6

Praying as Jesus taught us to pray: *Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil, for Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.*

Over the last few weeks we have been looking at the Model Prayer that Jesus taught His disciples. We have seen that our priority in prayer is to reverence Almighty God and although He is holy, He is not detached from us but very intimate and Someone we can legitimately call "*our Father*". He is God most high and God most nigh—He is in heaven but He is also in our heart! *For this is what the high and lofty One says—he who lives forever, whose name is holy: "I live in a high and holy place, but also with him who is contrite and lowly in spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite."*^{Is.57:15} In fact God is nearer than our hands and feet—He is in our mouth and our heart: *But the way to do what God requires must begin by having faith in him. Scripture says, "Do not say in your heart, 'Who will go up into heaven?'" That means to go up into heaven and bring Christ down. And do not say, 'Who will go down into the grave?' That means to bring Christ up from the dead. But what does it say? "The word is near you. It's in your mouth and in your heart." That means the word we are preaching. You must put your faith in it. Say with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord." Believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead. Then you will be saved. With your heart you believe and are made right with God. With your mouth you say that Jesus is Lord. And so you are saved.*^{Rom.10:6-10} We are to make God's Kingdom our priority and put His honour above our own comfort. *Steep your life in God-reality, God-initiative, God-provisions. Don't worry about missing out. You'll find all your everyday human concerns will be met. Give*

your entire attention to what God is doing right now, and don't get worked up about what may or may not happen tomorrow. God will help you deal with whatever hard things come up when the time comes.^{Matt.6:33-34} Our citizenship of heaven takes priority over our national citizenship and living by God's values and principles is not just the right thing to do but it is also be the best thing to do as well! The Kingdom of God is the rule of Christ in people's hearts—it is where people willingly submit to Jesus' authority and confess Him as "Lord". As God's children, we want what God wants—and we want that to be done on here earth as it is being done in heaven. That's why we should pray that Jesus' rule and reign should come here on earth now and not just in the future. But prayer alone doesn't bring in God's Kingdom—we must tell others about it! This is the Great Commission—or the Go-mission!! *Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."*^{Matt.28:18-20} And so we must act on God's will as well as ask for God's will! And there are eternal consequences to our actions—we will all have to give an account for what we have done! *So we make it our goal to please him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each of us may receive what is due us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.*^{2Cor.5:9-10} Then Jesus spoke to his disciples. He said: *If anyone wants to follow me, he must say no to himself. He must pick up his cross and follow me. If he wants to save his life, he will lose it. But if he loses his life for me, he will find it. What good is it if someone gains the whole world but loses his soul? Or what can anyone trade for his soul? The Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory. His angels will come with him. And he will reward everyone in keeping with what they have done.*^{Matt.16:24-27} So it makes sense to seek God's Kingdom first and follow God's instructions! But theology and experience both affirm that we can't do it by ourself—we need God's help! Not even our best or hardest effort will be enough to save us—or to keep us saved! God knows this and has intervened on our behalf—and He continues to intervene. *God who has saved us and called us to a holy life—not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace.*^{2Tim.2:9} *In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.*^{Heb.1:1-3} That is why we should ask God for help—help for support and for sustenance: *Give us today our daily bread.* To ask God for our daily food shows that we recognize our dependence on God for our whole life—even our breath: *God who gives you the breath of life and controls your destiny!*^{Dan.5:23} Enjoying life is a blessing from God: *Then I realized that it is good and proper for a man to eat and drink, and to find satisfaction in his toilsome labour under the sun during the few days of life God has given him—for this is his lot. Moreover, when God gives any man wealth and possessions, and enables him to enjoy them, to accept his lot and be happy in his work—this is a gift of God. He seldom reflects on the days of his life, because God keeps him occupied with gladness of heart.*^{Ecl.5:18-20} But this blessing will soon lose its impact if we hold a grudge against anyone. If we don't forgive others, the peace that should prevail in our hearts will be disrupted! *As holy people whom God has chosen and loved, be sympathetic, kind, humble, gentle, and patient. Put up with each other, and forgive each other if anyone has a complaint. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. Above all, be loving. This ties everything together perfectly. Also, let Christ's peace control you. God has called you into this peace by bringing you into one body. Be thankful. Let Christ's word with all its wisdom and richness live in you. Use psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to teach and instruct yourselves about God's kindness. Sing to God in your hearts. Everything you say or do should be done in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.*^{Col.3:12-17} If we don't forgive others, we will still carry the guilt of our own sins!

To end this Model Prayer, Jesus teaches us to ask God to keep us from temptation: *Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.* Another Version puts it this way: *Keep us from falling into sin when we are tempted. Save us from the evil one.*^{NIV} We are all subject to temptation—even Jesus was tempted: *As Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.” At once the Spirit sent him out into the desert, and he was in the desert forty days, being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him.*^{Mk.1:10-12} But the devil will flee from us if we resist him by submitting to God: *Submit yourselves, then, to God [give yourselves completely to God; place yourselves under God's authority]. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come near to God and he will come near to you.*^{Jas.4:7-8} We can break the power of temptation by prayer: *Pray that you will not fall into temptation.*^{Lk.22:40} But we need to pray sensible prayers not silly prayers that God can't answer or won't answer. We need to pray sensible prayers that will honour God's Name and declare our dependence on Him—and these will usually include the borrowed words of the Bible! If we wish to pray with confidence and gladness, then the words of Scripture will have to be the solid basis of our prayer. *For the word of God is alive and powerful. It is sharper than the sharpest two-edged sword, cutting between soul and spirit, between joint and marrow. It exposes our innermost thoughts and desires.*^{Heb.4:12} *May the praise of God be in their mouths and a double-edged sword in their hands.*^{Ps.149:6} Jesus resisted the devil's temptation by using the Word of God: *During that time the devil came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become loaves of bread." But Jesus told him, "No! The Scriptures say, 'People do not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" ... Jesus answered him, "It is also written... Jesus said to him, "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'" Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.*^{Matt.4:3-11} And we can resist the devil's temptation with the Word of God. *In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests.*^{Eph.6:16-18} Jesus was truly human and because He was tempted, He can help us when we are tempted: *Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.*^{Heb.4:14-16} *Since all of these sons and daughters have flesh and blood, Jesus took on flesh and blood to be like them. He did this so that by dying he would destroy the one who had power over death (that is, the devil). In this way he would free those who were slaves all their lives because they were afraid of dying. So Jesus helps Abraham's descendants rather than helping angels. Therefore, he had to become like his brothers and sisters so that he could be merciful. He became like them so that he could serve as a faithful chief priest in God's presence and make peace with God for their sins. Because Jesus experienced temptation when he suffered, he is able to help others when they are tempted. Brothers and sisters, you are holy partners in a heavenly calling. So look carefully at Jesus, the apostle and chief priest about whom we make our declaration of faith.*^{Heb.2:14-3:1} God will never tempt us to do wrong—it is either the devil or our own desires that leads us into temptation. Temptations are not sin unless we yield to them! And just like we can't stop birds flying over our head, but we can stop them from nesting in our hair—so we can't stop temptations from flying around in our mind, but we can stop those temptations from growing into sin. If we allow those thoughts to settle they will take root and will lead us into sin: *When you are tempted, you shouldn't say, "God is tempting me." God can't be tempted by evil. And he doesn't tempt anyone. But your own evil longings tempt you. They lead you on and drag you away. When they are allowed to grow, they give birth to sin. When sin has grown up, it gives birth to death. My dear brothers and sisters, don't let anyone fool you.*^{Jas.1:13-16} But God's grace teaches us to say “no” to temptation: *For the grace of God*

has appeared that offers salvation to all people. It teaches us to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope—the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.^{Tit.2:11-14} And God gives grace generously. As the Scriptures say, “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.”^{Jas.4:6} If we make the love of this world our priority, temptations will become too powerful! (The “world” is the temporal things, the now, the life that won’t stay with us into eternity. The world it isn’t necessarily wrong or evil but a distraction from our 1st love of God and His Kingdom, which should be our priority.) But faith—our confident trust in God—will keep us strong and deflect the devil’s arrows: *But people who want to get rich keep falling into temptation. They are trapped by many stupid and harmful desires which drown them in destruction and ruin. Certainly, the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil. Some people who have set their hearts on getting rich have wandered away from the Christian faith and have caused themselves a lot of grief. But you, man of God, must avoid these things. Pursue what God approves of: a godly life, faith, love, endurance, and gentleness. Fight the good fight for the Christian faith.*^{1Tim.6:9-12} I sent Timothy to find out about your faith. I wanted to see whether the tempter had in some way tempted you, making our work meaningless.^{1Thess.3:5} In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.^{Eph.6:16-17} We can replace our thoughts—including temptation and other strong desires—with God’s Word by pondering and musing on what God has said about us and about our situation. *How can a young person keep his life pure? By living in keeping with your word. I trust in you with all my heart. Don't let me wander away from your commands. 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.*^{Ps.119:9-12} We must make our lips do their duty by filling them with the Word of God. We must make them say what God says about our situation and not allow them to say anything to the contrary. And the Word of God will clean our minds: *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} *You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, as I also remain in you.*^{Jn.15:3-4} *I thank you for speaking straight from your heart; I learn the pattern of your righteous ways. I'm going to do what you tell me to do; don't ever walk off and leave me. How can a young person live a clean life? By carefully reading the map of your Word. I'm single-minded in pursuit of you; don't let me miss the road signs you've posted. I've banked your promises in the vault of my heart so I won't sin myself bankrupt. Be blessed, GOD; train me in your ways of wise living. I'll transfer to my lips all the counsel that comes from your mouth; I delight far more in what you tell me about living than in gathering a pile of riches. I ponder every morsel of wisdom from you, I attentively watch how you've done it. I relish everything you've told me of life, I won't forget a word of it.*^{Ps.119:7-16}

The Model Prayer concludes with: *For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.* Although this last line may not have been in the original text (it is not in the earliest manuscripts), it is certainly in harmony with the rest of the prayer and the whole of New Covenant doctrine. God has the power to make all this happen and whatever He does will compliment His glory. *Glory and power forever and ever belong to the one who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and has made us a kingdom, priests for God his Father. Amen.*^{Rev.1:5-6} *All the angels stood around the throne with the leaders and the four living creatures. They bowed in front of the throne with their faces touching the ground, worshiped God, and said, “Amen! Praise, glory, wisdom, thanks, honour, power, and strength be to our God forever and ever! Amen!”*^{Rev.7:11-12} Everything we desire and everything we do must be in harmony with the vision and values of God’s Kingdom and with His glory—and He has the power to make it happen. Amen!

Questions

Why is it important to begin our prayers with reverencing God and His Name?

Is temptation sin?

Where does temptation come from?

How can we resist temptation?

Does God tempt us?

How important is it to end our prayers by focusing on God's power and glory?

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 in order to trust You, for Your Word is sure truth. I have cast my anchor in the port of peace, knowing that my past, my present and my future are in Jesus' nail-pierced hands. You are so good, so wise, so just and so 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; take away 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.

Sunday 18th February Ps.48 Matt.3

What do you base your faith on? *This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah.*^{Matt.3:3}

There is a movement among the Christian community called the “*deconstruction movement*” and, as its name suggests, it encourages the deconstruction of faith. Whilst it is good to re-evaluate our faith, we should ensure that we do this in the context of faith and not unbelief: *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? Could it be that you're failing the test? I hope that you will realize that we haven't failed the test. We pray to God that you won't do anything wrong.*^{2Cor.13:5-7} The deconstruction movement encourages people to question the authority of God's Word and then tries to free people from the restraints of God's boundaries—which is exactly what the devil did in the Garden of Eden when he got Eve to doubt God's Word and then offered her something that looked attractive (but turned out to be atrophic!): *Did God really say? ... When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it.*^{Gen.3:1-6} This movement is gaining momentum as it prioritises evangelical Christians (who become “*exvangelicals*”), causing many to lose their faith. But this is not new—Demas was a fellow worker with Paul and lost his way: *Our dear friend Luke, the doctor, and Demas send greetings.*^{Col.4:4} *And so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas and Luke, my fellow workers.*^{Phile.24} *Do your best to come to me quickly, for Demas, because he loved this world, has deserted me and has gone to Thessalonica.*^{2Tim.4:10} John warns about the dangers of loving the world (the sensual, the “*now*”) over the spiritual and the eternal: *Don't love the world and what it offers. Those who love the world don't have the Father's love in them. Not everything that the world offers—physical gratification, greed, and extravagant lifestyles—comes from the Father. It comes from the world, and the world and its evil desires are passing away. But the person who does what God wants lives forever.*^{1Jn.2:15-17} Ever since Adam and Eve yielded to that 1st temptation, mankind has opposed God and His Kingdom. The Bible puts it this way: *There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands; there is no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have*

together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one... and the way of peace they do not know. There is no fear of God before their eyes.^{Rom.3:10-18} However, God has always had a remnant of Believers: So too, at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace.^{Rom.11:5} Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for... All these people were still living by faith when they died... 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... Women received back their dead, raised to life again. Others were tortured and refused to be released, so that they might gain a better resurrection. Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison. They were stoned; they were sawed in two; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated—the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground. 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. Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him.^{Heb.11:1-12:3} Believers have always been a “remnant” (which means “residue” or “remainder”!)—but although we are a minority, we are “on the winning side”! Life is longer than our short time on earth and it is the Believers who are the real winners in life because there is more to life than just the physical. Watch out! Be on your guard against wanting to have more and more things. Life is not made up of how much a person has... There are more important things for the body than clothes.^{1Jn.12:15-23} Our bodily life only continues until we take our last breath—but we are more than a mere body! We are made in God’s image and consist of spirit, soul and body. So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.^{Gen.1:27} 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 our spirit and soul will last for eternity: He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the hearts of men,^{Ecc.3:11} This can either be good news or bad news—good news if we can enjoy life but bad news if life is intolerable. Last week this was reported the national press: “Former Dutch Prime Minister, Dries van Agt, has died by euthanasia, 'hand in hand' with his beloved wife Eugenie. They were both 93.” This couple couldn’t face life anymore! What if that frustration and pain not only continued after death but was 1000 times worse—and not just for a few years but for ever and ever? That would be really bad news indeed! But what if we could live for ever in indescribable joy? This is the Good News that Jesus came to bring us: After Jesus said this, he looked toward heaven and prayed: “Father, the hour has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you... I am coming to you now, but I say these things while I am still in the world, so that they may have the full measure of my joy within them. I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world.”^{Jn.17:1-14} In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may result in praise, glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed. Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls.^{1Pet.1:6-9} To him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy—to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen.^{Jude.24-25} That’s why the Gospel really is good news! But how can we be sure that our eternal life will be wonderful and not terrible? What do we base our belief on? And how credible is our hope? If we can’t answer

these questions satisfactorily, then we will live in despair, despondency, distress and dis-ease: *If our hope in Christ is for this life only, we should be pitied more than anyone else in the world.*^{1Cor.15:19}

Although Christianity is about following Jesus Christ, our information about Jesus Christ is found in the Bible, the Holy Scriptures. And the Bible is a spiritual book that affects our spirit. This is how E.W.Kenyon summarises the spirituality of the Bible: *God is Spirit and He reveals Himself to spirit and He can reveal Himself to our spirit through the Word. For instance, we hear someone read the Word of God. The thing that is read is weighed and measured by our intellect but in some way which is inexplicable to reason, it affects our spirit. It answers a need. Listening to the Word God changes our spirit.*

Most Churches' Doctrinal Statement includes something on the Bible being our source of information about Jesus Christ. *We believe that the Bible (i.e. the Old and New Testaments excluding the Apocrypha), is the inspired Word of God, the infallible, all sufficient rule for faith and practice.* (AoG Statement of Faith). *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).

When John the Baptist preached about the coming Messiah, he based his message on the Scriptures: *A voice of one calling in the wilderness, Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.*^{Matt.3:3;Is.40:3} John was birthed in this tradition of using the Bible as a point of reference—John's father Zechariah used Scripture to prophecy over him when he was a tiny baby: *His father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit. He prophesied, "Give praise to the Lord, the God of Israel! He has come and set his people free. He has acted with great power and has saved us. He did it for those who are from the family line of his servant David. Long ago holy prophets said he would do it. He has saved us from our enemies. We are rescued from all who hate us. He has been kind to our people. He has remembered his holy covenant. He made an oath to our father Abraham. He promised to save us from our enemies, so that we could serve him without fear. He wants us to be holy and godly as long as we live. 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.2:67-79}

Isaiah made it clear that if we don't accept God's revealed Word then we will have no hope at all! *Follow what the LORD taught you and said to you through me. People who don't speak in keeping with those words won't have any hope in the morning. They will suffer and be hungry. They'll wander through the land. When they are very hungry, they will become angry. They'll look up toward heaven. They'll call down curses on their king and their God. Then they will look at the earth. They'll see nothing but suffering and darkness. They'll see terrible sadness. They'll be driven into total darkness.*^{Is.8:20-22}

The Scriptures reveal God's plan of Salvation: *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.3:15-17}

God revealed Himself to, and through, a succession of people with various amounts of insight into His plan of salvation. For instance, Adam and Eve knew that Eve's "Seed" (i.e. one of her descendants) would crush the "serpent's head": *So the LORD God said to the serpent: "...I will put enmity between you and the woman and between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head and you shall bruise His heel."*^{Gen.3:15}

Job knew about the final resurrection: *know that my redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand on the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; I myself will see him with my own eyes—I, and not another. How my heart yearns within me!*^{Job.19:25-27}

David knew about Jesus' resurrection: *But God raised [Jesus] from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him. David said about him: "I saw the Lord always before me. Because he is at my right hand, I will not be shaken. Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body also will rest in hope, because you will not abandon me to the realm of the dead, you will not let your holy one see decay. You have made known to me*

the paths of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence.' '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.' ^{Acts.2:22-32}

Christianity is unique among all religions for many reasons, but the main reason is the resurrection of Jesus—Christianity stands or falls on the resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Son of God and son of Mary. Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel. ^{2Tim.2:8} Alisa Childers writes: *I'm more convinced than ever that Christianity is not based on a mystical revelation or self-inspired philosophy. It's deeply rooted in history. In fact, it is the only religious system I can think of that depends on a historical event (the resurrection of Jesus) being real—not fake—news.* ^{Another Gospel} It is Jesus' resurrection that saves us (not baptism or following a creed): *In it only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water, and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also—not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a clear conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at God's right hand—with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him.* ^{1Pet.3:20-22} So we must believe in Jesus' resurrection to be saved. *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}

Perhaps the best-known Gospel verse is John 3:16: *For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.* And this begs the question: what does "believe" mean? Biblically, "faith" is *"the power or skill to act in accordance with the nature of the kingdom of God"*. It is *a trust in what we have reason to believe is true*. Understood in this way, we see that faith is built on reason and we should have good reasons for thinking that Christianity is true before we dedicate ourselves completely to it. There are 2 aspects to faith—"believing that" and "believing in". Faith is **believing that God exists**: *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} But even the demons believe in God—they tremble with fear! ^{Jas.2:19} But saving faith is also **believing in God and Jesus Christ**: *"Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household."* *Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house.* ^{Acts.16:31-32} *This is eternal life: to know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you sent.* ^{Jn.17:3} This faith is an active reliance on, or trust in, what you believe is true. Both believing that God exists and believing in God are necessary for genuine Christian faith. Faith is a response to evidence, not a rejoicing in the absence of evidence. And the Bible was written so that we could have a reliable, trustworthy record of the facts. *Jesus performed many other 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 Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.* ^{Jn.20:30-31} *Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.* ^{Lk.1:1-4}

So, what do you base your faith on? Genuine Christian Faith is based on Jesus Christ who rose from the grave with an immortal body and we believe the Biblical record, not because we understand it all but because it is credible and we have learned to trust it. *But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep... Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not*

all sleep, but we will all be changed—in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality... But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. ^{1Cor.15:20-58}

Questions

Why is there chaos and darkness in society?

Is it realistic to be optimistic about the future?

What do you base your hope on?

How important is Jesus' resurrection to the Christian faith?

Explain what you understand by "faith".

Puritan Prayer: O Lord, whose power is infinite and wisdom infallible, order things that they may not hinder me, discourage me, or prove obstacles to the progress of Your cause. Stand between me and all strife so that no evil befalls me and no sin corrupts my gifts, zeal or attainments. May I follow duty and not any foolish device of my own. Permit me not to labour at work which You will not bless, so that I may serve You without disgrace or debt. Let me dwell in Your most secret place under Your shadow, where there is safe impenetrable protection from the arrow that flies by day, the pestilence that walks in darkness, the strife of tongues, the malice of ill-will, the hurt of unkind talk, the snares of company, the perils of youth, the temptations of middle life, the mournings of old age and the fear of death. I am entirely dependent upon You for support, counsel and consolation. Uphold me by Your Spirit, and may I not think it enough to be preserved from falling, but may I always go forward, always abounding in the work You give me to do. Strengthen me by Your Spirit in my inner self for every purpose of my Christian life. All my jewels I give to the shadow of the safety that is in You—my name anew in Christ, my body, my soul, my talents, my character, my success, my spouse, my children, my friends, my work, my present, my future and my end. Take them, they are Yours. And I am Yours—now and for ever.

Sunday 25th February Ps.49 Matt.4

Satan and Scripture.

Knowing Scripture is not spirituality because even satan can quote Scripture! *[satan] said to Jesus, 'If you are the Son of God, jump! Scripture says, 'He will put his angels in charge of you. They will carry you in their hands so that you never hit your foot against a rock.'* ^{Matt.4:6} But knowing the Scriptures is essential to living a successful and worthwhile life. *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.* ^{Prov.3:1-2} Without Scripture, we wouldn't know for sure what is right and what is wrong. *I would never have known that coveting is wrong if the law had not said, "You must not covet." ...But still, the law itself is holy, and its commands are holy and right and good.* ^{Rom.7:7-12} Scripture is like a sharp sword and Jesus used Scripture to resist temptation. *For the word of God is alive and powerful. It is sharper than the sharpest two-edged sword, cutting between soul and spirit, between joint and marrow. It exposes our innermost thoughts and desires.* ^{Heb.4:12} Jesus said to him, "Again, Scripture says, 'Never tempt the Lord your God.'" ^{Matt.4:7} Satan has blinded people so they can't see God's truth or His glory: *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.* ^{2Cor.4:1-4} But spiritual blindness is removed when people turn to God: *But their minds were made stubborn. To this very day, the same veil remains when the old covenant is read.*

The veil has not been removed. Only faith in Christ can take it away. To this very day, when the Law of Moses is read, a veil covers the minds of those who hear it. But when anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. Now the Lord is the Holy Spirit. And where the Spirit of the Lord is, freedom is also there.^{2Cor.3:14-17} Because Scripture is the Word of God, the very words in the Bible are spiritual—but they don't automatically produce faith: *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} That is why we encourage the learning and confession of Scripture—not as a technique to get what we want in life but as a means of building the truths of God's Word into our life in dependence on the Holy Spirit. *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} That is why we encourage the learning and confession of Scripture—not as a technique to get what we want in life but as a means of building the truths of God's Word into our life in dependence on the Holy Spirit.

So who is satan? Satan is a spiritual being (i.e. he doesn't have a physical body) and because God has created everything (with the exception God Himself!), satan was created by God: *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.*^{Jn.1:1-3} And because everything was good when God created it, satan must have been good when he was created: *God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning—the sixth day. Thus the heavens and the earth were completed in all their vast array.*^{Gen.1:31-2:1} But something happened that destroyed God's perfect utopia because satan (who appeared as a snake) had become a deceiver and a liar when he tempted Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden: *You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies. Yet because I tell the truth, you do not believe me! Can any of you prove me guilty of sin? If I am telling the truth, why don't you believe me? Whoever belongs to God hears what God says. The reason you do not hear is that you do not belong to God.*^{Jn.8:44-47} And so, although satan used to be good (he is referred to as “Lucifer” or “Morning Star”), he is now bad and has been cast out of heaven: *How you have fallen from heaven, O morning star, son of the dawn! You have been cast down to the earth, you who once laid low the nations!*^{Is.14:12} *The 72 returned with joy. They said, “Lord, even the demons obey us when we speak in your name.” Jesus replied, “I saw satan fall like lightning from heaven. I have given you authority to walk all over snakes and scorpions. You will be able to destroy all the power of the enemy. Nothing will harm you. But do not be glad when the evil spirits obey you. Instead, be glad that your names are written in heaven.”*^{Lk.10:17-20} *The great dragon was hurled down—that ancient serpent called the devil, or satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him.*^{Rev.12:9} In Job's story, satan still had access to God: *One day angels came to the LORD. Satan also came with them. The LORD said to Satan, “Where have you come from?” Satan answered, “From traveling all around the earth. I've been going from one end of it to the other.”*^{Job.1:6-7} Jesus defeated satan when He died on the cross at Jerusalem: *And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*^{Phil.2:8-11} It was on the Cross that satan was disarmed and his work destroyed: *When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having cancelled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.*^{Col.2:13-15} Dear children, do not let anyone lead you astray. The one who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous. The one who does what is sinful is of the devil, because the devil has been sinning from the beginning.

The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work. No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God's seed remains in them; they cannot go on sinning, because they have been born of God.^{1Jn.3:7-}

⁹ The story of Adonai-Bezek being defeated, captured, disarmed and eventually dying at Jerusalem is an Old Testament illustration of satan's demise: *When Judah attacked, the LORD gave the Canaanites and Perizzites into their hands, and they struck down ten thousand men at Bezek. It was there that they found Adoni-Bezek and fought against him, putting to rout the Canaanites and Perizzites. Adoni-Bezek fled, but they chased him and caught him, and cut off his thumbs and big toes.*

Then Adoni-Bezek said, "Seventy kings with their thumbs and big toes cut off have picked up scraps under my table. Now God has paid me back for what I did to them." They brought him to Jerusalem, and he died there.^{Jdg.1:4-7}

After satan rebelled against God, he and his angels are described as being in darkness: *And the angels who did not keep their positions of authority but abandoned their proper dwelling—these he has kept in darkness, bound with everlasting chains for judgment on the great Day.*^{Jude.6} But satan still masquerades as an angel of light when he tries to deceive people! *And no wonder, even satan disguises himself as an angel of light. So it's not surprising if his servants also disguise themselves as servants who have God's approval. In the end they will get what they deserve.*^{2Cor.11:14-15} Deception only works when people don't realise that they are being deceived! Although many people have been deceived by counterfeit £5 and £20 notes, a counterfeit £7 note would not deceive anyone because there is no real £7 note! I found this quote many years ago: *"The devil sometimes floods your mind with truth in order to float one lie!"* Religious deception and heresies usually have an element of truth in them but then they go

off on a tangent into an extreme and unbalanced position that takes people's attention from Jesus the Son of God and our Saviour. For instance, the idea of purgatory give people a false hope of another chance to get right with God after they have died and experienced the torment of hell; the office of a priest to mediate between people and God replaces Jesus as our only Priest and Mediator; special diets and rules to become more spiritual replaces faith as our only sacrament; the union of state and church allows unbelievers to influence the Church; the special knowledge (that usually has to be bought) that is required to be a "real" Christian replaces complete work of conversion; (the list is almost endless!). The devil knows Scripture better than most Christians (he has had 1000's of years to learn them!) and he is very crafty in using them to deceive people! But even though satan is skilled at deception and can twist Scripture to mean anything but the truth, he never learns from his mistakes! Satan will ultimately fail at everything he does because God will fulfil His purposes for us: *Though I walk in the midst of trouble, you preserve my life; you stretch out your hand against the anger of my foes, with your right hand you save me. The LORD will fulfill [his purpose] for me; your love, O LORD, endures forever.*^{Ps.138:7-8} God's Kingdom will prevail: *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}

The greatest act of defiance against God by the devil and the people who succumbed to his dominion was to kill His Son—but God turned Jesus' death into satan's defeat and our victory! The cross became the symbol of salvation instead of shame as it hosted God's greatest act of love: *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. Faithfulness springs forth from the earth, and righteousness looks down from heaven.*^{Ps.85:9-11} 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} We do, however, speak a message of wisdom among the mature, but not

the wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing. No, we declare God's wisdom, a mystery that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began. None of the rulers of this age understood it, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.^{1Cor.2:6-8} When we see what is happening in the world today, we need to remember that we contend with a vanquished foe, who with all his subtlety and strength has been overcome—and so, instead of living in gloom and despair, we can live in light and hope:

Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress... The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned... 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.9:1-7} *The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the broken hearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the LORD's favour and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion—to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the LORD for the display of his splendour.*^{Is.61:1-3} We have left satan's domain of darkness and confusion and we now live in the light and order of God's domain: *For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) and find out what pleases the Lord. Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them.*^{Eph.5:8-11} *Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? Or what does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God.*^{2Cor.6:14-16} Although satan may appear clever and influential, he is still a thief, a murderer, a deceiver, and a fraudster—the only original thing satan has ever done is sin! Augustine described satan as “God's monkey” because he tries to copy what God has already done—and then corrupts it, using people to do his work for him! *The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons. Such teachings come through hypocritical liars, whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron. They forbid people to marry and order them to abstain from certain foods, which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and who know the truth. For everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, because it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer.*^{1Tim.4:1-5} Then Saul, who was also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked straight at Elymas and said, “You are a child of the devil and an enemy of everything that is right! You are full of all kinds of deceit and trickery. Will you never stop perverting the right ways of the Lord?”^{Acts.13:9-10} But I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent's cunning, your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ. For if someone comes to you and preaches a Jesus other than the Jesus we preached, or if you receive a different spirit from the Spirit you received, or a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it easily enough.^{2Cor.11:3-4} However, God turns bad things into good things! *And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.*^{Rom.8:28} But Joseph said to them, “Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. So then, don't be afraid. I will provide for you and your children.”^{Gen.50:19-21}

It is not how much we know about Scripture that matters but how much of the Scripture we understand and are putting into practice. Jesus replied, “But even more blessed are all who hear the word of God and put it into practice.”^{Lk.11:28} Why do you call me Lord but don't do what I tell you? 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.^{1Lk.6:46-49}

Learning Scripture is an important part of living a holy and fulfilling life: *Be strong and very courageous. Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go. Keep this Book of the Law always on your lips; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful.*^{Josh.1:7-8}

How can a young person stay on the path of purity? By living according to your word. I seek you with all my heart; do not let me stray from your commands. I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you. Praise be to you, LORD; teach me your decrees.^{Ps.119:9-12}

But because Scripture is a spiritual book, we need the Holy Spirit to impart its truth to us—those without the Holy Spirit can't understand spiritual matters: *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 even with the Holy Spirit's revelation, we need to use our minds to study the Scripture. *Keep reminding God's people of these things. Warn them before God against quarrelling about words; it is of no value, and only ruins those who listen. 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. Avoid godless chatter, because those who indulge in it will become more and more ungodly. Their teaching will spread like gangrene.*^{2Tim.2:14-17}

To be emancipated from satan and sin, we must not only know the truth but also hold to Jesus' teaching. *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.8:31-32}

In other words, to be really free and live in that freedom, we must actually do what Jesus teaches. This means we need to correctly understand the Bible. The Old Testament part of the Bible prepares the ground for the New Testament and illustrates New Covenant doctrines but if we take doctrine from the Old Testament, we will easily get side-tracked from the main purpose of the Bible—**which is to explain God's plan of salvation to mankind through Jesus Christ, His Son and our Saviour!**

So let's continue to read, remember and put into practice God's Word. God is good, His Word is true and it works in my life: *And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is indeed at work in you who believe.*^{1Thess.2:13}

Questions

Where does evil come from?

How dangerous is the devil to Christians?

Can a Christian live a holy life?

Why is it important to know the Bible?

Are there any absolutely essential doctrines of Christianity?

Can we disagree with a Church's teaching and continue in fellowship?

Puritan Prayer: O Lord, I bless You that the issue of the battle between Yourself and satan has never been uncertain, and will end in victory. Calvary broke the dragon's head, and I contend with a vanquished foe, who with all his subtlety and strength has already been overcome. When I feel the serpent at my heel, may I remember Him whose heel was bruised, but who, when bruised, broke the devil's head.

March 2024

In God we trust: *The LORD is a refuge for the oppressed, a refuge in times of trouble. Those who know Your name trust in You, for You, LORD, have never forsaken those who seek You.* Ps.9:9-10

Thought for the Month:

Truth and godliness belong together. Truth is a living thing—when it grips our minds, it changes our lives. If we claim to know the truth, then the Bible would require us to prove our claim by the evidence of a way of life matching the truth. *Alec Motyer.*

Sunday 3rd March Ps.50 Matt.5

Today, as we present our Annual Report and Accounts (available on our Church Website), we give thanks to God for the past year and ask His guidance, support and blessing on the coming year. We continue to support 3 children at the Fervent Academy in Cebu Philippines and the Orphanages in Ukraine through Smethurst Ministries. Since the war started just over 2 years ago, we have prayed each week for the situation there and also prayed by name for those we know who are involved there. We are determined that these prayers do not become a useless ritual but are an effective routine where we constantly ask our Heavenly Father to intervene. We are grateful to have been able to have been able to give practical support to the earthquake victims in Turkey (through Kody and Amy Friesen) and also to those affected by fire in the Philippines—just a mile away from the Church and school we support in Mandaue City, Cebu. As we look forward to the coming year, let's remember our Church's Vision, which is *to proclaim Jesus, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ.* Col.1:28 It has been said that the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result. Our Commission from our Lord and Master is to keep preaching the Gospel—but we are not insane to expect different results this year than last year because the Gospel is Simple, Settled, Spiritual and Supernatural! When Peter had toiled all night without any results, he thought it wasn't worth his while to keep fishing—until Jesus told him to! *Master, we've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets.* When they had done so, they caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to break. Lk.5:5-6 However, we can be inventive in the way we proclaim Jesus and so we encourage you to ask God for new ways to fulfill the Great Commission.

The beautiful attitudes of God's Kingdom *Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.* Matt.5:3

To be blessed is to possess God's favour—to have God smile on us and receive His grace and peace: *The LORD spoke to Moses. He said: Tell Aaron and his sons, 'Here is how I want you to bless the people of Israel. Say to them, "May the LORD bless you and take good care of you. May the LORD smile on you and be gracious to you. May the LORD look on you with favour and give you his peace." In that way they will put the blessing of my name on the people of Israel. And I will bless them.* Nu.6:22-27 Smiling is a sign of happiness and contentment and a smile is always reciprocal—when someone smiles at you in a loving way, it is almost impossible to not smile back and feel happy! But when God smiles on us, we are blessed—which is far more than just being happy! Being happy comes from favourable external circumstances, whereas being blessed comes from favourable internal circumstances—*we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.* Rom.5:1 Jesus is our Lord and His Kingdom is now within in us—that makes us truly blessed! *Christ is in us, the hope of glory.* Col.1:27 *Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will—to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us*

in the One he loves. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and understanding, he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfilment—to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.^{Eph.1:3-10} God's blessings include being holy and blameless in His sight. We are holy in God's sight because we have been re-made in God's image and He had given us a new spirit—a holy spirit. So now God is joined to us and we are joined to Him: *But he who unites himself with the Lord is one with him in spirit.*^{1Cor.6:17} *You are in the realm of the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God lives in you... 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} We were born-again of the incorruptible seed of the Word of God.^{1Pet.1:23} And although may not always look holy or even feel holy, God is still with us because we are joined to Him! But God has given us a conscience and we need to know how put our heart at rest when we feel guilty We clean our conscience by talking with Jesus and make our confession to Him: *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. If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word is not in 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.1:7-2:2}

God is bigger than our sins and no matter how guilty we feel, we should trust Him to do what He said He would do—which is to cleanse us from all unrighteousness! *This is how we know that we belong to the truth and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence: If our hearts condemn us, we know that God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.*^{1Jn.3:19-20} God knows our weaknesses and there is no point trying to hide from Him. Adam and Eve tried to hide from God but He found them and told them about a Saviour who would destroy that liar and accuser called satan (who had appeared as a snake). *So the LORD God said to the snake, "Because you have done this, You are cursed more than all the wild or domestic animals. You will crawl on your belly. You will be the lowest of animals as long as you live. I will make you and the woman hostile toward each other. I will make your descendants and her descendant hostile toward each other. He will crush your head, and you will bruise his heel."*^{Gen.3:14-15} Now that Jesus has disarmed satan and destroyed his work, we don't have to live under the guilt of sin. Isaiah prophesied about this time—about our time: *"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. If you are willing and obedient, you will eat the best from the land,"*^{Is.1:18-19} This is the blessing of God's Kingdom.

But there is more to God's Kingdom than just theology—the academic facts. God's Kingdom is a spiritual Kingdom—it is the domain or reign of Jesus in our hearts, and so attitude is everything! That's why the Beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount are sometimes called *"the beautiful attitudes"*!

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. When Jesus said *"Blessed are the poor in spirit"*, He did not mean *"blessed are the poor-spirited"* or the *"mean spirited"*. God's blessings make us rich not poor! *He will make you rich in every way.*^{2Cor.9:11} *The blessing of the LORD brings wealth, and he adds no trouble to it.*^{Prov.10:22} No! Being poor in spirit does not mean having a spirit of poverty! Those who are mean-spirited or stingy we will become poor (actually, they already are poor!). *One man gives freely, yet gains even more; another withholds unduly, but comes to poverty. A generous man will prosper; he who refreshes others will himself be refreshed.*^{Prov.11:24-25} Remember this: *Whoever*

sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work.^{2Cor.9:6-8} No! God's Kingdom is about abundance—spiritual abundance, an abundance of grace and peace: Grace and peace be yours in abundance through the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord.^{2Pet.1:2} How precious 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} His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.^{2Pet.1:3-4} For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.^{Rom.14:17}

So what does “poor in spirit” mean? The “poor in spirit” are those who are humble in spirit, those who know that they have nothing good of themselves and must rely on God alone!

Before salvation we had no inherent or intrinsic goodness: *As it is written: “There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands; there is no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one.”*^{Rom.3:10-12} This doesn't mean there

are no nice people—there are lots of lovely people who spend their lives being good to others.

No! What this means is that there is not one single person who is right with God by nature—

no-one who is good enough to enter God's holy presence. But at conversion we were given a

new spirit—just like Ezekiel prophesied: *I will give them an undivided heart and put a new spirit in*

them; I will remove from them their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh. Then they will follow my decrees

and be careful to keep my laws. They will be my people, and I will be their God.^{Ezek.11:19-20} *I will give you a new*

heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And

I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.^{Ezek.36:26-27} We are

given Jesus' righteousness: *What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness*

of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain

Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is

through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith.^{Phil.3:8-9} *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} But after salvation,

we still need to rely on God for our rightness and our holiness. *We shouldn't put the Lord to the*

test as some of them did. They were killed by snakes. Don't complain as some of them did. The angel of death

destroyed them. These things happened to make them an example for others. These things were written down as

a warning for us who are living in the closing days of history. So, people who think they are standing firmly

should be careful that they don't fall.^{1Cor.10:9-12} That is why we should pray to God for our daily bread

and ask Him to keep us from sinning when we are tempted. But the main difference between

pre and post salvation is that we now belong to God and He is with us all the time. *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} However, we must never become complacent.

Jesus had harsh words to say to the church in Laodicea. It seems that even they knew the

Scriptures, they didn't understand them. They belonged to God and He still loved them but

they had become arrogant and proud. They thought they were blessed and prosperous but Jesus

said they were wretched and poor! *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's Word is alive and works in our life but we have to do more than just learn Scripture and recite it by rote—we must hear God's Word and then put it into practice. When we open the door of our heart to Him, Jesus comes and fellowships with us. *Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching. My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them.* ^{Jn.14:23} Christianity is not just a ticket to heaven but an ongoing relationship with God that never ends. So, let's keep a "poor in spirit" attitude of dependency on God whilst maintaining a spirit of generosity as we give cheerfully and willingly, first of all to God and then to one another. Then, as we stay dependent on God, we will enjoy God's Kingdom—which is righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit!

Questions

What does "blessed" mean?

What does "poor in spirit" mean?

How is God's spiritual Kingdom different from the natural kingdoms of this world?

Give some examples where God's Kingdom is different from this world's kingdoms

Can we be theologically right but spiritually wrong?

What can we do to keep our heart in tune (in unison) with God's heart?

Puritan Prayer: 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 bounds and Your goodness no stint. You bring order out of confusion and my defeats are Your victories: The Lord God Omnipotent reigns! I come to You as a sinner with cares and sorrows, to leave every concern entirely to You, with every sin calling for Christ's precious blood. Revive deep spirituality in my heart and let me live near to the great Shepherd, hear His voice, know its tones and follow its calls. Keep me from deception by causing me to abide in the truth and keep me from harm by helping me to walk in the power of the Spirit. Give me an intenser faith in the eternal verities and burn into me by experience, the things I know. Let me never be ashamed of the truth of the gospel, that I may bear its reproach, vindicate it, see Jesus as its essence and know in it the power of the Spirit. Lord, help me, for I am often lukewarm and chilled; unbelief will mar my confidence and sin will make me forget You—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—and that all else is trifling. Gracious God, it is Your presence alone that can make me holy, devout, strong and happy.

Sunday 10th March Ps.51 Matt.5

Mothering Sunday

Adam was a handsome man, God made him from dust,
He placed him in a garden fair, away from sin and lust.
Adam was a perfect man but one thing makes me glum,
Although he lived in paradise, he never had a Mum!

Adam was a special man, he had a job to do,
He named the birds, he named the beasts as God had told him to,
He also gave the fruit its name, like apple, pear and plum,
And although he lived in paradise, he never had a Mum!

Eve was made from Adam's rib, a woman fair was she,
Her hair was long, her teeth were white, a perfect sight to see;
Adam fell in love with her, he said "I'm glad you've come
For though I live in paradise, I've never had a Mum!"

Eve & Adam lost their home in that sweet garden fair,
Sin had crept into their lives to drive them to despair;
They had to work and toil all day, from dawn to setting sun.
Who could they tell their troubles to? They never had a Mum!

People here on earth today, remember that first pair
Who never grew up in a home with other kids to share;
They may have had a paradise but when all's said and done,
You nearly have had everything, when you have had a Mum! (Bill West)

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Matt. 5:4

Last week we looked at the 1st of the beautiful attitudes in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount—a “*poor in spirit*” attitude. This does not mean a “*spirit of poverty*” because Christians should never be mean-spirited or stingy. We are created and re-created in God's image, who gives to us graciously and freely: *He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?*^{Rom. 8:32} To be “*poor in spirit*” means to be humble in spirit, recognising that we have nothing good of ourself and so we rely on God for life and godliness, which He has already given to us by the Holy Spirit who dwells within us: *His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.*^{2Pet. 1:3-4} No wonder Jesus said: *Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*^{Matt. 5:3}

Although the basic premise of Christianity is trusting God for everything, life is never “*plain sailing*” and we all experience ups and downs, glad times and sad times, happy times and hurting times, satisfying times and disappointing times. But Jesus taught that in our mourning, we can be blessed! And the blessing is not in the sadness we experience but in the comfort we receive from God. *Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.* When hardships come, we begin to see the difference between theory and theology, fantasy and faith, superstition and spirituality. True faith grows and matures under pressure. When we have to rely on God to support us, it makes it easy for our faith to become real and dominate our whole life, including the way we view our situation. *My brothers and sisters, you will face all kinds of trouble. When you do, think of it as pure joy. Your faith will be put to the test. You know that when that happens it will produce in you the strength to continue. The strength to keep going must be allowed to finish its work. Then you will be all you should be. You will have everything you need.*^{Jas. 1:2-4} When we can't help ourselves, we have to rely on God—and faith will prompt us to declare what God has declared: *Let God arise, let His enemies be scattered.*^{Ps. 68:1} This is a good prayer to pray daily: *Rise up within me O Christ of God and cause me to triumph and walk in victory every moment of this day!* Of course, we can decide to let our circumstances

overwhelm us instead of trusting God, but that that is not living in victory as an overcomer! God has promised great rewards for those who overcome: *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} Believers should be overcomers: *This is love for God: to obey his commands. And his commands are not burdensome, for everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world? Only he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.*^{1Jn.5:3-5} To be an overcomer, we must be able to handle the small difficulties if we are going to cope with the larger difficulties! David fought the lion and bear before he fought Goliath: *The LORD who rescued me from the claws of the lion and the bear will rescue me from this Philistine!*^{1Sam.17:37} The Israelites crossed the Red Sea without getting their feet: *Then the LORD said to Moses, "Why are you crying out to me? Tell the people to get moving! Pick up your staff and raise your hand over the sea. Divide the water so the Israelites can walk through the middle of the sea on dry ground."*^{Ex.14:15-16} But after 40 years of seeing God provide for them, they had enough faith to walk into the water when they crossed the river Jordan: *Look, the Ark of the Covenant, which belongs to the Lord of the whole earth, will lead you across the Jordan River! Now choose twelve men from the tribes of Israel, one from each tribe. The priests will carry the Ark of the LORD, the Lord of all the earth. As soon as their feet touch the water, the flow of water will be cut off upstream, and the river will stand up like a wall.*^{Josh.3:11-13}

Believers are just that—people who believe! Runners, run; walkers, walk; Believers, believe—they have faith! But not everyone has faith—some follow their own natural instincts instead of trusting God. *But, dear friends, remember what the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ foretold. They said to you, "In the last times there will be scoffers who will follow their own ungodly desires." These are the men who divide you, who follow mere natural instincts and do not have the Spirit. But you, dear friends, build yourselves up in your most holy faith and pray in the Holy Spirit [Let the Holy Spirit guide and help you when you pray]. Keep yourselves in God's love as you wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to bring you to eternal life.*^{Jude.17-21} But even though we are Believers, we still need to build ourselves up in our faith. If we are going to be spiritually healthy we must have a balanced spiritual diet and be spiritually fit! Faith is a living thing and Jesus said that even the smallest amount of living faith can move mountains. *Truly I tell you, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you.*^{Matt.17:20} Notice that Jesus didn't say "grain of sand" (which is inanimate and lifeless) but "mustard seed" (which is living and has the potential to grow). Faith is a confident trust in God, and He expects our faith to grow—like the Israelites' and David's faith. But unless we use our faith, our information about God will stay head knowledge instead being heart knowledge. James said that we should look on problems as opportunities for growing our faith! *Dear brothers and sisters, when troubles of any kind come your way, consider it an opportunity for great joy. For you know that when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow. So let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be perfect and complete, needing nothing.*^{Jas.1:2-4} The German theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was imprisoned by the Nazis during WW2 and he wrote this from his prison cell:

I'm still discovering right up to this moment, that it is only by living completely in this world that we learn to have faith... By this-worldliness I mean living unreservedly in life's duties, problems, successes and failures, experiences and perplexities. In so doing we throw ourselves completely into the arms of God, taking seriously, not our own sufferings, but those of God in the world—watching with Christ in Gethsemane. That, I think, is faith; that is *metanoia* (lit. "change of mind", i.e. "repentance"); and that is how one becomes a man and a Christian (cf. Jer.45!). How can success make us arrogant, or failure lead us astray, when we share in God's sufferings through a life of this kind? I think you see what

I mean, even though I put it so briefly. I am glad to have been able to learn this, and I know I've been able to do so only along the road that I've travelled.

[‘This is what the LORD says: I will overthrow what I have built and uproot what I have planted, throughout the land. Should you then seek great things for yourself? Seek them not. For I will bring disaster on all people, declares the LORD, but wherever you go I will let you escape with your life.’] ^{Jer.4-5}

When Jesus said *Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted*, He meant much more than “it’ll work out all right in the end!” Jesus was explaining that our comfort comes directly from God.

Paul made this profound statement that I always use in funeral services: *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 have received from God. For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows.* ^{2Cor.1:3-5}

God comforts us, not just to make us feel comfortable (which of course we do) but so that we can comfort others. There is a Kingdom principal of sowing and reaping and we should sow generously so that we reap abundantly: *Sow your seed in the morning, and at evening let your hands not be idle, for you do not know which will succeed, whether this or that, or whether both will do equally well.* ^{Ecd.11:6}

We sow to God in response to the grain and new wine that God has given to us. “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. I will sow 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}

The grain represents the Word of God and the new wine represents the Holy Spirit. We respond to God’s gracious gifts by sowing to the heavens (that is, giving praise and thanksgiving to God); and in return God responds to the earth by showing us more of His love! Sowing and reaping is often used in reference to money: *Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work.* ^{2Cor.9:6-8}

But money is secondary to giving ourselves to God and to others: *And now, brothers and sisters, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord’s people. And they exceeded our expectations: They gave themselves first of all to the Lord, and then by the will of God also to us.* ^{2Cor.8:1-5}

And in God’s Kingdom, money is the least important ingredient. In fact, what God offers us cannot be bought with money! *Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost. Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labour on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and you will delight in the richest of fare. Give ear and come to me; listen, that you may live. I will make an everlasting covenant with you, my faithful love promised to David.* ^{Is.55:1-3}

When Simon saw that the Spirit was given at the laying on of the apostles’ hands, he offered them money and said, “Give me also this ability so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit.” 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.8:18-23}

Our English currency is Pounds Sterling but the currency of God’s Kingdom is Faith—that confident, certain trust in God, based on His Character and His Word (who God is and what God has said). That is why it is imperative that we become sincere and serious students of God’s Word. If we are to become

mature Christians, we must know what God has told us. Understanding what God has said has nothing to do with intellect or academic ability but everything to do with spiritual life—which is why we need the Holy Spirit and also a new holy spirit: *The words we speak to those who have grown in the faith are wise. Our words are different from the words of the wise people or rulers of this world. People like that aren't going anywhere. No, we speak about God's secret wisdom. His wisdom has been hidden. But before time began, God planned that his wisdom would bring us heavenly glory. None of the rulers of this world understood God's wisdom. If they had, they would not have nailed the Lord of glory to the cross. It is written, "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has known what God has prepared for those who love him." But God has shown it to us through his Spirit. The Spirit understands all things. He understands even the deep things of God. Who can know the thoughts of another person? Only a person's own spirit can know them. In the same way, only the Spirit of God knows God's thoughts. We have not received the spirit of the world. We have received the Spirit who is from God. The Spirit helps us understand what God has freely given us. That is what we speak about. We don't use words taught to us by people. We use words taught to us by the Holy Spirit. We use the words of the Spirit to teach the truths of the Spirit. 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.2:6-14} Academics can befuddle us with their rhetoric but when God speaks, He gives revelation—it is a “light bulb moment”. 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} And revelation comes from meditation: Reflect on what I am saying, for the Lord will give you insight into all this.^{2Tim.2:7}

Let's continue to ponder on what God has said, especially about being blessed when we mourn—remembering that the blessing of mourning is in the comfort that God gives us. The Psalmist found great comfort from God's Word (especially God's promises). *Remember your word to your servant, for you have given me hope. My comfort in my suffering is this: Your promise preserves my life. The arrogant mock me unmercifully, but I do not turn from your law. I remember, LORD, your ancient laws, and I find comfort in them.*^{Ps.119:49-52} *I can see now, GOD, that your decisions are right; your testing has taught me what's true and right. Oh, love me—and right now!—hold me tight! just the way you promised. Now comfort me so I can live, really live; your instructions are my delight.*^{Ps.119:75-77} When David wrote this, only part of the Old Testament was written but we have the completed Scriptures to ponder over! So let's encourage one another with God's living Word because it really does work in a Believer's life: *And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is indeed at work in you who believe.*^{1Thess.2:13}

Questions

Is it unspiritual to be sad?

How does God comfort us?

Is God's comfort automatic or do we have to do anything to receive it?

How can we understand the Bible better?

Will we always have a good harvest when we sow generously?

What is your favourite Scripture?

Puritan Prayers: Eternal Father, it is amazing love, that You have sent Your Son to suffer in my stead; that You have given Your Spirit to teach, comfort, guide; that You have allowed the ministry of angels to wall me round. Permit Your unseen servants to be ever active on my behalf and to rejoice when grace expands in me. Suffer them never to rest until my conflict is over and I stand victorious on salvation's shore. Grant that my proneness to evil, my deadness to good and my resistance to Your Spirit's motions, may never provoke You to abandon me. May my heart awake Your pity, not Your wrath—and if the enemy gets an advantage through my

corruption, let it be seen that heaven is mightier than hell and that those who are for me are greater than those against me. Arise to my help in the richness of Covenant blessings—keep me feeding in the pastures of Your strengthening Word and searching Scripture to find You there. If my waywardness is visited with a scourge—enable me to receive correction meekly, to bless the reproving hand, to discern the motive of rebuke, to respond promptly and do the first work. Let all Your fatherly dealings with me, make me a partaker of Your holiness. Grant that in every fall, I may sink lower on my knees, and that when I rise, it may be to loftier heights of devotion. May every cross be sanctified, every loss be gain, every denial a spiritual advantage, every dark day a light of the Holy Spirit and every night of trial, a song.

Sunday 17th March Ps.54 Matt.5

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Matt.5:5

The values of the God's Kingdom are very different from the values of this world's kingdoms. In the world you usually need to promote yourself aggressively to be successful—but the Kingdom of God is different. Jesus introduced a spiritual dimension that goes against all the social and political norms because God takes the foolish things to confound the wise: *Few of you were wise in the world's eyes or powerful or wealthy when God called you. Instead, God chose things the world considers foolish in order to shame those who think they are wise. And he chose things that are powerless to shame those who are powerful. God chose things despised by the world, things counted as nothing at all, and used them to bring to nothing what the world considers important. As a result, no one can ever boast in the presence of God.*^{1Cor.1:26-29} When Jesus' disciples vied for prominence, He explained the difference between this world's values and His Kingdom's values: *They also started to argue. They disagreed about which of them was thought to be the most important person. Jesus said to them, "The kings of the nations hold power over their people. And those who order them around call themselves Protectors ["Benefactors" or "Friends of the people"]. But you must not be like that. Instead, the most important among you should be like the youngest. The one who rules should be like the one who serves. Who is more important? Is it the one at the table, or the one who serves? Isn't it the one who is at the table? But I am among you as one who serves.*^{Lk.22:24-27} This wasn't the first time Jesus' disciples argued over who they thought was the most important: *An argument started among the disciples as to which of them would be the greatest. Jesus, knowing their thoughts, took a little child and had him stand beside him. Then he said to them, "Whoever welcomes this little child in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. For it is the one who is least among you all who is the greatest."*^{Lk.9:46-48} In both cases, Jesus explained that the Kingdom of God is different from the kingdoms of this world—and if we want to be commended by God then we must be like God. Jesus came to show us what God was really like: *The person who has seen me has seen the Father. So how can you say, 'Show us the Father'? Don't you believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? What I'm telling you doesn't come from me. The Father, who lives in me, does what he wants. Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and that the Father is in me. Otherwise, believe me because of the things I do.*^{Jn.14:6-11} Jesus was meek—and even when he was on the cross, He stayed humble, leaving an example for us to follow: *Christ suffered for you. He is your example, and you must follow in his steps. He never sinned, nor ever deceived anyone. He did not retaliate when he was insulted, nor threaten revenge when he suffered. He left his case in the hands of God, who always judges fairly.*^{1Pet.2:21-25} Jesus told His followers that they should learn from Him—in other words, to be the same as Him: *Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.*^{Matt.11:28-30} Yes, we should have the same attitude and Jesus: *You must have the same attitude that Christ Jesus had.*^{Phil.2:5}

This world often sees meekness as weakness but God sees meekness as strength. God is compassionate and gracious. *The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love... as a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him;*^{Ps.103:8-}

¹³ The prophecies about the Messiah foretold that He too would be compassionate and gracious: *See, your king comes to you, gentle and riding on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.*^{Matt.21:1-6} *Here is my servant whom I have chosen, the one I love, in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him, and he will proclaim justice to the nations. He will not quarrel or cry out; no one will hear his voice in the streets. A bruised reed he will not break, and a smouldering wick he will not snuff out, till he has brought justice through to victory. In his name the nations will put their hope.*^{Matt.12:15-21}

So in God's evaluation, meekness is not weakness but strength! Before Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt, he lived as an Egyptian prince for 40 years, having been trained in all the political, social and military skills that was expected of his status, then he was a nomadic shepherd living in the desert for another 40 years. And even though he was described as a very meek person, he certainly was not weak. *(Now Moses was a very humble man, more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth.) ...The LORD said, "Listen to my words: "When there is a prophet among you, I, the LORD, reveal myself to them in visions, I speak to them in dreams. But this is not true of my servant Moses; he is faithful in all my house. With him I speak face to face, clearly and not in riddles; he sees the form of the LORD."*^{Nu.12:3-8}

It was his meekness and humility that gave Moses his special intimate relationship with God—and if we are going to have that special intimate relationship with God, we too need to be meek, gentle and humble. In Charles Dickens' novel David Copperfield, Uriah Heep pretended to be very 'umble, but he was full of pride and malevolence—and ended up in prison for bank fraud. And even when he appeared a repentant model prisoner, he remained full of malice. Humility is state of our heart—that is, our real personality—and although we were given a new heart at conversion, we still need to develop our character. Maturity is the development of our personality or character, and as Believers, we must develop our personality so that we become more like Jesus Christ. Mature Christians are friends of God and live by His values, not the world's values: *Don't you realize that friendship with the world makes you an enemy of God? I say it again: If you want to be a friend of the world, you make yourself an enemy of God. Do you think the Scriptures have no meaning? They say that God is passionate that the spirit he has placed within us should be faithful to him. And he gives grace generously. As the Scriptures say, "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." So humble yourselves before God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come close to God, and God will come close to you.*^{Jas.4:4-8}

When Jesus taught the values of God's Kingdom, they were not something that He suddenly thought up but they had already been revealed in the Old Testament Scripture. However, before Jesus came, religion (including the true religion that God revealed and required), majored on the legal aspect of the Law. But when Jesus came, He introduced the New Covenant, which is about wanting to obey God. *First he said, "Sacrifices and offerings, burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not desire, nor were you pleased with them" (although the law required them to be made). 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.10:8-10} *"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. If you are willing and obedient, you will eat the best from the land,"*^{Is.1:18-19} God is Omnipresent (present everywhere) and Omniscient (knowing everything) and so we can never actually hide from Him—God not only sees us but sees our motives too! *Hagar gave this name to the LORD who spoke to her: "You are the God who sees me," for she said, "I have now seen the One who sees me."*^{Gen.16:13} *I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well. My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place, when I was woven together in the depths of the earth. Your eyes saw my unformed body; all the days ordained for me were written*

in your book before one of them came to be. How precious to me are your thoughts, God! How vast is the sum of them! ... Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.^{Ps.139:14-24} And because God sees us and knows us intimately, He sees through every hypocrisy: Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same 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.5:17-20}

Jesus introduced the New Covenant because the Old Covenant did not work: *The days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they did not remain faithful to my covenant, and I turned away from them, declares the Lord. This is the covenant I will establish with the people of Israel after that time, declares the Lord. I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will they teach their neighbour, or say to one another, 'Know the Lord,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest. For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.* By calling this covenant “new,” he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and outdated will soon disappear.^{Heb.8:8-}

¹³ And so the Old Covenant has been replaced with the New Covenant and it will never be reinstated. Sadly, there are some people—even some Christians—who still expect a physical temple with priests to offer worship to God under the Old Covenant! This undermines everything that Jesus has done and is doing. The Old Covenant was a temporary institution until the New Covenant came. Now, under the New Covenant, the Old Covenant promises have been expanded, not abolished. The promise under the Old Covenant was that the meek would inherit the land: *But the meek will inherit the land and enjoy peace and prosperity.*^{Ps.37:11} But Jesus said: *Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.*^{Matt.5:5}

The New Covenant is better and more blessed than the Old Covenant because instead of keeping the Law to the letter, we follow the spirit of the Law! You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment... Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not break your oath, but fulfill to the Lord the vows you have made.' But I tell you, do not swear an oath at all: either by heaven, for it is God's throne; or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King... You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also... You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbour and hate your enemy.' But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.^{Matt.5:21-45}

And unlike Judaism and other religions, Christianity gives us a clean conscience because our sins are removed rather covered over—and we have peace with God: *This is an illustration for the present time, indicating that the gifts and sacrifices being offered were not able to clear the conscience of the worshiper. They are only a matter of food and drink and various ceremonial washings—external regulations applying until the time of the new order...* 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.9:9-14} They must keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience.^{1Tim.3:9}

But God's promises are only ours in Christ. For no matter how many promises God has made, they are “Yes” in Christ. And so through him the “Amen” is spoken by us to the glory of God.^{2Cor.1:20} That means,

until someone becomes a Believer in Jesus Christ, God's promises don't belong to them. For instance, Believers have peace from God, but unbelievers have no spiritual rest. *I have seen their ways, but I will heal them; I will guide them and restore comfort to Israel's mourners, creating praise on their lips. Peace, peace, to those far and near," says the LORD. "And I will heal them." But the wicked are like the tossing sea, which cannot rest, whose waves cast up mire and mud. "There is no peace," says my God, "for the wicked."*^{Is.57:18-21} Although God promised peace to those far and near, peace only comes through knowing God **AND** Jesus Christ: *Grace and peace be yours in abundance through the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord.*^{2Pet.1:2} And so, whatever promises God has given in the Scriptures, their true meaning and ultimate fulfilment is only found in Christ with the New Covenant. This especially applies to the Old Testament worship: *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.2:15-17}

God's Kingdom is a spiritual kingdom and so has a different set of principles from the kingdoms of this world. In God's Kingdom, no one is excluded because natural abilities or position of health, wealth or education. It is our spiritual condition that counts: *But you are not controlled by your sinful nature [flesh]. You are controlled by the Spirit if you have the Spirit of God living in you. (And remember that those who do not have the Spirit of Christ living in them do not belong to him at all.) And Christ lives within you, so even though your body will die because of sin, the Spirit gives you life because you have been made right with God. The Spirit of God, who raised Jesus from the dead, lives in you. And just as God raised Christ Jesus from the dead, he will give life to your mortal bodies by this same Spirit living within you.*^{Rom.8:9-11} In many ways, we are no different from others in the way we live—and yet in another way we are very different. By confessing Jesus Christ as Lord, we are out of step with this world's agenda and in step with the mandate of Christ, whose concern was to see God's rulership and grace established in the world. No! Being meek is not weakness but a blessing because it opens the whole earth to us—and heaven too! *Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.*^{Matt.5:5}

Questions

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

What does it mean to be meek?

How is Christianity different from other religions (including Judaism)?

Are the promises of the Old Testament still relevant in the New Covenant?

What are the blessings of God's Kingdom?

How can we qualify for the blessings of God's Kingdom?

Puritan Prayer. Heavenly Father, teach me to see that Your Spirit and Your power are mine by resting on Christ's death alone—and that if Christ has pacified You and satisfied divine justice, then He can also deliver me from my sins. I am justified by Christ and I do not live in self-confidence in my own strength, but I am enabled to obey You by the Spirit of life whom You have given me. That Spirit of life within, answers to the law without—and if I don't sin, I should thank You for it, but if I do sin, I should come to You for forgiveness. When I see how sin strikes at You, it makes me mourn and when I see that it was sin that caused Christ's death, it makes me mourn. You have taught me that faith is receiving Your kindness; that faith is resting on Christ; that faith is clinging to Christ, as a branch to the tree, and seeking life and vigour from Him. Reconciliation with You proves that my faith has truly apprehended Christ—and the evidence of my reconciliation is sanctification. I thank You for showing me the vast difference between knowing things by reason, and knowing them by the spirit of faith. By reason, I see a thing is so; but by faith, I know it is so. When I saw You by reason I was not

amazed, but when I saw You as You are in Your Son, I was overwhelmed to behold You. I bless You that I am Yours in my Saviour, Jesus.

Palm Sunday 24th March. Psalm 54 Matt.21

Spiritual fruit and religious nuts! *The kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit.* ^{Matt.21:43}

Karl Marx (in)famously 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. The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is the demand for their real happiness.* And because society has believed that lie, Believers are often considered “deluded” and “irrelevant” or “living in another world”. But actually, we should feel like strangers here. When we became a Christian, we became subjects of another kingdom—we became citizens of heaven. *For, as I have often told you before and now tell you again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is set on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior 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.3:18-21} We should live as resident aliens, just as our forefathers in the faith lived: *All these people died having faith. They didn't receive the things that God had promised them, but they saw these things coming in the distant future and rejoiced. They acknowledged that they were living as strangers with no permanent home on earth. Those who say such things make it clear that they are looking for their own country. If they had been thinking about the country that they had left, they could have found a way to go back. Instead, these men were longing for a better country—a heavenly country. That is why God is not ashamed to be called their God. He has prepared a city for them.* ^{Heb.1:13-16} However, there is no reason for us to be weird! Genuine Christianity is credible and people should enjoy our company, not cringe when they meet us! Jesus was welcomed by ordinary people and they loved His company—it was the religious hypocrites who opposed Him: *Then Levi gave a huge dinner for Jesus at his house. A large crowd of tax collectors and others were eating with them. But the Pharisees and their teachers of the law complained to Jesus' disciples. They said, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and 'sinners'?" Jesus answered them, "Those who are healthy don't need a doctor. Sick people do. I have not come to get those who think they are right with God to follow me. I have come to get sinners to turn away from their sins."* ^{Lk.5:29-31} But even though we are different from the world, when something happens that society can't cope with or science can't cure, people look to us for answers—that's why Chaplains are so respected! Unfortunately, most people only want slick answers to salve their consciences rather sound answers to save their souls! They want the goods without the God! Nevertheless, we should still bring comfort to those in distress—and God has given us the words to do that: *The Sovereign LORD has given me an instructed tongue, to know the word that sustains the weary. He wakens me morning by morning, wakens my ear to listen like one being taught.* ^{Is.50:4} We are all made in God's image and will have to give an account of ourselves to God: *For we will all stand before God's judgment seat. It is written: " 'As surely as I live,' says the Lord, 'every knee will bow before me; every tongue will acknowledge God.' "* ^{Rom.14:10-12} So then, each of us will give an account of ourselves to God. Humans have a spiritual dimension as well as an emotional dimension. Our spirit (our God-conscience) and our soul (our self-conscience) are so inter-twined that it is often difficult to distinguish between them—but God's Word can and does divide between them. *For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.* ^{Heb.4:12-13} (That is why sometimes people with a religious outlook can appear spiritual but actually they are just emotional!) Although as Marx said, religion provides

illusory happiness, genuine Christianity is different and can provide the true happiness of loving God, living for God and pleasing God: *We are receiving a kingdom that can't be shaken. So let us be thankful. Then we can worship God in a way that pleases him. We will worship him with deep respect and wonder.*^{Heb.12:28} *Give proper recognition to those widows who are really in need. But if a widow has children or grandchildren, these should learn first of all to put their religion into practice by caring for their own family and so repaying their parents and grandparents, for this is pleasing to God. The widow who is really in need and left all alone puts her hope in God and continues night and day to pray and to ask God for help.*^{1Tim.5:3-5} True religion is not just about *doing*, it is about *being*—it is about *being* God-like by being re-born from above.^{Jn.3:3} True religion is also about remaining uncorrupted by this world. *If a person thinks that he is religious but can't control his tongue, he is fooling himself. That person's religion is worthless. Pure, unstained religion, according to God our Father, is to take care of orphans and widows when they suffer and to remain uncorrupted by this world.*^{Jas.1:26-27}

When Jesus “*cursed*” the fig-tree, He was teaching that the Jewish religion was finished. *Seeing a fig tree by the road, he went up to it but found nothing on it except leaves. Then he said to it, “May you never bear fruit again!” Immediately the tree withered.*^{Matt.21:19} (Fig leaves were used by Adam and Eve to try to cover their shame before God.) Jesus “*cursed*” the fig tree, after He had “*cleansed*” the Temple. Jesus had already “*cleansed*” the Temple at the beginning of His ministry^{Jn.2} after He had turned the water into wine. Now Jesus “*cleansed*” the Temple again as He was completing His ministry.^{Matt.21} On both occasions Jesus was teaching that the Old Covenant with its rituals was being made obsolete^{Heb.8:13} and that the New Covenant would replace the Old Covenant. *So don't let anyone condemn you for what you eat or drink, or for not celebrating certain holy days or new moon ceremonies or Sabbaths. For these rules are only shadows of the reality yet to come. And Christ himself is that reality.*^{Col.2:16-}

¹⁷ Although at that time the Old Covenant rituals had spiritual significance, they were temporary religious replicas of the spiritual realities of Christ that the New Covenant was about to introduce and replace. This is why the Temple artefacts in Jerusalem had to be so precisely made: *We have a High Priest who sat down in the place of honour beside the throne of the majestic God in heaven. There he ministers in the heavenly Tabernacle, the true place of worship that was built by the Lord and not by human hands... If he were here on earth, he would not even be a priest, since there already are priests who offer the gifts required by the law. They serve in a system of worship that is only a copy, a shadow of the real one in heaven. For when Moses was getting ready to build the Tabernacle, God gave him this warning: "Be sure that you make everything according to the pattern I have shown you here on the mountain." But now Jesus, our High Priest, has been given a ministry that is far superior to the old priesthood, for he is the one who mediates for us a far better covenant with God, based on better promises.*^{Heb.8:1-6}

When Jesus turned the water into wine at the beginning of His ministry, He used water in the jars used for the Jewish rites of purification to show that we are cleansed by the “*wine*” of the New Covenant, (which represents the blood or life of Jesus), not by the water of ritual washing of the Old Covenant.^{Jn.2:6} We are cleansed by receiving the benefits of Jesus’ death not by rituals of religion! *This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.*^{Matt.26:28}

When Jesus cursed the fig tree at the end of His ministry, He showed that religion (man’s attempt to cover his guilt) is finished and even the good ritualist religion that God once prescribed is now proscribed! The fig leaves with which Adam tried to cover his shame were now withered! *At that moment their eyes were opened, and they suddenly felt shame at their nakedness. So they sewed fig leaves together to cover themselves.*^{Gen.3:7} So when Jesus cursed the fig tree and its leaves withered, He was teaching us that God has finished with human attempt to cover the shame of our sin and now we have to rely totally on His provision to make ourselves acceptable: *And the LORD God made clothing from animal skins for Adam and his wife.*^{Gen.3:21} *For he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of his righteousness.*^{Is.61:10} *I put on righteousness as my*

clothing.^{Job.29:14} I no longer count on my own righteousness through obeying the law; rather, I become righteous through faith in Christ. For God's way of making us right with himself depends on faith. I want to know Christ and experience the mighty power that raised him from the dead.^{Phil.3:9-10}

At both of the Temple cleansings, Jesus referred to His "Father's House". At the first cleansing, Jesus made reference to His body being the true Temple. Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days." They replied, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?" But the temple he had spoken of was his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples recalled what he had said. Then they believed the scripture and the words that Jesus had spoken.^{Jn.2:19-22} (The Temple was started 20BC and completed AD64.) At the second cleansing,

Jesus stated that His Father's House is a House of Prayer. The Scriptures declare, 'My Temple will be called a house of prayer for all nations'^{Is.56:7; Je.7:11} but you have turned it into a den of thieves.^{Mk.11:17}

In the New Covenant our body is God's Temple and we are the House of Prayer—WE are the place where God dwells. Don't you realize that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, who lives in you and was given to you by God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honour God with your bodies.^{1Cor.6:19-20}

We no longer go on pilgrimages or use special rituals and festivals in order to meet with God. God comes to us, makes us clean and takes away our shame. For we are the temple of the living God.

As God has said: "I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people."^{2Cor.6:16} God fellowships with us permanently! Jesus answered him, "Those who love me will do what I say. My Father will love them, and we will go to them and make our home with them."^{Jn.14:23}

The sacrifices we bring to God are offerings of praise and obedience—words and works. Through Jesus we should always bring God a sacrifice of praise, that is, words that acknowledge him.^{Heb.13:15} You also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.^{1Pet.2:5}

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

The true religion that God wants (and expects) from us, is to love Him and live for Him. This not only pleases God but also produces spiritual fruit in us. But the spiritual nature produces love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There are no laws against things like that.^{Gal.5:2-23}

And the flavour of this fruit is love: Dear friends, let us love one another, because love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born again because of what God has done. That person knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. How did God show his love for us? He sent his one and only Son into the world. He sent him so we could receive life through him. What is love? It is not that we loved God. It is that he loved us and sent his Son to give his life to pay for our sins. Dear friends, since God loved us that much, we should also love one another... in this world we love as Jesus did. There is no fear in love. Instead, perfect love drives fear away. Fear has to do with being punished. The one who fears does not have perfect love. We love because he loved us first. Anyone who says he loves God but in fact hates his brother or sister is a liar. He doesn't love his brother or sister, whom he has seen. So he can't love God, whom he has not seen. Here is the command God has given us. Anyone who loves God must also love his brothers and sisters.^{1Jn.4:7-21}

Our religious upbringing or even our religious experiences aren't enough—we must produce the right fruit or we are in danger of being cut down: 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. The axe is already lying at the roots of the trees. All the trees that don't produce good fruit will be cut down. They will be thrown into the fire.^{Matt.3:8-10}

And the fruit of our spirit will also become the fruit of our lips as we express our praise to God: Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that confess his name. And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.^{Heb.13:15-16}

Return, O Israel, to the LORD your God. Your sins have been your downfall! Take words with you and return to the LORD. Say to him: "Forgive all our sins and receive us graciously, that we may offer the fruit of our lips."^{Hos.14:1-2}

²This is what the people did as Jesus entered Jerusalem: *Some of the people went ahead of him, and some followed. They all shouted, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!" "Hosanna in the highest heaven!" When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred up. The people asked, "Who is this?" The crowds answered, "This is Jesus. He is the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee."*^{Matt.21:9-11} Sadly most of the crowd appeared to only see Jesus as a prophet instead of the Messiah, their Saviour because only a few days later the crowds were shouting a different chant: *Pilate wanted to let Jesus go. So he made an appeal to the crowd again. But they kept shouting, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" Pilate spoke to them for the third time. "Why?" he asked. "What wrong has this man done? I have found no reason to have him put to death. So I will just have him whipped and let him go." But with loud shouts they kept calling for Jesus to be crucified. The people's shouts won out.*^{Lk.23:20-23} It is good and right to praise Jesus, but we must move beyond just saying good things about Him. We must worship Jesus as the Son of God as well as acknowledging Him as the son of David: *Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven."*^{Matt.16:16-17} Ruth Heflin explains the difference between praise and worship:

I see the difference between praising and worshipping as if I were part of the Palm Sunday procession. I shout with the whole crowd, "Hosanna! Hosanna! Blessed is He that comes in the name of the Lord." That is praise. But when Jesus, King of Kings and Lord of Lords, looks at me and says, "I love you." and I reply, "Lord, I love You," I'm no longer waving my palm and shouting, "Hosanna!" I'm bowing in worship and saying, "My Lord and my God." Others are still waving their palms and shouting, "Hosanna!" But I'm totally oblivious to what is happening around me. He looks at me, and all the love of eternity is poured into my soul. At this moment, I know how much He loves me. I know His majesty in a way I have never known it before. Nobody has to tell me He is King. I know it, and I worship Him, bowing before Him, recognizing His majesty, His regal position. Worship is you shut away with God. In the middle of the busiest street in town, in the busiest restaurant, in the midst of the greatest activity of the day, you find little moments to be alone with the Lord. Thank God there can be many moments throughout the day in which it is just you and the Lord. Even though many things are happening around you, you can close yourself in with Him.

Today, we remember the events of Palm Sunday—the exhilarating praises of people who saw Jesus as a prophet, the withered fig tree and the redundant Temple sacrifices. But we also remember that we are a house of prayer, the real Temple of God where we offer genuine praise that progresses into reverent worship of Jesus, who is not only a Prophet but the Christ, the Son of the living God. We are not religious nuts but we do have true spiritual fruit!

Questions

"Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature... It is the opium of the people." Is this a valid statement? How involved should Christians be in social concerns?

What was the significance of Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a donkey?

What was the significance of Jesus chasing those who were buying and selling out from the Temple?

Why did people shout praise to God?

Puritan Prayer. O Holy Father, You have freely given me Your Son. O Divine Son, You have freely paid my debt. O Eternal Spirit, You have freely bid me come. O Triune God, You have freely graced me with salvation. My prayers and tears could not suffice to pardon my sins and a thankful acceptance could never pay my debts—but my believing is my receiving. What did You see in me, that I, a poor, diseased, despised sinner should be clothed in Your bright glory? Who can fathom Your immeasurable love? As far as the rational soul exceeds the senses, so does the spirit exceed the rational in its knowledge of You. You have given me understanding to compass the earth and to measure the sun, moon and stars, but above all—to know You, the only true God. I marvel that the finite can know the Infinite—here a little and then afterwards in full-orbed truth. Now I know but a small portion of what I shall know—here in part, then in perfection, here a hint, then in glory. To know is to enjoy—and to know You is life eternal. Keep me in Your freedom of experiencing Your salvation continually.

Easter Sunday 31st March Ps.24

Who is it you are looking for?^{Jn.20:15}

This world seems to be on a never-ending search for anything and everything except what really matters—God! For instance, the search for life on Mars has no practical purpose but has already cost more money than most countries' annual budget. The estimated cost of a manned mission to put humans on the surface of Mars range from US\$50 billion to US\$100 billion! But the cost of getting to heaven is free—yet so few people take up the offer! *As the Scriptures say, No one is righteous—not even one. No one is truly wise; no one is seeking God. All have turned away; all have become useless. No one does good, not a single one.*^{Rom.3:10-12} Unless God motivates people to seek Him, they aren't interested: *No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws them, and I will raise them up at the last day.*^{Jn.6:44} God draws people to Himself through the cross: *And when I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw everyone to myself.* He said this to indicate how he was going to die.^{Jn.12:32-33} That is why we must preach the **cross of Christ**. *God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.*^{1Cor.1:21-25} The cross of Christ refers to the resurrection of Jesus Christ as well as His sacrificial death because without the resurrection of Jesus there is no Gospel. *Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel.*^{2Tim.2:8}

The Gospel is far greater than a quick-fix to get us to heaven. The Gospel affects our whole life because it puts us right with God the teaching about righteousness is integral to Christian maturity: *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} Paul discoursed on righteousness, self-control and the judgment to come.^{Acts.24:25} Christian righteousness can be summed up in this one verse: *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} This Great Exchange of Jesus' righteousness for our sin took place on the Cross where God laid our sin on Jesus and gave us His peace: *He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain. Like one from whom people hide their faces he was despised, and we held him in low esteem. Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.*^{Is.53:3-6}

The good news of the Christian message (Gospel means “good news”) is that our sins are forgiven and we are declared right in God’s sight by believing and depending Jesus. When we place our trust in Jesus we are saved—from hell and for heaven—by what He accomplished when He died and rose again. *For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile. 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.1:16-17} But this wonderful message of hope is foolishness to the world. *For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God... While Jews clamour for miraculous demonstrations and Greeks go in for philosophical wisdom, we go right on proclaiming Christ, the Crucified. Jews treat this like an anti-miracle—and Greeks pass it off as absurd. But to us who are personally called by God himself—both Jews and Greeks—Christ is God's ultimate miracle and wisdom all wrapped up in one. Human wisdom is so tinny, so impotent, next to the seeming absurdity of God. Human strength can't begin to compete with God's “weakness.”*^{1Cor.1:18-25} We all like to “pay our way” and find it hard to accept “charity” (although if we analysed the word, it would be easier, because “charity” is the old word for “love”: *And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity. Follow after charity, and desire spiritual gifts, but rather that ye may prophesy.*^{1Cor.13:13-14:1}) However, when it comes to spiritual matters, receiving God’s “charity” (love) is the only way we can become right with God. Adam’s fig leaves didn’t cover his shame of guilt and nothing that we do will cover our guilt either—it is only the cross of Christ that reconciles us to God: *For he [Jesus] himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.*^{Eph.1:14-18}

In Roman times when criminals were crucified, a “certificate of debt” to Caesar, was nailed to the cross as a public display of their crime. When the punishment was completed, Caesar’s court cancelled the debt with a single Greek word stamped upon the parchment: “**tetelestai**” (meaning **finished, paid in full**). Jesus, who was born *King of the Jews*,^{Matt.2:2} died with the “certificate of debt” to Caesar that stated: *Jesus of Nazareth the King of the Jews.*^{Jn.19:1-9} However, being *king of the Jews* was not the crime that Jesus paid for! Hidden to all but the Father was another certificate nailed to that cross: **it was a certificate of sin.** It was our sin that was nailed to Jesus’ cross: *When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having cancelled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.*^{Col.2:13-15} **Jesus’ crime was 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} *But you know that he appeared so that he might take away our sins. And in him is no sin.*^{1Jn.3:5} *But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.*^{Is.53:5-6} *He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness.*^{1Pet.2:25} Jesus had finished the work His Father had given Him to do. He knew that everything was now finished. He knew that what Scripture said must come true... After Jesus drank he said, “It is finished.” Then he bowed his head and died.^{Jn.19:28-30} **So when Jesus died saying “it is finished” (Tetelestai) it was not a dying gasp but a cry of completion and the voice of victory. The price of our sins had been paid in full!** It is through Jesus’ death on the cross that we have peace with 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.1:20}

The benefits of Jesus' death are wonderful—

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!

But like our NHS, although these are “free at the point of need”, they are not free from cost! In the fiscal year 2021/22, the Department for Health and Social Care allocated a total of £190 billion to fund various health and care services. Our spiritual health is also very costly, but it can't be bought with money—not even £190 billion! The price of our spiritual health is our life because we have to “die to self” in order to live for God. *Whoever does not take up their cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake will find it.* ^{Matt.10:38-39} Then Jesus said to his disciples, “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it.” ^{Matt.16:24-25} Jesus has reconciled us to God and is now our Peace: *Christ himself is our peace. He has made Jews and non-Jews into one group of people. He has destroyed the hatred that was like a wall between us. Through his body on the cross, Christ put an end to the law with all its commands and rules. He wanted to create one new group of people out of the two. He wanted to make peace between them. He planned to bring both of them as one body back to God because of the cross. Christ put their hatred to death on that cross. He came and preached peace to you who were far away. He also preached peace to those who were near. Through Christ we both come to the Father by the power of one Holy Spirit.* ^{Eph.2:14-18} God's peace gives us real joy, not an illusory joy—it is a **contented joy which is permanent**, not just a temporary fix to get us through the next day. The cross of Christ means we have been saved from our sins and Jesus' resurrection is the evidence that we have been made right with God. *What does the Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.” ...The words “it was credited to him” were written not for him alone, but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness—for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.* ^{Rom.4:3;23-25}

So the question is: *Who is it you are looking for?* ^{Jn.20:15} Many people are looking for answers to life but look for the wrong things—they want to placate their conscience instead of saving their soul! Some look to religion and some even look to the Church but sadly they are usually fobbed off with a different Jesus from the Biblical Jesus. Jesus is no longer a baby in the manger, or a carpenter from Nazareth, or even just a good prophet—Jesus is *the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.* ^{Jn.1:29} He is *the Christ, the Son of the living God.* ^{Matt.16:16} Jesus died and has risen from the dead! *He is not here; he has risen, just as he said.* ^{Matt.28:6} *You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen!* ^{Mk.16:6} *He is not here; he has risen!* ^{Lk.24:6} When Jesus rose from the dead, He rose with an immortal body that is glorious, and in the true sense of the word, “awesome”: *His head and his hair were white like wool, as white as snow. And his eyes were like flames of fire. His feet were like polished bronze refined in a furnace, and his voice thundered like mighty ocean waves. He held seven stars in his right hand, and a sharp two-edged sword came from his mouth. And his face was like the sun 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.1:14-18} Then one of the elders said to me, “Do not weep! See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed. He is able to open the scroll and its seven seals.” Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing at the centre of the throne, encircled by the four living creatures and the elders. ^{Rev.5:5-6}

The Jesus we worship is now seated at the right hand of the Father in heaven. *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} And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross! Therefore, God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.^{Phil.2:8-11}

The Easter story is the very heart of the Christian message: *You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen!*^{Mk.16:60} Let's join with Thomas and respond: **My Lord and my God!**^{Jn.20:28} **Hallelujah!**

Questions

Is the Christian Gospel cheap or expensive?

Who caused Jesus' death?

What happened at Jesus' crucifixion?

Name some benefits of Jesus' crucifixion.

How is Jesus different now from when He lived on earth?

Why is the resurrection so important?

Puritan Prayer: 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 Your Spirit as my Teacher, my Guide and my Power, that I may live—repenting of sin, conquering temptations and finding victory in life. When You are present all blessings are mine.

April 2024

In God we trust: *But I trust in Your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in Your salvation. I will sing the LORD's praise, for He has been good to me.* Ps.13:5-6

Thought for the Month: Christianity is not based on a mystical revelation or self-inspired philosophy but it is deeply rooted in history. In fact, it is the only religious system I can think of that depends on a historical event (the resurrection of Jesus) being real—not fake—news. *Alisa Childers*

Sunday 7th April Ps.56 John 21

"I'm going fishing." "We'll come, too," they all said. ^{Jn.21:3}

But Peter obviously enjoyed fishing because when he was despondent, he decided to go fishing. Peter had boasted that he would never deny Jesus—then denied Him three times and later watched Him die! He was feeling about as low as you could get but the best way to cope with stress is to do something familiar that you enjoy, with friends that you trust—so Peter went fishing with his closest friends. And that is where Jesus restored Peter with the challenge: *Do you love me? Then follow Me and feed My sheep.* ^{Jn.21:15-17}

We are created in God's image ^{Gen.1:27} and so every person is intrinsically important (especially to God). Simon Peter's mission was fishing for people: *Let the nets down so you can catch some fish.* *When they had done so, they caught a large number of fish... Then Jesus said to Simon, "Don't be afraid. From now on you will catch people."* ^{Lk.5:4-10} "Fishing" for people involves loving Jesus, following Him and feeding His sheep: *"Simon, son of John, do you love me more than the other disciples do?" Peter answered him, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you."* Jesus told him, *"Feed my lambs."* Jesus asked him again, a second time, *"Simon, son of John, do you love me?"* Peter answered him, *"Yes, Lord, you know that I love you."* Jesus told him, *"Take care of my sheep."* Jesus asked him a third time, *"Simon, son of John, do you love me?"* Peter felt sad because Jesus had asked him a third time, *"Do you love me?"* So Peter said to him, *"Lord, you know everything. You know that I love you."* ...Then Jesus told him, *"Follow me."* ^{Jn.21:15-19} We too are commissioned to fish for people: *Jesus came and told his disciples, "I have been given all authority in heaven and on earth. Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations."* ^{Matt.28:18-19} And like Peter, we fish for people by loving Jesus, following Him and feeding His sheep. If we are going to fish confidently and credibly, we must be sure of our message and make every effort to keep the faith so we finish our race in victory and glory. *I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.* ^{2Tim.4:7-8}

We want to hear God say *"well done good and faithful servant"* ^{Matt.25:19-22} not *"well what have you done?"* Paul made every effort to ensure that he was not disqualified: *So I run with purpose in every step. I am not just shadowboxing. I discipline my body like an athlete, training it to do what it should. Otherwise, I fear that after preaching to others I myself might be disqualified.* ^{1Cor.9:26-27} And we too should make sure that we don't fail the faith test either! *Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you—unless, of course, you fail the test? And I trust that you will discover that we have not failed the test. Now we pray to God that you will not do anything wrong.* ^{2Cor.13:5-7}

Every Believer has been called and commissioned to help people come to faith and continue in their faith—but sadly some people will only make it *"by the skin of their teeth"*: *As you wait for his mercy, remain in God's love. Show mercy to those who doubt. Pull others out of the fire. Save them. To others, show mercy mixed with fear. Hate even the clothes that are stained by the sins of those who wear them.* ^{Jude 21-13}

If we are wise we will share our faith and save souls: *The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life, and he who wins souls is wise.* ^{Prov.11:30} True wisdom starts with respecting God: *The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction.* ^{Prov.1:7} *If you really want to become wise, you*

must begin by having respect for the LORD. All those who follow his rules have good understanding. People should praise him forever.^{Ps.111:10} And wise people build on a solid foundation not a sandy foundation: Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash.^{Matt.7:24-27} Jesus is described as a rock: 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.10:3-4} 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} Truly my soul finds rest in God; my salvation comes from him. Truly he is my rock and my salvation; he is my fortress, I will never be shaken.^{Ps.62:1-2} Even though the foundation of our faith is sound because it is the "rock" of Jesus Christ, we still have to build our life on that foundation. How we build our life—the choices we make, the company we keep—is our responsibility. We can either build with good materials or poor materials—it is up to us. But we should remember that there is a day of reckoning coming! *The mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ will bring you eternal life. God has given me the grace to lay a foundation as a master builder. Now someone else is building on it. 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}

Christianity is a heart-religion where only our own personal faith counts—second-hand theology is a good start but we have to personalise the Christian truths for ourselves. Faith is always personal, not proxy. We can pray for others and God will answer our prayers—that is what intercession is—but you cannot save someone else by your prayers. Salvation is personal—it is "I believe". That is why babies cannot be baptised—and if a baby undergoes the ceremony of baptism, it cannot be "Believers' Baptism" because they cannot express their own belief or faith: *Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus. As they travelled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water. What can stand in the way of my being baptized?" Philip said, "If you believe with all your heart, you may." The eunuch answered, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God."*^{Acts.8:35-37} Like Peter, we all need a personal revelation that Jesus is God's Son: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God!" Jesus replied, "Simon, son of Jonah, you are blessed! No human revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven revealed it to you."^{Matt.16:16-17} When some Jews tried to invoke the Name of Jesus that Paul preached, they found that it didn't work! *Some Jews who went around driving out evil spirits tried to invoke the name of the Lord Jesus over those who were demon-possessed. They would say, "In the name of the Jesus whom Paul preaches, I command you to come out." Seven sons of Sceva, a Jewish chief priest, were doing this. One day the evil spirit answered them, "Jesus I know, and Paul I know about, but who are you?" Then the man who had the evil spirit jumped on them and overpowered them all. He gave them such a beating that they ran out of the house naked and bleeding.*^{Acts.19:13-16} Abraham sent Eliezer to find a bride for Isaac, and when he found Rebekah, he gave straw and fodder to the camels^{Gen.24:32} but gold, silver and jewellery to Rebekah.^{Gen.24:53} A diamond is formed when carbon-bearing materials are exposed to high pressure at a temperature of about 1,000°C. These conditions are met in two places on Earth: in the lithospheric mantle below the continental plates, and at the site of a meteorite strike. Hay and straw are good as camel food

but not so good as building materials because they are not fire-resistant.^{1Cor.3:12} The spiritual food of preaching and teaching can be likened to hay and straw. What we receive from others may be good spiritual food but we can't build our life on theory—we must make that teaching our own. We need the pressure of life and the power of the Holy Spirit to transform the *hay and straw* of the teaching we hear and the books we read, into diamonds that will survive the trials of life and welcome us into eternity. And we also need to help other people transform the *hay and straw* of the sermons and other spiritual teachings they have received, into the *precious stones* of their own personal faith! Just as diamonds are made under high pressure and heat, so when the sermons and other studies are put into practice (lived out through life's stresses) with the "heat" of the Holy Spirit, *fodder* is changed into *precious stones* that we can build with and that will endure. Bible truths are described as milk and meat and both are important. But milk is when we only listen to the Word of God but meat is when we start living it: *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 [strong meat^{KJV}]! 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.5:12-14} *I could not address you as people who live by the Spirit but as people who are still worldly—mere infants in Christ. I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready. You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarrelling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere humans? For when one says, "I follow Paul," and another, "I follow Apollos," are you not mere human beings?*^{1Cor.3:1-4} *Therefore, rid yourselves of all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander of every kind. 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.2:1-3} We are blessed when we put God's Word into practice: *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.... Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it.*^{Lk.11:15;28}

Like Peter, we are to be "fishers of people" but to fish effectively, we must first of all, *want* to go fishing, then we need some equipment and lastly, we need to store the fish we catch. **We already have the desire**—at conversion we were given a new heart^{Ez.36:26} which gave us the desire to love Jesus, God's Word and also to love people because they are made in God's image. **We already have the basic equipment for fishing** and it's not expensive or complicated—it's **our mind and our mouth!** *Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.*^{Rom.12:2} We are to focus our thoughts on God and His Kingdom (His rule and authority): *Fix your thoughts on what is true, and honourable, and right, and pure, and lovely, and admirable. Think about things that are excellent and worthy of praise. Keep putting into practice all you learned and received from me—everything you heard from me and saw me doing. Then the God of peace will be with you.*^{Phil.4:8-9} But we also have to talk about what we are thinking! *In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: Preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction. For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths. But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry.*^{2Tim.4:1-5} Then we need a **place to store the fish**—and yes we have that too—it is **the Church**. The Church (the meeting of Believers in the Name of Jesus) is the storehouse—the place where we are fed and cared for. The "fish" need to be cleaned by clean people. Being clean does not mean that we never do anything wrong but that we **align our values with God's values** (His Word). *You are already*

clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.^{Jn.15:3-4} Christ loved the church. He gave up his life for her to make her holy and clean, washed by the cleansing of God's word. He did this to present her to himself as a glorious church without a spot or wrinkle or any other blemish. Instead, *she will be holy and without fault.*^{Eph.5:26-27} That's why we use the Word of God in our Praise, Prayer and Preaching. Our fishing (outreach) can be to large crowds, small crowds and even to individuals (like Peter catching one fish^{Matt.17:27}). But whatever the size of or "catch" we must keep on "fishing" and, if we don't give up, we will reap a harvest of righteousness. *Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. Whoever sows to please their flesh, from the flesh will reap destruction; whoever sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life. Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.*^{Gal.6:7-10}

To encourage us in our fishing, over the next 6 Sundays we will look again at Greg Koukl's "Story of Reality" where he emphasises the 5 basic principles of the Gospel: **God, Man, Jesus, Cross and Resurrection. So, I'm going fishing—will you come too?**

Questions:

What does it mean to be made in God's image?

What is the difference between milk of the Word and the meat of the Word?

How can we change spiritual food into solid faith?

How important is it for a Christian to have a personal faith?

Why did Peter want to go fishing?

How can we be more effective in fishing for people?

Puritan Prayer: O God, I bless You for the happy moment when I first saw Your law fulfilled in Christ—that Your wrath was appeased; that my death was destroyed; that my sin was forgiven; that my soul was saved. And ever since, You have been faithful to me—daily have I proven the power of Jesus' blood, and 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 You is freedom from condemnation; in Your righteousness, there is fullness of life; in Your given life, there is eternal vitality; in fellowship with You, there is enduring union. In You 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 You. If I am tempted and have no joy, give me strength enough to trust in You. If I am weak, may I trust in Your eternal love. If in extremity, let me feel that You can deliver me. If driven to the edge of hope and to the pit of despair, grant me grace to fall into Your arms. O God, hear me; do for me more than I can ask, think or dream.

Sunday 14th April Ps.57 John 1:1-28

For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. Jn.1:17

Christianity is not an ethnic identity but the name given to the religion of those who are followers of Jesus Christ—and when they meet together (not where they meet together!) it is called *Church*. Unlike adherents of most other religions who follow the teachings of their leaders, Christians are followers of Jesus Christ Himself. Thus, someone can keep all the moral and social teachings of Jesus without actually being a Christian! It is not enough to believe about Jesus Christ, or even follow His teachings—we must believe in Him. We must place our trust

in Him and accept His pardon for our sins.^{Jn.1:12} This is called conversion and is a spiritual re-birth.^{Jn.3:3} *For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God.*^{1Pet.1:23} Initially, Jesus' followers were all Jews or converts to Judaism (Proselytes) but it was in Paul's home town of Antioch that non-Jews (Gentiles) were first intentionally integrated into the Church. *Now those who had been scattered by the persecution...spread the word only among Jews. Some of them, however, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord... for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.*^{Acts.11:19-26} Although Gentiles had become Believers before then,^{Acts.10} the Church was seen as a Jewish sect because they kept the existing Jewish celebrations, ceremonies and customs and added Jesus to them. Not that those customs were bad but the early Church hadn't really grasped the enormity of Jesus' Commission: *All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. So you must go and make disciples of all nations. Baptize them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Teach them to obey everything I have commanded you. And you can be sure that I am always with you, to the very end.*^{Matt.28:18-20} Even when the Church conferred together about the faith,^{Acts.15} they didn't really leave the structure of the Old Covenant and for 40 years, the Old and New Covenants ran together in parallel. But when the Temple was destroyed in A.D.70, there was no opportunity for the ceremonies of the Old Covenant to be performed and the Church became 100% New Covenant. However, what is included in our Bible is not outdated or irrelevant because the Holy Spirit inspired the writers of the Scriptures. And even if the writers did not understand all the nuances of New Covenant doctrine, they wrote just what God wanted them to write! *Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation of things. For prophecy never had its origin in the human will, but prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.*^{2Pet.1:20-21}

Jesus introduced this transition from Old Covenant to New Covenant with the message of the Kingdom of God: *From that time on Jesus began to preach, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."*^{Matt.4:17} (The Kingdom of God is the domain or rule of God in people's hearts.) Jesus' ministry climaxed at His crucifixion where the New Covenant was implemented: *He said to them, "I have really looked forward to eating this Passover meal with you. I wanted to do this before I suffer. I tell you, I will not eat the Passover meal again until it is celebrated in God's kingdom." After Jesus took the cup, he gave thanks. He said, "Take this cup and share it among yourselves. I tell you, I will not drink wine with you again until God's kingdom comes." Then Jesus took bread. He gave thanks and broke it. He handed it to them and said, "This is my body. It is given for you. Every time you eat it, do it in memory of me." In the same way, after the supper he took the cup. He said, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. It is poured out for you."*^{Lk.22:15-20} (The "Breaking of Bread" is an Ordinance of the Church and was never meant to be a religious ritual but a respectful reminder of the New Covenant—not a ceremony but a commemoration of the cost of our redemption and a celebration of our new life in Jesus Christ.)

Because Jesus' Ministry and the introduction of the New Covenant is so important to our faith, there are four accounts of these events and each Gospel is written with a different emphasis. Matthew emphasises Jesus as the Messiah, the King and includes a lot about the King's domain—God's Kingdom. Matthew starts with Jesus' royal genealogy and includes the Magi coming to *worship the one who has been born king of the Jews?*^{Matt.2:2} Matthew also explains how Jesus fulfilled the Messianic prophesies and at least 8 times he writes about Scripture being fulfilled: *So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets...*^{Matt.2:23} Mark emphasises Jesus as the Servant and so no genealogy is included. This Gospel is brief and fast-moving, using phrases such as *Jesus*

left there and went to and immediately. Luke is the only non-Jewish writer of the Scriptures (Job wasn't a Jew but he lived before Israel became a nation). Luke emphasises Jesus' humanity and starts with His extended family of Zechariah and Elizabeth. Luke likes to highlight the occasions where Jesus ministers to non-Jews and, as a doctor, also includes a lot of healing. Being European, Luke's Gospel is the most chronologically accurate (the Arab/Jew thought-pattern does not need to follow a literal time sequence). John was the last to write his account of Jesus' ministry and he includes several events that the other 3 Gospels missed out. John explained that the reason he wrote his Gospel was to give us a credible eye witness of Jesus' ministry that we could trust and that would help us to believe *The disciples saw Jesus do many other miraculous signs in addition to the ones recorded in this book. But these are written so that you may continue to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing in him you will have life by the power of his name.*^{Jn.20:30-31} *This disciple is the one who testifies to these events and has recorded them here. And we know that his account of these things is accurate. Jesus also did many other things. If they were all written down, I suppose the whole world could not contain the books that would be written.*^{Jn.21:24-25}

John starts his Gospel at the very beginning—even before time began: *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.*^{Jn.1:1-5} This has similarities to the beginning of Genesis: *In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light.*^{Gen.1:1-3} John later identifies the Word of God as Jesus: *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.*^{Jn.1:14} And so, John starts his Gospel by locating Jesus' existence in eternity past with God. The term "*the Word*" (Greek *Logos*) conveys the notion of divine self-expression—how God communicates—and as seen in Genesis, when God speaks, things come into being: *God said, "Let there be light," and there was light.*^{Gen.1:3} God relates personally to His people by His Word (speech): *After this, the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward.*^{Gen.15:1} But now God communicates to us through Jesus, the pre-existent, eternal God. *In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word.*^{Heb.1:1-3} The God who created the universe has become a human being! By referring to Jesus as "*the Word*" and explaining that He was, and still is, God, John introduces the building blocks that go into the doctrine of the Trinity—the one true God who has always existed and who consists of three distinct Persons who relate to each other. From the Patristic period (Arius A.D.256-336) until the present day (Jehovah's Witnesses), some have claimed that "*the Word was God*" merely identifies Jesus as a god rather than identifying Jesus as God. But John emphasises that Jesus is truly God and is distinct from the Father and also from the Holy Spirit: *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. When the "Word became flesh", Jesus did not cease to be God but rather, the Word, who was God, also took on humanity: Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,*

and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.^{Phil.2:6-11} This was the most amazing event in all of history—the Eternal, Omnipotent, Omnipresent, infinitely holy Son of God took on a human nature and lived among humanity as One who was both God and Man at the same time, in one Person! The distinction between the Persons of the Triune God can be seen clearly at Jesus' baptism: *Jesus was baptized too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."*^{Lk.3:21-22}

When the Word became flesh, He made his dwelling [or more literally, "pitched his tent"] among us.^{Jn.1:14} This is an allusion to the Old Covenant Tabernacle (which was a tent) where God dwelt among His people. This is an allusion to the Old Covenant Tabernacle (which was a tent) where God dwelt among His people: *Then have them make a sanctuary for me, and I will dwell among them. Make this tabernacle and all its furnishings exactly like the pattern I will show you.*^{Ex.25:8-9} But now in the New Covenant God resides among His people in the incarnate Word, Jesus Christ. *This is the covenant I will establish with the people of Israel after that time, declares the Lord. I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.*^{Heb.8:10} *God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. He is the one we proclaim, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ.*^{Col.1:27-28} *"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."* *All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Emmanuel" (which means "God with us").*^{Matt.1:20-23} In the New Covenant, Believers are the Temple where God dwells and where His glory is displayed: *Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honour God with your bodies.*^{1Cor.6:19-20} There was nothing bad about the Old Covenant where God dwelt in a Tent (and then later in the Temple) but that Covenant (agreement) never worked because it could never remove people's sin or clear their conscience. The Old Covenant was always intended to be temporary until the New Covenant was established and so the coming of Jesus Christ marked a decisive event in the history of salvation. *For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.*^{Jn.1:17} In the law, God graciously revealed His character and His righteous requirements—in Jesus, God graciously revealed His final, definitive revelation of His grace and truth. Grace indicates God's unmerited favour that brings blessing and joy—and Jesus' grace is superior to Moses' law, just as Jesus is superior to Moses: *The former regulation is set aside because it was weak and useless (for the law made nothing perfect), and a better hope is introduced, by which we draw near to God... Jesus has become the guarantor of a better covenant.*^{Heb.7:18;22} *But in fact the ministry Jesus has received is as superior to theirs as the covenant of which he is mediator is superior to the old one, since the new covenant is established on better promises.*^{Heb.8:6}

Thank God for Jesus Christ and the salvation He brings! The law of Moses required complete obedience: *If you fully obey the LORD your God and carefully follow all his commands I give you today, the LORD your God will set you high above all the nations on earth. All these blessings will come on you and accompany you if you obey the LORD your God: You will be blessed in the city and blessed in the country. The fruit of your womb will be blessed, and the crops of your land and the young of your livestock—the calves of your herds and the lambs of your flocks. Your basket and your kneading trough will be blessed. You will be blessed when you come in and blessed when you go out.*^{Dent.28:1-6} But God's grace is unmerited and free at the point of need: *to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us.*^{Eph.1:6-8}

However, we have an obligation to live as children of God who honour the family name! *You, however, are not in the realm of the flesh but are in the realm of the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, they do not belong to Christ. But if Christ is in you, then even though your body is subject to death because of sin, the Spirit gives life because of righteousness. And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies because of his Spirit who lives in you. Therefore, brothers and sisters, we have an obligation—but it is not to the flesh, to live according to it. For if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live.*^{Rom.8:9-13}

So let's make every effort to please God and enjoy His fellowship. *Brothers and sisters, we instructed you how to live in order to please God, as in fact you are living. Now we ask you and urge you in the Lord Jesus to do this more and more. For you know what instructions we gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus. It is God's will that you should be sanctified.*^{1Thess.4:1-3}

Questions

What does it mean to be a Christian?

What role does Judaism have in Christianity?

Are there any differences between the four Gospel accounts of Jesus' Ministry?

In your own words explain the Trinity: God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

How is the New Covenant better than the Old Covenant?

How does God dwell with people?

Puritan 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; Your Spirit has made known to me Your reconciliation in Jesus; Your Spirit has taught me to believe it; and Your Spirit 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 You give, let it draw out greater love to You.

Sunday 21st April Ps.61 John 1:

Jesus—son of Joseph and the Son of God: *Philip found Nathanael and told him, “We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.” ... Then Nathanael declared, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the king of Israel.”*^{Jn.1:45-49}

Jesus was born around 2000 years ago and grew up in a socially and politically insignificant Jewish family—and yet He became the most significant Person to have ever lived. Other than the time Jesus was a refugee in Egypt, His childhood seemed very ordinary. Jesus grew up in Nazareth with His parents and His siblings: *Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord... The child's father and mother marvelled at what was said about him. Then Simeon blessed them... When Joseph and Mary had done everything required by the Law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee to their*

own town of Nazareth. And the child grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was on him.^{Lk.2:23-40} All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips. "Isn't this Joseph's son?" they asked.^{Lk.4:21} Isn't this the carpenter? Isn't this Mary's son and the brother of James, Joseph, Judas and Simon? Aren't his sisters here with us?^{Mk.6:3} Although Jesus became a popular itinerant preacher, he was executed like a criminal at just over 33 years of age. But instead of diminishing His influence, Jesus' death increased His influence, because He did something that no one else had ever done—He came back to life with an immortal body. And within a few years His followers had impacted the whole of the known world—including Britain! Gildas (A.D.516-570) a British Historian, states, *Meanwhile, these islands (i.e. the British Isles) ...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 (who was Roman Emperor A.D. 14-37).*

So what makes Jesus so different from any other person? Last week we saw that John begins his Gospel by stating that the Word was not only with God but also was God—and then quickly identifies the "Word" as Jesus who had become flesh (i.e. had taken on humanity): *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.*^{Jn.1:14} Jesus did not give up His deity to become a Man but rather, He added humanity to His divinity: *Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*^{Phil.2:6-11} The Trinity (i.e. tri-unity) is the doctrine that God consists of three distinct Persons—Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and is integral to orthodox Christianity. But right from the beginning, people have struggled with the concept of the Trinity, which is not surprising as it is beyond our understanding—how can 1 be 3 or 3 be 1! However, we can often make difficulties for ourselves when there aren't any—especially when translating languages. For instance, a very important yet simple statement in the Old Testament is: *Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.*^{Deut.6:4-5} Although this emphatically states that God is one, this does not conflict with the doctrine of the Trinity because the word for "one" is plural. The same word for "one" is also used for a bunch of grapes—1 bunch, many grapes: *The men came to the Valley of Eshcol. There they cut off a branch that had a single bunch of grapes on it. Two of them carried it on a pole between them. They carried some pomegranates and figs along with it.*^{Nu.13:23} Actually, God is a title not a name and so within the title of God we have 3 Persons—Father, Son and Holy Spirit. *May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.*^{2Cor.13:14} Because God is Spirit, we need spiritual insight to understand spiritual matters. When we became a Christian, we were given a new spirit and were also given the Holy Spirit—and it is the Holy Spirit who reveals spiritual matters to us: *However, as it is written: "What no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, and what no human mind has conceived"—the things God has prepared for those who love him—these are the things God has revealed to us by his Spirit... 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... But we have the mind of Christ.*^{1Cor.2:10-16} This is what happened to Peter: *Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven.*^{Matt.16:16-17} Those who deny Jesus that Jesus is God are called "antichrists" (literally, "one who opposes Christ"): *Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God,*

because many false prophets have gone out into the world. This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world.^{1Jn.4:1-3} *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}

The early Church formulated Creeds to clarify our core beliefs—including the Trinity. The word “creed” is from the Latin “credo” meaning “I believe”. Paul included several creed-like statements in his epistles: *He appeared in the flesh, was vindicated by the Spirit, was seen by angels, was preached among the nations, was believed on in the world, was taken up in glory.*^{1Tim.3:16} *For us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live.*^{1Cor.8:6} *For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.*^{1Cor.15:3-4} The Apostle’s Creed (though not written by the apostles), is the oldest creed of the Christian church and was drawn up in response to Gnosticism, which denied that Jesus was truly Man and counteracts that heresy.

I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, 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, he is seated at the right hand of the Father, and he will come again to judge the living and the dead.^{Apostles' Creed}

When the Nicene Creed was drawn up to counteract Arianism, which denied that Jesus was fully God. Arius was an elder in Alexandria, Egypt, in the early 300's and taught that in the beginning, the Father created (or begot) the Son, and that the Son, in conjunction with the Father, then proceeded to create the world.

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father. Through him all things were made. For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven: by the power of the Holy Spirit he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary, and was made man. For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried. On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures; he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.^{Nicene Creed}

Jesus, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit, have always existed as God, and so the English word “begotten” in the Nicene Creed is misleading because Jesus was neither begotten nor created! The word “begotten” or “begat” means “to bring into existence by the process of reproduction” i.e., to father a child: *Adam lived one hundred and thirty years, and begot a son in his own likeness, after his image, and named him Seth.*^{Gen.5:3} The KJV uses “begotten” in John 3:16: *For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.* But this is a different word and should be translated *For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son* as in the NIV. This word means “one of a kind” or “unique” as in the case of Isaac, who is called Abraham's “one-of-a-kind” son (in contrast to Ishmael who was a son but a slave): *By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had embraced the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son.*^{Heb.11:17} [Again the KJV translates this as Abraham’s “only begotten son”.] So, although Jesus is not the son of God by being created or born, He is the Son of God who is exactly like His Father in all attributes. However, there is a sense that God became Jesus’ Father after He rose from the dead: *The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven. So he became as much superior to the angels as the name he has*

inherited is superior to theirs. 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.1:3-6}

Jesus called God His Father many times in the Gospels: 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} Jesus said, "Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'"^{Jn.20:17} And although He revered God His Father in every aspect of His life and ministry, Jesus also knew that He was God: Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad." "You are not yet fifty years old," they said to him, "and you have seen Abraham!" "Very truly I tell you," Jesus answered, "before Abraham was born, I am!"^{Jn.8:56-58} Then the chief priest said to him, "Swear an oath in front of the living God and tell us, are you the Messiah, the Son of God?" Jesus answered him, "Yes, I am."^{Matt.26:63-64} They brought Jesus in front of their highest court and asked him, "Tell us, are you the Messiah?" Jesus said to them, "If I tell you, you won't believe me. And if I ask you [or, what you meant by your question], you won't answer me. But from now on, the Son of Man will be in the highest position in heaven." Then all of them said, "So you're the Son of God?" Jesus answered them, "You're right to say that I am." Then they said, "Why do we need any more testimony? We've heard him say it ourselves."^{Lk.22:67-71}

Because only God can forgive sins, when Jesus forgave sins, He was clearly stating that He was God: Help us, God our Saviour, for the glory of your name; deliver us and forgive our sins for your name's sake.^{Ps.79:9} When Jesus saw their faith, he said, "Friend, your sins are forgiven." The Pharisees and the teachers of the law began thinking to themselves, "Who is this fellow who speaks blasphemy? Who can forgive sins but God alone?" Jesus knew what they were thinking and asked, "Why are you thinking these things in your hearts? Which is easier: to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up and walk'? But I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins."^{Matt.9:20-24} And this was the message that John the Baptist was preaching: 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}

When John the Baptist referred to "the Lamb of God" he was alluding to the Old Covenant, where a lamb was sacrificed to atone for sin. But those animal sacrifices could never remove sin or appease the worshippers' conscience because they were only a picture or a type. The real sacrifice that would take away sin would be the death of Jesus. God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith.^{Rom.3:25} 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} Isaiah uses the picture of the Messiah being the sacrificial Lamb: Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity* of us all. 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.53:4-7} Philip explained to the Ethiopian that this passage referred to Jesus: This is the passage of Scripture the eunuch was reading: "He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before its shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth. In his humiliation he was deprived of justice. Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth." The eunuch asked Philip, "Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?"

Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus.^{Acts.8:32-35} Paul also refers to Jesus as the Passover Lamb: *For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed.*^{1Cor.5:7} Peter explains that Jesus is a “Lamb without blemish” and has redeemed us by His death: *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-}

²¹Thirty times in Revelation, Jesus is referred to as “the Lamb”: *“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!”*^{Rev.5:12-13}

Philip said that Jesus was the son of Joseph but Nathaniel recognised Jesus as the Son of God. Philip, like Andrew and Peter, was from the town of Bethsaida. Philip found Nathanael and told him, *“We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.”* “Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?” Nathanael asked. *“Come and see,”* said Philip. When Jesus saw Nathanael approaching, he said of him, *“Here truly is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit.”* “How do you know me?” Nathanael asked. Jesus answered, *“I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you.”* Then Nathanael declared, *“Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the king of Israel.”*^{Jn.1:44-49}

What about you? Do you see Jesus as the son of Joseph or the Son of God? Your answer will determine how you live now and throughout eternity. *But you have come to Mount Zion. You have come to the Jerusalem in heaven. It is the city of the living God... You have come to God. He is the judge of all people. You have come to the spirits of godly people who have been made perfect. You have come to Jesus. He is the go-between of a new covenant. You have come to the sprinkled blood. It promises better things than the blood of Abel. Be sure that you don't say no to the One who speaks.*^{Heb.12:22-25}

Questions:

Why is it so important to believe that Jesus is both God and Man?

What part does our mind have in what we believe about Jesus?

What part does our spirit have in what we believe about Jesus?

How can we get spiritual understanding (revelation) about Jesus?

How much do we need to understand about Jesus to be saved?

Does study and understanding increase our faith?

Puritan Prayer: 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.

Sunday 28th April Ps.62 John 2

Just do it! *Do whatever He tells you.*^{Jn.2:5}

The Gospel is Simple, Spiritual and Settled. The word translated “Gospel” literally means “good message” and the Christian message is the old, old story of Jesus and His love. This is not a weak ethereal love but a strong powerful love that saves us from our sin, saves us from the guilt of our sin and will ultimately save us from the consequences of our sin. *I am not ashamed of the gospel, because*

it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes.^{Rom.1:16} However, the Gospel is not about moral behaviour or being nice to people (although of course these are important values)—the Gospel is about Jesus Christ: *I have fully proclaimed the gospel of Christ.*^{Rom.15:19} Jesus came to give life to all who would receive Him and so the message is not only good but it has to be simple, spiritual and settled—or else we would never be able to access it! But just hearing the message is not enough—we have to combine it with faith or it won't save us: *Therefore, since the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it. For we also have had the gospel preached to us, just as they did; but the message they heard was of no value to them, because those who heard did not combine it with faith.*^{Heb.4:1-2}

The Gospel is Simple. *“Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.” And he took the children in his arms, placed his hands on them and blessed them.*^{Mk.10:14-16}

The Gospel has to be simple because it is for all people and for all ages. However, although the Gospel is simple, it is not insignificant—just uncomplicated. *Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.*^{Matt.11:28-30}

Today, nearly everything we buy will come with instructions that are either too small to read, or they are such a poor translation from Chinese that you cannot understand them! But the Gospel comes with clear instructions that are simple to follow: *Do whatever He tells you.*^{Jn.2:5} God's instructions are not complicated or burdensome: *Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and everyone who loves the father loves his child as well. 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, for everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world? Only the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.*^{1Jn.5:1-5}

A Believer is someone who believes! Just as walkers, walk, swimmers, swim and jumpers, jump, so Believers, believe—it really is that simple!!! But until God takes away someone's spiritual blindness, the Gospel doesn't make sense to them. The message of the Cross is foolishness to the world. *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}

If the Good News we preach is hidden behind a veil, it is hidden only from people who are perishing. Satan, who is the god of this world, has blinded the minds of those who don't believe. They are unable to see the glorious light of the Good News. They don't understand this message about the glory of Christ, who is the exact likeness of God... We preach that Jesus Christ is Lord, and we ourselves are your servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who said, "Let there be light in the darkness," has made this light shine in our hearts so we could know the glory of God that is seen in the face of Jesus Christ. We now have this light shining in our hearts, but we ourselves are like fragile clay jars containing this great treasure. This makes it clear that our great power is from God, not from ourselves.^{2Cor.4:3-7}

But when God opens people's spiritual eyes—gives them revelation—their lives are radically changed because the Gospel is God's power at work: *I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile. 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.1:16-17}

The Gospel is the message about God exchanging our sin for His righteousness, our death for His life, our shame for His glory, our despair for His hope. But just because the world calls the Gospel foolish, that doesn't mean that the Gospel is foolish. And even though the Gospel is simple, it is also very profound! But you don't have to be an academic to understand the Gospel—anyone who sincerely calls out to God can receive revelation and redemption. All

who actively and personally believe the Gospel will be saved! And those who are saved, can commune with God through prayer—which is also simple yet profound. Madame Guyon (1648–1717), wrote:

You must, then, learn a species of prayer which may be exercised at all times; which does not obstruct outward employments; which may be equally practised by princes, kings, prelates, priests and magistrates, soldiers and children, tradesmen, labourers, women, and sick persons; it is not the prayer of the head, but OF THE HEART. It is not a prayer of the understanding alone, for the mind of man is so limited in its operations that it can have but one object at a time; but it is the PRAYER OF THE HEART which is not interrupted by the exercises of reason. Nothing can interrupt this prayer but disordered affections; and when once we have enjoyed God, and the sweetness of his love, we shall find it impossible to relish aught but himself. Nothing is so easily obtained as the possession and enjoyment of God. He is more present to us than we are to ourselves. He is more desirous of giving Himself to us than we are to possess Him; we only need to know how to seek Him, and the way is easier and more natural to us than breathing. Ah! ye who think yourselves so dull and fit for nothing, by prayer you may live on God himself with less difficulty or interruption than you live on the vital air. Will it not then be highly sinful to neglect prayer? But doubtless you will not, when you have learnt the method, which is the easiest in the world. (*A Short and Very Easy Method of Prayer, Chapter 1*)

The Gospel is Spiritual. The Gospel is not only simple but it is also spiritual. And because it is spiritual, it cannot be understood with our natural ability—it takes the Holy Spirit to reveal the Gospel to us. Revelation literally means “to unveil” or to “remove our blindfold”, thus revelation is a restoration of sight—and when our spiritual eyes are opened, we have a different perspective on life. We realise that there is more to life than possessions or even happiness and comfort. *Life does not consist in an abundance of possessions. And he told them this parable: “The ground of a certain rich man yielded an abundant harvest. He thought to himself, ‘What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.’ Then he said, ‘This is what I’ll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store my surplus grain. And I’ll say to myself, “You have plenty of grain laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.” But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?’ This is how it will be with whoever stores up things for themselves but is not rich toward God.”*^{Lk.12:15-21} Jesus came to give us real, satisfying life: *I have come so they can have life. I want them to have it in the fullest possible way.*^{Jn.10:10} But we still have to choose to live in God’s blessings—we choose whether we live by our spirit or by our soul: *For if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live. For those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God.*^{Rom.8:13-14} *For none of us lives to himself alone and none of us dies to himself alone. If we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord.*^{Rom.14:7-8} God works our salvation in us, but we have to work our salvation out of us: *Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.*^{Phil.2:12-13} Augustine said: *Pray as though everything depended on God. Work as though everything depended on you.* Mother Teresa said: *There is always the danger that we may just do the work for the sake of the work. This is where the respect and the love and the devotion come in—that we do it to God, to Christ, and that’s why we try to do it as beautifully as possible.* Maturing in the Christian life takes time and effort but this work should not wear us out! Sweat and arduous toil is the result of Adam’s sin: *So I am putting a curse on the ground because of what you did. All the days of your life you will have to work hard to get food from the ground. You will eat the plants of the field, even though the ground produces thorns and thistles. You will have to work hard and sweat a lot to*

produce the food you eat. You were made out of the ground. And you will return to it. You are dust. So you will return to it.^{Gen.3:17-19} But this curse has been removed through Jesus' death on the cross: *Christ set us free from the curse of the law. He did it by becoming a curse for us. It is written, "Everyone who is hung on a pole is under God's curse."*^{Gal.3:13} When God made us in His image, He made us to live forever: *He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart.*^{Ecc.3:11} We will either live with Him for eternity, in perfect peace—or live without Him for eternity, in absolute torment. And so, if we don't take God and eternity into account, we are fools: *The fool says in his heart, "There is no God."*^{Psa.35:1} When our Heavenly Father looks after us, we have a quality of life (spiritual blessings) and quantity of life (eternity) that is something that the world can only dream of. We have a spiritual dimension to our life that gives us peace in the darkest storm.

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Gospel is Settled. Jesus' final cry on the cross was one of victory and completion: *He said, "It is finished!" Then he bowed his head and released his spirit.*^{Jn.19:30} Jesus' death provided everything that was needed for our salvation and there is nothing that we can do that can add to what God has already done. That is why Jesus cursed the fig tree—no more religious covering to hide our guilt. Because we could not save ourselves, Jesus came in Person to save us: *He died that we might be forgiven. He died to make us good that we might go at last to heaven saved by His precious blood. There was no other good enough to pay the price of sin; He only could unlock the gate of heaven, and let us in.* And if we do try to add anything to what God has done, we are saying that either God hasn't finished His work or that what He did wasn't quite good enough! *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.10:12-14} Because the Gospel is settled, we cannot add to it. That is why we must always keep Christ central to our message of salvation: *Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel.*^{1Tim.2:8} We must keep to the old, old story of Jesus and His love. *Tell me the old, old story, of unseen things above; Of Jesus and His glory, of Jesus and His love. That wonderful redemption, God's remedy for sin. Tell me the old, old story: "Christ Jesus makes thee whole."* And we must never lose sight of the fact that we are **saved by grace**: *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.*^{Eph.2:8-9} No! *We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.*^{Acts.15:11} There has always been heresy in the Church and we need to be on our guard to protect ourselves from those who would deceive us or lead us astray. *I am telling you this so no one will deceive you with well-crafted arguments.*^{Col.2:4} *You foolish Galatians! Who has cast a spell on you? Before your eyes Jesus Christ was vividly portrayed as crucified! The only thing I want to learn from you is this: Did you receive the Spirit by doing the works of the law or by believing what you heard? Are you so foolish? Although you began with the Spirit, are you now trying to finish by human effort? Have you suffered so many things for nothing? – if indeed it was for nothing. Does God then give you the Spirit and work miracles among you by your doing the works of the law or by your believing what you heard?*^{Gal.3:1-5} But if we do go astray, there is always a way back: *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.*^{Jn.2:1-2} However, although forgiveness is unconditional (that's what Grace means), restoration is conditional on repentance. *But now God commands all people everywhere to repent.*^{Acts.17:30} *But unless you repent, you too will all perish.*^{Lk.13:5} *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.^{Lk. 17:4} *Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.*^{Matt. 3:8} *Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret.*^{2Cor. 7:10} *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.*^{Rev. 3:19-20}

Repentance will always include these 5 A's

1 Acknowledgement of the wrong

2 Apology for the wrong

3 Action of determination to change

4 Appreciation of God's forgiveness

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

We can be different from one another but we don't have to be divided! We may be bruised but we don't have to be broken! For us Christians, the future is bright—not just because we are looking forward to a satisfying life here on earth, but because we are looking forward to a new earth and a new heaven where we will be with Jesus for ever: *But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness. So then, dear friends, since you are looking forward to this, make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him.*^{2Pet. 3:13-14} So let's make every effort to enter the eternal Kingdom of Jesus Christ and live in a way that honours God—that is not only the blest way to live but it is also the best way to live! Remember, **the Gospel is Simple, Spiritual and Settled**. So let's heed Mary's advice and *Do whatever He tells us!*

Questions

How simple is the Gospel?

What makes the Gospel spiritual?

If the Gospel is settled, what do we have to do for our salvation?

What is repentance?

How important is repentance to our salvation?

How can we stay united when we are different?

How can we stay whole when we are bruised?

Puritan Prayer: 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.

May 2024

In God we trust: *Now this I know: The LORD gives victory to his anointed. He answers him from His heavenly sanctuary with the victorious power of His right hand. Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the LORD our God.* Ps.20:6-7

Thought for the Month: Whatever the Holy Spirit touches, the Holy Spirit changes. So it is normal that the Holy Spirit will bring some changes, even in our feelings, in our emotions, in our way of expressing ourselves. It is normal when we first approach the Holy Spirit that there should a reaction of our laughter, of tears, of jumping for joy, or speaking in tongues. *Raniero Cantalamessa*

Sunday 5th May Ps.63 John 3:1-21:

The power of the cross. *Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.* Jn.3:14-15

When Nicodemus came to Jesus, he wanted to find out more about this Rabbi who was doing miracles: *Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council. He came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him."* Jn.3:2 But instead of continuing with a discussion on signs and wonders, Jesus went straight to the heart of the matter and said: *What I'm about to tell you is true. No one can see God's kingdom without being born again.* Jn.3:3 The Kingdom of God was the theme of John the Baptist's ministry: *Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.* Matt.3:2 And Jesus preached the same message: *From that time on Jesus began to preach, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."* Matt.4:17 However, the Kingdom of God is a spiritual kingdom, not a political kingdom—it is the rule of God in people's heart. God's Kingdom is not a matter of talk but action: *For the kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power.* 1Cor.4:20 We must **do** God's will, not just talk about it: *Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.* Matt.7:21 Because God's kingdom is a spiritual kingdom, we have to have a spirit that is a live and active, and in fellowship with God if we are to be part of His kingdom. But we are all guilty of sin—both our inherited sin and our own sin—and so we are by nature, alienated from God and under condemnation. The only way for us to escape God's punishment for sin is to die and rise again in with a new life—to be born-again. *For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body ruled by sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin—because anyone who has died has been set free from sin. Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. For we know that since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him. The death he died, he died to sin once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus.* Rom.6:6-11 This is what Jesus told Nicodemus: *What I'm about to tell you is true. No one can see God's kingdom without being born again.* Jn.3:3 Because of sin, we are mortal and will die—and the condition we are in when we die is eternal. If we die with our sins and unrighteous, we will spend eternity without God and in our sin, but if we die without our sins and righteous, we spend eternity with God and without our sin. Jesus refers to this new-birth as crossing over from death to life: *Very truly I tell you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be judged but has crossed over from death to life. Very truly I tell you, a time is coming and has now come when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live.* Jn.5:24-25

The reason God became human was so that He could die and pay the penalty for our sin. But because Jesus didn't have any sin of His own, death had no hold on Him. This is why the cross is central to the Christian message and is so powerful. *For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.* 1Cor.1:18 Jesus could have been killed in many different ways but God had a theme running through His plan of salvation that is seen throughout

the Old Testament rituals, ceremonies and prophesies. The Old Testament sacrifices were types, shadows, allegories, illustrations of what Jesus would achieve. For instance, the Passover lamb had to be a male sheep without defect and with no broken bones—and when Jesus died, He fulfilled that type. Jesus is *the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!*^{Jn.1:29}—the Passover Sacrifice who delivers us from spiritual slavery and leads us into God's Promises. *For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed.*^{1Cor.5:7}

The usual way that the Jews executed people who were considered blasphemers and heretics was by throwing stones at them—which is how they killed Stephen: *“We have heard Stephen speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God.” So they stirred up the people and the elders and the teachers of the law. They seized Stephen and brought him before the Sanhedrin... When the members of the Sanhedrin heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. “Look,” he said, “I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.” At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” Then he fell on his knees and cried out, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” When he had said this, he fell asleep.*^{Acts.6:11-7:60} But when Jesus died, He fulfilled the types and prophesies and died on a cross: *Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: “Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.” 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.3:13-14} Jesus explained to Nicodemus that He would fulfil the type of the snake on a stick that saved the Israelites from death: *Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.*^{Jn.3:14-15} Venomous snakes were biting the Israelites because they had rebelled against God—again! *But the people grew impatient on the way; they spoke against God and against Moses, and said, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!” Then the LORD sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died. The people came to Moses and said, “We sinned when we spoke against the LORD and against you. Pray that the LORD will take the snakes away from us.” So Moses prayed for the people. The LORD said to Moses, “Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live.” So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, they lived.*^{Nu.21:4-9} Snakes in the Bible often symbolise the devil because the devil appeared to Eve as a snake: *Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God really say, ‘You must not eat from any tree in the garden’?”*^{Gen.3:1} The great dragon was hurled down—that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. *He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him.*^{Rev.12:9} But just as Moses' snake on a stick became the cure for the poison of the snakes, so Jesus hanging on the cross became the cure for the poison of sin from satan's deception. Sadly, Moses' bronze snake eventually became an idol and Hezekiah destroyed it when he purged Israel of false religion: *Hezekiah son of Ahaʒ king of Judah began to reign. He was twenty-five years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem twenty-nine years. His mother's name was Abijah daughter of Zechariah. He did what was right in the eyes of the LORD, just as his father David had done. He removed the high places, smashed the sacred stones and cut down the Asherah poles. He broke into pieces the bronze snake Moses had made, for up to that time the Israelites had been burning incense to it. (It was called Nebushtan. [Nebushtan sounds like the Hebrew for both bronze and snake.])*^{2Kg.18:1-4}

Here are some important lessons we can learn from the cross.

The cross is central to the Christian message and is a reminder that we have died to our old life—and also that we have died to the world: *May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means*

anything; what counts is a new creation. Peace and mercy to all who follow this rule, even to the Israel of God.^{Gal.6:14-16}

The cross is a place of death and reminder of sin. When people grumbled against God and were presumptuous, arrogant, self-confident instead of God-confident, they died from snake bites—but a faith-filled look at the snake on the pole saved them: *We should not put the Lord to the test, as some of them did. They were killed by snakes. Don't tell your leaders how unhappy you are with them. That's what some of the people of Israel did. And they were killed by the destroying angel. 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. You are tempted in the same way all other human beings are. God is faithful. He will not let you be tempted any more than you can take. But when you are tempted, God will give you a way out so that you can stand up under it.*^{1Cor.10:9-13}

The cross is God's remedy for sin—and it is only through the cross that we have peace with 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} And it was on the cross that the devil was defeated, disarmed and his work destroyed. *When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having cancelled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.*^{Col.2:13-15}

Then the cross also reminds us that Jesus is the Christ the Son of God: *They did not understand that he was telling them about his Father. So Jesus said, "When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am he and that I do nothing on my own but speak just what the Father has taught me. The one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what pleases him."* Even as he spoke, many believed in him.^{Jn.8:27-}

³⁰ And it is Jesus on the cross that draws people to God: *Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and will glorify it again." The crowd that was there and heard it said it had thundered; others said an angel had spoken to him. Jesus said, "This voice was for your benefit, not mine. Now is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." He said this to show the kind of death he was going to die. The crowd spoke up, "We have heard from the Law that the Messiah will remain forever, so how can you say, 'The Son of Man must be lifted up'? Who is this 'Son of Man'?" Then Jesus told them, "You are going to have the light just a little while longer. Walk while you have the light, before darkness overtakes you. Whoever walks in the dark does not know where they are going. Believe in the light while you have the light, so that you may become children of light." When he had finished speaking, Jesus left and hid himself from them.*^{Jn.12:28-36}

We can, and should, invite people to Church, we can also discuss and debate with people about salvation and their eternal destiny—but ultimately it is Jesus on the cross that will draw them. The cross is God's plan of salvation and it is God's only plan—there is no other plan! So let's keep focussed on the cross and experience daily its power of salvation—which is the power of God Himself. *Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.*^{Jn.3:14-15}

Questions

Why is the cross of Christ so important?

What does the cross signify?

Why was Jesus crucified?

Why did Moses make a bronze snake and hang it on a pole?

What lessons can we learn from the snake story?

How does Jesus draw people to Himself through the cross?

Puritan Prayer: O Son of God and Son of Man, You were incarnate, You suffered, You rose and You 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. 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.

Sunday 12th May Ps.95. John 4:1-42

“And fit us for heaven to live with Thee there.” *God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth.*^{Jn.4:24}

Many people think of Marthin Luther's carol “*Away in the manger*” as just a children's Christmas lullaby but it actually contains an important message: “*And fit us for heaven to live with Thee there.*” Although heaven is our destination after death, we need to be fit for heaven before we die! God has done everything He can do to prepare us for heaven—He has forgiven us, made us righteous, given us a new heart, cleaned our conscience and made His home in us. Now it is up to us to do our part to prepare for heaven by being rooted and built up in our faith. *So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.*^{Col.2:6-7} Then we can stand firm in our faith no matter what life throws at us! *Anyone who listens to my teaching and follows it is wise, like a person who builds a house on solid rock. Though the rain comes in torrents and the floodwaters rise and the winds beat against that house, it won't collapse because it is built on bedrock.*^{Matt.7:24-25} My brothers and sisters, be very happy when you are tested in different ways. You know that such testing of your faith produces endurance. *Endure until your testing is over. Then you will be mature and complete, and you won't need anything.*^{Jas.1:2-4} *Therefore put on the full armour of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand.*^{Eph.6:13}

As we make every effort to prepare for our eternal home, we discover that to be in fellowship with God is the blessed and best way to live. Imagine what fellowship Adam had with God when they walked together in the Garden! But in Christ, we can have what Adam lost: *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}

So, what is heaven really like? The hymn goes: “*Heaven is a wonderful place, filled with wonder and grace; I want to see my Saviour's face, heaven is a wonderful place.*” When John had a glimpse of heaven, he saw everyone worshipping God: *All the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures. They fell down on their faces before the throne and worshipped God, saying: “Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honour and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!”*^{Rev.7:11-12} David also understood this concept of worship when he brought the Ark to Jerusalem: *Sing to the LORD, all the earth; proclaim his salvation day after day. Declare his glory among the nations, his marvellous deeds among all peoples. For great is the LORD and most worthy of praise; he is to be feared above all gods. For all the gods of the nations are idols, but the LORD made the heavens. Splendour and majesty are before him; strength and joy are in his dwelling place. Ascribe to the LORD, all you families of nations, ascribe to the LORD glory and strength. Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name; bring an offering and come before him. Worship the LORD in the splendour of his holiness. Tremble before him, all the*

earth! The world is firmly established; it cannot be moved. Let the heavens rejoice, let the earth be glad; let them say among the nations, "The LORD reigns!"¹*Chron.16:23-31*

Our English word "worship" comes from the Old English "*weorþscipe*", meaning "worthiness" or "worth-ship"—to worship something is to give value to it. One of the main differences between humans and animals is that we can worship God and they can't. Although animals are sentient (they can experience feelings) and cognitive (they can think, reason and remember), only humans have the capacity to worship God. This is because only humans have God's breath (spirit) within them: *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 soul.*^{Gen.2:24} If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body. So it is written: "The first man Adam became a living soul"; the last Adam, a life-giving spirit."¹*Cor.15:44-45* God put eternity into Adam's heart when He breathed life into him. *I have seen the task that God has given people to keep them occupied. He has made everything appropriate in its time. He has also put eternity in their hearts, but man cannot discover the work God has done from beginning to end.*^{Ecc.3:10-11} Unlike animals, humans have an eternal spirit that will never cease to exist and can never be annihilated. *There will be a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked.*^{Acts.24:15} *Huge numbers of people who lie dead in their graves will wake up. Some will rise up to life that will never end. Others will rise up to shame that will never end. Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the sky. Those who lead many others to do what is right will be like the stars for ever and ever.*^{Dan.12:2-3} *Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.*^{Matt.25:46} Although we are created by God and are called "sons of God", we will never be equal with God. And we will ever be able to completely comprehend who God is or what He has done because He is "ineffably sublime!" ("ineffably" means: incapable of being expressed; indescribable or unutterable and "sublime" means: inspiring awe, worthy of adoration, cannot be excelled; supreme). The hymn puts it this way: *Crown Him the Lord of years, the Potentate of time, Creator of the rolling spheres, ineffably sublime! All hail, Redeemer, hail! For You have died for me; Your praise shall never, never fail throughout eternity.* Even though we cannot adequately put God's value into words, we can at least try to express God's worth to us—what we know about Him and feel about Him! And when God opens our spiritual eyes, we have an insight into God's plans and purposes for us: "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him"—but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit... *We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us. This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words...* "For who has known the mind of the Lord that he may instruct him?" But we have the mind of Christ.¹*Cor.2:9-16*

Worship is spiritual (i.e. it is something we do from our spirit) and it is our response to the quickening of the Holy Spirit within our spirit: *God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth.*^{Jn.4:24} However, because we are a trinity of spirit, soul and body, spiritual worship involves our whole person: *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} True worship involves loving God with **our mind and our spirit**, as well as loving others as much as ourself. "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."¹*Matt.22:39-40* And likewise, prayer involves our soul and our spirit—we must use our God-given brain, mind, will, emotions, desires, reason and passion! *For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful. So what shall I do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will also pray with my understanding; I will sing with my spirit, but I will also sing with my understanding. Otherwise when you are praising God in the Spirit, how can someone else, who is now put*

in the position of an inquirer, say “Amen” to your thanksgiving, since they do not know what you are saying?^{1Cor.14:14-}

⁶ And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord's people.^{Eph.6:18} Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind.^{Phil.2:1-2}

Probably the best illustration of Worship is when the Magi found Jesus: *Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him.”... When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshipped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh.*^{Matt.2:1-11} There is a progression in worship, culminating in meeting with God and giving Him gifts from our treasure (heart):

- They were filled with joy (not fear or panic or unbelief; there is joy in God's presence)
- They came to Jesus (Jesus is the focus of our worship and we must “draw near”)
- They bowed down and worshipped (worship involves a submission to the King)
- They opened their treasure (worship requires an open heart)
- They presented Him gifts (worship is giving to God from our treasure i.e. our heart)

Worship is a love relationship with Jesus. As we respond to Him, He reveals intimacies to us: *Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.*^{Jas.4:8} *Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth - for your love is more delightful than wine. Pleasing is the fragrance of your perfumes; your name is like perfume poured out. No wonder the maidens love you.*^{Isa.1:2-}

³ *Surely the Sovereign LORD does nothing without revealing his plan to his servants the prophets.*^{Amos.3:7} Under the New Covenant worship is a continual event—a lifestyle—rather than something we do at the end of a pilgrimage. We don't keep coming to God and leaving and neither does God come and go—we are citizens of heaven and God resides in us. *But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ.*^{Phil.3:20} *He who overcomes I will make a pillar in the Temple of my God. Never again will he leave it. I will write on him the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which is coming down out of heaven from my God; and I will also write on him my new name.*^{Rev.3:12} *We know that we live in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit.*^{1Jn.4:13}

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} Jesus replied, “If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.”^{Jn.14:23}

We often call hymn singing “worship” but although worship may involve singing, worship is obedience not just singing songs. We see this illustrated with the account of Abraham and Isaac: *Abraham said to his servants, “Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you.*”^{Gen.22:5} Then later God said: *I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies, and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me.*^{Gen.22:17-18}

Our worship must be in truth—we cannot worship God with a lie—which is why it is important that our songs have sound Bible-based words. Many songs are sentimental (and music lends itself to emotion) but our hymns of praise and worship must be biblical and especially New Covenant based. Although we are “trinitarian”—we believe in God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit—our songs should be predominately about Jesus because He is the truth and the way to God the Father: *Jesus answered: I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.*^{Jn.14:6} It was Jesus who the Magi came to worship: *Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.”*^{Matt.2:1-2} It is Jesus who is worshiped in

heaven: *“Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honour and glory and praise!”*^{Rev. 5:12}

Isaac Watts (1674–1748) came home one Sunday complaining that the hymns were dull and lifeless and his father challenged him to write something better!” He did and the following Sunday the congregation sang a hymn that began, *“Behold the Glories of the Lamb amidst his Father’s throne: Prepare new honours for his name, and songs before unknown.”* This became the first of more than 650 hymns Watts would compose for the church. He revised all but twelve of the 150 psalms in order *“to make David speak like a Christian”* because he understood the importance of living in the New Covenant truths!

Let’s follow Luther’s advice and be ready for heaven as we worship God in spirit and in truth, building our faith on the solid rock of Jesus Christ and setting our minds on things above where Jesus is seated. Then we can be sure that we will stand firm in our faith to the very end—and beyond!

Questions

What has God done to prepare us for heaven?

What should we do to prepare ourselves for heaven?

What is worship?

How do we worship God in the spirit?

How important are the words of the hymns that we sing?

Puritan Prayer: 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 19th May Ps.65 John 4:43-54

Why do you believe in Jesus? *Because of his words, many more people became believers... now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Saviour of the world.”*^{Jn.4:41-42}

The Christian faith is a personal trust in Jesus Christ as Saviour. This trust is not based on imaginary concepts or ancient myths but is firmly rooted in historical facts. The main and essential historical facts of the Christian faith that we must believe are: Jesus is the Son of God and also the son of Mary (*i.e.* that Jesus is truly God and truly human); Jesus died and rose again; Jesus paid the penalty for our sins when He died; Jesus is Lord (*i.e.* that Jesus has all authority and that we willingly submit to His authority); Jesus will come again to judge those who have already died and also those who are still alive. Of course there are other important truths that we should know about, but those five are absolutely essential to the Christian faith. And whilst we must acknowledge these historical facts as true, they must mean more to us than just historical events. Christianity is a spiritual relationship with God and we must know these facts in our heart (spirit) as well as live them out in our lives. *“Who do people say the Son of Man is?” They replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” “But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?” Simon Peter answered, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Jesus replied, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven.”*^{Matt.16:13-17} *For I passed on to you what I received, which is of greatest importance:*

that Christ died for our sins as the Scriptures say; that he was buried and was raised to life on the third day as the Scriptures say; and that he was seen by Peter and then by the twelve apostles. After that, Jesus was seen by more than five hundred of the believers at the same time. Most of them are still living today but some have died. Then he was seen by James and later by all the apostles. Last of all he was seen by me.^{1Cor.15:3-8} In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: Preach the Word,^{2Tim.4:1} Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel.^{2Tim.2:8} He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.^{Acts.10:42-43} Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call."^{Acts.2:38-39} "The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart, that is, the word of faith we are proclaiming: That if you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved."^{Rom.10:8-10}

Faith is spiritual (that is, a function of our spirit) and will affect the way we live: For we live by faith, not by sight.^{2Cor.5:7} So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.^{2Cor.4:18} It is written: "I believed; therefore I have spoken." With that same spirit of faith we also believe and therefore speak, because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you in his presence.^{2Cor.4:13-14} Because faith is spiritual it starts in our spirit but it affects every part of our life—we are to love God with our spirit, soul and mind: '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.22:39-40} We pray and sing praises to God with our spirit and our mind: For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful. So what shall I do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will also pray with my understanding; I will sing with my spirit, but I will also sing with my understanding. Otherwise when you are praising God in the Spirit, how can someone else, who is now put in the position of an inquirer, say "Amen" to your thanksgiving, since they do not know what you are saying?^{1Cor.14:14-16} We are to offer our body to God as well as our spirit and soul: 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} Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me; with burnt offerings and sin offerings you were not pleased. Then I said, 'Here I am—it is written about me in the scroll—I have come to do your will, O God.'^{Heb.10:5-7}

But why do you believe in Jesus Christ? Why have you placed your trust in Him? The lady from Sychar started to believe in Jesus because He told her about her life: She said to the people, "Come. See a man who told me everything I've ever done. Could this be the Christ?"^{Jn.4:29} The others from her village initially believed because of her testimony but then they believed in Jesus because they experienced Jesus for themselves: Many of the Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I ever did." So when the Samaritans came to him, they urged him to stay with them, and he stayed two days. And because of his words many more became believers. They said to the woman, "We no longer believe just because of what you said; now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Saviour of the world."^{Jn.4:39-42} Experiences are powerful and persuasive but they are not always reliable. Our minds are complex and fallible. We can easily miss important parts of the story through intentional or unintentional distractions—that is how conjurers play their tricks! And as we grow older our minds embellish parts of the story—or even forget important details. But the Scripture is God's infallible Word written down by people who were carried

along by the Holy Spirit. Peter had an incredible experience of seeing Jesus transfigured and hearing God speak from heaven—but later wrote that the Scriptures are more reliable than experience: *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} The people in Berea believed in Jesus because they examined the Scriptures: *Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true. Many of the Jews believed, as did also a number of prominent Greek women and many Greek men.*^{Acts.17:10-12} Paul started his ministry with great power but finished it with a great concern for understanding the Scriptures: *When I came to you, I did not come with eloquence or human wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. I came to you in weakness with great fear and trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on human wisdom, but on God's power.*^{1Cor.2:1-5} Remind everyone about these things, and command them in God's presence to stop fighting over words. Such arguments are useless, and they can ruin those who hear them. Work hard so you can present yourself to God and receive his approval. Be a good worker, one who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly explains the word of truth. Avoid worthless, foolish talk that only leads to more godless behavior.^{2Tim.2:14-16}

Greg Koukl makes this comment:

In the beginning was the Word. He made all things come into being. He spoke the universe into existence and breathed life into our world. And there was harmony between man and Maker. Then our enemy whispered the question that drew our first parents into falsehood: “*Did God really say?*” Ever since his primal lie we have been questioning our Maker’s message. We fell from innocence to guilt, from beauty to brokenness, from fellowship to alienation. To rescue his creation, the Maker divulged his plan in written form. He gave man his Word, the Bible. But because of man’s rebellion, every generation has brought with it a new cadre of characters set on destroying the Bible’s credibility. Sceptics and critics routinely doubt Scripture’s accuracy, question its reliability, and challenge its goodness. Those who are persuaded by their schemes adopt the belief that Scripture is irrelevant. The belief that the Bible’s credibility has been undermined leaves believers without a powerful tool against our foe. Jesus, the Divine Word, modelled how to evade the enemy’s snare. When tempted, he appealed to God’s Word with, “*It is written.*” Why? Because Scripture is the proclamation of truth. It is sharper than a two-edged sword, an anchor that keeps us from drifting, and in it are the words of life. The confidence of Jesus can be ours as we respond to the world’s challenges when we declare, “***It Is Written.***”

After we have been Believers for a while, we should know the general outline of the Scriptures and have a working knowledge of Christian doctrine but we still need reminding of what God has said. *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} Even though Jesus is no longer physically here with us, we can believe what the Scriptures record about Him—and by believing, we have eternal life: *Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here. See my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. 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 me but still have believed.” Jesus did many other miraculous signs in front of his disciples. They are not written down in this book. But these are written down so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. If you believe this, you will have life because you belong to him.^{Jn.20:27-31} And so for us, the most important question is not “Why do you believe in Jesus?” but “What difference does believing in Jesus make to you?” There are many results of believing in Jesus but here are just three:

1) Believing in Jesus means that we know that we have eternal life: *I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life.*^{1Jn.5:13}

2) Believing in Jesus means that We overcome the world (that is, the world's ways): *Who is it that overcomes the world? Only he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.*^{1Jn.5:5}

3) Believing in Jesus means that we are identified as Christians by the gift of the Holy Spirit: *And when you believed in Christ, he identified you as his own by giving you the Holy Spirit, whom he promised long ago. The Spirit is God's guarantee that he will give us the inheritance he promised and that he has purchased us to be his own people. He did this so we would praise and glorify him.*^{Eph.1:13-14}

So let's think, talk, live and give as Believers—and remember, there is a reward for those who keep the rules and finish the faith race: *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:

Why do you believe in Jesus?

What is Christian faith?

How much faith do you need to become a Christian?

Why do so many people think that the Bible is irrelevant?

How can we show that the Bible is relevant?

What are the results of believing in Jesus?

Puritan Prayer: O God, Your main plan 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 will love and glorify Him for ever. In this world You have given us a beginning—but one day it will be perfected in the realm above. You have helped us to see and know Christ, to take Him, to receive Him, to possess Him, to love Him, and to bless Him in our thoughts, words and life. Help us to study and stand for discipline and all the ways of worship. Out of love for Christ, help us to show our thankfulness, to seek and know Your will from love, to hold Your will in love—and to daily keep this state of thought. You have led us to place all our nature and happiness in oneness with Christ; in having thought and mind centred only on Him and in being like Him in communicating good to others. This is our heaven on earth, but we need the force, energy and impulses of Your Spirit to carry us on our way to the New Jerusalem. Here it is our duty to be as Christ in this world, to do what He would do, to live as He would live, to walk in love and meekness—then He will be known and we will have peace in death.

Sunday 26th May Ps.66 John 5

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

From 1972–1997 the BBC ran a quiz programme called *Mastermind* where contestants were asked questions for 2 minutes, first on their specialised subject and then on general knowledge. This subsequently became one of the most-watched shows on British television and Magnus Magnusson, who originally hosted the quiz, was famous for his catchphrase “I've started so I'll finish.” When Jesus became human, He was determined to finish the work that His Father had sent Him to do—which was to give eternal life to all who believe in Him: *For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I*

shall lose none of all those he has given me, but raise them up at the last day. For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day.^{Jn.6:38-40} Eternal life is knowing God the Father and His Son Jesus Christ: *Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent. I have brought you glory on earth by finishing the work you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began.*^{Jn.17:3-5} This everlasting life was made possible because through His death, Jesus made peace between us and God: *He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness.*^{1Pet.2:24} For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.^{Col.1:19-20} And when Jesus died, He declared that His work was completed: *When he had received the drink, Jesus said, "It is finished." With that, he bowed his head and released his spirit.*^{Jn.19:30}

Even though Jesus has completed His work, there is still much for us to do. We have to work for God—and this work is primarily believing God! *Do not work for food that spoils. Work for food that lasts forever. That is the food the Son of Man will give you. God the Father has put his seal of approval on him.* Then they asked him, *"What does God want from us? What works does he want us to do?"* Jesus answered, *"God's work is to believe in the One he has sent."*^{Jn.6:27-29} Believing in Jesus will elevate us above life's difficulties and make us an overcomer: *I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.*^{Jn.16:33} Who is it that overcomes the world? Only he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.^{1Jn.5:5} And like Jesus, if we do God's work (and finish it), it will not wear us out but energise us—like food! Jesus said, *"My food is to do what my Father sent me to do. My food is to finish his work."*^{Jn.4:34} Paul said that he toiled night and day to help others believe in Jesus: *I served the Lord with great humility and with tears and in the midst of severe testing by the plots of my Jewish opponents. You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and from house to house. I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus.*^{Acts.20:19-21} But Paul was determined that he not only started but actually finished the work because there is a prize to win: *I do everything to spread the Good News and share in its blessings. Don't you realize that in a race everyone runs, but only one person gets the prize? So run to win! All athletes are disciplined in their training. They do it to win a prize that will fade away, but we do it for an eternal prize. So I run with purpose in every step. I am not just shadowboxing. I discipline my body like an athlete, training it to do what it should. Otherwise, I fear that after preaching to others I myself might be disqualified.*^{1Cor.9:23-27} For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time for my departure is near. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.^{2Tim.4:6-8}

Marriage is a lifelong commitment and the vows we made at our wedding were *"until death do us part"*. Conversion is also lifelong commitment and the vows we made to Jesus when we received Him as our Lord and Saviour are for even longer—they are *"until death does unite us"*! That is why we should consider the implications of our commitments and not make the vows lightly or wantonly. *Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Won't you first sit down and estimate the cost to see if you have enough money to complete it? For if you lay the foundation and are not able to finish it, everyone who sees it will ridicule you, saying, 'This person began to build and wasn't able to finish.'*^{Lk.14:28-30} Although we may have good intentions, none of us are capable of completely staying the course. We all fail and miss God's perfect standard—including our trust in Him—which is why the Bible states that God will complete the work that He started in us. *Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.*^{2Cor.1:21-22} Whenever I pray, I make my requests for all of you with joy, for

you have been my partners in spreading the Good News about Christ from the time you first heard it until now. And I am certain that God, who began the good work within you, will continue his work until it is finally finished on the day when Christ Jesus returns.^{Phil.1:4-6}

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

The Christians in Galatia (now part of modern-day Turkey) started well in their trust in Jesus but they were deceived and went back to relying on religious rituals. *You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you [or, tricked you; cast a spell on you; hypnotised you not to obey the truth]? Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified. I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by believing what you heard? Are you so foolish? After beginning by means of the Spirit, are you now trying to finish by means of the flesh? Have you experienced so much in vain—if it really was in vain? So again I ask, does God give you his Spirit and work miracles among you by the works of the law, or by your believing what you heard? So also Abraham “believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.” Understand, then, that those who have faith are children of Abraham.*^{Gal.3:1-7}

All God's gifts are just that—gifts! **God's** gift of **Grace** means that **God does** give us what we **do not deserve** (i.e. His love and forgiveness). **God's** gift of **Mercy** means that that **God does not give** us what **we do deserve** (i.e. the punishment for our sins and eternal condemnation). Nothing that we can do ourselves will be good enough to redeem us—our life is worth more than anyone can afford! *They trust in their wealth and boast of great riches. Yet they cannot redeem themselves from death by paying a ransom to God. Redemption does not come so easily, for no one can ever pay enough to live forever and never see the grave.*^{Ps.49:6-9} But God can redeem us and has! *Giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light. For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.*^{Col.1:12-14} God is gracious and forgives us: *The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin.*^{Ex.34:6} But the next verse explains that if we reject His grace we remain unforgiven: *Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation.*^{Ex.34:7}

God started us on our journey of faith and God will ensure that we complete it. *So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy.*^{Rom.9:16} *And I am certain that God, who began the good work within you, will continue his work until it is finally finished on the day when Christ Jesus returns.*^{Phil.1:4-}

⁶ Jesus left heaven to find us and He will never let us go: *For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.*^{Lk.19:10} *My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and*

they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand. I and the Father are one.^{Jn.10:27-30} Jesus came to do His Father's will—and He completed it. We have started doing the work that the Father has given us to do—we are Believers and we believe—but let's make sure that we finish that work, trusting Him in the difficult times as well as the good times. 'The we will be able to say with Paul: *I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.*^{1Tim.4:7-8}

Questions

What does God want us to do?

How do we do what God wants us to do?

How can we ensure that we are not tricked (like the Galatians)?

What should we do if we realise that we are tricked?

Define “*sin*”.

What is the greatest sin? (and why?)

Puritan Prayer: Three in One, One in Three, God of my salvation, Holy Father, Blessed Son, Eternal Spirit, One God in three distinct Persons, I adore You for bringing sinners to Your knowledge and to Your kingdom. O Father, You have loved me and sent Jesus to redeem me; O Jesus, You have loved me and assumed my nature, shed Your own blood to wash away my sins and wrought righteousness to cover my unworthiness; O Holy Spirit, You have loved me and entered my thought, implanted there eternal life and revealed to me the glories of Jesus. Three Persons and one God, I bless and praise You for love so unmerited, so unspeakable, so wondrous, so mighty to save the lost and raise them to glory. O Father, I thank You that in fullness of grace You have given me to Jesus—to be His sheep, His jewel and His portion; O Jesus, I thank You that in fullness of grace You have accepted me, espoused me and bound me; O Holy Spirit, I thank You that in fullness of grace You have exhibited Jesus as my salvation, implanted faith within me, subdued my stubborn thoughts and made me one with Him for ever. O Father You are enthroned to hear my prayers; O Jesus, Your hand is outstretched to take my petitions; O Holy Spirit, You are willing to help my infirmities, to show me my need, to supply words, to pray within me and to strengthen me that I faint not in supplication. O Triune God, who commands the universe, You have commanded me to ask for those things that concern Your kingdom and my soul. Let me live and pray as one baptized into the threefold Name.

June 2024

In God we trust: *May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in Him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.* Rom. 15:13

Thought for the Month: The thought of God stirs a person so deeply that he cannot be content unless he praises Him—because He made us for Himself and our hearts find no peace until they rest in Him. *Augustine of Hippo*

Sunday 2nd June Ps.67 John 5

You only live once—or do you? *Blessed and holy are those who have part in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with him* Rev. 20:6

The James Bond films have catchy titles such as “*You Only Live Twice*”, “*Live and let die*”, “*Die another day*” because they are meant to convey the dangerous and near-death exploits of the super-spy 007! But no matter how fantastic the exploits of the fictitious Bond are, he is only fiction. In a film, anyone can do anything, but in real life, injuries hurt and mortal people live just once—because death is final. But if life is just as pointless as a film with no consequences or accountability, we might as well live as in a film. This is what Paul says: *If the dead are not raised, “Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.”* ¹Cor. 15:32

However, Jesus introduced a new dimension to life and death when he said: *Anyone who believes in me will live, even if he dies. And those who live and believe in me will never die.* And this statement is not fiction but fact—not wishful thinking but a fact that is credible and reasonable because Jesus said it and is confirmed by His resurrection.

The context of Jesus’ statement was the death of his friend Lazarus: *Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.” Martha answered, “I know he will rise again. This will happen when people are raised from the dead on the last day.” Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Anyone who believes in me will live, even if he dies. And those who live and believe in me will never die. Do you believe this?” “Yes, Lord,” she told him. “I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God. I believe that you are the One who was supposed to come into the world.”* ²Jn. 11:23-27

The future resurrection that Marthas spoke about will be at the end of history and is the glorious hope (certainty) of Believers. But Jesus spoke about 2 resurrections—a spiritual resurrection and a physical resurrection—and 2 deaths—a spiritual death and a physical death. The 1st resurrection is now (*a time is coming and has already begun, the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God. **Those who hear it will live***). This a spiritual resurrection and refers to the new-birth or conversion when people hear the Gospel and respond. The 2nd resurrection is future (***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*). This will happen at the end of time when those who have died will receive a new body (*I know that my Redeemer lives, and he will stand upon the earth at last. And after my body has decayed, yet in my body I will see God!* ³Job. 19:25-26). 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. I can do nothing by myself. I judge only as I hear. And my judging is fair. I do not try to please myself. I try only to please the One who sent me.* ⁴Jn. 5:24-30

The 1st death is spiritual death—the separation from God that we inherited from Adam: *Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned.* ⁵Rom. 5:12

He gave us life even when we were dead in sin. ⁶Eph. 2:5

The 2nd death is

physical death and the judgement that follows. *The lake of fire is the second death. Anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire.*^{Rev.20:14-15} Those of us who have experienced **conversion** (the 1st resurrection) have no fear of the **conclusion** (the 2nd resurrection) because the 2nd death (physical death and beyond) will not harm us: *Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death.*^{Rev.2:10-11} *Blessed and holy are those who share in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them.*^{Rev.20:6} *But cowards, unbelievers, the corrupt, murderers, the immoral, those who practice witchcraft, idol worshipers, and all liars—their fate is in the fiery lake of burning sulphur. This is the second death.*^{Rev.21:8} Jesus has redeemed us from the curse of the law and even the cause of the curse (which is sin and the devil)! *Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who is hung on a pole." 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.3:13-14} *Christ entered the Most Holy Place only once—and for all time. He did not take with him the blood of goats and calves. His sacrifice was his own blood, and by it he secured eternal redemption from sin forever.*^{Heb.9:12} *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.*^{1Pet.1:18-19} *Since all of these sons and daughters have flesh and blood, Jesus took on flesh and blood to be like them. He did this so that by dying he would destroy the one who had power over death (that is, the devil). In this way he would free those who were slaves all their lives because they were afraid of dying.*^{Heb.2:14-15} Nevertheless, we all—believers and non-believers alike—will have to appear before the judgment seat of Christ: *Therefore we are always confident and know that as long as we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord. For we live by faith, not by sight. We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord. So we make it our goal to please him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each of us may receive what is due us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad. Since, then, we know what it is to fear the Lord, we try to persuade others.*^{2Cor.5:6-11} And so it is important that we understand about the judgement seat of Christ.

Many schools get their students to take the exams early so if they get poor results or even if they fail their exams, they can retake them without falling behind. Christians have already taken their life's "exams" and failed! We were judged and found guilty by God who then forgave us everything and gave us "top marks". Now we never have to worry about our "end of life" exams because we know we have "passed". The non-Christian still have to take their "end of life" exam and they too will fail it, but with no chance to re-take it. This is really serious and it certainly is worth asking people to consider the matter before it is too late. For the Believer, judgment is past, present and future. **Past Judgment:** This is our confidence because we were judged and found guilty by God who then forgave us everything. *Yet it was our weaknesses he carried; it was our sorrows that weighed him down. And we thought his troubles were a punishment from God, a punishment for his own sins! But he was pierced for our rebellion, crushed for our sins. He was beaten so we could be whole. He was whipped so we could be healed.*^{Is.53:4-5} There is now no condemnation for us who are in Christ Jesus.^{Rom.8:1} **Present Judgment:** This is our security because God disciplines not condemns. *And have you forgotten the encouraging words God spoke to you as his children? He said, "My child, don't make light of the LORD's discipline, and don't give up when he corrects you. For the LORD disciplines those he loves, and he punishes each one he accepts as his child." As you endure this divine discipline, remember that God is treating you as his own children.*^{Heb.12:4-11} *For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.*^{Jn.3:17-18} God is not the source of our problems, our bad choices are. Yes, He has the power to stop them, but He will

not override the human will. *But if we judged ourselves rightly, we should not be judged. But when we are judged, we are disciplined by the Lord in order that we may not be condemned along with the world.* ^{1Cor.11:31-32}

Future Judgment: This is our consolation because *mercy triumphs over judgment* ^{1Jn.4:18} *and there is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves punishment.* ^{1Jn.4:18} For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad. ^{2Cor.5:10} Salvation is not based on what we have done, but on what Jesus did for us. Man is not “unsaved” because of what he has done, but because of what he has not done—he has not received Jesus Christ. The believer has nothing to fear concerning this judgment of eternal punishment because *God has not destined us for wrath, but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ.* ^{1Thess.5:9} Christians who confess a Saviour should have the assurance of their salvation—we are called “believers” and so unbelief has no place in our lives! We can have the same assurance that Paul had: *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}

W.F.P. Burton in his book “[Safe Eternally](#)” 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’ (by Johannes Adam Simon Oertel 1876) representing a white-robed girl with hair hanging down her back. She was soaked with water, and clinging to a rock in the shape of a cross, while her feet still dangled beneath her in the wild waves. There was a threatening background of rough sea and stormy sky. The old lady was very proud of this picture and would refer to it as she exhorted her hearers to cling to the Cross. Much of her Christian life was directed to keeping herself saved—“*hanging on*”—as she expressed it. One evening, we went for the weekly cottage meeting in her house and found the picture gone. The faded wall-paper round the spot from which it had been taken showed that something was missing. “*What has happened to your picture, Mrs. B?*” we asked. “*I’ve smashed it*” she said most emphatically. “*Many’s the time I’ve looked at that poor girl hanging on, till it fairly made my arms ache for her. One slip and she would have been back beneath the waves, worse off than when she first fell into the sea. I’ve often wished there were something more secure than this ‘hanging on’ business. It seemed so risky with all those rocks, slippery with sea-weed. I’d like to have got the girl home, and given her a change of clothes and a good hot cup o’ tea. Today I was reading in First Peter chapter one, and when I came to the fifth verse: ‘Kept by the power of God, through faith’ I thought to myself, ‘The Lord Jesus is the Author and Finisher of my faith.*” ^{Heb.12:2} *Even the believing is Not for yourselves, lest any man should boast.*” ^{Eph.2:8} *It’s the gift of God. ‘I felt so safe with those Everlasting Arms underneath me, that when I looked up at the poor girl clinging there, it dawned on me suddenly— That picture is untrue. I’m not half in and half out. I’m saved with an everlasting salvation - saved from head to foot, seven days a week, from now on and for evermore. I’m not hanging to slippery rocks. I’m TWENTY MILES INLAND! So I pulled down the old picture, smashed it over my knee and shouted Hallelujah!’”*

Although this life is only lived once, if we participate in the 1st resurrection now, the 2nd death will have no power over us. *Blessed and holy are those who have part in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with him* ^{Rev.20:6} We have a glorious future that is dependent on Jesus not on our circumstances or any political regime. *Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope. 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.4:13-18}

We are **Foursquare Gospel** people who proclaim Jesus Christ as the **Coming King** as well as **Saviour, Baptizer and Healer**. Jesus came as a **Shepherd**^{Matt.10:14} but will come as a **King**.^{Rev.19:16}

He came on a **donkey**^{Matt.21} but will come on a **horse**.^{Rev.19:11} He came in **peace**^{Lk.19:42; Jn.14:27} but will come in **judgement**.^{1Pet.4:5; Jude1:15}

Jesus has saved us from God's wrath. *Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him.*^{Rom.5:9} *and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, that is Jesus, who delivers us from the wrath to come.*^{1Thess.1:10}

So let's live as people who have passed from death to life,^{1Jn.3:14} and who have been justified by God: *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.5:9-10}

Mike Petzer's booklet **The Miracle of Judgement** and W.F.P. Burton's book **Safe Eternally** are available from our [Church website](#) under "[Resources/Resources](#)".

Questions:

What did Jesus mean by the dead hearing His voice and living?

What did Jesus mean about people coming out of the graves?

Why will the 2nd death have no power over Believers?

How can we have an assurance of salvation?

Are we living in the end times?

If so, what difference should it make to the way we live?

Puritan Prayer: O God, may Your Spirit speak in me, that I may speak to You. I have no merit but the merit of Jesus which stands for me. I was undeserving—but I looked to Your tender mercy. I was full of infirmities, wants and sin—but You were full of grace. I confessed my sin—my frequent sin, my wilful sin and You gave me another master and lord, Your Son, Jesus. Now my heart is turned towards holiness and my life speeds as an arrow from a bow towards complete obedience to You. Help me in all my doings to put down sin, and save me from the love of the world and the pride of life. Deliver me from everything that is natural to fallen man and let Christ's nature be seen in me day by day. Grant me grace to bear Your will without repining (feel or express discontent; fret), so I will delight to be not only chiselled, squared and fashioned, but also separated from the old rock where I was embedded for so long. Lift me from the quarry to the upper air, where I may be built in Christ for ever.



The Rock of Ages by Johannes Adam Simon Oertel (1876)

Sunday 9th June Ps.68 John 6

We are more than a mere mortal! *Life is spiritual. Your physical existence doesn't contribute to that life. The words that I have spoken to you are spiritual. They are life.*^{Jn.6:63}

Last week we saw that Jesus introduced a new dimension to life and death by saying that anyone who believes in Him will live—even if they die—and those who live and believe in Him will never die! The context of this statement was the death of His friend Lazarus, so Jesus obviously didn't mean that we will never die physically. In fact, Jesus warned some of His Disciples that they would die: *If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even their own life—such a person cannot be my disciple. And whoever does not carry their cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.*^{Lk.14:26-27} Jesus said, “Feed my sheep. Very truly I tell you, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go.” Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Then he said to him, “Follow me!”^{Jn.21:17-29}

There is a spiritual dimension to life that elevates us humans above the rest of creation: O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name throughout the earth! Your glory is sung above the heavens. From the mouths of little children and infants, you have built a fortress against your opponents to silence the enemy and the avenger. When I look at your heavens, the creation of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have set in place—what is a mortal that you remember him or the Son of Man that you take care of him? You have made him a little lower than yourself. You have crowned him with glory and honour. You have made him rule what your hands created. You have put everything under his control: all the sheep and cattle, the wild animals, the birds, the fish, whatever swims in the currents of the seas. O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name throughout the earth!^{Ps.8:3-9} But even though we are called “mortals” in this Psalm, we are not “mere” mortals because God has given us a new status—children of God! *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} Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.^{Jn.1:12-13} However, even though we are “sons of the Most High,” if we live like mere mortals, we “will die like mere mortals”! God presides in the great assembly; he renders judgment among the “gods”: *‘How long will you defend the unjust and show partiality to the wicked? Defend the weak and the fatherless; uphold the cause of the poor and the oppressed. Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked. ‘The ‘gods’ know nothing, they understand nothing. They walk about in darkness; all the foundations of the earth are shaken. ‘I said, ‘You are ‘gods’; you are all sons of the Most High.’ But you will die like mere mortals; you will fall like every other ruler.*”^{Ps.82:1-7}

Each of us will lose loved ones in the next 10 years and some of us will even face death ourselves. If we live as *mere mortals* we will die as *mere mortals* but if we live as *sons of the Most High* we can die as *sons of the Most High*! Believers are “sons of God” and we can live spiritually healthy lives that are blessed and full of hope. When Jesus quoted from that Psalm, He confirmed the validity of all Scripture as well as those verses: Jesus answered them, “Is it not written in your Law, ‘I have said you are gods’? If he called them ‘gods,’ to whom the word of God came—and the Scripture cannot be broken—what about the one whom the Father set apart as his very own and sent into the world?”^{Jn.10:35-36} In the NLT the word “god” is translated “judge” which helps us understand the meaning of this passage: *God presides over heaven's court; he pronounces judgment on the judges.*^{Ps.82:1} We must make sound godly judgments (make decisions like God), if we are to live like “gods” and “sons of the Most High.” Although God’s blessings makes us rich in contentment and joy, we are not guaranteed a pain-free life, or even a sadness-free life. But **Faith** elevates us from a “**mere mortal**” to a “**more than mortal**” and we become an overcomer. *Everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world? Only the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.*^{1Jn.5:4-5} Even so, some of God's children still live as mere mortals,

or even slaves—they are remain spiritually hungry and tired because they are controlled by their flesh (flesh means temporal things like food, feelings, desires—in fact anything that will not pass through death and be with us in heaven). This is because they don't really believe that God keeps His word: *As long as your own children are young, they are no different from slaves in your house. They are no different, even though they own all of the property... When we were children, we were slaves to the basic things the people of the world believe... Because you are his children, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts. He is the Holy Spirit... So you aren't slaves any longer. You are God's children. Because you are his children, he gives you what he promised to give his people.*^{Gal.4:1-7}

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

Paul's letter to Corinth is not about the *gifts of the Spirit* but rather about **being spiritual**. Many translations have added the word “*gifts*” (*Follow the way of love and eagerly desire [gifts] of the Spirit, especially prophecy.*^{1Cor.14:1}) whereas Paul was actually saying “*eagerly desire spirituality*” or “*yearn to be spiritual*” (the word “*gift*” is not in the Greek text). **Being spiritual is behaving like God.** There is no competition or disagreement within the Trinity: *I and the*

Father are one.^{Jn.10:30} *Then God said, “Let us make man in our likeness...” So God created man in his own likeness. He created him in the likeness of God. He created them as male and female. God blessed them.*^{Gen.1:26-}

²⁸ *Jesus showed us what God is really like. Jesus Christ has given us grace and truth. No one has ever seen God. But God, the one and only Son, is at the Father's side. He has shown us what God is like.*^{Jn.1:14} *Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father! So why are you asking me to show him to you?*^{Jn.14:9} God has always been the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin.^{Ex.34:6-7}

This is also the description of those who fear God: *Blessed are those who fear the LORD, who find great delight in his commands... Even in darkness light dawns for the upright, for those who are gracious and compassionate and righteous.*^{Ps.112:1-4} Although God is gracious and compassionate, He is not sentimental or weak: *The LORD reigns forever; he has established his throne for judgment. He rules the world in righteousness and judges the peoples with equity. The LORD is a refuge for the oppressed, a stronghold in times of trouble.*^{Ps.9:7-9}

God is kind but He is not a soft touch: *Since they didn't bother to acknowledge God, God stopped bothering them and let them run loose... Those people are on a dark spiral downward. But if you think that leaves you on the high ground where you can point your finger at others, think again. Every time you criticize someone, you condemn yourself. It takes one to know one. Judgmental criticism of others is a well-known way of escaping detection in your own crimes and misdemeanours. But God isn't so easily diverted. He sees right through all such smoke screens and holds you to what you've done. You didn't think, did you, that just by pointing your finger at others you would distract God from seeing all your misdoings and from coming down on you hard? Or did you think that because he's such a nice God, he'd let you off the hook? Better think this one through from the beginning. God is kind, but he's not soft. In kindness he takes us firmly by the hand and leads us into a radical life-change. You're not getting by with anything. Every refusal and avoidance of God adds fuel to the fire. The day is coming when it's going to blaze hot and high, God's fiery and righteous judgment. Make no mistake: In the end you get what's coming to you—Real Life for those who work on God's side, but to those who insist on getting their own way and take the path of least resistance, Fire!*^{Rom.2:1-8}

And God expects us to be the same as Him—kind but not soft: *How long will you stand up for those who aren't fair to others? How long will you show favour to sinful people? Stand up for those who are weak and for those whose fathers have died. See to it that those who are poor*

and those who are beaten down are treated fairly. Save the weak and those who are in need. Save them from the power of sinful people. ^{Ps.82:2-4}

Let's return to the simple Gospel of *peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.* ^{Rom.5:1} But we can only do this if we live as *sons of the Most High* and not as *mere mortals*. We are a trinity of spirit, soul and body and if we are going to live as spiritual beings and sons of God, we must base our life on God's Word not "*things*" or "*stuff*". *Life is spiritual. Your physical existence doesn't contribute to that life. The words that I have spoken to you are spiritual. They are life.* ^{Jn.6:63} Beware! Guard against every kind of greed. *Life is not measured by how much you own.* ^{Lk.12:15} Paul criticised people for living as *mere mortals*. He said: *For since there is jealousy and quarrelling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere men?* ^{1Cor.3:3} Note that Paul did not say that they were not Believers, only that they were **acting as mere men**. There will always be differences amongst us because we each see life through our own personal experiences and even prejudices **BUT** we can be **different without being divisive**: *I hear that when you come together as a church, there are divisions among you, and to some extent I believe it. No doubt there have to be differences among you to show which of you have God's approval.* ^{1Cor.11:18-19}

We are not **mere mortals** anymore—we are **more than mortals** because we are God's dwelling place (His Temple). *Don't you know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you?* ^{1Cor.3:16} We are sons of the Most High and we can make sound judgements because we have the mind of Christ. *Stop judging by mere appearances, but instead judge correctly.* ^{Jn.7:24} *The Spirit understands all things. He understands even the deep things of God. Who can know the thoughts of another person? Only a person's own spirit can know them. In the same way, only the Spirit of God knows God's thoughts. We have not received the spirit of the world. We have received the Spirit who is from God. The Spirit helps us understand what God has freely given us. That is what we speak about. We don't use words taught to us by people. We use words taught to us by the Holy Spirit. We use the words of the Spirit to teach the truths of the Spirit. Some people don't have the Holy Spirit. They don't accept the things that come from the Spirit of God. Things like that are foolish to them. They can't understand them. In fact, such things can't be understood without the Spirit's help. Everyone who has the Spirit can judge all things. But no one can judge those who have the Spirit. It is written, "Who can ever know what is in the Lord's mind? Can anyone ever teach him?" But we have the mind of Christ.* ^{1Cor.2:10-16} But the LORD said to Samuel, "Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The LORD does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart." ^{1Sam.16:7} And if we find that we are controlled by our flesh (our natural ability and feelings), we should re-align our spiritual compass and get back on course. We should re-focus on Jesus and make our born-again spirit dominate our soul (our personality): *Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Saviour and my God.* ^{Ps.42:5} We do this by praising God (saying good words about Him—doxologies, benedictions). When we behave as a 'god' by making godly judgments and decisions, we can live as a *son of the Most High*—and then we can end our earthly life as a *son of the Most High* rather than a *mere mortal*. This will bring honour to God and hope to the world: *The Spirit of the LORD speaks through me; his words are upon my tongue. The God of Israel spoke. The Rock of Israel said to me: The one who rules righteously, who rules in the fear of God, is like the light of morning at sunrise, like a morning without clouds, like the gleaming of the sun on new grass after rain.* ^{2Sam.23:2-4} **Yes, we are sons of the Most High, so let's live like sons of God and then when our time comes, we will die like sons of God!**

Questions

What makes people different from the rest of Creation?

What makes Believers different from the rest of humanity?

Can we behave like a mere mortal and still be a child of God?

How can we live as children of God?

How can we prepare for that final day when we take our last breath?

Puritan Prayer: My dear Lord, I can but tell You that You know I long for nothing but Yourself, nothing but holiness, nothing but union with Your will. You have given me these desires and You alone can give me the thing desired. My soul longs for communion with You, for mortification of indwelling corruption—especially spiritual pride. How precious it is to have a tender sense and clear apprehension of the mystery of godliness and of true holiness! What a blessedness to be like You as much as it is possible for a creature to be like its Creator! Lord, give me more of Your likeness, enlarge my soul to contain fullness of holiness and engage me to live more for You. Help me to be less pleased with my spiritual experiences and when I feel at ease after sweet communings, teach me it is far too little that I know and do. Blessed Lord, let me climb up near to You, and love and desire for deliverance from the body of sin, for my soul mourns to think it should ever lose sight of its beloved. Wrap my life in divine love—keep me ever desiring You and more focused on You. May I always humble and resigned to Your will, that I may be more fitted for doing and serving.

Sunday 16th June Ps.70 Fathers' Day

On 28th August 1963, Martin Luther King delivered what was probably the most famous and influential speech of the 20th Century. He was at the *March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom* rally where more than a quarter of a million people had gathered when he delivered that 17-minute speech, now known as "*I Have a Dream*". Whilst he was speaking, someone shouted behind him, "*Tell them about the dream*" and King departed from the prepared text and said:

I say to you today, my friends, so even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream.

I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal."

I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.

I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the colour of their skin but by the content of their character. I have a dream today.

I have a dream that one day, down in Alabama, with its vicious racists, with its governor having his lips dripping with the words of interposition and nullification; one day right there in Alabama, little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers. I have a dream today.

This came to be regarded as one of the finest speeches in the history of American oratory and helped put civil rights at the top of the agenda of reformers as well as facilitating passage of the *Civil Rights Act* of 1964. But even though King was a Baptist Minister and his powerful speech was in total harmony with the principles of God's Kingdom, his dream was about a social and humanitarian message to the country, not a spiritual message to the Church.

Last Sunday Geraldine shared a dream with us that had really impacted her. She saw our Church meeting in a temple-like place with open archways. There were lots of people passing by who were dirty, distressed, despondent and some were desperate, and whilst some of the Church didn't want to help them, others said emphatically, that we have an abundance of the Living Word and we must share what we have with them. The meaning was clear—we have the answer to the world's spiritual needs and we must share what we have. So this morning I am explaining what place dreams can have within the Church.

Firstly, the Church was founded in the expectation of Believers having dreams and visions: *Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd: 'Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say. These people 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 heavens 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} This was not Peter getting excited in his preaching and using exaggerated expressions. No! Peter was preaching under the anointing of the Holy Spirit and explaining that Joel's prophecy was being fulfilled amongst them. In this context, prophecy, dreams, visions, signs and wonders all refer to atmosphere of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit—and the purpose of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit is salvation: *And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.* The Old Covenant was introduced with signs and wonders: *Then Moses led the people out of the camp to meet with God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain. Mount Sinai was covered with smoke, because the LORD descended on it in fire. The smoke billowed up from it like smoke from a furnace, and the whole mountain trembled violently. As the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke and the voice of God answered him.*^{Ex.19:17-19} And the New Covenant was also introduced with signs and wonders: *When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.*^{Acts.2:1-4} But whereas the Old Covenant was darkness and gloom, the New Covenant is joyful and glorious: *You have not come to a mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire; to darkness, gloom and storm... you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the Judge of all, 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.12:18-24}

Nevertheless, dreams and visions were integral to the early Church. In the New Testament God spoke in dreams and visions before Pentecost (c.f. Zechariah, Mary and Joseph) and He spoke in dreams and visions after Pentecost (c.f. Peter, Paul, Annanias and John). Dreams are usually considered to be people's thoughts and imaginations that occur when they are unconscious (normally when asleep) and visions are usually thought of as people's thoughts and imaginations that occur when they are conscious (or in a trance). These sort of dreams and visions are part of the soul's conscious or subconscious activity—even animals dream and we often hear our dogs chasing something in their sleep! However, we are spirit, soul and body and so we have a spiritual dimension. God is Spirit and we worship Him in Spirit (or with our spirit). Our spirit relates to the spiritual world and when we are born-again, we relate to God—God speaks to us and we hear God's voice in our spirit. And by the way, there is no mention in the New

Testament of any spiritual gift of interpreting dreams! When God speaks to us, He will ensure that we understand what He is saying. If we are Jesus' sheep, we will hear His voice and will follow Him—if we don't hear His voice, it is because we aren't His sheep: *You do not believe because you are not my sheep. My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand. I and the Father are one.*^{Jn.10:26-30} [When God spoke to Believers in the Scriptures, they understood what He was saying to them—it was only the unbelievers that needed an interpretation of the dreams, such as Pharaoh, Nebuchadnezzar!]

The first time we hear God's voice, it quite literally raises the dead and we pass from spiritual death to spiritual life. We then have to learn to keep in step with the Holy Spirit: *Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.*^{Gal.5:25} And so if we have a dream or a vision or even a "prophecy" we need to discern if it is from our soul (our mind, thought or imagination) or whether it is from our spirit and thus God speaking to us. Jesus' transfiguration was a real event that Peter, James and John witnessed: *Jesus took with him Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light. Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus... a bright cloud covered them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!"*^{Matt.17:1-5} They saw Jesus transformed with their physical eyes and they heard God speak from heaven with their physical ears: *For we did not follow cunningly devised fables when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of His majesty. For He received from God the Father honour and glory when such a voice came to Him from the Excellent Glory: "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." And we heard this voice which came from heaven when we were with Him on the holy mountain.*^{2Pet.1:16-18} But Matthew calls this experience a "vision" because they saw it—"vision" means "to see": *As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus instructed them, "tell the vision to no one [don't tell anyone what you have seen], until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead."*^{Matt.17:9} In the Old Testament, the prophets were called "seers" because they saw into the spiritual world. *Formerly in Israel, if someone went to inquire of God, they would say, "Come, let us go to the seer," because the prophet of today used to be called a seer.*^{1Sam.9:9} When John was in the Spirit, he saw into heaven: *I was in the Spirit on the Lord's Day... Then I turned to see the voice that spoke with me. And having turned I saw...*^{Rev.1:10-12} God can and does show us things today—but always through His Son, Jesus Christ: *Long ago God spoke many times and in many ways to our ancestors through the prophets. And now in these final days, he has spoken to us through his Son.*^{Heb.1:1-2} This means that whatever God says to us will be in harmony with the teachings of Jesus and usually directly through the Scriptures because the Scriptures are always reliable and never change—even when society changes: *The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever.*^{Is.40:8} *Your word, LORD, is eternal; it stands firm in the heavens.*^{Ps.119:89} *the Scripture cannot be broken.*^{Jn.10:35} Peter said that his experience was wonderful but that the Scriptures are a more certain and reliable way of hearing from God: *We ourselves heard the voice that came from heaven. We were with him on the sacred mountain. The word of the prophets is made more certain. We have that word. You must pay attention to it. It is like a light shining in a dark place. It will shine until the day Jesus comes. Then the Morning Star will rise in your hearts. Above all, here is what you must understand. No prophecy in Scripture ever came from a prophet's own understanding. It never came simply because a prophet wanted it to. Instead, the Holy Spirit guided the prophets as they spoke. So prophecy comes from God.*^{2Pet.2:18-21}

Occasionally God may speak to us in a dramatic way but normally it is through a still small voice: *"Go out and stand before me on the mountain," the LORD told him. And as Elijah stood there, the LORD passed by, and a mighty windstorm hit the mountain. It was such a terrible blast that the rocks were*

torn loose, but the LORD was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. And after the earthquake there was a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire there was the sound of a gentle whisper.^{1Kgs.19:11-12} 'Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,' says the LORD Almighty.^{Zech.4:6} The Holy Spirit usually speaks through nudges or prompts—what feels like a strong feeling or conviction. But God will never contradict New Covenant teaching, which is why we should strive to be Bible literate and know the Scriptures as well as recognise the Holy Spirit's leading: *You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God.*^{Matt.22:29} We need to be discerning so that we are not deceived: *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. For certain individuals whose condemnation was written about long ago have secretly slipped in among you. They are ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into a license for immorality and deny Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord... Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding towns gave themselves up to sexual immorality and perversion. They serve as an example of those who suffer the punishment of eternal fire. In the very same way, on the strength of their dreams these ungodly people pollute their own bodies, reject authority and heap abuse on celestial beings.*^{Jude3-8}

God has given Ministry gifts to the Church—including shepherds (pastors): *Now these are the gifts Christ gave to the church: the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, and the pastors and teachers. Their responsibility is to equip God's people to do his work and build up the church, the body of Christ. This will continue until we all come to such unity in our faith and knowledge of God's Son that we will be mature in the Lord, measuring up to the full and complete standard of Christ.*^{Eph.4:11-13} *Ask the LORD for rain in the springtime; it is the LORD who sends the thunderstorms. He gives showers of rain to all people, and plants of the field to everyone. The idols speak deceitfully, diviners see visions that lie; they tell dreams that are false, they give comfort in vain. Therefore the people wander like sheep oppressed for lack of a shepherd.*^{Zech.10:1-2} But people—even pastors—are fallible! *In the days to come you will understand all this very clearly. "I have not sent these prophets, yet they run around claiming to speak for me. I have given them no message, yet they go on prophesying. If they had stood before me and listened to me, they would have spoken my words, and they would have turned my people from their evil ways and deeds. Am I a God who is only close at hand?" says the LORD. "No, I am far away at the same time. Can anyone hide from me in a secret place? Am I not everywhere in all the heavens and earth?" says the LORD. "I have heard these prophets say, 'Listen to the dream I had from God last night.' And then they proceed to tell lies in my name. How long will this go on? If they are prophets, they are prophets of deceit, inventing everything they say. By telling these false dreams, they are trying to get my people to forget me, just as their ancestors did by worshiping the idols of Baal. "Let these false prophets tell their dreams, but let my true messengers faithfully proclaim my every word. There is a difference between straw and grain! Does not my word burn like fire?" says the LORD. "Is it not like a mighty hammer that smashes a rock to pieces? "Therefore," says the LORD, "I am against these prophets who steal messages from each other and claim they are from me. I am against these smooth-tongued prophets who say, 'This prophecy is from the LORD!' I am against these false prophets. Their imaginary dreams are flagrant lies that lead my people into sin. I did not send or appoint them, and they have no message at all for my people. I, the LORD, have spoken!"*^{Jer.23:20-32}

Not everyone who says they have heard from God has really heard from God and so we should be on our guard. The Church is God's place of security and protection and when we meet together in the Name of Jesus, God intends to display His wisdom amongst us. Together we can discern what is true and what is false, what agrees with Scripture and what contradicts Scripture. *And this is God's plan: Both Gentiles and Jews who believe the Good News share equally in the riches inherited by God's children. Both are part of the same body, and both enjoy the promise of blessings because they belong to Christ Jesus. By God's grace and mighty power, I have been given the privilege of serving him by spreading this Good News. Though I am the least deserving of all God's people, he graciously gave me the privilege of telling the Gentiles about the endless treasures available to them in Christ. I was chosen to explain*

to everyone this mysterious plan that God, the Creator of all things, had kept secret from the beginning. God's purpose in all this was to use the church to display his wisdom in its rich variety to all the unseen rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. This was his eternal plan, which he carried out through Christ Jesus our Lord. Because of Christ and our faith in him, we can now come boldly and confidently into God's presence.^{Eph. 3:6-12}

So let's heed what God has told us: we have the answer to the world's spiritual needs and we must share what we have. As we act on His word, we can expect Him to do what He said He would do. Amen!

Questions

How does God speak to us today?

What is the purpose of signs, wonders, dreams and visions?

How can we discern what is from our own mind and what is from God?

How can we ensure that we are not deceived?

What security measures has God provided to keep us from error?

Puritan Prayer: Great God, in public and private, in sanctuary and home, may my life be steeped in prayer, filled with the spirit of grace and supplication—and may each prayer be perfumed with the incense of atoning blood! Help me and defend me, until from praying ground I pass to the realm of unceasing praise. Urged by my need, invited by Your promises and called by Your Spirit, I enter Your presence and worship You with godly fear—awed by Your majesty, greatness, glory, but encouraged by Your love. I am all poverty as well as all guilt, having nothing of my own with which to repay You—but in the arms of faith, I bring Jesus to You, pleading His righteousness to offset my iniquities, rejoicing that He will weigh down the scales for me and satisfy Your justice.

Adam's Wrong Diet

As Adam slept beneath a tree

An artful snake accosted he.

The snake was beautiful it seems

And roused young Adam from his dreams.

"Your wife and I have had a chat,

She seems to be confused and that

It would be wrong for her to dabble

With the fruit that's like an apple."

Adam said "My wife is right,

Her diet is prescribed as light

She only eats the proper food,

Which keeps her slim and looking good."

Thus the snake now looking coy

Thought he'd try another ploy

He said to Eve "Of brains you're short,

To try this fruit you really ought.

You see, you've never been to school

And basically you're just a fool.

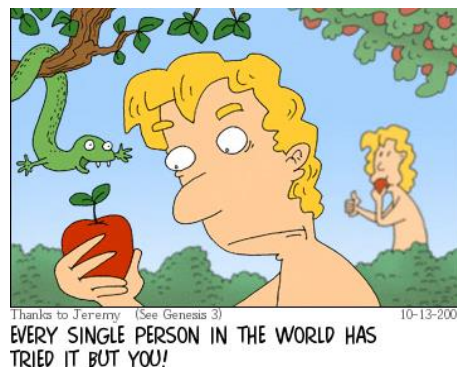
This is just the stuff for brains,

She who eats it wisdom gains."

Adam came and they did share,
 Not an apple or a pear;
 Forbidden fruit, Oh yes they knew it
 Mankind's future, they just blew it.

When they ran to hide their shame,
 Each the other tried to blame.
 They both had made a big mistake
 They really should have ate the snake!

Bill West



Sunday 23rd June Ps.71

Trouble in life is certain: *People are born for trouble as readily as sparks fly up from a fire.*^{Job.5:7} **But we don't have to be disheartened!** **Jesus said:** *in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.*^{Jn.16:33}

When trouble comes, remember these ABC's ABC of "Don'ts"

1) Don't get Angry: Anger is an emotion and if it is not controlled, it will lead us into sin. *Anger is cruel, and wrath is like a flood, but jealousy is even more dangerous.*^{Psm.27:4} There is an angry indignation that Jesus exhibited: *"Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?" But they remained silent. Jesus looked around at them in anger and, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts, said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was completely restored.*^{Mk.3:4-5} But even "righteous anger" must be controlled or it can open the way for more problems: *"In your anger do not sin": Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold.*^{Eph.4:26-27} Although God is angry toward sin, He is rich in love: *The LORD is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love. The LORD is good to all; he has compassion on all he has made.*^{Ps.145:8-9} We too must show the same compassion to others without compromising our holiness: *Always be humble and gentle. Be patient with each other, making allowance for each other's faults because of your love.*^{Eph.4:2} *I want the men everywhere to pray, lifting up holy hands without anger or disputing.*^{1Tim.2:8} *May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had, so that with one mind and one voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.*^{Rom.15:5-6} **Our attitude determines our altitude!**

2) Don't Blame others, and certainly not God: God is always right because He is God—but God is also good and can't be contaminated with evil: *You are good, and what you do is good;*^{Ps.119:68} *God can't be tempted by evil. And he doesn't tempt anyone. . . Every good and perfect gift is from God. It comes down from the Father. He created the heavenly lights. He does not change like shadows that move.*^{Jas.1:13-17}

If anyone disagrees with God, they are opposing God and are in the wrong—which is sin: *Woe to (what sorrow awaits; how terrible it will be for) anyone who argues with his Maker!*^{Is.45:9} We should be careful to always say good things—and especially say good things about God (which is praise): *Therefore, let us offer through Jesus a continual sacrifice of praise to God, proclaiming our allegiance to his name.*^{Heb.13:15} *I will extol the LORD at all times; his praise will always be on my lips.*^{Ps.34:1} *In all this, Job did not sin by charging God with wrongdoing... In all this, Job did not sin in what he said.*^{Job.1:22; 2:10} *I will be careful about how I live. I will not sin by what I say. I will keep my mouth closed when sinful people are near me.*^{Ps.39:1}

Blame brings bitterness which corrupts and defiles: *Look after each other so that none of you fails to receive the grace of God. Watch out that no poisonous root of bitterness grows up to trouble you, corrupting many.*^{Heb.12:15} *And do not bring sorrow to God's Holy Spirit by the way you live. Remember, he has identified you as his own, guaranteeing that you will be saved on the day of redemption. Get rid of all bitterness, rage, anger, harsh words, and slander, as well as all types of evil behaviour. Instead, be kind to each other, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, just as God through Christ has forgiven you.*^{Eph.4:30-32}

3) Don't Complain: Complaining will destroy contentment! Complaining is a criticism of God and how He is handling our situation! *And don't grumble as some of them did... These things happened to them as examples for us. They were written down to warn us... If you think you are standing strong, be careful not to fall. The temptations in your life are no different from what others experience. And God is faithful. He will not allow the temptation to be more than you can stand. When you are tempted, he will show you a way out so that you can endure.*^{1Cor.10:10-13} **Either Jesus is Lord of all or not Lord at all!** God never has an “off-day” and neither does He sleep! *My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth! He will not let you stumble; the one who watches over you will not slumber. Indeed, he who watches over Israel never slumbers or sleeps. The LORD himself watches over you!*^{Ps.121:2-5} We can **groan but not moan!** *Don't grumble about each other, my brothers and sisters, or God will judge you. For look! The great Judge is coming. He is standing at the door!*^{as.59} *For we know that all creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. And we believers also groan, even though we have the Holy Spirit within us as a foretaste of future glory, for we long for our bodies to be released from sin and suffering.*^{Rom.8:22-23}

ABC of “Do’s”

1) Do Adore Jesus (Worship): To love God is the first call on our life. Loving God means that we adore Him—we appreciate and enjoy Him, we take delight in Him and say good things about Him. Love involves our emotions as well as our will. *The most important commandment is this: ‘Listen, O Israel! The Lord our God is the one and only LORD. And you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength.’*^{Mk.12:29-30} *And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.*^{1Cor.13:13} *You are my God, and I will praise you; You are my God, and I will exalt you. Give thanks to the LORD, for He is good; His mercy (love) endures forever.*^{Ps.118:28-29} Bad things happen to good people because life is unpredictable: *The race is not to the swift or the battle to the strong, nor does food come to the wise or wealth to the brilliant or favour to the learned; but time and chance happen to them all.*^{Ecd.9:11} Life’s difficulties can make us or break us—depending on our attitude we can either see them as stepping stones or stumbling blocks. But whatever happens, God can and He will use them for His glory and our good: *And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God.*^{Rom.8:28} We are not told to give thanks **for** every situation **BUT** we should **pray with thanksgiving in** every situation: *Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*^{Phil.4:6-7} *Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.*^{1Thes.5:16-18} Giving thanks to God honours Him and facilitates His solution to our situation: *He who sacrifices thank offerings honours me, and he prepares the way so that I may show him the salvation of God.*^{Ps.50:23} **Adoration is not only the right thing to do—it is also the best thing to do as well!**

2) Do Believe Jesus (Trust): To believe God is to trust Him. We trust God because we have total confidence in Him and that confidence is based on what we know of God. The more we know God, the easier it is to trust Him—and the more we know God, the harder it is to not trust Him! Trust is not passive but active and is the basis of a happy and contented life: *May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.*^{Rom.15:13} Because God has never rescinded on any of His promises, we can trust Him for our own situation today: *The LORD is my shepherd, I lack nothing.*^{Psa.23:1} *Not one of all the LORD's good promises to Israel failed; everyone was fulfilled.*^{Josh.21:45} *Praise be to the LORD, who has given rest to his people Israel just as he promised. Not one word has failed of all the good promises he gave through his servant Moses.*^{1Kg.8:56}

3) Do Confess Jesus (Agree): In the Greek language “confession” is *homologos* [*homo* (same) and *logos* (word)] meaning *of one mind; to speak the same; to agree*. Thus “confession” is to “say the same thing.” The Christian’s Confession is simply believing with our heart and repeating with our lips **God’s own declaration of who we are and what we have in Christ**—what He says about us, our sins and everything included in our redemption—and it is a **Good Confession**. A spiritual law that few recognize is that our confession rules us. *You think like a man—you don’t think like God!*^{Mk.8:33} *Your thoughts concerning God are too human.*^{Martin Luther} It is what we confess with our lips that really dominates our inner being. **We must make our lips do their duty and make them harmonize with the Word of God.** We should fill our lips with God’s Word and make them say what God says about us and not allow them to say anything to the contrary! We must refuse to allow our words destroy the effectiveness of God’s Word in our situation. Some confess with their lips but deny in their heart—they say, “Yes, the Word is true,” but in their heart they say, “But it is not true in my case.” The confession of our lips has no value as long as our heart repudiates it. **CONFESSION** (saying what God says in each of His promises) is made **UNTO SALVATION.**^{Rom.10:10}

It is our privilege and duty to believe and say what we know God says about us in His Word. As we honour God by applying these principles, we will live above our circumstances instead of under them! *But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.*^{1Cor.15:57}

No one can make you feel inferior without your consent! ^{E.Roosevelt}

Questions:

God made everything good—so where does trouble come from?

How can we stay cheerful through difficult situations?

Is it wrong to be angry?

Is it wrong to complain about our problems?

What does it mean to “believe Jesus”?

What does it mean to “confess Jesus”?

Puritan Prayer: Almighty God, as I cross the threshold of this day, I commit myself—my soul, my body, my affairs and my friends—into Your care. Watch over me, keep me, guide me, direct me, sanctify me and bless me. Incline my heart to Your ways. As a potter forms clay, mould me wholly into the image of Jesus. May my lips be a well-tuned harp to sound Your praise. Let those around, see me living by Your Spirit, trampling the world underfoot, unconformed to lying vanities, transformed by a renewed mind, clad in the entire armour of God, shining as a never-dimmed light and showing holiness in all my doings. Let no evil this day soil my thoughts, words or hands. May I travel the miry paths of life, free from spot or stain. In needful transactions let my affection be in heaven and my love soar upwards in flames of fire. May my gaze be fixed on unseen things, and my eyes open to the emptiness, fragility, mockery and vanities of this world. May I view all things in the mirror of eternity, waiting for the coming of

my Lord, listening for the last trumpet call, havening unto the new heaven and earth. Order this day all my communications according to Your wisdom and to the gain of mutual good. May I speak each word as if my last word and walk each step as if my final one—and if my life should end today, let this be my best day.

Sunday 30th June Ps.42 Jn.7

Have a drink on me! *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.*^{Jn.7:37}

Jesus was in Jerusalem for the Feast of Tabernacles when He made this profound and dramatic statement. All the OT festivals were very important, not just because of their cultural value but especially because they portrayed an aspect of the Messiah: *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} Most Christians realise that Passover prefigured Jesus' death and resurrection. The first Passover was in Egypt when a lamb was killed and it's blood painted on the doorposts so that God's judgement would "pass-over" the Israelites but was fulfilled at Calvary when Jesus died: *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 have seen and I testify that this is God's Chosen One."*^{Jn.1:29-34} Pentecost was 50 days after Passover and celebrated the giving of the Law of Moses and also the beginning of the harvest. This was fulfilled with the beginning of the harvest of souls at the start of the Church, when the Holy Spirit came to reside within Believers—and the same number of people were saved when Peter preached at that Pentecost as died on the first Pentecost: *When the LORD finished speaking to Moses on Mount Sinai, he gave him the two tablets of the covenant law, the tablets of stone inscribed by the finger of God.*^{Ex.31:18} *The Levites did as Moses commanded, and that day about three thousand of the people died.*^{Ex.32:28} *Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call." With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation." Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.*^{Acts.2:38-41} The New Covenant is much better and more glorious than the Old Covenant—the New Covenant brings life not death: *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. 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?*^{2Cor.3:6-8}

But not so many people understand the significance of the Feast of Tabernacles. This was a longer festival and the Israelites lived shelters or booths for 7 days to remind them of the 40 years they wandered in the desert. *On the fifteenth day of the seventh month the LORD's Festival of Tabernacles begins, and it lasts for seven days... Live in temporary shelters for seven days: All native-born Israelites are to live in such shelters so your descendants will know that I had the Israelites live in temporary shelters when I brought them out of Egypt. I am the LORD your God.*^{Ex.23:34-43} This feast also celebrated the end of the harvest: *Celebrate the Festival of Tabernacles for seven days after you have gathered the produce of your threshing floor and your winepress. Be joyful at your festival... For seven days celebrate the festival to the LORD your God at the place the LORD will choose. 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.*^{Dent.16:13-15} The spiritual significance of the Feast of Tabernacles is that the spiritual harvest which started on the Day of Pentecost with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit (as recorded in Acts chapter 2) will conclude after the 7th day (7 in Bible numerology represents complete), when we will leave the "tent" of our mortal body and enter our permanent home: *For*

we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands. Meanwhile we groan, longing to be clothed instead with our heavenly dwelling, because when we are clothed, we will not be found naked. For while we are in this tent, we groan and are burdened, because we do not wish to be unclothed but to be clothed instead with our heavenly dwelling, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. Now the one who has fashioned us for this very purpose is God, who has given us the Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.^{2Cor.5:1-5}

Another aspect of the Feast of Tabernacles is the glory of God. This was seen at the dedication of Solomon's Temple: *Then King Solomon summoned into his presence at Jerusalem the elders of Israel... to bring up the ark of the LORD's covenant from Zion, the City of David. All the Israelites came together to King Solomon at the time of the festival in... the seventh month... The priests then brought the ark of the LORD's covenant to its place in the inner sanctuary of the temple, the Most Holy Place, and put it beneath the wings of the cherubim... When the priests withdrew from the Holy Place, the cloud filled the temple of the LORD. And the priests could not perform their service because of the cloud, for the glory of the LORD filled his temple.*^{1Kg.8:1-11} Each year at this Feast the Temple was lit so brightly that there were no shadows in the Temple, portraying the return of Jesus when we enter our heavenly rest with great glory: *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.6:14-16} The priests also collected a flagon of water from the Pool of Siloam and poured it out on the altar at the Temple. It was at this event that Jesus declared that the real meaning of this ritual was that whoever is spiritually thirsty could be satisfied through Him: *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} John's explanation is important because it assures us that under the New Covenant we will never be spiritually empty. God will never abandon us but remains with us and flows out of us in abundance. This was prophesied in the OT: *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.58:11} *For I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground; I will pour out my Spirit on your offspring, and my blessing on your descendants. They will spring up like grass in a meadow, like poplar trees by flowing streams. Some will say, 'I belong to the LORD'; others will call themselves by the name of Jacob; still others will write on their hand, 'The Lord's,' and will take the name Israel.*^{Is.44:3-4} But God's promises are fulfilled in Jesus and so we are the recipients of His promises: *All these people were known for their faith, but none of them received what God had promised. God planned to give us something very special so that we would gain eternal life with them. Since we are surrounded by so many examples «of faith», we must get rid of everything that slows us down, especially sin that distracts us. We must run the race that lies ahead of us and never give up. We must focus on Jesus, the source and goal of our faith.*^{Heb.11:39-12:2}

The Psalmist asked where he could find spiritual refreshment, and then gave the answer—put your hope in God and praise Him: *As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, my God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God? ... Why are you discouraged, my soul? Why are you so restless? Put your hope in God, because I will still praise him. He is my saviour and my God.*^{Ps.42:1-11} Spiritual refreshment can't be bought with money or even effort. *"Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost. Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labour on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and you will delight in the richest of fare. Give ear and come to me; listen, that you may live.*^{Is.55:1-3} Spiritual refreshment (which is what peace is), comes from knowing God and Jesus Christ: *Grace and peace be yours in abundance through the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord.*^{2Pet.1:2}

Paul says the same in at least 5 of his letters: *Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.*^{Rom.1:7} [see also 1Cor.1:3; Eph.1:2; 1Tim.1:2; Tit.1:4] God has made this spiritual refreshment available to all who want it: *The Spirit and the bride say, "Come!" And let the one who hears say, "Come!" Let the one who is thirsty come; and let the one who wishes take the free gift of the water of life.*^{Rev.22:17} The Bible often uses allegories, or metaphors to explain spiritual truths as seen in Jesus' teaching: *I am the Bread of Life; I am the Way the Truth and the Life; I am the Good Shepherd; etc.* The purpose of these metaphors was to explain the Kingdom of God: *His disciples asked him what this story meant. Jesus answered, "Knowledge about the mysteries of the kingdom of God has been given directly to you. But it is given to others in stories. When they look, they don't see, and when they hear, they don't understand."*^{Lk.8:9-10} But even so, the Disciples didn't always understand: *Then he left the crowd and entered the house. His disciples asked him about this teaching. "Don't you understand? [are you so dull?]" Jesus asked. "Don't you see? Nothing that enters people from the outside can make them 'unclean.' It doesn't go into the heart. It goes into the stomach. Then it goes out of the body."* In saying this, Jesus was calling all foods "clean."^{Mk.7:17-29}

There are several metaphors in the Scriptures that represent the Holy Spirit—such as water, oil, fire, wind and breath—they all have flowing movement and are linked with energy or power. Rivers usually have several tributaries which all flow into 1 river before it enters the sea but the river in Eden had 1 source and divided into 4 rivers today, *A river watered the garden. It flowed from Eden. From there it separated into four other rivers.*^{Gen.2:10} This is because the river is an allegory for the Holy Spirit, as seen in Ezekiel's vision, where the source of the river is the throne of God: *The man brought me back to the entrance to the temple. I saw water flowing east from under a temple gateway. The temple faced east. The water was coming down from under the south side of the temple. It was flowing south of the altar... But now it was a river that I could not go across. The water had risen so high that it was deep enough to swim in. He asked me, "Son of man, do you see this?" Then he led me back to the bank of the river. When I arrived there, I saw a large number of trees. They were on both sides of the river. The man said to me, "This water flows toward the eastern territory. It goes down into the Arabah Valley. There it enters the Dead Sea. When it empties into it, the water there becomes fresh. Large numbers of creatures will live where the river flows. It will have huge numbers of fish. This water flows there and makes the salt water fresh. So where the river flows everything will live... Fruit trees of all kinds will grow on both banks of the river. Their leaves will not dry up. The trees will always have fruit on them. Every month they will bear fruit. The water from the temple will flow to them. Their fruit will be used for food. And their leaves will be used for healing."*^{Ezk.47:1-12} In the book of Revelation, John writes about this river, saying that it brings life and healing wherever it flows. *Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life. It was as clear as crystal. It flowed from the throne of God and of the Lamb. It flowed down the middle of the city's main street. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing 12 crops of fruit. Its fruit was ripe every month. The leaves of the tree bring healing to the nations.*^{Rev.22:1-2}

The Holy Spirit was released from heaven in a new dynamic way following Jesus' death, resurrection and ascension. *On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit."*^{Acts.1:4-5} *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} This was prefigured in Israel's history when Moses hit the rock and water flowed out: *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.17:6} 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.^{1Cor.10:1-4} Zechariah prophesied the new ministry of the Holy Spirit, mentioning Jesus'

ascension from the Mount of Olives and the river that divided the whole earth (into believers and unbelievers). *On that day he will stand on the Mount of Olives. It's east of Jerusalem. It will be split in two from east to west. Half of the mountain will move north. The other half will move south. A large valley will be formed. The people will run away through that mountain valley. It will reach all the way to Azel. They'll run away just as they ran from the earthquake when Uzziah was king of Judah. Then the LORD my God will come. All of the holy ones will come with him. There won't be any light on that day. The sun, moon and stars will not shine. It will be a day unlike any other. It won't be separated into day and night. It will be a day known only to the LORD. After that day is over, there will be light again. At that time water that gives life will flow out from Jerusalem. Half of it will run into the Dead Sea. The other half will go to the Mediterranean Sea. The water will flow in summer and winter. The LORD will be king over the whole earth. On that day there will be one LORD. His name will be the only name.*^{Zech.14:4-9}

This King over the whole earth is the One Lord—Jesus Christ. For us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live.^{1Cor.8:6}

God the Father has given Jesus a Name that is above every name: *In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*^{Phil.2:5-11}

Now we can (and should) give thanks to the Lord for He satisfies us with spiritual refreshment. *Let them give thanks to the LORD for his unfailing love and his wonderful deeds for mankind, for he satisfies the thirsty and fills the hungry with good things.*^{Ps.107:8-9} *Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.*^{Matt.5:6} He who was seated on the throne said, “I am making everything new!” Then he said, “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.” He said to me: “It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To the thirsty I will give water without cost from the spring of the water of life. Those who are victorious will inherit all this, and I will be their God and they will be my children.”^{Rev.21:5-7}

Once we recognise our spiritual thirst and come to Jesus, we will never be thirsty again—we will always have our own spiritual “well” of the Holy Spirit: *Whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life.*^{Jn.4:14} So let’s take Jesus at His Word and “have a drink on Him” because He has been glorified and the Holy Spirit is here!

Questions

Why is much of Israel’s history recorded in Scripture?

What can we learn from the history in the Old Testament?

What is the significance of Moses hitting the rock?

Why couldn’t the priests perform their service when the Temple was dedicated? (1Kg.8:1-11)

What is the spiritual harvest that the Feast of Tabernacles signified?

Explain: *Up to that time the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified.*^{Jn.7:39}

Why will we never be spiritually thirsty again if we believe in Jesus?

Puritan Prayer: O God the author of all good, I come to You for the grace another day will require for its duties and events. I step out into a wicked world; I know that without You I can do nothing, that everything with which I shall be concerned, however harmless in itself, may prove an occasion of sin or folly, unless I am kept by Your power. You hold me up and so I shall be safe. Preserve my understanding from subtilty of error, my affections from love of idols, my character from stain of vice, my profession from every form of evil. May I engage in nothing in which I cannot implore Your blessing, and in which I cannot invite Your inspection.

Prosper me in all lawful undertakings, or prepare me for disappointments. Give me neither poverty nor riches. Feed me with food convenient for me, lest I be full and deny You and say, "Who is the Lord?" or be poor, and steal, and take Your name in vain. May every creature be made good to me by prayer and Your will. Teach me how to use the world and not abuse it; to improve my talents and to redeem my time; to walk in wisdom toward those without and in kindness to those within; to do good to all people and especially to my fellow Christians. And to God be all the glory.

July 2024

In God we trust: *My salvation and my honour depend on God; He is my mighty rock, my refuge. Trust in Him at all times, you people; pour out your hearts to Him, for God is our refuge.* Ps.62:7-8

Thought for the Month: Jesus says that to experience the Holy Spirit is like to be born again. It's a new birth in the sense that everything comes alive. The Holy Spirit doesn't change anything and yet He changes everything! He doesn't add anything to what Jesus has already said and instituted, but He makes all that Jesus has said and done become alive today. *Raniero Cantalamessa*

Sunday 7th July Ps.73 Jn.8

Do you know who you are? I don't mean what you do or what you like, but who you really are. What we do and what we like usually reflect something of who we are, but the real us is our personality, our inner person, the part of us that yearns, dreams and drives us. People who don't know who they are, will be unsure of themselves—they won't be confident and may well have a serious inferiority complex, every little problem will seem insurmountable and they end up believing that they are failures—the exact opposite of faith! Paul was arrogant when he made this statement—he was just being a normal Christian: *I am not ashamed, for 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}

Jesus knew exactly who He was: *Jesus answered, "Even if I testify on my own behalf, my testimony is valid, for I know where I came from and where I am going."* ^{Jn.8:14} *Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God.* ^{Jn.13:3} *I came from the Father and entered the world; now I am leaving the world and going back to the Father.* ^{Jn.16:28} Throughout the Gospels Jesus called God His Father ^{Lk.10:22} and He said that He was doing His Father's will. ^{Jn.4:34} Jesus said that He was alive before Abraham was born; ^{Jn.8:58} that He came from heaven and was returning there; ^{Jn.3:13;6:31-58} that He saw Satan fall from heaven; ^{Lk.10:18} and that the Scriptures prophesied about Him. ^{Lk.24:44} It was so He could redeem us that Jesus left His place in glory and became a human being, making His home with us: *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.* ^{1Jn.1:14} *For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.* ^{Lk.19:10} *For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.* ^{Jn.3:17} Jesus was sinless: *God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.* ^{2Cor.5:21} And He knew that He was sinless: *Yet because I tell the truth, you do not believe me! Can any of you prove me guilty of sin? If I am telling the truth, why don't you believe me? Whoever belongs to God hears what God says. The reason you do not hear is that you do not belong to God.* ^{Jn.8:45-47} Jesus was obedient to His heavenly Father: *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 [i.e. accomplished his work or mission], he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.* ^{Heb.2:7-9} And Jesus was obedient to His earthly parents: *Then he went down to Nazareth with them and was obedient to them. But his mother treasured all these things in her heart. And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and man.* ^{Lk.2:51-52}

Jesus knew that He would die in our place—and willingly laid down His life: *I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd. 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.10:15-18} *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.^{1Jn.3:16} *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}

Yes, Jesus knew who He was—but do you know who you are? Jesus said that we are “gods”—and based His statement on Scripture! *Is it not written in your Law, ‘I have said you are gods’? If he called them ‘gods,’ to whom the word of God came—and the Scripture cannot be broken—what about the one whom the Father set apart as his very own and sent into the world? Why then do you accuse me of blasphemy because I said, ‘I am God’s Son’? Do not believe me unless I do what my Father does. But if I do it, even though you do not believe me, believe the miracles, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me, and I in the Father.*^{Jn.10:34-38} Of course, when the scripture says that we are “gods” it obviously doesn’t mean that we are another God Almighty—we are not creators and we certainly are not omnipotent, omnipresent or omniscient! However, Jesus truly is God and He added humanity to His Deity: *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.*^{Phil.2:6-8} And Jesus created the world: *Christ is the exact likeness of God, who can’t be seen. He is first, and he is over all of creation. All things were created by him. He created everything in heaven and on earth. He created everything that can be seen and everything that can’t be seen. He created kings, powers, rulers and authorities. Everything was created by him and for him. Before anything was created, he was already there. He holds everything together.*^{Col.1:15-17} And in any case, there is only one God (who consists of Father Son and Holy Spirit): *Israel, listen to me. The LORD is our God. The LORD is the one and only God.*^{Deut.6:4} *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.*^{1Cor.8:6} We cannot redeem the life of anyone: *No one can redeem the life of another or give to God a ransom for them—the ransom for a life is costly, no payment is ever enough—so that they should live on forever and not see decay.*^{Ps.49:7-9} Which is why we need a Saviour who has not been tainted by sin: *But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy. It is for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior 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.’*^{1Lk.2:10-12} *Then all mankind will know that I, the LORD, am your Savior, your Redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob.*^{Is.49:26} And neither are we priests who can mediate between God and people—only Jesus can do that: *Jesus was God’s Son. But by suffering he learned what it means to obey. In that way he was made perfect. Eternal salvation comes from him. He saves all those who obey him. God appointed him to be the high priest, just like Melchizedek.*^{Heb.5:8-10} *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} Under the Old Covenant, God required a priest to intervene on behalf of people and to mediate for their sins—but because these priests were descendants of Adam, with Adam’s nature, they could never sort out the sin problem! Everything they did had to be repeated again and again because it didn’t work—and it never dealt with a person’s conscience either! The ministry of human priests was a stop-gap until God’s real Priest came, who is Jesus the Messiah—God in the flesh. Jesus was God and also a real human but untainted by Adam’s fallen nature! *There were many priests under the old system, for death prevented them from remaining in office. 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. He is the kind of high priest we need because he is holy and blameless, unstained by sin. He has been set apart from sinners and has been given the highest place of honour in heaven. Unlike those other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices every day. They did this for their own sins first and then for the sins of the people. But Jesus did this once for all when he offered himself as the sacrifice for the people’s sins... Here is the main point: We have a High Priest who sat down in the place of honour beside the throne of the majestic God in heaven. There he ministers in the heavenly Tabernacle, the true*

place of worship that was built by the Lord and not by human hands.^{Heb.7:23-8:2} Now that Jesus has become our High Priest, He calls all Christians to live and function as His under-priests. There is no status division between Believers—someone is either a Believer or they are an unbeliever (although Believers do have different roles—their functions and ministries are according to their calling, equipping and gifting by the Holy Spirit). Under the New Covenant, all Believers have direct personal access to God and all Believers serve God as priests under the Great High Priest—which gives each of us the privilege of signposting others to God: *All glory to him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by shedding his blood for us. He has made us a Kingdom of priests for God his Father. All glory and power to him forever and ever! Amen.*^{Rev.1:5-6} *He gave me the priestly duty of proclaiming the gospel of God, so that the Gentiles might become an offering acceptable to God, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.*^{Rom.15:16} *And you are living stones that God is building into his spiritual temple. What's more, you are his holy priests. Through the mediation of Jesus Christ, you offer spiritual sacrifices that please God... You are a chosen people. You are royal priests, a holy nation, God's very own possession. As a result, you can show others the goodness of God, for he called you out of the darkness into his wonderful light.*^{1Pet.2:5-9}

And so, in light of all that God is and all that He has done, it is little wonder David asked: *What are mere mortals that you should think about them, human beings that you should care for them?*^{Pss.8:4} If we don't know who we are, we will either ignore God or be overwhelmed by God. Christians are followers of Christ and children of God but we need a balanced understanding of God. We need to appreciate God's holiness and His love—which is summed up as “*the fear of God*”, or a holy reverence for God: *Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. [may your name always be kept holy; may your name be honoured; we honour your name as sacred and holy; we want everyone to respect you; may the glory of your name be the centre on which our lives turn.]*^{Matt.6:9} And because a Believer's identity is in Jesus, if we know who He is, we can know who we are. The Bible explains who Jesus is: *As it is written in the second Psalm: 'You are my son; today I have become your father.'*^{Acts.13:33} Jesus explained to His Disciples what the Scriptures said about Himself: *And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.*^{Lk.24:27} The Bible is canon—it is the base-line by which we measure everything pertaining to spiritual matters: about God, Jesus Christ, mankind, salvation, our spiritual condition, our faith, our future, the world's future! *To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, they have no light of dawn.*^{Is.8:20} Other Translations offer helpful insights into the meaning of this passage: *Look to God's instructions and teachings! People who contradict his word are completely in the dark. Tell them, "No, we're going to study the Scriptures." People who try the other ways get nowhere—a dead end!*^{ITM} *They should go to the teachings and to the written instructions. If people don't speak these words, it is because it doesn't dawn on them.*^{GW} *Follow what the LORD taught you and said to you through me. People who don't speak in keeping with those words won't have any hope in the morning. They will suffer and be hungry. They'll wander through the land. When they are very hungry, they will become angry. They'll look up toward heaven. They'll call down curses on their king and their God. Then they will look at the earth. They'll see nothing but suffering and darkness. They'll see terrible sadness. They'll be driven into total darkness.*^{NIRV} *Go to God's teaching and His testimony to guide your thoughts and behaviour! If any response disagrees with the word of God, then it's muddling and wrong and not the least bit illuminating. It leaves the people bedraggled and desperate, drifting here and there. In their hunger, the people are bound to be infuriated and curse their king and God. They'll look up to the heavens and down to the earth, yet see nothing but trouble, gloom, anguish, and darkness. They will be driven out into the darkness.*^{TV} The Scriptures were written for our benefit, for our spiritual food and to equip us: *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.3:16-17} And those who distort the Scriptures, do so to their own detriment! Our dear brother Paul told you the same thing when he wrote to you with the wisdom that God gave him. He writes about this in all his letters. Some

things in Paul's letters are hard to understand, and people who are ignorant and weak [unstable] in faith explain these things falsely [distort them]. They also falsely explain [distort] the other Scriptures, but they are destroying themselves by doing this.^{2Pet.3:15-16}

So, who are we? We are God's creation. We are created in God's image: *Then God said, "Let us make man in our likeness. Let them rule over the fish in the waters and the birds of the air. Let them rule over the livestock and over the whole earth. Let them rule over all of the creatures that move along the ground." So God created man in his own likeness. He created him in the likeness of God. He created them as male and female.*^{Gen.1:26-27}

And we are re-created in God's image: *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.4:22-24}

Although every human being is, in a general sense, a child of God, they are by nature, separated from God and don't have the right to call Him "Father". But when someone is born again, they are united with God and they become God's children in a real and personal way that permits them to legitimately call God "Father": *See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. All who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.*^{1Jn.3:1-3}

But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship. Because you are his sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, "Abba, Father." So you are no longer a slave, but God's child; and since you are his child, God has made you also an heir.^{Gal.4:4-7}

We are justified (which can be interpreted as: just-as-if-I'd-never-sinned!): *But when the kindness and love of God our Savior 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 Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life. This is a trustworthy saying.*^{Tit.3:4-8}

This means that rebellious sinners are now counted as righteous saints! And this status is given to us by God when we believe Him: *What does Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness." ... Abraham never wavered in believing God's promise. In fact, his faith grew stronger, and in this he brought glory to God. He was fully convinced that God is able to do whatever he promises. And because of Abraham's faith, God counted him as righteous. And when God counted him as righteous, it wasn't just for Abraham's benefit. It was recorded for our benefit, too, assuring us that God will also count us as righteous if we believe in him, the one who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. He was handed over to die because of our sins, and he was raised to life to make us right with God.*^{Rom.4:3,20-25}

Being right with God means that our prayers are powerful and effective: *The earnest prayer of a righteous person has great power and produces wonderful results [produces wonderful results; makes things happen]*^{Jas.5:16}

A Christian's identity is in Christ: *As He is, so are we in this world.*^{1Jn.4:17} *For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.*^{Eph.2:10}

And so if we know who Jesus is, we will know who we are—and then we can go through life with our heads held high and smile in our hearts (and hopefully on our faces too!). Paul summarises it so well: *Christ died for everyone. He died so that those who live should not live for themselves anymore. They should live for Christ. He died for them and was raised again. So from now on we don't look at anyone the way the world does. At one time we looked at Christ in that way. But we don't anymore. Anyone who believes in Christ is a new creation. The old is gone! The new has come! It is all from God. He brought us back to himself through Christ's death on the cross. And he has given us the task of bringing others back to him through Christ. God was bringing the world back to himself through Christ. He did not hold people's sins against them. God has trusted us with the message that people may be brought back to him. So we are Christ's official messengers.*

It is as if God were making his appeal through us. Here is what Christ wants us to beg you to do. Come back to God!^{2Cor.5:15-20}

Questions

Why is it important to know who we are?

Who is Jesus?

Who are you?

What do you base your evaluation on?

Prayer: 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 also 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 14th July Ps.73 Jn.9

Are you reaping what you sowed? *Teacher, whose sin caused this man to be born blind—his own sin or his parents sin?*^{Jn.9:1}

Gardens don't just happen—they have to be prepared, planted, pruned and protected. Even the Garden of Eden needed someone to tend it: *The LORD God took the man and placed him in the orchard in Eden to care for it and to maintain it.*^{Gen.1:15} And God has established the principle that we reap what we sow: *Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. Whoever sows to please their flesh, from the flesh will reap destruction; whoever sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life. Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.*^{Gal.6:7-10} The way we sow is the way we will reap: *Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously.*^{2Cor.9:6} *Give away your life; you'll find life given back, but not merely given back—given back with bonus and blessing. Giving, not getting, is the way. Generosity begets generosity.*^{Lk.6:38} So it is obvious that we should care for others and be nice to people—not only because we can expect a reciprocation, but also because it is the right thing to do: *So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.*^{Matt.7:12} If we are to be nice to others, we should be nice to ourselves! We should take care of our heart—our soul (the natural-aware part of us, or our personality) and our spirit (the God-aware part of us)—because it is from the heart that our life is motivated and steered: *Guard your heart above all else, for it determines the course of your life.*^{Prou.4:23}

But however nice we are to ourselves and to others, life isn't fair—sometimes bad things happen to good people. This is not God's fault and we should never even think about blaming God—

God is Omnibenevolent (which means: perfectly good and all love). *You are good, and what you do is good. Teach me your orders.*^{Ps.119:68} Bad things come from people's hearts because they are dominated by sin: *Then the LORD said to Cain, "Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? Sin is crouching at the door, eager to control you. But you must subdue it and be its master."*^{Gen.4:6-7}

Sin originated from the devil who is evil personified. *You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies.*^{Jn.8:34} The devil is not only evil, but leads the whole world astray: *The great dragon was hurled down—that*

ancient serpent called the devil, or satan, who leads the whole world astray.^{Rev.13:9} The devil influenced Cain to kill his brother: *We must not be like Cain, who belonged to the evil one and killed his brother. And why did he kill him? Because Cain had been doing what was evil, and his brother had been doing what was righteous.*^{1Jn.3:12} No! Bad things don't come from God but the enemy: *'Sir, didn't you plant good seed in your field? Where did the weeds come from?'* *'He told them, 'An enemy did this.'*^{Matt.13:27-28} Jesus promised us a cheerful life and a conquering life but not a comfortable life—even roses have thorns! *I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.*^{Jn.16:33} When Job's life hit rock-bottom, he never blamed God: *In all this, Job did not sin by charging God with wrongdoing.*^{Job.1:22} Obviously actions have consequences but not all our difficulties are the result of our own deeds —sometimes things just happen: *Time and chance happen to everyone.*^{Ecd.9:11} Job is a prime example of trouble through no fault of his own—and an example to us of patience: *Brothers and sisters, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. As you know, we count as blessed those who have persevered. You have heard of Job's perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy.*^{Jas.5:10-11} Eliphaz said Job's trouble was his own fault: *Doesn't your reverence for God give you confidence? Doesn't your life of integrity give you hope? "Stop and think! Do the innocent die? When have the upright been destroyed? My experience shows that those who plant trouble and cultivate evil will harvest the same.*^{Job.4:6-8} But God said that Eliphaz was wrong and was angry with him: *the LORD said to Eliphaz, 'I'm very angry with you and your two friends because you didn't speak what is right about me as my servant Job has done.*^{Job.42:7}

Suffering is part of life's curriculum that we have to graduate through—in fact all the spiritual heroes of God's Kingdom have had to endure suffering. Jesus our Master and Model suffered more than anyone. *He was despised and rejected by people. He was a man of sorrows, familiar with suffering. He was despised like one from whom people turn their faces, and we didn't consider him to be worth anything. He certainly has taken upon himself our suffering and carried our sorrows, but we thought that God had wounded him, beat him, and punished him. He was wounded for our rebellious acts. He was crushed for our sins. He was punished so that we could have peace, and we received healing from his wounds.*^{Is.53:3-5} Even though Jesus was God's Son, he learned obedience from the things he suffered.^{Heb.5:8} Paul looked on suffering as an identification with Jesus and says it assures us of our future resurrection: *I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. [This is the approval that comes from God and is based on faith that knows Christ. Faith knows the power that his coming back to life gives and what it means to share his suffering. In this way I'm becoming like him in his death, with the confidence that I'll come back to life from the dead. It's not that I've already reached the goal or have already completed the course. But I run to win that which Jesus Christ has already won for me.]*^{Phil.3:10-12} John looked on suffering as part of “belonging” to Jesus: *I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus, was on the island of Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.*^{Rev.1:9} Peter spoke of suffering as a common factor amongst all Believers and he encourages us to trust God for the grace we need: *Stand firm in what you believe. All over the world you know that your brothers and sisters are going through the same kind of suffering. God always gives you all the grace you need. So you will only have to suffer for a little while. Then God himself will build you up again. He will make you strong and steady. And he has chosen you to share in his eternal glory because you belong to Christ.*^{1Pet.5:9-10}

Suffering is character-building and should cause us to rely totally on God. *And that's not all. We are full of joy even when we suffer. We know that our suffering gives us the strength to go on. The strength to go on produces character. Character produces hope. And hope will never let us down. God has poured his love into our*

hearts. He did it through the Holy Spirit, whom he has given to us.^{Rom. 5:5} What? Although suffering is temporary for Believers, it is nothing compared to the glory we will receive later: *What we are suffering now is nothing compared with the glory that will be shown in us. Everything God created looks forward to the time when his children will appear in their full and final glory.*^{Rom. 8:18-19} Suffering gives us an opportunity to make God proud of us. *God is pleased if a person is aware of him while enduring the pains of unjust suffering. What credit do you deserve if you endure a beating for doing something wrong? But if you endure suffering for doing something good, God is pleased with you.*^{1Pet. 2:19-20} Suffering should cause us to do a faith “safety-check” to confirm that we are in fellowship with God, His Word and His people. *Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you—unless, of course, you fail the test?*^{2Cor. 13:5} Suffering should help us keep focused on Jesus: *Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the Pioneer and Perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.*^{Heb. 12:1-3}

During the English Civil war, the established Churches in the kingdoms of Scotland, England and Ireland agreed upon a Covenanted uniformity in religion which included the Westminster Shorter Catechism. This was completed in 1647 and consists of 107 questions about Christian Doctrine followed by answers and Scripture references. Here are the first 6 Q&As:

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

A. Man’s chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him for ever. [

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, is the only rule to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy him.

Q. 3. What do the Scriptures principally teach?

A. The Scriptures principally teach what man is to believe concerning God, and what duty God requires of man.

Q. 4. What is God?

A. God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth.

Q. 5. Are there more Gods than one?

A. There is but one only, the living and true God.

Q. 6. How many persons are there in the Godhead?

A. There are three persons in the Godhead; the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost [a]; and these three are one God, the same in substance, equal in power and glory.

Our priority in life is to worship God and love Him with every part of our self and our life: “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} Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken the love you had at first. Consider how far you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place.^{Rev. 2:4-5}

Yes, we often do reap what we sow, but there are other factors at play in life that we are not responsible for and that we may not even be aware of! Not everything that happens to us is our fault—either bad or good! But if we are a Believer in Jesus Christ, we know that everything that happens to us is for God’s glory and will ultimately work out for our good too! And because we are Believers, our faith accepts this as true and enables us to overcome. *In fact, this is love for God: to keep his commands. And his commands are not burdensome, for everyone born of God overcomes the*

world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world? Only the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.^{1Jn.5:3-5} Suffering will come, but instead of worrying too much about why we suffer, let's make sure that God's work is done: "*Rabbi, who sinned: this man or his parents, causing him to be born blind?*" Jesus said, "*You're asking the wrong question. You're looking for someone to blame. There is no such cause-effect here. Look instead for what God can do. We need to be energetically at work for the One who sent me here, working while the sun shines. When night falls, the workday is over.*"^{Jn.9:2-4} And God's work is firstly to believe in Jesus and then to share our faith. So, regardless of the outcome, we should always do what's right. *Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.*^{Matt.11:19} Yes we do reap what we sow but we need to view our life in the mirror of eternity and wait patiently for God to work the details out for His glory—which will also be for our good!

Questions

Is “you reap what you sow” a Biblical concept?

Are there consequences to our actions?

Why do bad things happen to good people?

How should we deal with suffering?

What should we do when life is a struggle?

Puritan Prayer: Lord of immortality, before whom angels bow and archangels veil their faces, enable me to serve You with reverence and godly fear. You who are Spirit and require truth in the inward parts, help me to worship You in spirit and in truth. You who are righteous, let me not harbour sin in my heart, or indulge a worldly temper, or seek satisfaction in things that perish. I haven't towards an hour when earthly pursuits and possessions will appear vain, when it will be indifferent whether I have been rich or poor, successful or disappointed, admired or despised. But it will be of eternal moment that I have mourned for sin, hungered and thirsted after righteousness, loved the Lord Jesus in sincerity and gloried in His cross. May these objects engross my chief solicitude (consideration)! Produce in me those principles and dispositions that make Your service perfect freedom. Expel from my mind all sinful fear and shame, so that with firmness and courage I may confess the Redeemer before others. May I go forth with You, being zealous with Your knowledge, filled with Your wisdom, walking with Your circumspection, asking counsel of You in all things, repairing to the Scriptures for Your orders and staying my mind on Your peace because nothing can befall me without Your permission, appointment and administration.

Sunday 21st July Ps.23 Jn.10

I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me.^{Jn.10:14}

When I was a teenager, the pastor of the Chapel I attended with my parents gave me a Bible dated 1581—which I still have. This is a Geneva Bible which was the first English Bible to include verses. Stephen Langton (who was Archbishop of Canterbury at the time of the Magna Carta) added the chapters to the Latin Vulgate Bible in the early C13th but the verses in our Bibles today were introduced in the C16th by Robert Estienne (often called Robert Stephens). The Geneva Bible was taken to America on board “*The Mayflower*” and was used by Shakespeare, Bunyon and Cromwell. King James banned the Geneva Bible in 1611 because he saw it as a challenge to his authority as a monarch. The marginal notes in the Geneva Bible were often interpreted as promoting disobedience to authority, something that James, who believed in the divine right of kings, could not tolerate. Moreover, the Geneva Bible was not authorized by the Church of England and its widespread use was seen as a challenge to the established church. King James also disliked the theological differences between his Episcopalian beliefs (that is,

the Church ruled by bishops) and the Geneva Bible's Calvinistic influence. However, I have enjoyed reading the margin notes and found them really helpful. For instance, this is the margin note for verse 6 of Psalm 23: *He does not set his felicities (happiness) in the pleasures of this world, but in the fear and service of God.*

The Bible is the record of God's plan of salvation for mankind, through Jesus Christ. And so, if we don't see Jesus in the Scriptures, we have missed the point of them! *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.5:39-40} *For all of God's promises have been fulfilled in Christ with a resounding "Yes!" And through Christ, our "Amen" (which means "Yes") ascends to God for his glory.*^{2Cor.1:20}

Of course it is easy to see Jesus in the examples He gives, such as *I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me.*^{Jn.10:14} But that theme of Jesus being our Shepherd is a theme that runs through the whole of Scriptures because it illustrates the care and protection that He provides.

But we should also remember that although Jesus is the Chief Shepherd, He has delegated to each of us the practical responsibility of caring for the flock of God's people and according to our ability, gifting and opportunity we are all under-shepherds. *Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, watching over them—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not pursuing dishonest gain, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away.*^{1Pet.5:2-4}

If we love Jesus, we are, like Peter, commissioned to care for the need of others: *When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?" "Yes, Lord," he said, "you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Feed my lambs." Again Jesus said, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" He answered, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Take care of my sheep." The third time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, "Do you love me?" He said, "Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Feed my sheep."*^{Jn.21:15-17} *Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has become a child of God. And everyone who loves the Father loves his children, too. We know we love God's children if we love God and obey his commandments. Loving God means keeping his commandments, and his commandments are not burdensome. For every child of God defeats this evil world, and we achieve this victory through our faith. And who can win this battle against the world? Only those who believe that Jesus is the Son of God.*^{1Jn.5:1-5}

As we look through the 23rd Psalm, let us see Jesus as the good Shepherd who cares for our souls and recall the goodness of God. *For "you were like sheep going astray," but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.*^{1Pet.2:25}

The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want. God is our Shepherd and so when Jesus said that He was the good Shepherd, He was affirming His deity—but He was also showing His great love and compassion for us. The shepherds in the Middle East look after their sheep by taking them to good pasture and ensuring that they have water to drink; they personally guard and guide their flocks as they walk with them, leading them out from the fold and leading them back at the end of the day. This a wonderful illustration of how God is with us, watching over us, spiritually feeding us as we graze on His Word. Our faith in Jesus Christ is not just something we talk about on Sundays but is a daily, intentional trust in Him throughout every part of our life. And we activate our faith by "hearing" the Word of God. *Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ.*^{Rom.10:17} We don't have to read the Word of God to hear it, especially when we know what the Scriptures say—but we must have the Scriptures in our heart for it to be the Word of God: *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} It is easy to trust God in Church when we are in an atmosphere of faith and encouragement, but Church is (at least it should be!) a place of encouragement where we can build ourselves up in our faith so that we can trust God everywhere—whether at home or at work, with believers or with unbelievers. But our fellowship with God is not dependant on external stimuli, such as other Christians or “religious” music. Our fellowship with God is dependent on His presence and our personal interaction with Him and with other Believers: *My salvation and my honour depend on God; He is my mighty rock, my refuge. Trust in Him at all times, you people; pour out your hearts to Him, for God is our refuge.*^{Ps.62:7-8} *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. This is the message we heard from Jesus and now declare to you: God is light, and there is no darkness in him at all. So we are lying if we say we have fellowship with God but go on living in spiritual darkness; we are not practicing the truth. But if we are living in the light, as God is in the light, then we have fellowship with each other, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, cleanses us from all sin.*^{1Jn.1:3-7} The Lord is our Shepherd—but our Shepherd is also the Lord, which means that He has all authority and all power and is able to care for us. God will protect us and provide for us, both spiritually and practically. The Geneva Bible has this comment: *He has care over me and ministers unto me all things.*

He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he restores my soul. Evangelists are, in the right sense, *agitators* because they stir people up and try to make them uncomfortable enough to turn to God. Luke describes John the Baptist’s preaching as “exhortation” *He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet: “A voice of one calling in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him. Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth. And all people will see God’s salvation.’ ”... And with many other words John exhorted the people and proclaimed the good news to them.*^{Jn.3:3-18} But shepherds cause the sheep to lie down in green pastures. Sheep are ruminants and need to regurgitate their food in order to digest it (it is called “*chewing the cud*”). It is as we hear the Word of God and then regurgitate (reflect on) the Word of God that we are spiritually fed and are able to grow as Believers. The word “*selah*” in the Psalms could be paraphrased “*chew the cud*,” in other words reflect on what you have just read—remember, revelation comes from meditation: *Reflect on what I am saying, for the Lord will give you insight into all this*^{2Tim.2:7} *Keep this Book of the Law always on your lips; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful.*^{Josh.1:8} *But the seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop.*^{Lk.8:15} As we feed and reflect on the Word of God, our soul prospers—and as our soul prospers, so the rest of our life also prospers: *Beloved, I pray that you may prosper in all things and be in health, just as your soul prospers. [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.]*^{3Jn.2} The word “*prosper*” literally means “*to journey*” and so we can expect a good journey through life when we look after our soul—which is why we must ensure that our soul is restored through being spiritually well fed and rested. And as we saw last week, although Jesus hasn’t promised us a comfortable life, He has promised us a cheerful life and a conquering life.

He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Although God leads us in paths of righteousness, we are never meant to walk these paths alone—Church is family and we share our journey with other Believers. Wesley said to someone: *Sir, You wish to serve God and go to heaven. Remember you cannot serve Him alone; you must therefore find companions or make them. The Bible knows nothing of solitary religion.* If we are going to fellowship with the Shepherd, we must

also fellowship with the sheep and follow the tracks: *Tell me, you whom I love, where you graze your flock and where you rest your sheep at midday. Why should I be like a veiled woman beside the flocks of your friends? If you do not know, most beautiful of women, follow the tracks of the sheep and graze your young goats by the tents of the shepherds.*^{SofS.1:7-8} On Dartmoor, the boggy ground can be quite soft and difficult to ride over but if you follow the sheep tracks, you will be safe. Studying Church history is a way of following the sheep tracks—seeing how our fathers in the faith lived out their faith in the good and also in the difficult times. And then (hopefully!) we won't make the same mistakes that they did!

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. The shepherd's staff is his crook to catch the sheep and also a walking aid to steady him. The word has its roots in "support" or "lean": *The field commander said to them, "Tell Hezekiah: "This is what the great king, the king of Assyria, says: On what are you basing this confidence of yours? You say you have the counsel and the might for war—but you speak only empty words. On whom are you depending, that you rebel against me? Look, I know you are depending on Egypt, that splintered reed of a staff, which pierces the hand of anyone who leans on it! Such is Pharaoh king of Egypt to all who depend on him. But if you say to me, "We are depending on the LORD our God"—isn't he the one whose high places and altars Hezekiah removed, saying to Judah and Jerusalem, "You must worship before this altar in Jerusalem"?"*^{2Kg.18:19-22} The shepherd's rod is his weapon to beat off predators such as robbers or wild animals. *"I have been taking care of my father's sheep and goats," he said. "When a lion or a bear comes to steal a lamb from the flock, I go after it with a club and rescue the lamb from its mouth. If the animal turns on me, I catch it by the jaw and club it to death. I have done this to both lions and bears, and I'll do it to this pagan Philistine, too, for he has defied the armies of the living God! The LORD who rescued me from the claws of the lion and the bear will rescue me from this Philistine!"*^{1Sam.17:34-37} The word for "rod" is sometimes translated sceptre, which is the symbol of kingly authority: *Your throne, O God, will last for ever and ever; a sceptre of justice will be the sceptre of your kingdom.*^{P.45:6} We no longer have to fear evil because God's stability, ability, defence and authority are more than adequate to protect us in every situation! But we should never become complacent because the devil is still active: *Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that the family of believers throughout the world is undergoing the same kind of sufferings. And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast. To him be the power for ever and ever. Amen.*^{1Pet.5:8-11} And when we have to walk through the "valley of the shadow of death" into eternity we have no need to be afraid because Jesus has broken the devil's power so we are no longer dominated by the fear of dying. And in any case, Jesus will never leave us! *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} God's stability, ability, defence and authority comforts us! But when God comforts us, we are to share that experience with others to give them a proper, godly and credible comfort: *Give praise to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! He is the Father who gives tender love. All comfort comes from him. He comforts us in all our troubles. Now we can comfort others when they are in trouble. We ourselves have received comfort from God. We share the sufferings of Christ. We also share his comfort. If we are having trouble, it is so that you will be comforted and renewed. If we are comforted, it is so that you will be comforted. Then you will be able to put up with the same suffering we have gone through. Our hope for you remains firm. We know that you suffer just as we do. In the same way, God comforts you just as he comforts us.*^{2Cor.1:3-7}

Jesus is the Good Shepherd who cared enough to lay down His life for us so we can be in His flock. And He is still caring for us. So, what sort of “sheep” are you? Are you still the sheep that went astray? If so, come back to the Good Shepherd. *“Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Does he not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbours together and says, ‘Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.’ I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.”*^{Lk.15:4-7} Or are you the sheep that has returned to the Shepherd? If so, let Him care for your soul and have a good journey through life as your soul prospers: *For you were like sheep going astray, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.*^{1Pet.2:25}

Questions

Are all translations of the Bible the Word of God?

Why did John the Baptist call Jesus the “Lamb of God”?

Why did Jesus say that He was the “Good Shepherd”?

In what ways are we like sheep?

How can we keep on the “paths of righteousness”?

What should we do if we find ourselves fearing evil?

Puritan Prayer: Lord of immortality, before whom angels bow and archangels veil their faces, enable me to serve You with reverence and godly fear. You who are Spirit and require truth in the inward parts, help me to worship You in spirit and in truth. You who are righteous, let me not harbour sin in my heart, or indulge a worldly temper, or seek satisfaction in things that perish. I haven't towards an hour when earthly pursuits and possessions will appear vain, when it will be indifferent whether I have been rich or poor, successful or disappointed, admired or despised. But it will be of eternal moment that I have mourned for sin, hungered and thirsted after righteousness, loved the Lord Jesus in sincerity and gloried in His cross. May these objects engross my chief solicitude (consideration)! Produce in me those principles and dispositions that make Your service perfect freedom. Expel from my mind all sinful fear and shame, so that with firmness and courage I may confess the Redeemer before others. May I go forth with You, being zealous with Your knowledge, filled with Your wisdom, walking with Your circumspection, asking counsel of You in all things, repairing to the Scriptures for Your orders and staying my mind on Your peace because nothing can befall me without Your permission, appointment and administration.

Sunday 28th July Ps.100 Jn.10

I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me. Jn.10:14

When Jesus said that he was the Good Shepherd, He was affirming His deity because the Lord is our Shepherd, but was also affirming that He cared for us personally and practically—like a shepherd! *For the Lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd; ‘he will lead them to springs of living water.’ ‘And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.’*^{Rev.7:17} *Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.*^{1Pet.5:6-7} *Cast your cares on the LORD and he will sustain you; he will never let the righteous be shaken.*^{Ps.55:22} God cares about both the large and the little things in our life. *Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground outside your Father's care. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.*^{Matt.10:29-31} *Come to me, all of you who are tired and are carrying heavy loads. I will give you rest. Become my servants and learn from me. I am gentle and free of pride. You will find rest for your souls. Serving me is easy, and my load is light.*^{Matt.11:28-30} As our Shepherd, Jesus brings us to a place of rest where we can feed and mature. Sheep are ruminants

and need to regurgitate their food in order to digest it—and we are fed spiritually by reflecting on the Word of God. God gives us understanding about spiritual matters when we meditate (recall and reflect) on the Word of God—revelation comes from meditation: *Reflect on what I am saying, for the Lord will give you insight into all this.*^{2Tim.2:7} But the seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop.^{Lk.8:15} God's plans and purposes for us are good and His paths are safe. *He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. The LORD is my inheritance and my cup. You are the one who determines my destiny. Your boundary lines mark out pleasant places for me. Indeed, my inheritance is something beautiful.*^{Ps.16:5-6} For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart."^{Jer.29:11-13} [Wisdom's] ways are pleasant ways. All her paths lead to peace. She is a tree of life to those who hold her close. Those who hold on to her will be blessed.^{Prov.3:17-18} And because of God's rod and staff (stability, ability, protection and authority) we have no need to fear evil—or the evil one. However, we must never become complacent because the devil is like a roaring lion and is able to devour us if we are not alert: *Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith.*^{1Pet.5:8-9} Which is why Jesus taught us to pray for deliverance from the evil one: *Keep us from falling into sin when we are tempted. Save us from the evil one.*^{Matt.6:13} But if we stay alert the evil one can't harm us: *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. 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.5:18-20}

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. God doesn't always deliver us from our enemies but regardless of our surroundings or circumstances, we can have peace and rest for our souls. God gave David rest whilst his enemies were still around him: *After the king was settled in his palace and the LORD had given him rest from all his enemies around him...*^{2Sam.7:1} We will always have turbulence in our lives—life can be really hard and difficult, even to the point of thinking about giving up—but Believers can have peace in the mist of these troubles because Jesus is with us: *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.16:31} [Mary] will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Emmanuel" (which means "God with us").^{Matt.1:21-23} We should follow Job's example and never blame God for troubles: *Job stood up and tore his robe in grief. Then he shaved his head and fell to the ground to worship. He said, "I came naked from my mother's womb, and I will be naked when I leave. The LORD gave me what I had, and the LORD has taken it away. Praise the name of the LORD!" In all of this, Job did not sin by blaming God.*^{Job.1:20-22} Even though we may be in the presence of enemies, God has provided an abundant feast for us to share: *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} How sad that many people don't partake of God's abundant provision! All we have to do is open our heart to God and show our love for Him by obeying Him and He will fellowship with us! *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.*^{Rev.3:20} *Whoever has my commands and keeps them is the one who loves me. The one who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love them and show myself to them... Anyone who loves*

me will obey my teaching. My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them.^{Jn.14:21-23}

You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Anointing refers to delegated authority—the oil represents the Holy Spirit who empowers us to represent God. In the OT, priests and kings were anointed to consecrate them (set them apart) and to show that their authority was not their own but given to them by God. *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.28:41} Then the men of Judah came to Hebron, and there they anointed David king over the tribe of Judah.^{2Sam.2:4} We are anointed by God for exactly the same reason—to set us apart and to empower us with God’s Presence. God’s anointing (or Presence) teaches about God’s Person (or glory). *As for you, see that what you have heard from the beginning remains in you. If it does, you also will remain in the Son and in the Father. And this is what he promised us—eternal life. I am writing these things to you about those who are trying to lead you astray. As for you, the anointing you received from him remains in you, and you do not need anyone to teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about all things and as that anointing is real, not counterfeit—just as it has taught you, remain in him.*^{1Jn.2:24} And this anointing (i.e. God’s Presence) equips us to proclaim the good news—the Gospel: *The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the broken hearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the LORD’s favour and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion—to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the LORD for the display of his splendour.*^{Is.61:1-3} 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.2:21-22} You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness; therefore God, your God, has set you above your companions by anointing you with the oil of joy.^{Heb.1:9} Anointing is not a little dabble but a smearing or a rubbing in of oil: *Get up, you officers, oil the shields!*^{Is.21:5} David took up this lament concerning Saul and his son Jonathan, “A gazelle lies slain on your heights, Israel. How the mighty have fallen... Mountains of Gilboa, may you have neither dew nor rain, may no showers fall on your terraced fields. For there the shield of the mighty was despised, the shield of Saul—no longer rubbed with oil.”^{2Sam.1:17-21} In the NT, a shield represents faith because it protects us from attack: *In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one.*^{Eph.6:16} And his commands are not burdensome, for everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world? Only the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.^{1Jn.5:3-5} Faith is not just knowing and trusting the facts about God—faith is having that knowledge about God animated and quickened (made alive) by the Holy Spirit! Faith and the Holy Spirit are inseparably linked: *They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit,*^{Acts.6:5} Barnabas was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord.^{Acts.11:24} God is a of abundance: *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.36:8-9} You gave abundant showers, O God; you refreshed your weary inheritance.^{Ps.68:9} And we have an abundance of peace and grace from God: *Grace and peace be yours in abundance through the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord.*^{2Pet.1:2} We are meant to share what we have received from God: *[Moses] was in the assembly in the wilderness, with the angel who spoke to him on Mount Sinai, and with our ancestors; and he received living words to pass on to us.*^{Acts.7:38} For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you.^{1Cor.11:23} And so there is always an overflow to others—an overflow of the Kingdom of God, which is righteousness, peace and joy: *For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit,*^{Rom.14:17}

Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life. So many people are seeking love and acceptance instead of seeking Jesus Christ. When we belong to God, goodness and love follow us—we don't have to go looking for them! We are accepted by God through Jesus Christ and His love is unconditional. That means, He loves us and blesses us regardless of whether we respond to Him or not. God gives general blessings to everyone: *But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.*^{Matt. 5:44-45} But God also gives specific blessings of protection and provision to us—both spiritual and practical: *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} *And my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus.*^{Phil. 4:19} *So don't worry about these things, saying, 'What will we eat? What will we drink? What will we wear?'* These things dominate the thoughts of unbelievers, but your heavenly Father already knows all your needs. *Seek the Kingdom of God above all else, and live righteously, and he will give you everything you need. "So don't worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring its own worries. Today's trouble is enough for today."*^{Matt. 6:31-34} However, when we acknowledge God's favour, God gives us credit: *Your faith has saved you; go in peace.*^{Lk. 7:50} *Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace.*^{Lk. 8:48} *Rise and go; your faith has made you well.*^{Lk. 17:19} *Receive your sight; your faith has healed you.*^{Lk. 18:42} *You sent me aid more than once when I was in need. Not that I desire your gifts; what I desire is that more be credited to your account. I have received full payment and have more than enough. I am amply supplied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent. They are a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God. And my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus.*^{Phil. 4:16-19}

And I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever. The Geneva Bible translates it this way: *and I shall remaine a long season in the house of the Lord.* Our relationship with God is permanent because we will dwell in the house of the LORD for a long season—eternity! The “House of the Lord” is not a building but a relationship with God: *Therefore, holy brothers and sisters, who share in the heavenly calling, fix your thoughts on Jesus, whom we acknowledge as our apostle and high priest. He was faithful to the one who appointed him, just as Moses was faithful in all God's house. Jesus has been found worthy of greater honour than Moses, just as the builder of a house has greater honour than the house itself. For every house is built by someone, but God is the builder of everything. “Moses was faithful as a servant in all God's house,” bearing witness to what would be spoken by God in the future. But Christ is faithful as the Son over God's house. And we are his house, if indeed we hold firmly to our confidence and the hope in which we glory.*^{Heb. 3:1-6} God has promised to be with us and that we will be with Him: *For we are the temple of the living God. As God has said: “I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people.”*^{2Cor. 2:16} *Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”*^{Rev. 21:1-4} Although eternity will be a “long season”, it will not go on and on and on, *ad infinitum* so that we get tired or bored but rather eternity for Believers will be the most beautiful and wonderful time ever—but will never end, because time will be no more! Eternity will be a “now” moment with no days or nights or changing seasons: *I saw no temple in the city, for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. And the city has no need of sun or moon, for the glory of God illuminates the city, and the Lamb is its light. The nations will walk in its light, and the kings of the world will enter the city in all their glory. Its gates will never be closed at the end of day because there is no night there... No longer will there be a curse upon anything. For the throne of God and of the Lamb will be there, and his servants will worship him. And they will see his face,*

and his name will be written on their foreheads. And there will be no night there—no need for lamps or sun—for the Lord God will shine on them. And they will reign forever and ever.^{Rev.21:22-22:5}

But until we get to heaven and leave time behind, our Master expects us to be faithful—both in the sense of loyal and also in being full of faith. *Who then is the faithful and wise manager, whom the master puts in charge of his servants to give them their food allowance at the proper time? It will be good for that servant whom the master finds doing so when he returns. Truly I tell you, he will put him in charge of all his possessions.*^{Lk.12:42-44} We Christians have changed our citizenship and allegiance from this world's kingdom to God's kingdom and we became God's House when He has made His home with us. *But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior 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} We shall remain a long season in the house of the Lord so we should start getting used to our new home and our new country. So let's watch our vocabulary and make sure we only say what God says—and keep the faith!

Questions

How can we be at rest in the midst of trouble?

What does it mean to be anointed?

How does our cup overflow?

In what way does goodness and mercy follow us?

What does it mean to “dwell in the house of the Lord forever”?

Puritan Prayer: Lord Jesus, I sin. Grant that I may never cease grieving because of it, never be content with myself and never think I can reach a point of perfection. Kill my envy, command my tongue, trample down my self. Give me grace to be holy, kind, gentle, pure and peaceable; to live for You and not for self; to copy Your words and Your acts; to be transformed into Your likeness; to be consecrated wholly to You; to live entirely to Your glory. Deliver me from attachment to things unclean, from wrong associations, from the predominance of evil passions and from the sugar of sin as well as its gap—so that with self-loathing, deep contrition and earnest heart searching I may come to You, cast myself on You, trust in You, cry to You, be delivered by You.

August 2024

In God we trust: *May Your unfailing love come to me, LORD, Your salvation, according to Your promise; then I can answer anyone who taunts me, for I trust in Your word.* Ps.119:41-42

Thought for the Month: Triumphant prayer is almost impossible where there is neglect of the study of the Word of God. Prayer that is born of meditation upon the Word of God is the prayer that soars upward most easily to God's listening ears. R.A.Torrey

Sunday 4th August Ps.73:24-28 Jn.11

Then Jesus said, "Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?" Jn.11:40

The glory of God is His Presence. God's glory is not just an emotional feeling (although it can certainly be felt)—God's glory is a real, tangible yet spiritual atmosphere. God's glory has been seen as a thick cloud or heavy mist and even as fire but is more often experienced as an awareness of God Himself. God is Spirit, and so His Presence is spiritual not physical but because we are spirit and flesh, we are aware of God's presence with our physical senses—sight, sound, smell, taste or touch. John saw God's glory as smoke: *And the temple was filled with smoke from the glory of God and from his power, and no one could enter the temple until the seven plagues of the seven angels were completed.* ^{Rev.15:8} Isaiah saw God's glory as smoke: *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. Above him were seraphim, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. And they were calling to one another: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory." At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke.* ^{Is.6:1-4} Moses saw God's glory as a cloud: *Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. Moses could not enter the tent of meeting because the cloud had settled on it, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle.* ^{Ex.40:34-35} Solomon saw God's glory as a cloud: *When the priests withdrew from the Holy Place, the cloud filled the temple of the LORD. And the priests could not perform their service because of the cloud, for the glory of the LORD filled his temple. Then Solomon said, "The LORD has said that he would dwell in a dark cloud; I have indeed built a magnificent temple for you, a place for you to dwell forever."* ^{1Kg.8:10-13} Ezekiel saw God's glory as fire and brilliant light: *I saw that from what appeared to be his waist up he looked like glowing metal, as if full of fire, and that from there down he looked like fire; and brilliant light surrounded him. Like the appearance of a rainbow in the clouds on a rainy day, so was the radiance around him. This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD. When I saw it, I fell facedown, and I heard the voice of one speaking.* ^{Ezek.1:27-28} The Disciples saw God's glory as a flash of fire and brilliant light: *As he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning. Two men, Moses and Elijah, appeared in glorious splendour, talking with Jesus.* ^{Lk.9:29-30} There he was transfigured before them. *His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light.* ^{Matt.17:2} On the Day of Pentecost the glory of God appeared as wind and fire: *Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.* ^{Acts.2:2-4}

When someone experiences God's glory, we usually call it "revival" but theologically we should call it "revelation". Revival means to bring back to life and back-sliders need reviving to restore them to faith: *Let your hand rest on the man at your right hand, the son of man you have raised up for yourself. Then we will not turn away from you; revive us, and we will call on your name. Restore us, LORD God Almighty; make your face shine on us, that we may be saved.* ^{Ps.80:17-19} Unbelievers can't be revived because they have no spiritual life to be restored—they need converting! *"Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ." When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?"* Peter

replied, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call.” With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, “Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.” Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.^{Acts.2:36-41} Of course, God is not restricted to who He shows His glory to—and God has already shown His glory to everyone in creation: LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory in the heavens.^{Ps.8:1} 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} But God’s holy and majestic glory of His personal Presence is what heaven is full of, and what we sometimes catch glimpses of here on earth. The Hebrew word that is often used for this physical manifestation of God’s Presence is “shekinah” which literally means “dwelling” or “settling”: When Moses went up on the mountain, the cloud covered it, and the glory of the LORD settled on Mount Sinai.^{Ex.24:15-16} God’s glory is in the spiritual dimension and although it is very real, God has to “reveal” or “unveil” it to us for us to experience it. The Book of Revelation was written by John after he experienced that timeless, spiritual dimension—which is why it is called “revelation”. After this I looked, and there before me was a door standing open in heaven. And the voice I had first heard speaking to me like a trumpet said, “Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this.” At once I was in the Spirit, and there before me was a throne in heaven with someone sitting on it. And the one who sat there had the appearance of jasper and ruby. A rainbow that shone like an emerald encircled the throne.^{Rev.4:1-3} We need God to open our spiritual eyes to see beyond the natural into the supernatural. This is what happened to Elisha’s servant: When the servant of the man of God got up and went out early the next morning, an army with horses and chariots had surrounded the city. “Oh no, my lord! What shall we do?” the servant asked. “Don’t be afraid,” the prophet answered. “Those who are with us are more than those who are with them.” And Elisha prayed, “Open his eyes, LORD, so that he may see.” Then the LORD opened the servant’s eyes, and he looked and saw the hills full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha.^{2Kg.6:15-17} Paul was commissioned to “open people’s eyes”: ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,’ the Lord replied. ‘Now get up and stand on your feet. I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness of what you have seen and will see of me. I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles. I am sending you to them to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.’^{Acts.26:15-18} And so Paul prayed for people’s spiritual eyes to be opened and their hearts to be enlightened: For this reason, ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all God’s people, I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers. I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, and his incomparably great power for us who believe.^{Eph.1:15-19}

But whatever our understanding of theology and whatever words we use—whether revival, refreshing or revelation—we should all make it our desire to see God’s glory. Moses was used to spending time with God and experiencing His glory: Now Moses used to take a tent and pitch it outside the camp some distance away, calling it the “tent of meeting.” Anyone inquiring of the LORD would go to the tent of meeting outside the camp. And whenever Moses went out to the tent, all the people rose and stood at the entrances to their tents, watching Moses until he entered the tent. As Moses went into the tent, the pillar of cloud would come down and stay at the entrance, while the LORD spoke with Moses. Whenever the people saw the pillar of cloud standing at the entrance to the tent, they all stood and worshiped, each at the entrance to their tent. The LORD would speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend. Then Moses would return to the camp, but his young aide Joshua son of Nun did not leave the tent.^{Ex.33:7-11} But there came a time when Moses was desperate

to see God's glory again—and God said that He would show His glory because He was pleased with Moses and knew him by name! *The LORD replied, "My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest." Then Moses said to him, "If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here. How will anyone know that you are pleased with me and with your people unless you go with us? What else will distinguish me and your people from all the other people on the face of the earth?" And the LORD said to Moses, "I will do the very thing you have asked, because I am pleased with you and I know you by name." Then Moses said, "Now show me your 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. 33:14-23} The history of Israel was often a prophetic statement about our salvation through Jesus Christ: *They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. They all ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ.*^{1Cor. 10:2-4} And we can take this event of Moses hiding in the cleft of a rock as an allegory of Jesus—that we can only experience God's glory through the effects of Jesus' death.

To please God we must have faith (faith is an interactive trust in Jesus Christ, based on His Character and His Word): *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} And so we must live in the realm of the Spirit, not the realm of the flesh: *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.*^{Rom. 8:8-9} Living in the realm of the flesh means ignoring God; living in the realm of the Spirit means having an active relationship with God and affirming Him in all that we think, say and do: *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}

God knows us personally—He knows our name, He calls us by name and has written our name on His hands: *The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.*^{Jn. 10:2-3} But now, this is what the LORD says—he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: *"Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you,"*^{Is. 43:1-2} *I will not forget you! See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands.*^{Is. 49:15-16}

Jesus prayed that we might share in God's glory and so this is our inheritance—our spiritual birth-right: *Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world.*^{Jn. 17:24} And so let's ask God to show us His glory. Because we please God and God knows us by name, we too, like Moses, can experience God's goodness in the shelter of the Rock of Jesus Christ.

Questions:

What is God's "glory"?

How can we experience God's glory?

What difference should God's glory make to us?

Does someone's experience of God make them more spiritual?

What is spiritual maturity?

Puritan Prayer: O God, the Eternal One, help me to know that all things are shadows—but You are the substance; that all things are quicksands—but You are the mountain; that all things are shifting—but You are the anchor; that all things are ignorance—but You are true wisdom. If my life is to be a crucible amid burning heat, so be it—but You sit at the furnace mouth to watch the ore so that nothing is lost. If I sin wilfully, grievously or tormentedly, in grace take away my mourning and give me music; remove my sackcloth and clothe me with beauty; still my sighs and fill my mouth with song—and then give me summer weather as a Christian!

Sunday 11th August Ps.75 Jn.12

The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. Jn.12:3

We said last week that the history of Israel was often a prophetic statement about our salvation through Jesus Christ: *They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. They all ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ.* ^{1Cor.10:2-4} Edersheim writes: *And perhaps the most valuable element in Rabbinic commentation on Messianic times is that... all the miracles and deliverances of Israel's past would be re-enacted, only in a much wider manner, in the days of the Messiah. Thus the whole past was symbolic, and typical of the future—the Old Testament the glass, through which the universal blessings of the latter days were seen. (The Life & Times of Jesus the Messiah)* This is what Paul wrote: *Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ.* ^{Col.2:16-17} And so, to understand about our salvation, we have to study the Scriptures, including the OT. If we don't see Jesus and our salvation in the stories, the festivals, the ceremonies, they are just a part of Jewish history and irrelevant to us. But if we see Jesus and our salvation in the Scriptures, they become relevant to us because we can learn about who we are and grow in our faith. *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."* ^{1Pet.2:4-8} As we see different aspects of our salvation in the Scriptures, we will ponder them with awe and wonder. *Therefore every teacher of the law who has been instructed about the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old.* ^{Matt.13:52} This is what Jesus explained to the Disciples: *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... He said to them, "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms." Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, "This is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high."* ^{Lk.24:25-49}

For the worshipers in the OT Tabernacle and Temple incense was reminders of the beauty and majesty of God—and the strong lingering fragrance helped people remember that God was with them. When the incense was burnt, thick clouds of smoke ascended from the burner, reminding them that their prayers had ascended to God: *May my prayer be set before you like incense; may the lifting up of my hands be like the evening sacrifice.* ^{Ps.41:2} *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.^{Rev.5:8} Another angel, who had a golden censer, came and stood at the altar. He was given much incense to offer, with the prayers of all God's people, on the golden altar in front of the throne. The smoke of the incense, together with the prayers of God's people, went up before God from the angel's hand.^{Rev.8:3-4} The aroma of bunt offerings reminded people that they had given their complete sacrifice to God and that He was pleased with it. Then burn the entire ram on the altar. It is a burnt offering to the LORD, a pleasing aroma, a food offering presented to the LORD.^{Ex.29:18} The NT fulfilment of this is that we give ourselves as a complete spiritual sacrifice to God and that He is pleased with us: 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 Our spiritual sacrifice leaves an aroma that some people find offensive and but to those who are being saved, brings life: But thanks be to God, who always leads us as captives in Christ's triumphal procession and uses us to spread the aroma of the knowledge of him everywhere. For we are to God the pleasing aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are an aroma that brings death; to the other, an aroma that brings life. 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, as those sent from God.^{2Cor.2:14-17}

However, Mary's anointing of Jesus' feet was not connected with Temple worship but with Jesus worship. Then Mary took about a pint of pure nard, an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus' feet and wiped his feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.^{Jn.12:3} Mary was a worshipper: As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!" "Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed—or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her."^{Lk.10:38}

Our English word "worship" is derived from the Old English "weorpscipe," meaning "to give worth to something" or "to venerate" and so worship is always personal and something that you do yourself. You cannot worship on behalf of someone else because worship is your personal evaluation of someone or something. And so, when we worship God, we are expressing what He is worth to us. All the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures. They fell down on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, saying: "Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!"^{Rev.7:11-12} Worship is intimate and the most common word for worship in the NT is "proskuneo" (from pros, "towards," and kuneo, "to kiss") and means "to make obeisance, do reverence to". Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth.^{Jn.4:23-24} In our services and even our personal times with God, to help us focus on God, we often use a selection of Scriptures or, songs, or even written prayers. But however good these are, unless they are an expression of our heart, we are not worshipping God. The first and greatest Commandment is to love with all that we have: "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?" "The most important one," answered Jesus, "is this: 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these."^{Mk.12:28-31} When we draw near to God, He draws near to us: Draw near to God and he will draw near to you.^{Jas.4:8} In the Song of Songs, worship is depicted as kisses—and intimate closeness to Jesus where appreciate His perfume: Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth—for your love is more delightful than wine. Pleasing is the fragrance of your perfumes; your name is like perfume poured out.^{SgS.1:2-3}

One of the Hebrew words for worship is “*barak*” and means to “*kneel*” or “*bless*” and is used over 300 times in OT! And so, to bless (*barak*) God is to enthrone Him as Lord—to kneel before Him. *Come, let us bow down in worship, let us kneel before the LORD our Maker; for he is our God and we are the people of his pasture, the flock under his care.*^{Ps.95:6-7} In the NT, we become a Christian when we confess that Jesus is Lord: *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.”*^{Rom.10:9-11} But when God no longer has pre-eminence in our lives we praise (*barak*) someone or something else—and this is called a curse: *His sons used to take turns holding feasts in their homes, and they would invite their three sisters to eat and drink with them. When a period of feasting had run its course, Job would send and have them purified. Early in the morning he would sacrifice a burnt offering for each of them, thinking, “Perhaps my children have sinned and cursed [barak] God in their hearts.” This was Job's regular custom.*^{Job 1:4-5} When Mary anointed Jesus’ head (Matthew and Mark’s Gospels) and feet with perfume, she was demonstrating her devotion to Jesus but also as a prophetic statement of Jesus’ imminent death. *Mary took a bottle of very expensive perfume made from pure nard and poured it on Jesus' feet. Then she dried his feet with her hair. The fragrance of the perfume filled the house. One of his disciples, Judas Iscariot, who was going to betray him, asked, “Why wasn't this perfume sold for a high price and the money given to the poor?” (Judas didn't say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief. He was in charge of the moneybag and carried the contributions.) Jesus said to Judas, “Leave her alone! She has done this to prepare me for the day I will be placed in a tomb. You will always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me with you.”*^{Jn.12:3-8} The amount of perfume and the quality of the perfume meant that Jesus would still be immersed in that sweet fragrance during His phoney trial, His scourgings and His crucifixion. We can only imagine what impact that had on the hardened soldiers—we know that at least one soldier recognised Jesus’ deity: *The centurion, seeing what had happened, praised God and said, “Surely this was a righteous man.”*^{Lk.23:47} Mary’s expression of worship filled the house: *The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.*^{Jn.12:3} What about our worship? What do people say about our worship? Let’s draw near to God and immerse ourselves in His Presence so that we are daily aware of Him. *Draw near to God and he will draw near to you.*^{Jas.4:8} *But as for me, it is good to be near God. I have made the Sovereign LORD my refuge; I will tell of all your deeds.*^{Ps.73:28} And remember that to worship God is the greatest accomplishment we can ever achieve.

Questions

Why is the OT history important for Christians today?

In the Temple worship, incense was used. What is its relevance to us today?

Should we use written prayers if we must worship God in spirit and truth?

How important is it for Believers to meet together?

What should we expect to happen when we meet together as Believers?

Puritan Prayer: O Lord, whose power is infinite and wisdom infallible, order things that they may not hinder me, discourage me, or prove obstacles to the progress of Your cause. Stand between me and all strife so that no evil befalls me and no sin corrupts my gifts, zeal or attainments. May I follow duty and not any foolish device of my own. Permit me not to labour at work which You will not bless, so that I may serve You without disgrace or debt. Let me dwell in Your most secret place under Your shadow, where there is safe impenetrable protection from the arrow that flies by day, the pestilence that walks in darkness, the strife of tongues, the malice of ill-will, the hurt of unkind talk, the snares of company, the perils of youth, the temptations of middle life, the mournings of old age and the fear of death. I am entirely dependent upon You for support, counsel and consolation.

Sunday 18th August Ps.76 Lk.13

Is Britain under judgment? *And what about the eighteen people who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them? Were they the worst sinners in Jerusalem? No, and I tell you again that unless you repent, you will perish, too.* ^{Lk.13:4-5}

Thinking about the social unrest, the discontent and the disorder in our country—and especially the riots a couple of weeks ago—are we under the judgement of God? Of course, we want justice and fairness for all, but life often seems to be the opposite—good people struggle and bad people seem to go through life with not a care in the world! King David felt the same way and he became quite despondent—until he took it to the Lord in prayer. *Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart. But as for me, my feet had almost slipped; I had nearly lost my foothold. For I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. They have no struggles; their bodies are healthy and strong. They are free from common human burdens; they are not plagued by human ills. Therefore pride is their necklace; they clothe themselves with violence. From their callous hearts comes iniquity; their evil imaginations have no limits. They scoff, and speak with malice; with arrogance they threaten oppression. Their mouths lay claim to heaven, and their tongues take possession of the earth. Therefore their people turn to them and drink up waters in abundance. They say, “How would God know? Does the Most High know anything?” This is what the wicked are like—always free of care, they go on amassing wealth. Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure and have washed my hands in innocence. All day long I have been afflicted, and every morning brings new punishments. If I had spoken out like that, I would have betrayed your children. When I tried to understand all this, it troubled me deeply till I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood their final destiny. Surely you place them on slippery ground; you cast them down to ruin. How suddenly are they destroyed, completely swept away by terrors! They are like a dream when one awakes; when you arise, Lord, you will despise them as fantasies.* ^{Ps.73:1-20} After David spent time with God, he began to see life from God’s perspective—he saw beyond the natural and into the spiritual; he saw beyond the now and into eternity. Life began to make sense as he saw that God was still in control—and David repented of his embittered spirit as he affirmed that God was his strength: *When my heart was grieved and my spirit embittered, I was senseless and ignorant; I was a brute beast before you. Yet I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into glory. Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. Those who are far from you will perish; you destroy all who are unfaithful to you. But as for me, it is good to be near God. I have made the Sovereign LORD my refuge; I will tell of all your deeds.* ^{Ps.73:21-28}

How should we react when trouble comes to us or to those we know? What should our response be when we see our country in despair, and as we have just lately, in anarchy? Are we under God’s judgement? Is it our fault? The Government’s fault? Or is it anyone’s fault? Of course, we know that “*you reap what you sow*”—it’s in the Bible: *Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows.* ^{Gal.6:7} But that is only the first part of the passage—the next part is this: *Whoever sows to please their flesh, from the flesh will reap destruction; whoever sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life. Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.* ^{Gal.6:8-10} This passage is not about apportioning blame but seeing the spiritual dimension of our life—about explaining the eternal consequences of what we say and do. Jesus said that there will be a time of reckoning and words are powerful so we should take them seriously. *But I tell you that everyone will have to give account on the day of judgment for every empty [idle, careless] word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned.* ^{Matt.12:36-36} But this also means that when we don’t see an immediate result to our righteous living, we should not despair, lest we grow weary and lose heart. We can stay confident because there will be a time of reaping: *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} Greg Koukl often reminds us that we should never read a Bible verse—we should read the whole passage! And so, to understand the Bible correctly we must always read a Bible passage in context and in the light of Jesus' finished work—realising what His death, resurrection and ascension has accomplished for us. **A Bible verse out of context is a pretext!** We can prove anything from the Bible if we take a verse out of context. For instance, the Bible says that there is no God—but the whole passage actually says: *The fool says in his heart, "There is no God."*^{Ps.53:2} A fool is someone who says that there is no God, or someone who ignores God: *A rich man had land that produced good crops. He thought, "What should I do? I don't have enough room to store my crops." He said, "I know what I'll do. I'll tear down my barns and build bigger ones so that I can store all my grain and goods in them. Then I'll say to myself, "You've stored up a lot of good things for years to come. Take life easy, eat, drink, and enjoy yourself." ' But God said to him, "You fool! I will demand your life from you tonight! Now who will get what you've accumulated?" That's how it is when a person has material riches but is not rich in his relationship with God.*^{Lk.12:16-21}

But to go back to the subject about the trouble we are facing and whether it is the judgement of God on us or our nation. Not everything that happens to us is our fault or the direct result of our own actions. Job's friends tried to comfort him with human logic and natural philosophy. Then Eliphaz the Temanite replied: *"If someone ventures a word with you, will you be impatient? But who can keep from speaking? Think how you have instructed many, how you have strengthened feeble hands. Your words have supported those who stumbled; you have strengthened faltering knees. But now trouble comes to you, and you are discouraged; it strikes you, and you are dismayed. Should not your piety be your confidence and your blameless ways your hope? "Consider now: Who, being innocent, has ever perished? Where were the upright ever destroyed? As I have observed, those who plough evil and those who sow trouble reap it. At the breath of God they perish; at the blast of his anger they are no more."*^{Job.4:1-9} Even though Eliphaz used religion in his arguments, he ended up speaking lies and made God angry with him: *After the LORD had said these things to Job, he said to Eliphaz the Temanite, "I am angry with you and your two friends, because you have not spoken the truth about me, as my servant Job has. So now take seven bulls and seven rams and go to my servant Job and sacrifice a burnt offering for yourselves. My servant Job will pray for you, and I will accept his prayer and not deal with you according to your folly. You have not spoken the truth about me, as my servant Job has."* So Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite and Zophar the Naamathite did what the LORD told them; and the LORD accepted Job's prayer.^{Job.42:7-}

⁹ There is a spiritual dimension to life and only God sees the whole picture. When we placed our faith in God, we declared that we would trust Him through the bad times as well as the good times. Fate says "what will be, will be" but faith says "God's will, will be!" We must always bring God into our thinking and not rely on human reasoning or human logic alone. Human philosophy is not evil but it ignores the spiritual dimension—and we are spiritual people! *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. For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form.*^{Col.2:6-9} Where is the wise person? Where is the teacher of the law? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe.^{1Cor.1:20-21}

When Jesus was asked about some recent events where people had been killed, He explained the spiritual dimension. *About this time Jesus was informed that Pilate had murdered some people from Galilee as they were offering sacrifices at the Temple. "Do you think those Galileans were worse sinners than all the other people from Galilee?" Jesus asked. "Is that why they suffered? Not at all! And you will perish, too, unless you repent of your sins and turn to God. And what about the eighteen people who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them? Were they the worst sinners in Jerusalem? No, and I tell you again that unless you repent, you will perish, too."*^{Lk.13:1-}

⁵We could make it topical and ask the same questions about the World Trade Centre bombing in 2001 when 2,996 people died (including the 19 hijackers); or the Grenfell Towers fire in 2017 when 72 people died; or the Manchester Arena bombing in 2017 when 22 people were killed and another 1,017 injured; or the recent event in Southport when 3 children were killed and another 11 injured. Jesus would give the same answer—this was not judgement on them because they deserved it or because they were worse than anyone else. Bad things can happen to anyone—but unless we repent (change our mind about God and place our trust in Him), we will end our lives without God. Health and wealth have no value in the grave. What is more impractical than working hard all your life and getting paid with nothing more than an expensively framed death certificate? We need to be rich in our relationship with God and have true riches. *The master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly. For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light. I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings. Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much. So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches? And if you have not been trustworthy with someone else's property, who will give you property of your own? No servant can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money.” The Pharisees, who loved money, heard all this and were sneering at Jesus. He said to them, “You are the ones who justify yourselves in the eyes of men, but God knows your hearts. What is highly valued among men is detestable in God's sight.* ^{Lk.16:8-15}

The true riches that Jesus referred to are spiritual riches and these cannot be bought with money: *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... Seek the LORD while he may be found. Call on him while he is near. Let wicked people abandon their ways. Let evil people abandon their thoughts. Let them return to the LORD, and he will show compassion to them. Let them return to our God, because he will freely forgive them.* ^{Is.55:1-7}

In the OT God dealt with nations but under the New Covenant God deals with individuals. Of course there is a lot wrong with our country, but the greatest sin is unbelief—of rejecting Jesus Christ as Lord and refusing His forgiveness. And if we reject God's provision, there is nothing else that can save us. *If we go on sinning after we have learned the truth, no sacrifice can take away our sins. All that is left is a terrifying wait for judgment and a raging fire that will consume God's enemies. If two or three witnesses accused someone of rejecting Moses' Teachings, that person was shown no mercy as he was executed. What do you think a person who shows no respect for the Son of God deserves? That person looks at the blood of the promise (the blood that made him holy) as no different from other people's blood, and he insults the Spirit that God gave us out of his kindness. He deserves a much worse punishment.* ^{Heb.10:26-29}

But even in the OT, God said that He would not destroy a wicked city if there were only 10 righteous people. *Then Abraham came up to him. He said, “Will you sweep away godly people along with those who are evil? What if there are 50 godly people in the city? Will you really sweep it away? Won't you spare the place because of the 50 godly people in it? “You would never kill godly people along with those who are evil, would you? You wouldn't treat godly and evil people alike. You would never do anything like that! Won't the Judge of the whole earth do what is right?” The LORD said, “If I find 50 godly people in the city of Sodom, I will save it. I will spare the whole place because of them.” ...Then he said, “Lord, don't let your anger burn against me. Let me speak just one more time. What if only ten are found there?” He answered, “If there are ten, I will not destroy it.”* ^{Gen.18:23-32} Under the New Covenant, we are made right with God through faith in Jesus Christ: *that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith.* ^{Phil.3:9} And so, if trouble comes our way, it

is not direct judgement from God. Of course, the whole sinful world is under judgement and all nations exist in conditions of permanent catastrophe, but we are living in the age of grace and mercy. *As God's co-workers we urge you not to receive God's grace in vain. For he says, "In the time of my favour I heard you, and in the day of salvation I helped you." I tell you, now is the time of God's favour, now is the day of salvation.*^{2Cor.6:1-2} *I remain confident of this: I will see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living. Wait for the LORD; be strong and take heart and wait for the LORD.*^{Ps.27:13-14}

Yes we do reap what we sow, whether good or bad—and sin is a reproach to a nation. *Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a disgrace to any people.*^{Prov.14:34} Any sin automatically leads to evil consequences and national sin (i.e. the promotion of social and political values that undermine the values of God's Kingdom) will have corresponding consequences—but not by special Divine edict. Jesus said that weeds are sown by an enemy: *The owner's servants came to him and said, 'Sir, didn't you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the weeds come from?' 'An enemy did this,' he replied.*^{Matt.13:27-28} *The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.*^{Jn.10:10} And that enemy is the devil: *Why is my language not clear to you? Because you are unable to hear what I say. You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desire. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies.*^{Jn.8:43-44} *The one who does what is sinful is of the devil, because the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work. No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God's seed remains in them; they cannot go on sinning, because they have been born of God. This is how we know who the children of God are and who the children of the devil are: Anyone who does not do what is right is not God's child, nor is anyone who does not love their brother and sister.*^{1Jn.3:8-10} *The great dragon was hurled down—that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him.*^{Rev.12:9} The godlessness of people in Britain is wickedly inexcusable and deliberate. Such culpable wrong brings inevitable effects, particularly crime and corruption. However, our task is not pronouncements of judgment but the Gospel—the call to repent and believe in Jesus Christ. Let's make it our intention to think, talk and live as Believers who are living under God's Grace so that others can see and visualise what it is to have the true riches of sins forgiven and peace with God.

Questions

Why are we seeing so much unrest in the world?

What should our response be to the chaos around us?

Will God bring people to account for their behaviour?

How can we still our hearts when we are surrounded by chaos?

Can we ever have a Christian nation in this world?

How can we make a difference to our nation?

Puritan Prayer: Let me dwell in Your most secret place under Your shadow, where there is safe impenetrable protection from the arrow that flies by day, the pestilence that walks in darkness, the strife of tongues, the malice of ill-will, the hurt of unkind talk, the snares of company, the perils of youth, the temptations of middle life, the mournings of old age and the fear of death. I am entirely dependent upon You for support, counsel and consolation. Uphold me by Your Spirit and may I not think it enough to be preserved from falling, but may I always go forward, always abounding in the work You give me to do. Strengthen me by Your Spirit in my inner self for every purpose of my Christian life. All my jewels I give to the shadow of the safety that is in You—my name anew in Christ, my body, my soul, my talents, my character, my success, my spouse, my children, my friends, my work, my present, my future and my end. Take them all—they are Yours. And I am Yours, both now and for ever.

Sunday 25th August. Ps.40 *Paul and Margaret's 25th Anniversary of Ministry in Deal*

As Peter Goodchild is preaching today, I am using this article by J. Warner Wallace - <https://coldcasechristianity.com>

Seven Tips For Good Christian Case Making Conversations

As an investigator, I made a living conducting interviews. In fact, my agency repeatedly utilized me when they needed someone to confess to a crime. I love talking to people, particularly when the conversation is difficult to navigate. Spiritual conversations can also be difficult on occasion, and if you've ever tried to talk to your unbelieving friends or family, you know exactly what I'm talking about. Every suspect interview is an opportunity to uncover the truth, and every spiritual conversation is an opportunity to share the truth. There are similarities between these two forms of interaction. Let me share seven things I've learned in over twenty-five years of interviewing. These tips were field tested in suspect interviews and jury presentations. They have direct application if you are trying to determine what people believe so you can share the truth of your Christian beliefs:

1. Know Your Case. I often say my success in criminal investigations has been based more in hard work than special gifting. My goal is to know the truth of the case better than the person I am investigating (or the defence team I am facing). Success doesn't come cheaply. You've got to work for it. I typically spend several years working a case before it ever results in an arrest. By the time I get to the trial, no one knows the case better than I do. If you want success in spiritual conversations, you need to know why your beliefs are true and understand your case better than anyone you might engage. Don't be lazy. Take the time to know what you believe and why you believe it.

2. Pick Your Jury. You can have a great case yet still fail to persuade anyone it's true. Cases aren't won at opening statement, evidence presentation or closing argument; they're won at jury selection. Good jurors are interested, open-minded and humble. If you want to have success at trial, you'll need to fill your jury box with these kinds of people. In a similar way, your Christian case making is dependent on good jury selection. We'll need to be sensitive to our environment and pick the right people if we want to have success. Take the time to evaluate your jury. This doesn't mean you shouldn't share your case with people even if they fail to possess these characteristics, but it may help you to have reasonable expectations should you decide to do so. The better the juror, the more likely you are to succeed.

3. Love Your Jurors. If a jury doesn't like you as a detective, prosecutor or defence attorney, it's a lot harder to persuade them. It's hard to be convincing if your audience thinks you're a jerk. It's equally difficult to persuade your non-believing friends and family if they don't like you (at least a little bit). As Christians, our love for others ought to be rooted in our transformed nature, not simply in a shrewd effort to persuade. I can honestly say my interview skills improved dramatically after becoming a Christian. Why? I learned to love the people I had to take to jail. I think they could see it in my behaviour and attitude, and it certainly helped me gain their trust. If you want to effectively reach people, start by loving them.

4. Ask Before Declaring. When I first heard Greg Koukl talk about his book, *Tactics*, it resonated with my experience as an interviewer. Greg correctly identified the value of good questions. Before I declare what I know to a suspect, I take the time to mine out what he or she wants me to believe. I don't typically reveal my hand until my suspect has revealed his (or hers). When someone makes a claim, there are two important questions I need to ask: (1) What do you mean by that? and (2) Why do you think that's true? By asking these two simple questions, I can learn what people believe and why they believe it. These questions are equally valuable when talking to people about spiritual matters. Before I take a stand for what I know to be true, I want to know exactly what others believe. Take the time to ask good questions before you launch into the case for Christianity.

5. Look for Inconsistencies. My professional interviews and interrogations are an exercise in good listening. Every word matters to a detective. I learned not to talk over my interviewees so I could better identify discrepancies in their statements. When people are lying, they invariably make inconsistent statements. It's my job to identify these statements so I can get to the truth. In a similar way, when people hold false ideas, they invariably make comparably inconsistent statements. It's our job to identify these statements so we can help them find the truth. Listen carefully for self-refuting ideas, logical contradictions and factual errors.

6. Use Questions to Point Out Discrepancies. Once I've identified a false statement or factual inconsistency, I'm sometimes tempted to jump on the error to make my case. I've learned to resist the temptation, however. My goal in these situations is to reveal the discrepancy to my interviewee so I can get to the truth, but it's far more effective to highlight the error with a question rather than a statement. In a recent conversation with a pro-choice friend, I used disarming questions to identify the error of her thinking. My friend claimed the unborn were not yet human because they were still dependent upon their mothers for survival. Rather than stating why this was errant thinking, I simply asked her a question: *"It sounds like you're saying physical independence and autonomy are the basis for human identity, am I hearing you correctly? But if that is true, does that mean aging or injured adults who are dependent upon pacemakers or dialysis machines are less human than others?"* My goal was to help her see the error in her thinking in the least threatening way possible. Good questions can help you accomplish this goal.

7. Clearly Articulate the Case. At some point in a conversation, you'll hopefully earn the right to declare the truth. Start by mastering the topic, then pick your jury carefully and demonstrate your love for them. Ask good questions and be a careful listener. Help them see their errors in an unthreatening way. Then state the truth in love. This is not your *"gotcha"* moment; it's not your opportunity to beat them with a *"truth stick"*. But in every conversation, I try to leave people with something to think about. If I'm engaging a suspect, there will come a time when I tell him or her that I believe they are guilty of the crime, even if they haven't confessed to it yet. In my spiritual conversations, there will eventually come a time when I share what Christianity teaches about the topic under discussion. I cannot shrink from the truth, even when it may be uncomfortable. But if I've chosen my jury carefully, demonstrated my love for them, asked disarming questions and listened carefully for inconsistencies, I bet I can find the right words to share the truth of the Christian worldview.

Every suspect interview is an opportunity to uncover the truth, and every spiritual conversation is an opportunity to share the truth. There are similarities between these two forms of interaction.

Questions

How can we know more about what we believe?

How can we have credibility with other people—especially non-Christians?

Why should we listen to other people's point of view when we are right?

Should we confront people's false beliefs?

How can we be more confident in sharing our faith?

Puritan Prayer: 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 bounds 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.

September 2024

In God we trust: *Those who trust in the LORD are like Mount Zion, which cannot be shaken but endures forever. As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the LORD surrounds His people both now and forevermore.* Ps.125:1-2

Thought for the Month: We should be able to build into our life the things that have true foundations in the Scripture. Of course, there are some things concerning both our personal life and also church life, that are not mentioned in the New Testament, and here we must be careful that we depend upon our sanctified reasoning faculties and righteous judgment. *George Jeffreys*

Sunday 1st September. Ps.31

Lessons in Ministry that we have Learnt (1)

God planned it for good. *But Joseph said to them, "Don't be afraid. Do you think I'm God? You planned to harm me. But God planned it for good. He planned to do what is now being done. He wanted to save many lives. "So then, don't be afraid. I'll provide for you and your children." He set them free from their fears. And he spoke in a kind way to them.* Gen.50:19-21

To be a Christian, you must believe the basic facts about God's Son, Jesus Christ—and then apply those facts to your life. The most basic facts about Jesus are that He is God, that He died for our sins and rose again from the dead. Paul puts it very simply like this: *If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.* Rom.10:9

If Jesus is not God, then He cannot be our Saviour—but if Jesus is God then He has forgiven our sins. If Jesus did not rise from the dead then His death did not pay the price for our sins—but if Jesus did rise from the dead, then He did pay the price for our sins and His resurrection proves that He told the truth about Himself (and us): *Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.* Is.53:4-6

Because Jesus is God, He is eternal—He had no beginning and has no end: *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind.* Jn.1:1-4

And so Jesus not only sees the end from the beginning, but He has planned the end from the beginning as well—and He has a plan for my life and your life. *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. You are all around me. You are behind me and in front of me. You hold me in your power. I'm amazed at how well you know me. It's more than I can understand... When you were putting me together, your eyes saw my body even before it was formed. You planned how many days I would live. You wrote down the number of them in your book before I had lived through even one of them. God, your thoughts about me are priceless. No one can possibly add them all up.* Ps.139:1-17

God has a plan for us: *Many, LORD my God, are the wonders you have done, the things you planned for us. None can compare with you; were I to speak and tell of your deeds, they would be too many to declare.* Ps.40:5

When I look back over my life, I can see the theme of God's grace woven right through each day, each event and even each mistake. Yes, God has His hand on your life and He won't let you go! *For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.* Jer.29:11 When I was a young teenager, the pastor of our Church decided to give me a Bible. It wasn't just any old Bible but it was a very old Bible—it was a Geneva Bible and was published in 1581. The Geneva Bible was the first English translation to

have both chapters and verses! Why did he give that Bible to me? Probably no one else would have appreciated it, but God knew that I would appreciate it. That Bible was a seed sown into my life that bore fruit many years later. God has a plan for each of us and orchestrates events to bring His purposes about—even before we acknowledge Him. Isaiah, Jeremiah and Paul declared that God knew them and called them before they were even born: *Listen to me, you islands; hear this, you distant nations: Before I was born the LORD called me; from my mother's womb he has spoken my name. 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 splendor."*^{Is.49:1-3} *The word of the LORD came to me, saying, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations."*^{Jer.1:4} *For you have heard of my previous way of life in Judaism, how intensely I persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it. I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers. But when God, who set me apart from my mother's womb and called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him.*^{Gal.1:13-16}

When God called us into full-time ministry, I was challenged to give my whole life to Him through this Scripture: *Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship.*^{Rom.12:1} My work was more than a job—it was a lifestyle where I was “at work” 24 hours each day, 7 days a week and I wasn’t prepared to give that up on a whim. I needed to know for sure that God’s plan for me was to go into full-time ministry and so I asked God to confirm His call—and God did make it very clear. I am so glad that we waited for that confirmation because without a conviction of God’s plan for our lives, we could have been broken-hearted and given up because we went through some very testing times. When things look bleak and you think it can’t get any worse, it often does—it did for us! But we knew that God had a plan for us and that no one can thwart God’s plan—my God is so big, so strong and so mighty, there’s nothing that He cannot do! *The LORD Almighty has sworn, "Surely, as I have planned, so it will be, and as I have purposed, so it will happen. I will crush the Assyrian in my land; on my mountains I will trample him down. His yoke will be taken from my people, and his burden removed from their shoulders." This is the plan determined for the whole world; this is the hand stretched out over all nations. For the LORD Almighty has purposed, and who can thwart him? His hand is stretched out, and who can turn it back?*^{Is.14:24-27} *Then Job replied to the LORD: I know that you can do all things; no plan of yours can be thwarted.*^{Job.42:1-2} In 1998 our Church denomination closed our Church and cancelled my Ministerial credentials, but refused to give us a reason—they just said that they wouldn’t tell us why!!! We were living in the Church building and every time we came home, we saw the notice board outside which advertised in large writing: “Jesus is Lord”. We had to decide—either Jesus is Lord or He is not Lord. If Jesus is not Lord, then He has no plan for us (or if He has a plan for us, He can’t implement it!) so we had better take the notice board down as would be false advertising! But if Jesus is Lord, then He does have a plan for our lives—*plans to prosper us and not to harm us, plans to give us hope and a future*—in which case why are we being anxious? Confessing “Jesus is Lord” means that we acknowledge Jesus’ power and authority and that we submit willingly to His authority—that is how we became a Christian.^{Rom.10:9} Christians have no right to be anxious: *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} Many years ago, when Yan Hadley was preaching here, he said that worry is a vote of no confidence in God! We all have the capacity to worry and we all have thoughts about worry but by faith we overcome worry— and all the other characteristics of the world, such as anxiety, fear,

disillusionment, disheartency, despondency, depression, despair, discouragement, doubt and unbelief. *This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world? Only the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.*^{1Jn.5:4-5} Martin Luther was asked how he overcame the devil, and this as his reply: *"Well, when he comes knocking upon the door of my heart, and asks, 'Who lives here?' The Lord Jesus goes to the door and says, 'Martin Luther used to live here but he has moved out. Now I live here.' The devil, seeing the nail-pierced hands, and the nail-pierced side, takes flight immediately."* Fear knocked at the door but when faith answered it, there was no one there!

When Elijah confronted the pagan beliefs of Israel on Mt Carmel, he prayed that God would show Himself to be real by supernaturally igniting the sacrifice. Elijah asked the people to pour water on his sacrifice because he knew that nothing could not stop God's plans and purposes for him. When our problems got worse and the future looked even more bleak, we just said that was more *"water on the altar"* because we knew that those difficulties could not thwart God's plans and purposes for us either! And when the breakthrough came, it would have to be God that did it because we did not have the ability in ourselves! This is not being fatalistic but *"faithalistic!"* Fate says *"what will be, will be"* but faith says *"God's will, will be!"* John records Jesus saying five time *"I have told you this so that..." I have told you now before it happens, so that when it does happen you will believe.*^{Jn.14:29} God never leaves us without hope! When our denomination took my credentials away and closed our Church congregation but refused to tell me why, we were perplexed but not devastated because we knew God had a plan for our lives! Faith—that simple yet profound trust in Jesus that is based on His Character and His Word (who He is and what He has said) is the antidote to doubt, defeat, despair, discouragement and despondency. However, God prepares us and cares for us in bespoke ways—ways that are personal to us and our situation: *But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may also be revealed in our mortal body. So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you. 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.4:7-15} God sent people to us to prepare us for our difficulties and so we could look back and recall what God had told us. Some of the prophecies were very specific about the events and timing: *"In 18 months you will have a change of direction"; "You will go to an "L" shaped building that seats about 120 people"; "There will be a house attached to the ministry with a bedroom for each of the boys"; "Margaret will see the hills behind you when you preach";* and quite a few other prophecies too! We left Bridgwater before this Church agreed to have us and we were homeless, living in a caravan on my brother's farm in Sussex. But although we knew that Deal was God's plan for us, we refused to tell the people here about our situation or what God had told us in case we interfered with God's plan for us—they had to hear from God, not make an emotional response to us and our situation. We had an interview on the Friday, the Church was unanimous in wanting us to come (even though only one of the people we gave as referees actually gave us a reference!) and so we moved in on the Wednesday—without any furniture as the removals could deliver it for another month!

Everything was fulfilled just as God had told us, including the hills behind me as there was a mural of Dartmoor on the wall at the back of the stage. But to have confidence in God and His plans, you need to know the Scriptures, not just as stories but as the wisdom of God—the

source of meaning which inspires all our willing, planning, acting and living. The Scripture's history, personalities, stories, prophets, precepts, wisdom and challenges can all become a source of inspiration when we apply them to our life's circumstances. We should prayerfully and carefully read the Scriptures—not just for information but to let God's Word mould our conscious and subconscious thoughts so that we begin to think like God. It is easy to turn our reading of Scripture into a game of “*Twenty Questions*” or even as a manual for life—how to have a happy relationship, how to learn financial faithfulness, *etc.* Of course, the Bible should be database for addressing our questions and a “*how-to*” manual for life, but we should use the Scriptures to shape our minds so that we understand God and His creation through Scripture-shaped lenses. **This requires patient, deliberate reading—reading, as it were, for no good reason but for the sake of having our dispositions and reflexes shaped by Scripture.** Jesus said: *Listen carefully to what I am about to tell you...*^{Lk.9:44} Other translations say: *Let these words sink into your ears.*^{ESV} *Mark these words diligently.*^{Geneva} *Take these words to heart.*^{NET} *Listen to me and remember what I say.*^{NLTse} *Treasure and ponder each of these next words.*TM

The lesson that “*God planned it for good*” was an essential lesson for Joseph, it was an essential lesson for us, and it is an essential lesson for you too. *But I trust in you, LORD; I say, “You are my God.” My times are in your hands.*^{Ps.31:14-15} Without the confidence that God has a plan for our lives, that God's are good and that God will over-rule other people's plans to harm us, we will live in the pit of despair, we will become disillusioned, disheartened, despondent, depressed and live in despair. But God has something much better for us than living in conflict torn lives, embittered lives, struggling lives, battered lives, weak and defeated lives, greatly stressed lives, beggarly lives, obscure lives, handicapped lives, greatly burdened lives, troubled lives and compromising lives that are filled with fear, worry, cares and anxieties. God has provided a new pattern of life for us. *Whoever is a believer in Christ is a new creation. The old way of living has disappeared. A new way of living has come into existence. God has done all this. He has restored our relationship with him through Christ, and has given us this ministry of restoring relationships.*^{2Cor 5:17-18} The governing principles for our lives have been changed and our behavioural pattern has changed and so the way we act and react must change or we will be living in deception and a lie. And in addition, God has provided a new life-style for us, which is to walk as children of the light. *For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light.*^{Eph.5:8} Yes, God has a great, glorious and wonderful plan for us and has made provision for it too: *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. All sorts of manifestations, far from the real thing are seen all over the place.*^{Eph.1:3} Now it is up to us to trust God and then see His purposes fulfilled. *I cry out to God Most High, to God who will fulfill his purpose for me.*^{Ps.57:2}

Questions

In what way does God have a plan for our lives?

What is God's plan?

Can God's plans be thwarted?

How can we overcome our difficulties?

What should we do when those difficulties still remain?

Puritan Prayer: I come to You as a sinner with cares and sorrows, to leave every concern entirely to You, with every sin calling for Christ's precious blood. Revive deep spirituality in my heart and let me live near to the great Shepherd, hear His voice, know its tones and follow its calls. Keep me from deception by causing me to abide in the truth and keep me from harm by helping me to walk in the power of the Spirit. Give me an intenser faith in the eternal verities and burn into me by experience, the things I know. Let me never be ashamed of the truth of the gospel, that I may bear its reproach, vindicate it, see Jesus as its essence and know in it the

power of the Spirit. Lord, help me, for I am often lukewarm and chilled; unbelief will mar my confidence and sin will make me forget You—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—and that all else is trifling. Gracious God, it is Your presence alone that can make me holy, devout, strong and happy.

Sunday 8th September 10.30am Ps.65. Lessons we have Learnt in ministry (2)

The importance of personal encouragement. *But commission Joshua, and encourage and strengthen him, for he will lead this people across and will cause them to inherit the land that you will see.* ^{Dent.3:28}

I shared last week how important it is to know that God has a plan and a purpose for each of us—and that God's plans are good and will bless us. Without that assurance, we can easily become disheartened and disillusioned or even become so discouraged that we despair of any hope. We need to get the same revelation as David who said: *Have mercy on me, O God, have mercy! I look to you for protection. I will hide beneath the shadow of your wings until the danger passes by. I cry out to God Most High, to God who will fulfil his purpose for me. He will send help from heaven to rescue me, disgracing those who bound me. Selah. God will send forth his unfailing love and faithfulness.* ^{Ps.57:1-3} And also of Job who said to God: *I know that you can do all things; no plan of yours can be thwarted.* ^{Job.42:2} When God brings us comfort, it is not so that we can feel comfortable but so that we can share that comfort with others. *Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God.* ^{2Cor.1:3-4} God blesses us so that we can bless others: *I will bless you... and you will be a blessing.* ^{Gen.12:2}

I was brought up in a Christian environment and spent Sundays in services—Sunday School at 10.00am, the morning Service at 11.00am followed by picnic lunch at the Chapel and then Sunday School again at 2.00pm and the evening Service at 6.00pm. But even though that Church was strong on meetings, they were weak on fellowship—I never heard anyone sharing what God had done for them—and certainly not in a Church Service—and I never saw anyone receiving personal prayer. I left home at 19 and moved to Oxfordshire to work and shortly later someone visited me from a local Church as they had heard I had just moved to the area. Before they left, they asked if they could pray for me. This was a culture shock to me but left an indelible mark in my memory because someone had encouraged me and helped me find strength in the Lord (that person was Ian Aldersley and he preached for us on Zoom in 2020). Years later we were with some people and I was hesitant to pray for them, but Margaret reminded me of how much that first prayer meant to me and that encouraged me to make the move to pray for them. Throughout our lives we have experienced many other people who have encouraged us in the faith. When the Elim denomination closed our Church and removed my Ministerial credentials, 3 people wrote to express their support and confidence in us—Harmony Ibe, the national leader of the Elim Churches in Nigeria (he preached here in 2001 and 2003), Yan Hadley and Dave Smethurst (who have both preached here every year since we came). Their encouragement and support made such a difference to us and helped us—not to just keep the faith but to stay exuberant in the faith! God is a God of abundance and He gives grace and peace in abundance too! *Grace and peace be yours in abundance through the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord.* ^{2Pet.1:2}

The early Church leaders were people who were full of faith and great encouragers: *When Barnabas arrived and saw what the grace of God had done, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord.* ^{Acts.11:23-24} *Then Paul and Barnabas returned... strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith. "We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of*

God,” they said.^{Acts.14:22} Our faith is a personal faith and it is as individuals that we are complete in Christ: *For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily; and you are complete in Him, who is the head of all principality and power.*^{Col.2:9-10} But it is collectively that we are the Church, the Body of Christ and God has always intended that we have someone to help us and encourage us. *It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.*^{Gen.2:18} We need people to encourage us and so we need to be established in a Family. *God sets the lonely in families.*^{Ps.68:6} Before God made Eve, Adam was alone. Adam had contact with animals—he may even have had some pets!—but none of the animals were suitable as a spiritual support or companion for him: *So the man gave names to all the livestock, the birds in the sky and all the wild animals. But for Adam no suitable helper was found.*^{Gen.2:20} Animals can be wonderful companions and God created them for us to use and to enjoy—but they are not and cannot be a substitute for another human being. Animals only have a soul and body—they don’t have a spirit—and therefore they cannot encourage us in our faith. Only people can encourage us to find strength in the Lord—it is people who “preach the word of the Lord” who will strengthen us in our faith: *So the men were sent off and went down to Antioch, where they gathered the church together and delivered the letter. The people read it and were glad for its encouraging message. 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. But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, where they and many others taught and preached the word of the Lord.*^{Acts.15:30-35} Only Believers can impart something of the Holy Spirit to us and build us up in our faith. *I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong—that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other’s faith.*^{Rom.1:11-12}

Faith comes from hearing the Word of God and so if we are going to build one another up in our faith we need to know 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. May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had, so that with one mind and one voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.*^{Rom.15:4-6} We need to have the mind of Christ: *Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus.*^{Phil.2:5} And to have the same mind as Jesus, we need to know the Scriptures, not just as stories but as the wisdom of God—the source of meaning that inspires all our willing, planning, acting and living. We must let the Scriptures shape our minds so that we understand God and His creation (including ourselves) through Scripture-shaped lenses. We should *listen carefully to what Jesus says, let His words sink into our ears, mark His words diligently, remember what He says, treasure and ponder each of His words...*^{Lk.9:44} Then our mind will become the like God’s mind, our thoughts will become like God’s thoughts, our world-view will become the same as God’s world-view. But this can only happen if we are a Believer who exudes the Holy Spirit. Even though all Believers have the Holy Spirit (because only the Holy Spirit can open our spiritual eyes to see Jesus), not all Believers exude the Holy Spirit:

Although faith is a gift from God, it is also a journey with God and we develop our faith as we see God keep His promises: *My comfort in my suffering is this: Your promise preserves my life.*^{Ps.119:50} But our trust in God is contagious and when we mix with other Believers, we can spread faith to them and help them to trust God for themselves.. Jonathan helped David find strength in God and then later David was able to find strength in God by himself: *Jonathan went to David... and helped him find strength in God.*^{1Sam.23:16} *David was greatly distressed because the men were talking of stoning him; each one was bitter in spirit because of his sons and daughters. But David found strength in the LORD his God.*^{1Sam.30:6} If we are going to be encouraged and an encourager, we need the fellowship of Believers who are in fellowship with the Holy Spirit. And that is what the Church is—the fellowship of Believers. True spiritual fellowship is not just sharing with people at Church;

spiritual fellowship is not even just sharing with people who know about the theology of the New Covenant—true spiritual fellowship is sharing with people who live the theology of the New Covenant because they have the Holy Spirit within them **and** flowing out of them. Baptism means immersion or saturation and Holy Spirit baptized Believers are people who “leak” the Holy Spirit—they leave a trail of the Holy Spirit wherever they go, a trail of God’s glory or Presence. Mary and Elizabeth had a glory meeting when they met: *When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice she exclaimed: “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favoured, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!”*^{Lk. 1:41-}

⁴⁵ God’s plan for experiencing and sharing His glory is the Church: *I am praying this so that you may be completely filled with God. 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. 3:19-21}

God’s plan for experiencing and sharing His glory has always been the Church—who is the Bride of Christ. “Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb.” And he carried me away in the Spirit to a mountain great and high, and showed me the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. It shone with the glory of God, and its brilliance was like that of a very precious jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal.^{Rev. 21:9-11}

God had to divorce Israel (Judaism) because of her spiritual adultery: *I gave faithless Israel her certificate of divorce and sent her away because of all her adulteries. Yet I saw that her unfaithful sister Judah had no fear; she also went out and committed adultery. Because Israel’s immorality mattered so little to her, she defiled the land and committed adultery with stone and wood. In spite of all this, her unfaithful sister Judah did not return to me with all her heart, but only in pretence,” declares the LORD.*^{Jer. 3:8-10}

And then God made a new Covenant with His Bride because the old Covenant was with His unfaithful bride: *For if there had been nothing wrong with that first covenant, no place would have been sought for another. But God found fault with the people and said: “The days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they did not remain faithful to my covenant, and I turned away from them, declares the Lord. This is the covenant I will establish with the people of Israel after that time, declares the Lord. I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will they teach their neighbour, or say to one another, ‘Know the Lord,’ because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest. For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.” By calling this covenant “new,” he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and outdated will soon disappear.*^{Heb. 8:7-13}

But now God has a New Covenant and a new Bride—and the new Bride consists of **all those who believe**, regardless of ethnicity, age or gender—they **all** know the Lord: “Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready. Fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear.” (Fine linen stands for the righteous acts of God’s holy people.)^{Rev. 19:6-8}

The Church is not a collection of independent individuals but a fellowship of Believers who encourage one another in the Lord and in the faith. *Instead, be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.*^{Eph. 5:18-20} It is in the Church that God intends to display His wisdom: *His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known.*^{Eph. 3:10}

The Bible says that a cheerful heart is good medicine: *A cheerful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones.*^{Prov. 17:22} An encourager brings cheer and joy by their presence and if they speak words of encouragement as well, the medicine is twice as effective!! I have learnt that the

best way to receive a blessing is to bless someone else—"if you have a need, sow a seed". Everything we have comes from God: *Everything comes from you, and we have given you only what comes from your hand.*^{1Chron.29:14} Even the ability to work is a gift from God: *You may say to yourself, "My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me." But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth, and so confirms his covenant, which he swore to your ancestors, as it is today.*^{Deut.8:17-18} God's gifts always include "bread to eat" (something for us to keep, to use and enjoy) and "seed to sow" (something to give away and bless others—which will eventually produce a harvest). Remember this: *Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work. As it is written: "They have freely scattered their gifts to the poor; their righteousness endures forever." Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness. You will be enriched in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God. This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of the Lord's people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God.*^{2Cor.9:6-12} And as we remind ourselves each week, this is not primarily about money—this is about our whole life, about giving ourselves first to God: *And now, brothers and sisters, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord's people. And they exceeded our expectations: They gave themselves first of all to the Lord, and then by the will of God also to us.*^{2Cor.8:1-5} And Paul told those Macedonian Churches that because of their faithfulness, God would meet their needs: *the gifts you sent. They are a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God. And my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus. To our God and Father be glory for ever and ever. Amen.*^{Phil.4:19-20} Which is the same as Jesus taught: *But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.*^{Matt.6:33-34}

So let's determine to encourage one another with words and deeds—and wherever we go, leave an awareness of God's Presence and His glory: *May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word.*^{2Thess.2:16-17}

Questions

How can we find strength in God?

How does God expect us to respond to His comfort?

What is the Church?

How can we be encouraged?

How can we encourage others?

Puritan Prayer: Eternal Father, it is amazing love, that You have sent Your Son to suffer in my stead; that You have given Your Spirit to teach, comfort, guide; that You have allowed the ministry of angels to wall me round. Permit Your unseen servants to be ever active on my behalf and to rejoice when grace expands in me. Suffer them never to rest until my conflict is over and I stand victorious on salvation's shore. Grant that my proneness to evil, my deadness to good and my resistance to Your Spirit's motions, may never provoke You to abandon me. May my heart awake Your pity, not Your wrath—and if the enemy gets an advantage through my corruption, let it be seen that heaven is mightier than hell and that those who are for me are greater than those against me. Arise to my help in the richness of Covenant blessings—keep

me feeding in the pastures of Your strengthening Word and searching Scripture to find You there.

Sunday 15th September Ps.77 Lessons in ministry that we have learnt (3)

God's Voice *My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me.*^{Jn.10:27}

In the “Lessons in ministry that we have learnt” I have shared that God has a good plan and purpose for us—for each of us—and God will fulfill His purposes for us. *The LORD will fulfill his purpose for me; your steadfast love, O LORD, endures forever.*^{Ps.138:8} I have also talked about the value of personal encouragement—that we should share what God has given to us with others, but first of all we need to give ourselves to God and then give out to others. *They gave themselves first of all to the Lord, and then by the will of God also to us.*^{2Cor.8:1-5} Encouragement does everyone good: *A cheerful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones.*^{Prov.17:22}

This week I am sharing about God's voice. “*God told me!*” is a phrase that we have heard people use quite glibly and often erroneously. And whilst it is true that God does speak to us, He rarely speaks with an audible voice (although He can do—and has done on rare occasions). But God does communicate to us in many different ways, including creation: *The heavens tell about the glory of God. The skies show that his hands created them. Day after day they speak about it. Night after night they make it known. But they don't speak or use words. No sound is heard from them. At the same time, their voice goes out into the whole earth. Their words go out from one end of the world to the other.*^{Ps.19:1-4} 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} However, God always speaks by His Son, Jesus Christ. *In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven. So he became as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs.*^{Heb.1:1-4} This means that God will never say anything different from Jesus. God will never contradict what Jesus said or what He has accomplished. When Jesus died, He exclaimed “*it is finished!*” and this cry of victory declared that He had completed everything His Father had asked of Him. And because His work was completed, Jesus could then *sit down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.*^{Heb.1:3} Christians are followers of Christ and know His voice: *His sheep follow him because they know his voice... My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand.*^{Jn.10:5;27-28} Jesus is the only true Shepherd and the only way to God the Father—even though the Pope may disagree! Speaking in Singapore this week Pope Francis said: “*Since God is God for all, then we are all children of God... If you start to fight—‘My religion is more important than yours; mine is true and yours isn’t’—then where will that lead us? There is only one God, and each of us has a language to reach God. Some are Sikh, some Muslim, Hindu, Christian. And they are all paths to God.*” (Vatican News 13 September 2024)

So when God speaks, what does He say? The first thing God says to us is “*repent!*” This was John the Baptist's message and Jesus' message: *And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins... After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. “The time has come,” he said. “The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!”*^{Mk.1:4-15} The call to repentance was also the Apostles' message: *Peter replied, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call.”*^{Acts.2:38-39} I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must

turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus.^{Acts.20:21} And the call to repentance is God's message to us for the rest of history: He said to them, *"This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms."* Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, *"This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and remission of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high."*^{Lk.24:44-}

⁴⁹ Repentance literally means to change your mind, change your thinking—we must change what we think about God, about ourself, about our past, about our present, about our future because Jesus has completed His work of salvation and God has forgiven our sins. Although God has done His part, we still need to our part and receive His forgiveness—and then live in the reality of our sins forgiven. Receiving the forgiveness of sins is what Jesus called being born-again. Jesus told Nicodemus *What I'm about to tell you is true. No one can see God's kingdom without being born again.*^{Jn.3:3} and then Jesus went on to explain that this new birth is a spiritual rebirth. Because we all inherited Adam's spiritual nature, we enter this world spiritually dead and separated from God. And so until we are born-again, the heavenly dimension of life is closed to us. But when we are born-again, we receive the Holy Spirit and become citizens of God's Kingdom—with full citizens' rights. *But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior 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} Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.^{Eph.2:19-22} Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things.^{Col.3:1-2} When Emanuel Twagirimana (from Ruanda) preached at our Church in 2001 and 2003, he said that he had a message from Jesus to give wherever he went. That message included: *"You will never get to heaven unless you are born-again."*

But after we have heard God call to repentance, God still communicates to us. Even in the OT, God spoke to people for their protection: *For God speaks again and again, though people do not recognize it. He speaks in dreams, in visions of the night, when deep sleep falls on people as they lie in their beds. He whispers in their ears and terrifies them with warnings. He makes them turn from doing wrong; he keeps them from pride. He protects them from the grave, from crossing over the river of death.*^{Job.33:14-18} And God foretold of the time when people would clearly hear God's voice: *Although the Lord gives you the bread of adversity and the water of affliction, your teachers will be hidden no more; with your own eyes you will see them. Whether you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you, saying, "This is the way; walk in it."*^{Is.30:20-21} God speaks to our spirit by the Holy Spirit who guides us into truth: *I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you.*^{Jn.16:12-14} Elijah heard God speak in a quiet whisper: God said, *"Go out and stand in front of the LORD on the mountain."* As the LORD was passing by, a fierce wind tore mountains and shattered rocks ahead of the LORD. But the LORD was not in the wind. After the wind came an earthquake. But the LORD wasn't in the earthquake. After the earthquake there was a fire. But the LORD wasn't in the fire. And after the fire there was a quiet, whispering voice. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his coat, went out, and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then the voice said to him, *"What are you doing here, Elijah?"*^{1Kg.19:11-13}

When the people in the OT wanted to know something from God, they asked the High Priest who consulted the Urim and Thummim, which were 2 stones (which probably had a distinct colour or marking on each side) that he kept in breastplate pouch. The people asked the priest a question and the answer was either “yes” or “no”. *He fastened the Ephod with a woven belt, making it snug. He put the Breastpiece on him and put the Urim and Thummim in the pouch of the Breastpiece.*^{Lev.8:8} Then Saul prayed to the LORD, the God of Israel, “Why have you not answered your servant today? If the fault is in me or my son Jonathan, respond with Urim, but if the men of Israel are at fault, respond with Thummim.” Jonathan and Saul were taken by lot, and the men were cleared. Saul said, “Cast the lot between me and Jonathan my son.” And Jonathan was taken.^{1Sam.14:41-42} The governor ruled that they could not eat from the holy food until a priest could determine their status with the Urim and Thummim.^{Ezra.2:63} The NT equivalent to the Urim and Thummim is the Word of God and the peace of God. *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 in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.*^{Col.3:15-16} When we have a question about something, we should refer to the Word of God—does Scripture allow it (i.e. is it compatible with the principles of God’s Kingdom) and then if it is, then do we have a peace about it. If we have a “yes” on both accounts, then we are free to do what desire. *The Spirit of the LORD will come powerfully upon you, and you will prophesy with them; and you will be changed into a different person. Once these signs are fulfilled, do whatever your hand finds to do, for God is with you.*^{1Sam.10:6-7} Nathan replied to the king, “Whatever you have in mind, go ahead and do it, for the LORD is with you.” But that night the word of the LORD came to Nathan, saying: “Go and tell my servant David, ‘This is what the LORD says: Are you the one to build me a house to dwell in?’^{2Sam.7:3-5} It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements: You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things.”^{Acts.15:28-29}

The Holy Spirit’s guiding is an inner prompting, like a strong thought that doesn’t go away. *Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other.*^{Gal.5:25-26} Most of us have felt prompted to do something or say something and then hesitated because we weren’t sure if it was from God, only to find someone else doing or saying the same as we wanted to—and then of course we say “if only we had done...” or “if only I had said...”!!! And so when we feel impressed to speak to someone or to give to someone, we should check it out with the values of God’s Kingdom and then see how we feel. If we are not sure then ask God again—remember, the children of God are led by the Holy Spirit: *For those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God.*^{Rom.8:14} God has given us a mind and an intellect that He expects us to use—but within the parameters of the principles of His Kingdom: *I’m a friend and companion of all who fear you, of those committed to living by your rules. Your love, GOD, fills the earth! Train me to live by your counsel. Be good to your servant, GOD; be as good as your Word. Train me in good common sense; I’m thoroughly committed to living your way. Before I learned to answer you, I wandered all over the place, but now I’m in step with your Word. You are good, and the source of good; train me in your goodness.*^{Ps.119:63-68} George Jeffreys wrote: *We should be able to build into our life the things that have true foundations in the Scripture. Of course, there are some things concerning both our personal life and also church life, that are not mentioned in the New Testament, and here we must be careful that we depend upon our sanctified reasoning faculties and righteous judgment. Our prayers in these situations can be a swift, silent supplication to God—Eliezer said: Elihu said: Before I finished praying in my heart.*^{Gen24:45} *Hannah was praying in her heart, and her lips were moving but her voice was not heard.*^{1Sam.1:13} *Then I prayed to the God of heaven, and I answered the king...*^{Neh.2:4-5}

Jesus brought God to us: *“The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Emmanuel”—which means, “God with us.”*^{1Matt.1:23} And so God is always with us: *because God has said, “Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.”*^{2Heb.13:5} Fellowship with God requires interacting with God and staying in harmony with Him: *Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.*^{3Gal.5:25} *Woe to him who quarrels with his Maker.*^{4Is.45:9} Fellowship with God is always through Jesus Christ, not through religious relics, religious places or even religious songs—no matter how emotional, sentimental, or even “spiritual” they appear. We can never be closer to God than we are right now (if we are a Believer). Dorothy Frances Blomfield (1858–1932) wrote a sentimental poem called God's Garden from which people often quote. *The kiss of the sun for pardon, The song of the birds for mirth, One is nearer God's heart in a garden, Than anywhere else on earth.* Although both her father and husband were Anglican priests, her theology is dangerous as it ignores the most basic truths of our Christian faith—which is that we can only come to God through Jesus His Son. *Jesus answered, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”*^{5Jn.14:6} *Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved.*^{6Acts.4:12} We are not nearer to God in a garden. We cannot get nearer to God than having God dwell within us—which is why Paul told the Corinthians to *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?*^{72Cor.13:5} However, we need to learn to spend time with God without being distracted. The essential thing is not the place where we worship because a heart can meet with God anywhere one wants to meet with Him, and at any time. Worship is us shut away with God. In the middle of the busiest street in town, in the busiest restaurant, in the midst of the greatest activity of the day, we can find little moments to be alone with the Lord. Thank God there can be many moments throughout the day in which it is just you and the Lord. Even though many things are happening around us, we can close ourselves in with Him—and it is in those intimate times that God speaks to us, encourages us and reveals the Himself to us. When we keep an attitude of prayerful thankfulness, we prepare the way for God to show us the way ahead—God's way for us and God's solution to our problems (which is what salvation is!): *He who sacrifices thank offerings honours me, and he prepares the way so that I may show him the salvation of God.*^{8Ps.50:23}

Questions

How does God speak to us today?

How can we hear God speak to us?

How can we discern whether it is God speaking to us?

How can we get close to God?

Why is fellowship with God important?

Puritan Prayer: May my heart awake Your pity, not Your wrath—and if the enemy gets an advantage through my corruption, let it be seen that heaven is mightier than hell and that those who are for me are greater than those against me. Arise to my help in the richness of Covenant blessings—keep me feeding in the pastures of Your strengthening Word and searching Scripture to find You there. If my waywardness is visited with a scourge—enable me to receive correction meekly, to bless the reproving hand, to discern the motive of rebuke, to respond promptly and do the first work. Let all Your fatherly dealings with me, make me a partaker of Your holiness. Grant that in every fall, I may sink lower on my knees, and that when I rise, it may be to loftier heights of devotion. May every cross, be sanctified, every loss, be gain, every denial, a spiritual advantage, every dark day, a light of the Holy Spirit and every night of trial, a song.

Sunday 22nd September Ps.133 Lessons we have Learnt (3)

God's Anointing: *But as his anointing teaches you about all things and as that anointing is real, not counterfeit—just as it has taught you, remain in him.*^{1Jn.2:27}

God's anointing is His Presence. Moses reached a place in his relationship with God where he wanted more than emotion, more than miracles, more than even God speaking with him. Moses wanted the Presence of God to stay with Him: *The LORD replied, "My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest." Then Moses said to him, "If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here. How will anyone know that you are pleased with me and with your people unless you go with us? What else will distinguish me and your people from all the other people on the face of the earth?" And the LORD said to Moses, "I will do the very thing you have asked, because I am pleased with you and I know you by name." Then Moses said, "Now show me your 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."*^{Ex.33:14-19} And this personal Presence of God is what we call "*the Anointing*". Jesus Christ is the Anointed One (Christ means Anointed One) and "*the anointing*" in a Christian sense is just that—Christ with us. *I have become its servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness—the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the Lord's people. To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.*^{Col.1:25-27} Moses was a type of Jesus in the sense that he was a prophet and a redeemer: *Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord, and that he may send the Christ, who has been appointed for you—even Jesus. He must remain in heaven until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets. For Moses said, 'The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you must listen to everything he tells you. Anyone who does not listen to him will be completely cut off from among his people.'*^{Acts.3:19-23} But even Moses needed God's Presence with him and prophesied about the time when God's Spirit would fall on all people, not just the leaders: *Moses went out and told the people what the LORD had said. He brought together seventy of their elders and had them stand around the tent. Then the LORD came down in the cloud and spoke with him, and he took some of the power of the Spirit that was on him and put it on the seventy elders. When the Spirit rested on them, they prophesied—but did not do so again. However, two men, whose names were Eldad and Medad, had remained in the camp. They were listed among the elders, but did not go out to the tent. Yet the Spirit also rested on them, and they prophesied in the camp. A young man ran and told Moses, "Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp." Joshua son of Nun, who had been Moses' aide since youth, spoke up and said, "Moses, my lord, stop them!" But Moses replied, "Are you jealous for my sake? I wish that all the LORD's people were prophets and that the LORD would put his Spirit on them!" Then Moses and the elders of Israel returned to the camp. Now a wind went out from the LORD and drove quail in from the sea. It scattered them up to two cubits deep all around the camp, as far as a day's walk in any direction.*^{Nu.11:24-31} God's Presence within us releases a spiritual dimension to what we say and what we do. *The Sovereign LORD has given me an instructed tongue to know the word that sustains the weary. He wakens me morning by morning wakens my ear to listen like one being taught.*^{Is.50:4} *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.*^{Deut.32:46-47} God's Presence within us changes obstacles into opportunities and troubles into testimonies—

You give me shelter, You give me peace, You give me comfort, healing release.

The peace and comfort of the knowledge of God in my heart

You healed my body, released my mind; You give me faith to leave the past behind.

The peace and comfort of the knowledge of God in my heart.

And no matter what life may bring, This peace in my heart just makes me sing,

You're my God, Saviour, Lord, You're my God, King of kings.

You're my God, Prince of peace and all the earth is going to see the glory of my God.

The anointing (God's Presence) is a joining of our spirit with God's Holy Spirit in conjunction with the Scriptures: *I am writing these things to you about those who are trying to lead you astray. As for you, the anointing you received from him remains in you, and you do not need anyone to teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about all things and as that anointing is real, not counterfeit—just as it has taught you, remain in him.*^{1Jn.2:26-27} Because our anointing is from God, it is real and it is pure, clean, holy and majestic—all characteristics of God Himself: *But you have an anointing from the Holy One, and all of you know the truth. I do not write to you because you do not know the truth, but because you do know it and because no lie comes from the truth. Who is the liar? It is the man who denies that Jesus is the Christ. Such a man is the antichrist—he denies the Father and the Son. No one who denies the Son has the Father; whoever acknowledges the Son has the Father also. See that what you have heard from the beginning remains in you. If it does, you also will remain in the Son and in the Father. And this is what he promised us—even eternal life. I am writing these things to you about those who are trying to lead you astray. As for you, the anointing you received from him remains in you, and you do not need anyone to teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about all things and as that anointing is real, not counterfeit—just as it has taught you, remain in him.*^{1Jn.3:20-27} The anointing of God sets us free—and keeps us free: *It shall come to pass in that day that his burden will be taken away from your shoulder, and his yoke from your neck, and the yoke will be destroyed because of the anointing oil. [In that day their burden will be lifted from your shoulders, their yoke from your neck; the yoke will be broken because you have grown so fat.]*^{Is.10:27} *And you also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation. When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession—to the praise of his glory.*^{Eph.1:13-14}

You said you find it hard to pray, your prayer times empty pass;

The air it feels like granite, and the ceiling seems like brass!

You said your prayers don't go beyond, the room; that you feel static.

The ceiling! Who told you that God lives inside your attic?

Whoever told you had it wrong—misplacing God's true venue:

The truth is, once invited there, that God resides within you. *Gordon Bailey*

God's anointing empowers us to witness. When Jesus read from Isaiah, He said that He was preaching with the Holy Spirit's anointing: *And he stood up to read. The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour."* Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him, and he began by saying to them, *"Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."*^{Lk.4:17-21} Preaching is different from lecturing—anyone can lecture on a subject that they have studied but preaching requires the Holy Spirit to quicken the words that are spoken so they have life. *The Spirit alone gives eternal life. Human effort accomplishes nothing. And the very words I have spoken to you are spirit and life. But some of you do not believe me.*^{Jn.6:63-64} *And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is indeed at work in you who believe.*^{1Thess.2:13} *For nothing is impossible with God. [For no word from God will ever fail; no word of God void of power.]*^{Lk.1:37}

God's anointing prepares us for heaven. When we enter heaven we will be like Jesus Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. All who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.^{1Jn.3:2-3} And so our goal in life should be to have the same mindset, attitude, outlook and uplook as Jesus—to be like Him. *In your relationships with one another, have*

the same mindset as Christ Jesus.^{Phil.2:5} This is true holiness and whilst our new spirit is holy, our soul needs saving! *These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may result in praise, glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed. Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls.*^{1Pet.1:7-9} God has predestined us to be like Jesus: *For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.*^{Rom.8:29-30} And we are changed by contemplating God's glory: *Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.*^{2Cor.3:17-8} We need to agree with God and say the same things as God—not to look spiritual but because we are spiritual—and also because God is always right! *“Woe to those who quarrel with their Maker.”*^{Is.45:9} We need to have the same mindset as God: *You think like a man—you don't think like God!*^{Mk.8:33} *Your thoughts concerning God are too human.*^{Martin Luther} In the Greek language “confession” is “homologos” [*homo* (same) and *logos* (word)] meaning of one mind; to speak the same; to agree. Thus “confession” is to “say the same thing.” To stay in harmony with God, we need to simply believe with our heart and repeat with our lips God's own declaration of who we are and what we have in Christ. We need to confess what He says about us, our sins and everything included in our redemption—and it is a Good Confession. We live at a time where people accumulate information and think that is truth—but facts are not the same as truth. Facts are a collection of information that produce evidence. Truth is evidence seen from the divine perspective, seeing things as God sees them—and that is the truth that set us free: *Then Jesus said to those Jews who believed Him, “If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.”*^{Jn.8:31-32} Truth is inextricably linked to abiding in God's Word. Reading books give us an insight into the author's mind and when we read the Bible, we have an insight into God's mind! A spiritual law that few recognize is that our confession rules us. It is what we confess with our lips that really dominates our inner being. We must make our lips do their duty and make them harmonize with the Word of God. We should fill our lips with God's Word and make them say what God says about us and not allow them to say anything to the contrary! We must refuse to allow our words destroy the effectiveness of God's Word in our situation. Some confess with their lips but deny in their heart—they say, “Yes, the Word is true,” but in their heart they say, “But it is not true in my case.” The confession of our lips has no value as long as our heart repudiates it. Confession (*saying what God says in each of His promises*) is what saves us! (*c.f. Rom.10:10*). It is our privilege and duty to believe and say what we know God says about us in His Word. As we honour God by applying these principles, we will live above our circumstances instead of under them! *But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.*^{1Cor.15:57}

Questions

- What is God's anointing?
- How can you be anointed?
- What is the result of being anointed?
- How do we stay anointed?
- What does it mean to confess Jesus as Lord?

Puritan Prayer: Heavenly Father, teach me to see that Your Spirit and Your power are mine by resting on Christ's death alone—and that if Christ has pacified You and satisfied divine justice, then He can also deliver me from my sins. I am justified by Christ and I do not live in self-confidence in my own strength, but I am enabled to obey You by the Spirit of life whom You have given me. That Spirit of life within, answers to the law without—and if I don't sin, I should thank You for it, but if I do sin, I should come to You for forgiveness. When I see how sin strikes at You, it makes me mourn and when I see that it was sin that caused Christ's death, it makes me mourn. You have taught me that faith is receiving Your kindness; that faith is resting on Christ; that faith is clinging to Christ, as a branch to the tree, and seeking life and vigour from Him.

Sunday 29th September Ps.78

Ruth Heflin's book "Glory" is a "must" for all those who want to know about God's glory—and you can read or download it from our [Church Website under Resources](#)

Lessons in ministry that we have learnt (5)

God's Glory. *Then the LORD will create over all of Mount Zion and over those who assemble there a cloud of smoke by day and a glow of flaming fire by night; over everything the glory will be a canopy. It will be a shelter and shade from the heat of the day, and a refuge and hiding place from the storm and rain.* ^{Is.4:5-6}

Last week we looked at the Anointing and said that God's Anointing is His Presence, which gives a spiritual dimension to what we say and do. This anointing is the heritage of every Christian as the name Christian suggests—Christians are anointed ones as well as followers of Christ. Because our words have God's Spirit and life, when we speak to people, it is as if God is speaking to them: *And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is indeed at work in you who believe.* ^{1Thess.2:13} But the anointing also prepares us for heaven by giving us the desire to be like Jesus and the ability to become like Jesus: *Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.* ^{1Jn.3:2-3} All who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure. ^{1Jn.3:2-3} When we are born-again, we receive a new, holy spirit that becomes united with God's Holy Spirit: *But whoever is united with the Lord is one with him in spirit.* ^{1Cor.6:17}—but our soul still needs saving! And it is our faith—our trust in God and His Word—that saves our soul: *Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls.* ^{1Pet.1:8-9} Even though we possess God's life (because we have the Holy Spirit within us) we still need to express God's life by living the holy and consecrated life that behoves an honourable citizen of heaven. But this faith that we need to save our souls is not something that we can work up or attain through effort or struggle. The transformation of our soul—our personality, our thoughts, wills and emotions—comes from contemplating, pondering, thinking, reflecting upon God's glory: *Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.* ^{2Cor.3:17-8} When Moses spent time in God's personal presence, his face shone (even though God's glory was fading away): *When Moses finished speaking to them, he put a veil over his face. But whenever he entered the LORD's presence to speak with him, he removed the veil until he came out. And when he came out and told the Israelites what he had been commanded, they saw that his face was radiant. Then Moses would put the veil back over his face until he went in to speak with the LORD.* ^{Ex.34:33-35} But today, all Believers can spend time with God. We have a more glorious ministry than Moses because God will never leave us—and God's glory doesn't fade away like it did with Moses. *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! Therefore, since we have such a hope, we are very bold. We are not like Moses, who would put a veil over his face to prevent the Israelites from seeing the end of what was passing away. But their minds were made dull, for to this day the same veil remains when the old covenant is read. It has not been removed, because only in Christ is it taken away. Even to this day when Moses is read, a veil covers their hearts. But whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate (or reflect) the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.^{2Cor.3:7-18}

God's glory is seen in the Gospel. *The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. For we do not preach 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 the glory of God in the face of Christ. But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.*^{2Cor.4:4-7} This means that God's majesty and presence is only accessed through Jesus and what He accomplished on the cross. We cannot come to God any other way than through Jesus Christ. All other religions are false and a deception. Even the most basic review of religions makes it obvious that they are not all the same—they could all be wrong but they can't all be right! The idea that all religions are equal is gaining popularity again—even the Pope seems to have been taken in by this deception when he says that *There is only one God, and each of us has a language to reach God. Some are Sikh, some Muslim, Hindu, Christian. And they are all paths to God.* (Vatican News 13 September 2024) Yes there is only one God: *Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.*^{Dent.6:4-5} But that makes all other so-called deities, fakes, frauds and deceptions: *We know that "An idol is nothing at all in the world" and that "There is no God but one."* For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as indeed there are many "gods" and many "lords"), yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live.^{1Cor.8:4-6} Very truly I tell you Pharisees, anyone who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep.^{Jn.10:1-2} Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."^{Jn.14:6} The Jesus of Christianity was God, is God and will always be God and so if there is a Jesus who is not eternally God, he cannot be the Jesus of Christianity: *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.*^{Jn.1:1-3} By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible.^{Heb.11:3} but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven. So he became as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs.^{Heb.1:2-4} The Jesus of Christianity died for our sins and rose again from the dead and so if there is a Jesus who did not die for our sins or did not rise from the dead, he cannot be the Jesus of Christianity. The words "it was credited to him" were written not for him alone, but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness—for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.^{Rom.4:23-25} For we believe that Jesus died and rose again.^{1Thes.4:14} For what I

received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.^{1Cor.15:3-4} In fact, if anyone presents a Gospel of another Jesus, other than the Jesus of Christianity, it is not a Gospel at all—instead of good news it is bad news because it is a deception and a lie and the person preaching it is under condemnation: *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}

To be part of God's glory—God's presence and majesty—doesn't mean that life is easy for us. Isaiah had an awesome glory experience that equipped him to serve God as a prophet: *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. Above him were seraphim, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. And they were calling to one another: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory." At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke. "Woe to me!" I cried. "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty." Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. With it he touched my mouth and said, "See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for." Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I. Send me!" He said, "Go and tell this people..."^{Is.6:1-9} This insight into God's heavenly realm, radically changed Isaiah's life and enabled him to speak about Jesus: *For this reason they could not believe, because, as Isaiah says elsewhere: "He has blinded their eyes and hardened their hearts, so they can neither see with their eyes, nor understand with their hearts, nor turn—and I would heal them." Isaiah said this because he saw Jesus' glory and spoke about him.*^{Jn.12:39-41} But Isaiah lived in the worst of all possible times, with the worst king Israel ever had—Manasseh. This is the description of Manasseh: *Manasseh did what was evil in the sight of the LORD. He followed the practices of the nations. The LORD hated those practices... Manasseh also set up altars to the gods that were named after Baal. He made poles that were used to worship the goddess Asherah. He even bowed down to all of the stars. And he worshiped them. He built altars in the LORD's temple... to honour all of the stars. He burned his son as a sacrifice... consulted fortune-tellers, cast evil spells, practiced witchcraft, and appointed royal mediums and psychics. He did many things that made the LORD furious.*^{2Chron.33:2-6} Manasseh eventually killed Isaiah by sawing him in two (as mentioned in the great faith chapter of Hebrews): *They were put to death by stoning; they were sawed in two; they were killed by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated—the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, living in caves and in holes in the ground. 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.11:37-40} But because Isaiah saw and spoke about God's glory, he lived in the reality of God's glory. *Then the LORD will create over all of Mount Zion and over those who assemble there a cloud of smoke by day and a glow of flaming fire by night; over everything the glory will be a canopy. It will be a shelter and shade from the heat of the day, and a refuge and hiding place from the storm and rain.*^{Is.4:5-6} "The Redeemer will come to Zion, to those in Jacob who repent of their sins," declares the LORD. "As for me, this is my covenant with them," says the LORD. "My Spirit, who is on you, will not depart from you, and my words that I have put in your mouth will always be on your lips, on the lips of your children and on the lips of their descendants—from this time on and forever," says the LORD. "Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD rises upon you. See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples, but*

the LORD rises upon you and his glory appears over you.^{Is.59:20-60:2} Obviously the glorious Zion that Isaiah spoke about was not the Jerusalem of the Middle East because that was anything but glorious. The Zion that Isaiah spoke about was the Bride of Christ, the heavenly Jerusalem made up of the redeemed people of God—which includes you and me! *But you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven.*^{Heb.12:22-23} *“Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb.” And he carried me away in the Spirit to a mountain great and high, and showed me the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. It shone with the glory of God, and its brilliance was like that of a very precious jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal.*^{Rev.21:9-11} Peter, James and John had a glimpse of that glory when Jesus was transfigured. *About eight days after Jesus said this, he took Peter, John and James with him and went up onto a mountain to pray. As he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning. Two men, Moses and Elijah, appeared in glorious splendour, talking with Jesus. They spoke about his departure, which he was about to bring to fulfilment at Jerusalem.*^{Lk.9:28-31} Jesus prayed that we would share in His glory: *My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one—I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world.*^{Jn.17:20-24} Yvonne Craig, a Paramedic with NIAS (Northern Ireland Ambulance Service) wrote this week for CAA’s (Christian Ambulance Association) “Faith on Friday”: *In every decision, in everything small or large to have God at the forefront of our minds is the challenge of living a Christian life. Sometimes I wonder if people see Christ in me or just me, am I living as a true Christian. Then I asked a colleague who's not saved and she said of course she knows that I'm a Christian, it was a great opportunity to witness about my faith in the Lord. Even though others may not read the bible, they can read our lives. The challenge is "Am I living a life where I'm putting God first, Do others see a Christ-like life?"* Now that Jesus has died, risen from the grave and ascended to the Father, He shares His glory with us by living within us. We can now participate in Jesus’ glory and it is that glory that distinguishes us from the rest of the world. Because we have the life of Jesus within us—the resurrected, ascended and glorified Jesus—we can bring a touch of heaven to earth. Let’s do it!!

Questions

What is God’s glory?

How can we participate in God’s glory?

Do our circumstances affect our relationship with God?

How can we become more spiritual?

What does Isaiah mean by “Zion”?

Puritan Prayer. When I see how sin strikes at You, it makes me mourn and when I see that it was sin that caused Christ's death, it makes me mourn. You have taught me that faith is receiving Your kindness; that faith is resting on Christ; that faith is clinging to Christ, as a branch to the tree, and seeking life and vigour from Him. Reconciliation with You proves that my faith has truly apprehended Christ—and the evidence of my reconciliation is sanctification. I thank You for showing me the vast difference between knowing things by reason, and knowing them by the spirit of faith. By reason, I see a thing is so; but by faith, I know it is so. When I saw You by reason I was not amazed, but when I saw You as You are in Your Son, I was overwhelmed to behold You. I bless You that I am Yours in my Saviour, Jesus.

October 2024

In God we trust: *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.* Is.30:15

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

Sunday 6th October 1Chron.16:8-29.

Lessons in ministry that we have learnt (6) 'The God of miracles

You are the God who performs miracles; you display your power among the peoples. Ps.77:14

Kathryn Kuhlman said that expectancy was the atmosphere for miracles and so she always started her TV programme called “*I believe in Miracles*” with this song:

Creation shows the power of God, There's glory all around,
And those who see must stand in awe, For miracles abound.

*I believe in miracles, I've seen a soul set free, Miraculous the change in one Redeemed through Calvary;
I've seen the lily push its way up through the stubborn sod; I believe in miracles, for I believe in God!*

I cannot doubt the work of God, There's glory all around,
And those who see must stand in awe, For miracles abound.

The love of God! O power divine! 'Tis wonderful to see
The miracles that He has wrought Should lead to Calvary.

Christians believe that God can perform miracles, which is hardly surprising as Christianity is birthed in the miraculous—and of course, the new-birth is a spiritual miracle where God speaks life and light into our heart: *For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ.* ^{2Cor.4:6} God created the universe miraculously and He sustains the universe miraculously. Jesus was conceived miraculously and His resurrection was miraculous. Jesus' ministry was miraculous—He went around performing miracles: *Fellow Israelites, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know.* ^{Acts.2:22} *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} And the early Church was renowned for the miracles that God performed through the apostles: *This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard him. God also testified to it by signs, wonders and various miracles, and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will.* ^{Heb.2:3-4} And so, although Christians believe that God can perform miracles, not every Christian expects God to perform miracles. Even so, we should be clear what we mean by “*miracle*”.

Words have different meanings to different people and so we should be careful to clearly explain what we mean when we use a specific word. For instance, the English word “*evil*” now means “*profound wickedness*” and usually has a demonic influence—but the Anglo-Saxons used it to mean bad, cruel, unskilful, defective, misfortune and disease (in the C16th “*evil-favoured*” only meant “*ugly*”!). So when we say that God performs miracles we need to explain what a miracle is. The usual word translated “*miracle*” in the NT is “*dunamis*” meaning “*power*” —it is where we

get the word “*dynamite*” from. My definition of a miracle is when God intervenes in our life. God can intervene supernaturally—such as recreating parts of our body or objects—or He can intervene naturally and use the existing laws of nature (that He created!) or He can use circumstances and people. In the natural intervention, the miracle is usually God’s timing—something happened at just the right time to meet a need or prevent a tragedy. A miracle then, has a spiritual dimension—but because the devil can perform extra-ordinary signs, we should be discerning as to something’s origin. Although God is sovereign and can do anything, He will never act out of character or give us counterfeit gifts. *You parents—if your children ask for a loaf of bread, do you give them a stone instead? Or if they ask for a fish, do you give them a snake? Of course not! So if you sinful people know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give good gifts to those who ask him.*^{Matt.7:9-11} God is Light and does not use deception or sleight of hand like a conjurer. *Don't be deceived, my dear brothers and sisters. Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created.*^{Jas.1:16-18} And God doesn’t change—He means what He says and says what He means. *God is not human, that he should lie, not a human being, that he should change his mind. Does he speak and then not act? Does he promise and not fulfill?*^{Nu.23:19} *I the LORD do not change.*^{Mal.3:6}

In the 1990s, we had a dynamic move of God where there was a lot of emotion and drama as people experienced many signs and wonders in our Church meetings and also outside of our Church meetings. Because I was personally involved, I often pondered about what was happening, especially with things that are not specifically mentioned in Scripture. And so when I had the opportunity to study for a Masters’ degree in Theology, I chose “Miracles” for my Dissertation—which has, I believe, given me a credible and theological understanding of what God was doing. (The actual title was “*The Effects of Signs, Wonders and Miracles on Faith throughout the History of the Christian Church*” and is available from our Church Website under [Resources/Miracles in the Church](#))

The greatest miracle God performs is conversion (new-birth) where a person who is spiritually dead towards God becomes spiritually alive and a member of His family—I *believe in miracles, I've seen a soul set free; Miraculous the change in one redeemed through Calvary.* This miracle has to be performed by God because we are incapable of saving ourselves—but this miracle of new-birth is the only reason why Jesus hasn’t returned yet—He is giving humanity chance to repent and come back to Him. *Anyone who believes in Christ is a new creation. The old is gone! The new has come! It is all from God. He brought us back to himself through Christ's death on the cross. And he has given us the task of bringing others back to him through Christ. God was bringing the world back to himself through Christ. He did not hold people's sins against them. God has trusted us with the message that people may be brought back to him. So we are Christ's official messengers. It is as if God were making his appeal through us. Here is what Christ wants us to beg you to do. Come back to God.*^{2Cor.5:17-20} Dear friends, here is one thing you must not forget. *With the Lord a day is like a thousand years. And a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow to keep his promise. He is not slow in the way some people understand it. He is patient with you. He doesn't want anyone to be destroyed. Instead, he wants all people to turn away from their sins. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar. Fire will destroy everything in them. God will judge the earth and everything in it. So everything will be destroyed. And what kind of people should you be? You should lead holy and godly lives. Live like that as you look forward to the day of God. It will make the day come more quickly.*^{2Pet.3:8-12} All other miracles are secondary to the miracle of new-birth because: *What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit his very self?*^{Lk.9:25} And if we don’t live in the reality of our new-birth, even our “*spiritual*” ability is pointless and meaningless: “Teacher, which commandment is the greatest in Moses’ Teachings?” Jesus answered him, “ ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all

your mind.' This is the greatest and most important commandment. The second is like it: 'Love your neighbour as you love yourself.' All of Moses' Teachings and the Prophets depend on these two commandments. ¹Matt.22:36-40 *If I could speak all the languages of earth and of angels, but didn't love others, I would only be a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. If I had the gift of prophecy, and if I understood all of God's secret plans and possessed all knowledge, and if I had such faith that I could move mountains, but didn't love others, I would be nothing. If I gave everything I have to the poor and even sacrificed my body, I could boast about it; but if I didn't love others, I would have gained nothing.* ¹Cor.13:1-3

However, God created the universe in order to allow mankind to enjoy His workmanship and even after Adam broke the fellowship with Him, God did not abandon us. God planned a way to restore our fellowship with Him, and that plan includes the blessings of enjoying His creation. *He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?* ²Rom.8:32 Most of what we call “miracles” are aids to enjoy this temporary life—better health, better wealth, better standard of living, more “stuff” to collect! And yet a truly fulfilled life does not consist of “stuff” or comfort but a restored relationship with God. *Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions.* ^{Lk.12:15} *Ordinary people are only a breath. Important people are not what they seem to be. If they were weighed on a scale, they wouldn't amount to anything. Together they are only a breath. Don't trust in money you have taken from others. Don't be proud of things you have stolen. Even if your riches grow, don't put your trust in them. God, I have heard you say two things. One is that you, God, are strong. The other is that you, Lord, are loving. I'm sure you will reward each person in keeping with what he has done.* ^{Ps.62:9-12} Nevertheless, God does give us better health, better wealth, better standard of living and more “stuff” to collect—but with the proviso that we share what we receive! God always gives bread to eat and seed to sow! *Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness. You will be enriched in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God. This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of the Lord's people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God.* ²Cor.9:10-12 Most of us are normally in fairly good health and if we do become poorly, we expect to recover quickly thanks to reasonable standard of living and a very good medical support through the National Health Service—which is “free at the point of need”. But many of us have also experienced God intervening in our lives with healing, provision and protection as a direct answer to our prayers. And intervention in people's lives by God, is a major theme that runs throughout Scripture: *For I am the LORD who heals you.* ^{Ex.15:26} *He sent forth his word and healed them.* ^{Ps.107:20} *Praise the LORD, O my soul and forget not all his benefits—who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases.* ^{Ps.103:2-3} *My son, pay attention to what I say; listen closely 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 a man's whole body.* ^{Prov.4:20-22} *The word of God, which is at work in you who believe.* ¹Thes.2:13 *Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; This will bring health to your body and nourishment to your bones.* ^{Prov.3:5-8} *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.6:31-34} *And this same God who takes care of me will supply all your needs from his glorious riches, which have been given to us in Christ Jesus.* ^{Phil.4:19}

As I researched miracles through Scripture and Church history, this was my conclusion: The Christian's faith is in God, not His miracles—miracles are signposts pointing to the Miracle-Maker. It is our faith that pleases God, not the miracles. Miracles follow and confirm the preaching of God's word. However, miracles 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} Miracles are a means of blessing in themselves, especially healing, protection and provision but they are also “*tokens of God’s love*”: God loves us so much that he desires to give us visible signs of His love, something that not only we can see, but also 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 the Holy Spirit baptism gives us power to be Jesus’ witnesses,^{Acts1:8} many Christians struggle with evangelism. However, those who have received a miracle from God find it difficult not to be a 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. Miraculous manifestations makes people excited about going to Church, excited about sharing their faith, and excited about growing in faith so that they can do more for the Lord who obviously loves them so much. And God wants people to see His glory and miracles and so when God gives us signs and wonders, we shouldn’t hide them—they are for people to see! *We are guides into God’s most sublime secrets, not security guards posted to protect them.*^{1Cor.4:1} Miracles are not a sign of maturity or of perfection—they simply display God’s glory and love—and you don’t have to be perfect before God will shower you with “*tokens of His love*”! Miracles make you feel good about yourself—and also make you feel good about God too! The assurance that God is personally interested in you and loves you, will build faith and increase your self-value. And so, miracles are a major contribution to developing our faith and also to sharing our faith with others.

Questions:

How would you define a miracle?

Do miracles produce faith?

Does God still perform miracles today?

Why don’t we see many miracles?

Do miracles only come from God?

Puritan Prayer: O Holy Father, You have freely given me Your Son. O Divine Son, You have freely paid my debt. O Eternal Spirit, You have freely bid me come. O Triune God, You have freely graced me with salvation. My prayers and tears could not suffice to pardon my sins and a thankful acceptance could never pay my debts—but my believing is my receiving. What did You see in me, that I, a poor, diseased, despised sinner should be clothed in Your bright glory? Who can fathom Your immeasurable love? As far as the rational soul exceeds the senses, so does the spirit exceed the rational in its knowledge of You. You have given me understanding to compass the earth and to measure the sun, moon and stars, but above all—to know You, the only true God.

Sunday 13th October Ps.81

Lessons in ministry that we have learnt (7)

Prophets and Prophecies—*For the essence of prophecy is to give a clear witness for Jesus.*^{Rev.19:10}

Charities (including Churches) are by definition, non-profit organisations. A friend (who is a Cessationist) recently described his Church as a “non-prophet” organisation! When I am asked to describe a Pentecostal Church, I usually say that the activities of the Early Church as described in the Book of Acts may happen in our Church today—including prophecy—but as I said last week, we need to define the words we use. The essence of prophecy is to give a clear witness for Jesus, not about seeing into the future as a sort of religious fortune telling—which is forbidden by God anyway!

Prophecy is about Jesus: *Then I fell down at his feet to worship him, but he said, "No, don't worship me. I am a servant of God, just like you and your brothers and sisters who testify about their faith in Jesus. Worship only God. For the essence of prophecy is to give a clear witness for Jesus."*^{Rev. 19:10} Our identity is inseparably joined with Jesus because our lives are hidden with Christ in God: *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} And so, if we are not giving a clear witness to Jesus, we are not living up to the expected standard of our new life in Christ and become poor representatives and dishonourable Ambassadors. Our goal in life is to be like Jesus—not to be like Jesus in the clothes we wear but in the attitude of our mind and the way we conduct our daily lives. *This is how we know that we live in him and he in us: He has given us of his Spirit. And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Saviour of the world. If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in them and they in God. And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. 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.*^{1Jn. 4:13-21}

Our time in Somerset brought us into contact with the prophetic. For several years we hosted a Discipleship School over the Easter period where young people came for 2 weeks of intense Discipleship training, including preaching, teaching, worship and evangelism. This was run by Vaughan Jarrold who had been trained up in Jerusalem under Ruth Heflin, one of the most powerful Prophets of the late 20th century. Ruth's grandparents attended the Azusa Street Mission in Los Angeles and her grandfather was a founding member of the Assemblies of God in America. Ruth was the longest serving Pastor in Jerusalem and an internationally renowned prophet—she personally prophesied over many world leaders including several Presidents of the USA, the Emperor of Ethiopia and members of the royal family in Nepal. When Ruth returned to her family home in Ashland, VA, she oversaw the Church which was renowned for their Camp Meetings. When any of the missionaries from Ashland passed through England, they usually preached in our church and so we were blessed to have a lot of prophetic input by credible people. However, the most important lesson we learnt from that time was to see beyond the natural and connect with the spiritual—to discern the heavenly dimension. And so we now plan our Church meetings with the intention of reaching out to God through the Word of God and facilitating the opportunity to be able to spend time appreciating Jesus in the atmosphere of God's Presence—to touch the glory realm. In her book "Glory" ([available from our Church Website under Resources](#)) Ruth explains it this way:

I was born in the glory one Sunday after the evening service. My parents were Pentecostal pioneers. At the time I was born, they were living in a couple of the Sunday school rooms of the church they founded in Richmond, Virginia. I was born in those rooms in the glory of God that was manifested in their ministry... Sounds of glory, dropped into my spirit from those years, have kept me as I travelled all over the world in ministry. I have been in thousands of meetings and heard thousands of sermons, but the greatest influence in my life has been those glory sounds... where God's people touched the eternal realm. As air is the atmosphere of the earth, glory is the atmosphere of Heaven. It lifts us up above the earthly, into the very presence of God. Later, when I moved to Jerusalem to live and worship on Mt. Zion, the Lord began to show me the progression from PRAISE to WORSHIP to GLORY and the relationship between the three. I have found myself sharing these simple truths with God's

people all over the world. **Praise** ... until the spirit of worship comes. **Worship** ... until the glory comes. Then ... stand in the **glory**. If you can capture the basic principles of praise, worship and glory—so simple that we often miss them—you can have anything else you want in God. It doesn't matter if you're alone and have nobody to agree with you in prayer. It doesn't matter at what stage you are in your spiritual development. Move into the glory realm, and anything becomes possible!

As we draw near to God through Scripture and songs, through praise, prayer and preaching, we become absorbed with Jesus and appreciate the reality that He has drawn near to us—and that the devil is nowhere near! *Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.*^{Jas.4:7-8} That is why our services are planned—what we do is deliberate and intentional—with the aim to draw near to God and bring us into a place where we can hear God with our spiritual ears. *Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.*^{Rev.3:6} But although our services are planned, we are quick to change so we can accommodate what the Holy Spirit is saying to us—either through one of the leaders or through a member of the congregation. *Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.*^{Gal.5:25} John learnt about the connection between being in the Spirit and seeing the heavenly glory. *On the Lord's Day I was in the Spirit, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet.*^{Rev.1:10} *After this I looked, and there before me was a door standing open in heaven. And the voice I had first heard speaking to me like a trumpet said, "Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this." At once I was in the Spirit, and there before me was a throne in heaven with someone sitting on it.*^{Rev.4:1-2} It is in the realm of heavenly glory that we can easily hear the voice of God and catch His heart and Spirit—and this intimacy with Jesus is the essence of prophecy.

Prophets are people who speak on behalf of God. Aaron spoke on behalf of Moses and so was called his prophet. *Now when the LORD spoke to Moses in Egypt, he said to him, "I am the LORD. Tell Pharaoh king of Egypt everything I tell you." But Moses said to the LORD, "Since I speak with faltering lips, why would Pharaoh listen to me?" Then the LORD said to Moses, "See, I have made you like God to Pharaoh, and your brother Aaron will be your prophet. You are to say everything I command you, and your brother Aaron is to tell Pharaoh to let the Israelites go out of his country.*^{Ex.6:28-7:2} And so, prophesy is speaking on behalf of God—being His mouthpiece and representing God in person. [Actually, the first mention of a prophet in Scripture is Abraham, and we don't read that he ever prophesied! But Abraham did represent God on earth and when he prayed, closed doors were opened! *Now then, return the man's wife, for he is a prophet, so that he will pray for you, and you shall live. But if you do not return her, know that you shall surely die, you and all who are yours.* ... *Then Abraham prayed to God, and God healed Abimelech, and also healed his wife and female slaves so that they bore children. For the LORD had closed all the wombs of the house of Abimelech because of Sarah, Abraham's wife.*^{Gen.20:7-18}] All Christians are witnesses to Jesus—our name "*Christ-ian*" gives it away!—and so we should eagerly desire to prophesy in the Biblical way of giving a clear witness to Him. *Follow the way of love and eagerly desire gifts of the Spirit, especially prophecy... But the one who prophesies speaks to people for their strengthening, encouraging and comfort... but the one who prophesies edifies the church... I would rather have you prophesy. The one who prophesies is greater than the one who speaks in tongues, unless someone interprets, so that the church may be edified.*^{1Cor.14:1-5} The ministry gifts to the Church are all subordinate to the Gift of Jesus—Jesus is our Apostle (Sent One),^{Heb.3:1} Jesus is our Prophet,^{Acts.7:37} Jesus is our Evangelist (Preacher),^{Lk.8:1} Jesus is our Pastor (Shepherd),^{Heb.13:20} Jesus is our Teacher.^{Matt.12:38} But God has also delegated these roles/functions/giftings to people. We are all sent by God, we are all spokespersons for God, we are all messengers from God, we are all shepherds who care for others, we are all teachers, explaining the Kingdom of God to others. However, God has appointed some people to function publicly in the Church with these gifts in order to bring maturity to the Body: *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.^{Eph.4:11-13} God's plan is that we all become mature Christians and are able to stand firm in our faith—regardless of our circumstances. When we are blown and buffeted by circumstances—or even the devil—we should be able to stand firm in our faith because we are rooted in Christ. *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.3:6-8} 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. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.^{Eph.3:13-19} We have an anchor for our soul that keeps us from being shipwrecked. We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure. It enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain, where our forerunner, Jesus, has entered on our behalf. God uses people to build the Church up—which means building people up in the faith and enabling them to stand firm.^{Heb.6:19-20} But we need to dress properly and wear our spiritual armour. Therefore put on the full armour of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.^{Eph.6:13-17}

Prophets are people. Although God now speaks to us through His Son,^{Heb.1:1-3} and through His Word,^{2Tim.3:14-17} God still speaks through people. *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.*^{Eph.3:11-13} In the OT God used prophets to communicate with His people: *Surely the Sovereign LORD does nothing without revealing his plan to his servants the prophets.*^{Amos.3:7} And we too can expect God to give us “inside information” about important events. But when God uses a person to tell us things, it is mostly confirmation or explanation of what He is impressing on us, rather than directional. Jesus said: *I have told you now before it happens, so that when it does happen you will believe.*^{Jn.14:29} *All this I have told you so that you will not fall away... I have told you this, so that when their time comes you will remember that I warned you about them.*^{Jn.16:1-4} *I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace.*^{Jn.16:33} People—even people who prophesy—are fallible. We are not yet completely perfect—and although we have a great treasure, it is an earthen vessel, which is fragile and sometimes a little dirty! *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. But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.*^{2Cor.6:6-7} And so we should test what people say and never feel under an obligation to do something because the “prophet” said so—even if they say “thus says the Lord”! *Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world.*^{1Jn.4:1} *Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others judge.*^{1Cor.14:29}

In the NT we are warned about false prophets and deceivers: *Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles?*^{2Matt.7:15-16} *At that time if anyone says to you, ‘Look, here is*

the Messiah!" or, "Look, there he is!" do not believe it. For false messiahs and false prophets will appear and perform signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect. So be on your guard; I have told you everything ahead of time.^{Mk.13:21-23} *But there were also false prophets among the people. In the same way there will be false teachers among you. In secret they will bring in teachings that will destroy you. They will even turn against the Lord and Master who died to save them. His death paid for their sins. They will quickly destroy themselves. Many people will follow their shameful ways. They will give the way of truth a bad name. Those teachers are never satisfied. They want to get something out of you. So they make up stories to take advantage of you. They have been under a sentence of death for a long time. The One who will destroy them has not been sleeping.*^{2Pet.2:1-}

³ However, in our caution about false prophets, we should be careful not to quench the Holy Spirit but respect and honour prophecies from genuine followers of Christ: *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.5:19-22} God inspires prophets and if we stay true to Scripture and keep focused on Jesus, we will be truly blessed by taking note of what God has to say to us through them. *The angel said to me, "These words are trustworthy and true. The Lord, the God who inspires the prophets, sent his angel to show his servants the things that must soon take place." "Look, I am coming soon! Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy written in this scroll." I, John, am the one who heard and saw these things. And when I had heard and seen them, I fell down to worship at the feet of the angel who had been showing them to me. But he said to me, "Don't do that! I am a fellow servant with you and with your fellow prophets and with all who keep the words of this scroll. Worship God!"*^{Rev.22:6-9}

Questions (for October 23rd)

What is prophecy?

Who can prophesy?

Are there still prophets today?

Should we take notice of "prophecies"?

How can we discern a false prophet?

Puritan Prayer: O Holy Father, You have freely given me Your Son. O Divine Son, You have freely paid my debt. O Eternal Spirit, You have freely bid me come. O Triune God, You have freely graced me with salvation. You have given me understanding to compass the earth and to measure the sun, moon and stars, but above all—to know You, the only true God. I marvel that the finite can know the Infinite—here a little and then afterwards in full-orbed truth. Now I know but a small portion of what I shall know—here in part, then in perfection, here a hint, then in glory. To know is to enjoy—and to know You is life eternal. Keep me in Your freedom of experiencing Your salvation continually.

Sunday 20th October Ps.84

As OJ is preaching today, I have used an article by Alan Shlemon from www.str.org

Let God take the heat.

Over the last two decades as a Stand to Reason speaker, I've been yelled at, cursed at, and even threatened. Somehow, though, I haven't yelled back, cursed back, or threatened anyone. In fact, I respond to such attacks in a rather calm way. How do I keep my cool? Here's my secret: I let God take the heat. It's a principle that's based on the recognition that God is our King and we are his children. He's in charge and we're his followers. As we live our lives, we abide by his commands and proclaim his message. If people get upset with what I'm saying or doing, I point them to God. I show them that I'm simply following God's commands or saying what he says is true. That way I absolve myself of the responsibility and put the "blame" where it belongs: on God.

To be clear, I'm not talking about being a jerk for Jesus. If you come across as harsh, offensive, or condescending, then the problem is with you. You're at fault and you deserve what's coming.

You can't pass the blame onto God. In those cases, you need to repent of your action and adopt biblical ideas. I'm talking about times when you are faithful to the teachings of Scripture. If you're attacked in those situations, then let God take the heat. Don't take it personally. Though they may be mad at you for what you're saying or doing, remember that you're representing God and they're really mad at him. When I see things this way, it helps me to avoid getting upset with the person, which, in turn, helps me not retaliate.

For example, when I say that Jesus is the only way to Heaven, sometimes people get angry and claim I'm narrow-minded. Even though I feel uneasy when that happens, I try to remember to let God take the heat. After all, Scripture teaches there's only one way to Heaven, not me. That's why in this case, I point them to what Jesus said: *I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father except through me.*^{Jn.14:6} If they have a problem with that idea, they need to take it up with Christ, not me. I let him take the heat by directing them to his words.

Not in every instance do I point someone to Scripture or even say anything. Most times I simply remind myself that their anger is ultimately a result of God's position on a matter. Whether I'm talking about the Gospel, homosexuality, Islam, evolution, abortion, or other topics, I try to let God take the heat. That way I'm not inordinately burdened or tempted to respond with malice. Letting God take the heat helps prevent three problems.

1) It helps prevent pride. When you think people's objections or anger are a result of your thinking, you're taking credit for God's principles and ideas. Although you may convey biblical ideas, the responsible party is God, not you. You're merely an ambassador and your job is to proclaim God's message in a clear and gracious manner. As Jesus said, "*No servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him.*"^{Jn.13:16} Stay humble by keeping a proper perspective of who is really the author of the truth you're communicating.

2) It helps prevent unnecessary stress. When people are upset with me, I feel responsible. I've done something wrong or said something that made them angry. That's stressful. The reality, though, is that they're probably upset with God (whether they acknowledge it or not). He demands people submit to him and his ideas. Since that's not a popular concept, it's understandable people get upset with him. The benefit of letting God take the heat is that you don't burden yourself with the responsibility of thinking you're the problem.

3) It helps prevent a revengeful attitude. If you know people are upset with God's principles and not your own, then you're less likely to get back at them. Scripture reminds us: *Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord.*^{Rom.12:19} I'm not suggesting you don't respond. Rather, your response is less likely to be motivated by retaliation and more by clarification. After all, God is responsible for the ideas and you're responsible for clearly and graciously conveying them.

Therefore, remember the principle to let God take the heat. After all, he's God. It's his problem. He's the Savior. Let him bear the burden. Jesus even reminds us that, *If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first.*^{Jn.15:18} He's the ultimate problem for people who won't submit to him. At the same time, we should strive to not draw unnecessary anger on ourselves. Paul notes, *If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.*^{Rom.12:18} One way to do that is let God take the heat.

Puritan Prayer: 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.

Sunday 27th October Ps.42

Lessons in ministry that we have learnt (8) 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}

Years ago when we were going through a tough time, someone said to us that we must need a lot of prayer—and we responded: “No! We don’t need a lot of prayer—we need faith and people who will stand in faith with us!” Prayer is important and pleases God—it is described as “incense”: *May my prayer be set before you like incense; may the lifting up of my hands be like the evening sacrifice.*^{Ps.141:2} But just “praying” is not enough because: *If anyone turns a deaf ear to my instruction, even their prayers are detestable.*^{Prov.28:9} *The LORD detests the sacrifice of the wicked, but the prayer of the upright pleases him.*^{Prov.15:8} *The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.*^{Jas.5:16} We are made righteous through faith and so faith is the answer—not prayer! Faith is the answer—not prayer! God answers prayer but He responds to faith—and God also rewards 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} Prayer is not a monologue where we tell God what to do. Prayer is a dialogue where we listen to God and then respond to Him. Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes in his book *Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible: 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.* Our prayers don’t inform God of our needs because our Heavenly Father knows our situation—and He has already prepared His solution to our needs! *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 is how you should pray: Our Father in heaven, may your name be honoured... [The world is full of so-called prayer warriors who are prayer-ignorant. They’re full of formulas and programs and advice, peddling techniques for getting what you want from God. Don’t fall for that nonsense. This is your Father you are dealing with, and he knows better than you what you need. With a God like this loving you, you can pray very simply. Like this: Our Father in heaven, Reveal who you are...]*^{Matt.6:7-9} Effective (and Biblical) prayers don’t depend on how long or loud we pray but whether we are righteous. *The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.*^{Jas.5:16} However, no one is born righteous: *For we have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under the power of sin. As it is written: “There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands; there is no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one.”*^{Rom.3:9-12} God credits us with righteousness when we believe Him: *What does Scripture say? Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.*^{Rom.4:3} Abraham is our “father in the faith”: *Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham’s offspring—not only to those who are of the law but also to those who have the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all.*^{Rom.4:16-17} And so we should learn from Abraham. *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.*^{Is.51:1-2} When circumstances looked impossible for Abraham to receive God’s promises, he looked beyond the natural and saw the spiritual knowing that God would keep His Word. *Abraham never wavered in believing God’s promise. In fact, his faith grew stronger, and in this he brought glory to God. He was fully convinced that God is able to do whatever he promises.*^{Rom.4:22-22} When we trust God, we can enjoy Him and stay in fellowship with Him—regardless of our circumstances! So what is faith and how do we get this living faith? Faith is a gift: *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} However, we don’t need lots of faith—just living faith: *The apostles said to the Lord,*

"Increase our faith!" He replied, "If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it will obey you."^{Lk.17:5-6} A better word for "faith" is "trust" and our trust in God is based on His Character and His Word—who He is and what He has said. But to trust God, we have to train our soul (senses) to submit to our spirit and not let our soul (senses) dominate our spirit. *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.42:11} That is why the new birth is essential for faith—until God has given us a new heart, we cannot trust Him. But after we have been given faith, we still need to build ourselves up in the faith. *But you, dear friends, by building yourselves up in your most holy faith and praying 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} Faith (trust) develops as we walk with God and see Him work in our lives. When the Israelites left Egypt and needed to cross the Red Sea, God told Moses to hold his stick over the sea and the waters parted, allowing them to cross without even getting their feet wet! *Then the LORD said to Moses, "Why are you crying out to me? Tell the Israelites to move on. Raise your staff and stretch out your hand over the sea to divide the water so that the Israelites can go through the sea on dry ground... Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and all that night the LORD drove the sea back with a strong east wind and turned it into dry land. The waters were divided, and the Israelites went through the sea on dry ground, with a wall of water on their right and on their left."*^{Ex.14:15-22} Forty years later when the Israelites needed to cross the river Jordan, the priests had to get their feet wet before the waters parted. *And the LORD said to Joshua, "Today I will begin to exalt you in the eyes of all Israel, so they may know that I am with you as I was with Moses. Tell the priests who carry the ark of the covenant: 'When you reach the edge of the Jordan's waters, go and stand in the river.' ... And as soon as the priests who carry the ark of the LORD—the Lord of all the earth—set foot in the Jordan, its waters flowing downstream will be cut off and stand up in a heap." ... So when the people broke camp to cross the Jordan, the priests carrying the ark of the covenant went ahead of them. Now the Jordan is at flood stage all during harvest. Yet as soon as the priests who carried the ark reached the Jordan and their feet touched the water's edge, the water from upstream stopped flowing. It piled up in a heap a great distance away, at a town called Adam in the vicinity of Zarethan, while the water flowing down to the Sea of the Arabah (that is, the Dead Sea) was completely cut off. So the people crossed over opposite Jericho. The priests who carried the ark of the covenant of the LORD stopped in the middle of the Jordan and stood on dry ground, while all Israel passed by until the whole nation had completed the crossing on dry ground."*^{Josh.3:7-17} During those forty years they had seen God keep His Word and act according to His character. And so, when God told them to walk into a river that was in full flood, they knew they could trust Him—even if their feet got wet!

Faith is a walk with God—see the great "faith" chapter of Hebrews which names people who "lived by faith," even though many of them died in terrible circumstances. Faith reaches out to God and trusts Him to save us **from** our sins—and to save us **for** our Saviour. Faith is active and not only motivates us to live for God but also enables us to live for God. By faith Abel became righteous, he was able to truly worship God and he left a legacy for those to come: *By faith Abel brought God a better offering than Cain did. By faith he was commended as righteous, when God spoke well of his offerings. And by faith Abel still speaks, even though he is dead.*^{Heb.11:4} Christian maturity is simply trusting God and believing what He says about us and our situation, especially that we are righteous—that we are counted right with God. Immature Christians are infants. *Now everyone who lives on milk is inexperienced with the message about righteousness, because he is an infant. But solid food is for the mature—for those whose senses have been trained to distinguish between good and evil.*^{Heb.5:13-}

¹⁴ The word "infant" is literally a "non-speaker" and so immature Christians are those who don't talk about their faith or talk about being right with God. Jesus had to become sin in order for us to become righteous. *God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the*

righteousness of God.^{2Cor.5:21} And if we live as though we are no good, or that we are unworthy, or if we worry and are unduly anxious, we deny God's New Creation, we denounce the New Covenant, we belittle the effects of Jesus' death and resurrection in their lives. This is unconscious blasphemy because it denies the finished work of Jesus.

The Christian's righteousness is imputed and also imparted—we are made legally right with God and also become literally right with God. *What does Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and that faith was regarded by God to be his approval of Abraham." When people work, their pay is not regarded as a gift but something they have earned. However, when people don't work but believe God, the one who approves ungodly people, their faith is regarded as God's approval. David says the same thing about those who are blessed: God approves of people without their earning it. David said, "Blessed are those whose disobedience is forgiven and whose sins are pardoned. Blessed is the person whom the Lord no longer considers sinful."*^{Rom.4:3-7} We are factually right with God and we are actually right with God—not because we live a perfect life but because God has made us righteous and He says that we are right with Him. This is a gift from God and like all gifts, they have to be received in order for them to become ours. Faith doesn't make something true but faith does make it real. Faith believes what God has said and we affirm what God has said through what we say and what we do—which is why we must be watch our language. We can forfeit God's promises through our language. And so we must make our lips do their duty by filling them with the Word of God, making them say what God says about our situation and not allow them to say anything to the contrary. *I thank you for speaking straight from your heart; I learn the pattern of your righteous ways. I'm going to do what you tell me to do; don't ever walk off and leave me. How can a young person live a clean life? By carefully reading the map of your Word. I'm single-minded in pursuit of you; don't let me miss the road signs you've posted. I've banked your promises in the vault of my heart so I won't sin myself bankrupt. Be blessed, GOD; train me in your ways of wise living. I'll transfer to my lips all the counsel that comes from your mouth; I delight far more in what you tell me about living than in gathering a pile of riches. I ponder every morsel of wisdom from you, I attentively watch how you've done it. I relish everything you've told me of life, I won't forget a word of it.*^{Ps.119:7-16} Faith (maturity) will keep us sound, safe and secure: *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 men in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into 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.4:14-16}

Faith and Exegesis (correctly understanding the Word of God) are inseparable because they are the way to gain God's approval: *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} *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} [Exegesis is the process of getting "out" ('ex') of the text what is truly there in the first place but eisegesis is the process of putting "into" ('eis') the text something that wasn't intended by the author and is almost a "blank cheque" for you to make the Bible say whatever you want!] The correct principles of Bible interpretation (hermeneutics) are: **1. Context:** Always read the entire passage/chapter/book before trying to understand what a single verse actually means. **2. Consistency:** Never interpret a text so that your interpretation contradicts the overall message of Scripture. **3. Comprehension:** Don't get side-tracked from the main purpose of the Bible, **which is to explain God's plan of salvation to mankind through Jesus Christ, His Son and our Saviour!** And remember that God's Word is spiritual not academic. We accept the Scriptures to be without error but they were not written as a scientific manual or even an historical record—Scripture is spiritual. The Word of God is living, it is a lamp, it cleans our minds and is a vaccination against sin! *The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts*

for nothing. The words I have spoken to you—they are full of the Spirit and life. Yet there are some of you who do not believe.^{Jn.6:63-64} For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.^{Heb.4:12-13} It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'^{Matt.4:4} Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path.^{Ps.119:105} You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, as I also remain in you.^{Jn.15:3-4} I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you.^{Ps.119:11} Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote: I do not treasure God's promise in my understanding but in my heart. It is not to be analysed by my intellect, but to be pondered in my heart. Therefore, it is never sufficient simply to have read God's Word. It must penetrate deep within us, dwell in us, like the Holy of Holies in the Sanctuary, so that we do not sin in thought, word, or deed. Faith comes from hearing the Word of God: So faith comes from hearing the message. And the message that is heard is the word of Christ.^{Rom.10:17} And faith gives us access to God's grace—which we all need (and rely on)! 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} Which is why being full of faith is the norm. Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word." This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism. They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them. So the word of God spread.^{Acts.11:4-6} News of this reached the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. When he arrived and saw what the grace of God had done, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord.^{Acts.11:22-24} So let's make every effort to trust God in every circumstance and ensure that we affirm our trust by the language we use, because: *If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all.*^{1s.7:9}

Questions

What is faith?

Why is faith important?

How do we receive faith?

How do we develop our faith?

What are the effects of faith?

Can our words affect our faith?

Puritan Prayer. 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 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 Your Spirit as my Teacher, my Guide and my Power, that I may live—repenting of sin, conquering temptations and finding victory in life. When You are present all blessings are mine.

November 2024

In God we trust: *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.* Is.12:2

Thought for the Month: The most basic level of Christianity is to be blessed—the highest level of Christianity is to be a blessing! *I will bless you... you will be a blessing.* ^{Gen.12.2} It's not God's plan for our life but our life for God's plan. *Andrew Corbett*

Sunday 3rd November Ps.85

Joy Crick is preaching today, so I have included this article by Greg Koukl (www.str.org)

My niece was accused of being “*closed-minded*”. What I told her may help you.

My niece, Kirsten, has a friend named Aiman who accused her of being close-minded simply because she believed Jesus' claim that He was the only way of salvation. If you have encountered this yourself, you might be interested in what I told her. Notice that the complaint here is not that Kirsten was wrong about Jesus. Aiman conveniently side-stepped that issue. Instead, she was wrong—“*close-minded*”—simply for thinking she was right. Apparently Aiman was not aware that he cannot refute a view by attacking something else—in this case Kirsten's character. First, it is completely proper to think that if your view is true, opposing views must be mistaken. How could it be different? For example, if it is true that all religions lead to God, then it is false that only one religion leads to God. It is nonsense to affirm both that there are many ways to God and that there is only one way to God. I think you can see very quickly that regardless of whoever is correct on the theological point, the other person must be mistaken. Both people must be “*narrow*” at this juncture. There is no way of escaping it without sounding silly. This is elementary. In fact, this observation is so basic it would be trivial if it were not that so many people seem to miss it. Ironically, Aiman affirms as much. He thinks himself correct on his pluralism and faults Kirsten for her opposing view. Nothing odd here except, perhaps, that he doesn't consider himself equally close-minded for doing the same as she.

This leads to a second point. “*Narrow-mindedness*” is not a proper criticism of what you believe, but of how you believe it. Here's what I mean. “*Narrow*” is the proper and unavoidable way to describe the content of any belief (as I've just pointed out). “*Narrow-minded*,” however, is entirely different. It refers not to the belief, but to the person who won't consider opposing views. Instead, he dismisses them without a hearing out of dogmatism, bias, or bigotry. Christians have certainly been guilty of this in the past, but they have no corner on the market. So-called sceptics are frequently narrow-minded in this regard. Which brings me to my final point. I don't mean to be unkind, but it strikes me that Aiman is (ironically) the close-minded person here. He dismisses Kirsten's view as narrow—which, of course, it must be if it is a view at all—without engaging her reasons why it might be true. A personal attack (“*You're narrow-minded*”) substitutes for engaging the ideas. This is classic close-mindedness. The way to demonstrate that people like Aiman are making this error is to simply ask them (Columbo style) if they are open-minded: Yes or no? Are they genuinely open to the possibility that Jesus is who He claimed to be? If their openness is authentic, they should be willing to consider Jesus' claim and why He made it. Then they would be in a better position to judge the view itself instead of judging the Christian who holds it.

On his present course, though, Aiman could never admit that. If he were truly openminded to the possibility Jesus was right, he would be perilously close to becoming the kind of person he thinks is close-minded. Aiman has boxed himself in. Aiman is not able to escape this self-refuting circle. Based on his definition of openness, he is either not open to even consider Kirsten's view—making him truly close-minded—or he would have to admit her “*narrow*”

view might be correct—making him just as close-minded as he says she is. As you can see, Aiman’s effort commits suicide, demonstrating that his entire approach is a dead-end. He would be better off abandoning this silly challenge and being open-minded enough to give the Christian view a fair hearing instead of dismissing it.

Barnhouse is alleged to have said that the purpose of an open mind is like the purpose of an open mouth. Eventually it should close down on something solid. Minds, like mouths, should not be continually gaping open. Sooner or later we have to commit ourselves to some beliefs that seem reasonable. Put another way, we don’t want to have our minds so open that our brains fall out!

Thoughtfully open-minded, *Gregory Koukl*

Questions

Why does it matter what we believe?

How can we be sure of what we believe?

Is it intolerant to disagree with other points of views?

Is faith incompatible with reason?

Are science and religion incompatible?

Puritan Prayer: O God, I bless You for the happy moment when I first saw Your law fulfilled in Christ—that Your wrath was appeased; that my death was destroyed; that my sin was forgiven; that my soul was saved. And ever since, You have been faithful to me—daily have I proven the power of Jesus’ blood, and 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!



The mainstream Reformer’s view of New Testament Christianity.

Although Luther’s ‘*Ninety Five Theses*’ in 1517 is regarded as the official starting date of the Reformation, it was two years later, in 1519, when he publicly declared that “*the pope and even (the) General Councils of the Church could err. Scripture was the only authority.*” Within three years of his attack on indulgences, Luther had become a spiritual and political leader. With the support of Frederick of Saxony, Luther proclaimed the doctrine of ‘*justification by faith alone*’, rejected all supernatural remedies (especially the sacraments and the Mass), denied the meritoriousness of good works (thus condemning monastic vows and Christian asceticism in general), and finally rejected the institution of a genuine hierarchical priesthood (especially the papacy) in the Church. In parallel with Luther in Wittenberg, Zwingli was reforming Zürich and by 1523, it “*became the first Protestant state outside of Germany.*” Zwingli’s theology was much simpler than Luther’s: “*if the Old or New Testament did not say something explicitly and literally, then no Christian should believe or practice it.*”

However, it was **Communion** that was at the heart of the Reformation and where the real division came. All the Reformers were agreed in rejecting the doctrine of ‘*Mass*’ because it re-enacted Christ’s single sacrifice. They also rejected the Catholic concept of ‘*transubstantiation*’ as “*an unscriptural piece of priestly magic.*” ‘*Transubstantiation*’ is the belief that: *the ‘substance’ (the reality within) the bread and the wine was ‘transformed’ into the substance of the body and blood of Christ (Real Presence) leaving only the ‘accidents’ (or superficial properties—what you could see, touch or taste) unchanged.* Luther taught ‘*consubstantiation*’, where “*our Lord is really present, but without a change in the substance of the emblems.*” Zwingli, however, went much further and saw Communion as “*only symbolic and*

the partaking of the emblems a memorial only.” In 1529, Luther and Zwingli came together to discuss their differences but to no avail. Calvin, who took the middle ground, taught that although there is no ‘Real Presence’ and the substance of the emblems is unchanged, there is “a ‘spiritual reception’ of Christ by faith” in the act of Communion. (Taken from my essay on “[Anabaptists](#)” available from our Church website under [Resources](#).)

Remembrance Sunday 10th November Ps.90

Remember. *Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel.*^{2Tim.2:8}

Today is Remembrance Sunday and is a national opportunity to remember the service and sacrifice of those who have defended our freedoms and protected our way of life. Although WWI hostilities formally ended "at the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month" of 1918, when the Armistice was signed by representatives of Germany and the Entente, it wasn't until 28th June 1919 that the war officially ended when the Treaty of Versailles was signed. The first UK commemoration of the end of the hostilities took place at Buckingham Palace, with King George V hosting a "Banquet in Honour of The President of the French Republic" in the evening of 10 November 1919. The next morning (11th November 1919), the first official Armistice Day events were held in the grounds of the Palace and included a two-minute silence at 11am as a mark of respect for those who died in the war as well as those left behind. The following year, on Armistice Day in 1920, the funeral of the Unknown Soldier took place at the London Cenotaph and a two-minute silence was observed throughout the nation. Buses halted, electricity was cut to tram lines, and even trading on the London Stock Exchange halted. Remembrance Day is sometimes called *Poppy Day* and artificial poppies were first sold in Britain in 1921 to raise money for the Earl Haig Fund in support of ex-servicemen and the families of those who had died in the conflict. Selling poppies proved so popular that in 1922 the British Legion founded a factory (staffed by disabled ex-servicemen) to produce its own poppies and continues to do so today. Our Act of Remembrance today reminds us of the finality of death and the importance of remembering the supreme sacrifice of those who laid down their lives for our liberty. *They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old: Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn. At the going down of the sun and in the morning, we will remember them... When you go home, tell them of us and say, "For their tomorrow we gave our today".*

We all need “memory aids” to keep important events and facts fresh in our minds. Although we may know the stories quite well, life and circumstance often take precedence in our daily thoughts—which is why we have War Memorials and our annual Remembrance Day. And the same is true of our spiritual life—we may know the Bible stories well enough, but the busyness of life can often crowd them out of our memory and we lose the impact of their relevance. Peter was aware of this when he wrote his letters: *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} The hymn we sang this morning summarises this well:

Tell me the old, old story of unseen things above,
of Jesus and His glory, of Jesus and His love.

Tell me the story simply, as to a little child,
for I am weak & weary and helpless & defiled.

Tell me the old, old story, tell me the old, old story. Tell me the old, old story, of Jesus and His love.

Tell me the story slowly, that I may take it in,
that wonderful redemption, God's remedy for sin.

Tell me the story often, for I forget so soon;
the early dew of morning has passed away at noon.



The annual Remembrance Sunday is an important date in our national life—and probably more so today than ever before as people abuse our freedom and ignore the great price that others paid for it—but we also have a weekly Remembrance Sunday which is an even more important event in our spiritual life. At our weekly Remembrance Sunday, we remember an even greater Victory and a greater freedom than our Servicemen and women gave us—we remember the victory that Jesus has won and the freedom He has given us. *“Here is my servant whom I have chosen, the one I love, in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him, and he will proclaim justice to the nations. He will not quarrel or cry out; no one will hear his voice in the streets. A bruised reed he will not break, and a smouldering wick he will not snuff out, till he has brought justice through to victory. In his name the nations will put their hope.”*^{⁹Matt.12:18-21} *It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.*^{Gal.5:1} Our weekly Remembrance Sunday is to help us remember that Jesus has conquered satan and destroyed the consequences of sin, including death itself. Jesus said to her, *“I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?”* *“Yes, Lord,” she told him, “I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world.”*^{⁹Jn.11:25-27} However, we still have to wait until the Final Resurrection until we see the end of physical death: *Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed—in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality. When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: “Death has been swallowed up in victory.” “Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?” The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.*^{1Cor.15:51-57}

Our weekly Remembrance Sunday could also be called Resurrection Day, because it was on the 1st day of the week (Sunday) that Jesus rose from the dead: *Jesus rose early on the first day of the week.*^{Mk.16:9} Under the Old Covenant, the Jews were commanded to remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy: *Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labour and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God.*^{Ex.20:8-10} God created the universe and everything in it, over 6 “days” but rested on the 7th day. *By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. Then 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} We don’t know how long each day was because God is outside of time and 1 day could be 1000 years. *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.*^{2Pet.3:8} *A thousand years in your sight are like a day that has just gone by, or like a watch in the night.*^{Ps.90:4} (In Bible symbolism 1000 represents a large number rather than a mathematical number *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!”*^{⁹Rev.5:11-12}) And so, the creation story is more than an historical record of beginning of the Universe—it is also an allegory, or an illustration to teach us about our salvation. And although we still remember the Sabbath by keeping it holy, under the New Covenant, the Sabbath that we remember is not the end of the week but the end of our working—not our daily routine of work but the end of working towards our salvation and acceptance by God. *There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; for anyone who enters God’s rest also rests from their works, just as God did from his. Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest,*

so that no one will perish by following their example of disobedience.^{Heb.4:9-11} Our salvation is a gift from God and we cannot add anything to what God has done for us—we can only accept God's gift with thankfulness and live in the benefits of it! The early Church changed their day of worship from the 7th day of the week to the 1st day of the week—which is the day that God spoke light into the world; the day when Jesus rose from the dead; the day the Holy Spirit was sent from heaven. The Christian day of worship is a “day to rejoice and to sing Hallelujah right from the start” because we are remembering God's light, life and liberty. The resurrection of Jesus is more important than just an historical fact—it is absolutely and essentially integral to the Gospel and to our Christian Faith: *And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead. But he did not raise him if in fact the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.*^{1Cor.15:14-20} Which is why Paul wrote that we should: *Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel.*^{2Tim.2:8} The resurrection of Jesus is what makes Christianity both unique and credible. No other religion claims to have their deity become human, live a sinless life, die as a perfect substitute and then rise from the dead in an immortal human body—which is not surprising because there are no other real deities besides our God! *We know that “An idol is nothing at all in the world” and that “There is no God but one.” For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as indeed there are many “gods” and many “lords”), yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live.*^{1Cor.8:4-6} And because there are no other deities, no other religion has any credible witnesses to their deity's activity! *Now, brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.*^{1Cor.15:1-8} Paul made the point that because Jesus' life, death and resurrection was witnessed publicly by many people, it gives credibility to the Christian faith—but also that these events are both true and reasonable: *But God has helped me to this very day; so I stand here and testify to small and great alike. I am saying nothing beyond what the prophets and Moses said would happen—that the Messiah would suffer and, as the first to rise from the dead, would bring the message of light to his own people and to the Gentiles.” At this point Festus interrupted Paul's defence. “You are out of your mind, Paul!” he shouted. “Your great learning is driving you insane.” “I am not insane, most excellent Festus,” Paul replied. “What I am saying is true and reasonable. The king is familiar with these things, and I can speak freely to him. I am convinced that none of this has escaped his notice, because it was not done in a corner. King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know you do.”*^{Acts.26:22-27}

However, the historical facts alone are not what makes Christianity so important—it is the spiritual facts that really makes Christianity so ineffable! If it was only Jesus' good life and unwarranted death that made Christianity a religion, then Christianity would still be unique—but we would have no eternal hope because we would still be spiritually dead and separated from God for all eternity. No! Christianity is a spiritual miracle because God re-creates our spirit and makes us spiritually brand new. *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.^{2Cor.5:17-21} God doesn't just help us and then leave us—He helps us and stays with us! God has said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you." So we say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?"^{Heb.13:5-6} Jesus was God's "one and only Son" For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.^{Jn.3:16} But now Jesus is God's firstborn! 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} By Jesus' death and resurrection, we too are now God's children: In bringing many sons and daughters to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through what he suffered. Both the one who makes people holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters. He says, "I will declare your name to my brothers and sisters; in the assembly I will sing your praises."^{Heb.2:10-12} Jesus' resurrection makes Him the firstborn from the dead: He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy.^{Col.1:17-18} Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.^{Rev.1:5} And we are going to be the second-born from the dead because Jesus' resurrection guarantees our resurrection. 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. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his.^{Rom.6:4-5}

Today, we remember the service and sacrifice of those who have defended our freedoms and protected our way of life, especially those who made the supreme sacrifice of laying down their lives for our liberty—even though most had no choice about their actions. But we also remember the One who laid down His life for our eternal liberty. *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} Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.^{Matt.20:28} Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command.^{Jn.15:13-14} So as we remember those who have died for our democracy, let us especially remember the One who died for our sins and has also risen from the grave to declare His supreme victory over sin. Jesus has not just given us hope of a better future but He has guaranteed us an eternal future: *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 Christ, the Son of God, who is to come into the world."*^{Jn.11:25-27}

Questions

Can Christians serve the Prince of Peace and still take up arms to fight people?
 Why is it important to remember the people who defended our national freedom?
 Why do we need to refresh our memories about our Christian faith?
 What are the main beliefs that we need to constantly remind ourselves of?
 What can we do to remember the important tenets of our faith?

Puritan Prayer: May my cry be always: Only Jesus! Only Jesus! In You is freedom from condemnation; in Your righteousness, there is fullness of life; in Your given life, there is eternal vitality; in fellowship with You, there is enduring union. In You 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 You. If I am tempted and have no joy, give me strength enough to trust in You. If I am weak, may I trust in Your eternal love. If in extremity, let me feel that You can deliver me. If driven to the edge of hope and to the pit of despair, grant me grace to fall into Your arms. O God, hear me; do for me more than I can ask, think or dream.

Sunday 17th November Ps.91 Remember

Remember. *Remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come.*^{Ecc.12:1}

Last week we commemorated Remembrance Sunday, but we said that every Sunday was Remembrance Sunday because it was on a Sunday that Jesus rose from the dead, affirming the truth about who He is and what He said, Jesus Christ was raised from the dead—and His resurrection is our gospel.^{2Tim.2:8} Sunday is the 1st day of the week (not the 7th) and it was on the very 1st day of Creation that God spoke light into darkness—which is also an allegory of the new creation when God spoke light into our hearts: *For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God’s glory displayed in the face of Christ.*^{2Cor.4:6} Not only is Sunday the day of creation and resurrection, but Sunday is also the day that Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to us at Pentecost and birthed the Church. *Unless I go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you.*^{Jn.16:7} *When he ascended on high, he took many captives and gave gifts to his people.*^{Eph.4:8-9} *When the day of Pentecost came, they were all... filled with the Holy Spirit.*^{Acts.2:1-4} Yes, Sunday is a “day to rejoice and to sing Hallelujah right from the start” because we remember God’s light, life and liberty. But actually, it is not just Sunday that is holy but every day is holy because for the Christian there is no sacred/secular divide: *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 in the house of the LORD Almighty.*^{Zech.14:20-21} However, the Old Covenant command to “remember the Sabbath by keeping it holy” is still applicable under the New Covenant—it’s just the Sabbath that we remember is not the end of the week but the end of our working. Of course we still work for our bread and butter—work is a God-given principle for everyone, whether they are in paid employment or not: *Then I realized that it is good and proper for a man to eat and drink, and to find satisfaction in his toilsome labour under the sun during the few days of life God has given him—for this is his lot. Moreover, when God gives any man wealth and possessions, and enables him to enjoy them, to accept his lot and be happy in his work—this is a gift of God. He seldom reflects on the days of his life, because God keeps him occupied with gladness of heart.*^{Ecc.5:18-20} *A fool’s work wearies him; he does not know the way to town.*^{Ecc.10:15} But we do not and cannot work for our acceptance by God or for our salvation. *There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; for anyone who enters God’s rest also rests from their works, just as God did from his. Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will perish by following their example of disobedience.*^{Heb.4:9-11} Our salvation is a gift from God and there is nothing that we can add to what God has done for us—we can only accept God’s gift with thankfulness and live in the benefits of it! Although we might treat some days as special, there are no days “un-special” for the Christian because God is living with us every moment of every day. *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... For none of us lives for ourselves alone, and none of us dies for ourselves alone. If we live, we live for*

the Lord; and if we die, we die for the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord. For this very reason, Christ died and returned to life so that he might be the Lord of both the dead and the living. ^{Rom.14:5-9}

When God wrote His Law on tablets of stone at the 1st Pentecost of the Old Covenant, 3000 people died because of their unbelief. ^{Ex.32:28} But when God wrote His Law on people's hearts at the Pentecost of the New Covenant, 3000 people were born again because of their belief. ^{Acts.2:41} This is an illustration that although the letter kills, the Spirit brings life: *You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts. Such confidence we have through Christ before God. Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God. 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.3:3-6} And so for the Christian, every day is new creation day, a resurrection day and a Holy Spirit day—a day that God has made for us to rejoice and to be glad! *Open for me the gates of righteousness; I will enter and give thanks to the LORD. This is the gate of the LORD through which the righteous may enter. I will give you thanks, for you answered me; you have become my salvation. The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone; the LORD has done this, and it is marvellous in our eyes. This is the day the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.* ^{Ps.118:19-24}

However, all of us are swamped with busyness that easily distracts us from our spiritual focus—we may want to live in close fellowship with God, but “things” happen and we can easily forget God. Nevertheless, fellowship with God is not impossible—we just need to involve God in our daily thoughts and decisions. But to involve God, we need to know about God, be conscious of Him and trust Him. There are some helpful historical accounts in the Bible of people who tried to maintain fellowship with God, they failed, but then succeeded. Solomon had several face-to-face encounters with God: *When Solomon had finished building the temple of the LORD and the royal palace, and had achieved all he had desired to do, the LORD appeared to him a second time, as he had appeared to him at Gibeon. The LORD said to him: “I have heard the prayer and plea you have made before me; I have consecrated this temple, which you have built, by putting my Name there forever. My eyes and my heart will always be there. As for you, if you walk before me faithfully with integrity of heart and uprightness, as David your father did, and do all I command and observe my decrees and laws, I will establish your royal throne over Israel forever, as I promised David your father when I said, ‘You shall never fail to have a successor on the throne of Israel.’”* ^{1Kg.9:1-5} Solomon enjoyed every natural success that you could imagine—wisdom, wealth, fame, knowledge: *God gave Solomon wisdom and very great insight, and a breadth of understanding as measureless as the sand on the seashore. Solomon's wisdom was greater than the wisdom of all the men of the East, and greater than all the wisdom of Egypt... And his fame spread to all the surrounding nations. He spoke three thousand proverbs and his songs numbered a thousand and five. He described plant life, from the cedar of Lebanon to the hyssop that grows out of walls. He also taught about animals and birds, reptiles and fish. Men of all nations came to listen to Solomon's wisdom, sent by all the kings of the world, who had heard of his wisdom.* ^{1Kg.4:29-34} He had the best stable in the east, with thousands of horses and even kept a menagerie: *King Solomon also had many trading ships at sea, along with Hiram's ships. Every three years the ships returned, bringing back gold, silver, ivory, apes, and baboons [peacocks]. So Solomon had more riches and wisdom than all the other kings on earth. People everywhere wanted to see King Solomon and listen to the wisdom God had given him. Every year those who came brought gifts of silver and gold, clothes, weapons, spices, horses, and mules. Solomon had fourteen hundred chariots and twelve thousand horses. He kept some in special cities for the chariots, and others he kept with him in Jerusalem.* ^{1Kg.10:22-26}

Nevertheless, despite all this, Solomon backslid big time into apostacy—wine, women and song became his “god” and the real God was pushed out of his life: *I said to myself, “Come now, I will test you with pleasure to find out what is good.” But that also proved to be meaningless. “Laughter,” I said, “is madness. And what does pleasure accomplish?” I tried cheering myself with wine, and embracing folly—my*

mind still guiding me with wisdom. I wanted to see what was good for people to do under the heavens during the few days of their lives. I undertook great projects: I built houses for myself and planted vineyards. I made gardens and parks and planted all kinds of fruit trees in them. I made reservoirs to water groves of flourishing trees. I bought male and female slaves and had other slaves who were born in my house. I also owned more herds and flocks than anyone in Jerusalem before me. I amassed silver and gold for myself, and the treasure of kings and provinces. I acquired male and female singers, and a harem as well—the delights of a man's heart. I became greater by far than anyone in Jerusalem before me. In all this my wisdom stayed with me. I denied myself nothing my eyes desired; I refused my heart no pleasure. My heart took delight in all my labour, and this was the reward for all my toil. Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun.^{Ecd.2:1-11} But Solomon's lifestyle wasn't just an eccentric alternative lifestyle—it was a sinful alternative lifestyle that made God angry: King Solomon, however, loved many foreign women besides Pharaoh's daughter... They were from nations about which the LORD had told the Israelites, "You must not intermarry with them, because they will surely turn your hearts after their gods." Nevertheless, Solomon held fast to them in love. He had seven hundred wives of royal birth and three hundred concubines, and his wives led him astray. As Solomon grew old, his wives turned his heart after other gods, and his heart was not fully devoted to the LORD his God, as the heart of David his father had been. He followed Ashtoreth the goddess of the Sidonians, and Molek the detestable god of the Ammonites. So Solomon did evil in the eyes of the LORD; he did not follow the LORD completely, as David his father had done... The LORD became angry with Solomon because his heart had turned away from the LORD, the God of Israel, who had appeared to him twice. Although he had forbidden Solomon to follow other gods, Solomon did not keep the LORD's command. So the LORD said to Solomon, "Since this is your attitude and you have not kept my covenant and my decrees, which I commanded you, I will most certainly tear the kingdom away from you and give it to one of your subordinates."^{1Kg.11:1-11} Eventually Solomon came to his senses and he gave this advice in his memoirs: Remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come and the years approach when you will say, "I find no pleasure in them"—before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars grow dark, and the clouds return after the rain; when the keepers of the house tremble, and the strong men stoop, when the grinders cease because they are few, and those looking through the windows grow dim; when the doors to the street are closed and the sound of grinding fades; when people rise up at the sound of birds, but all their songs grow faint; when people are afraid of heights and of dangers in the streets; when the almond tree blossoms and the grasshopper drags itself along and desire no longer is stirred. Then people go to their eternal home and mourners go about the streets. Remember him—before the silver cord is severed, and the golden bowl is broken; before the pitcher is shattered at the spring, and the wheel broken at the well, and the dust returns to the ground it came from, and the spirit returns to God who gave it.^{Ecd.12:1-7} We only have one opportunity to live this life and life is more important than possessions! Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions.^{Lk.12:15} Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life? So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.^{Matt.6:25-34} As grow older, our life's priorities change and many people start to think about the meaning of life and some even think about what happens after this life. Sadly, most people don't ask the right people or search in the right place—they look everywhere except the reliable sources. We see this especially with the "conspiracy theorists" who are sincere, devout and often great researchers but are sincerely wrong

and sadly deceived because they ask the wrong questions or read the wrong books! Sincerity is good when you are right—but it is possible to be sincerely wrong! The Jews were/are devout, sincere and zealous for God but Paul explains that their zeal is not based on knowledge! *Brothers and sisters, my heart's desire and prayer to God for the Israelites is that they may be saved. For I can testify about them that they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge. Since they did not know the righteousness of God and sought to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness. Christ is the culmination of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes.*^{Rom10:1-4}

Solomon's advice in Ecclesiastes is especially relevant today when so many people are ignoring God. Although Solomon seemed to have the best of everything, sin always has consequences! David knew about the blessedness of sins forgiven: *David says the same thing when he speaks of the blessedness of the one to whom God credits righteousness apart from works: "Blessed are those whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the one whose sin the Lord will never count against them."*^{Rom.4:5-8} But he also knew the guilt of sin that tormented his conscience: *Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are proved right when you speak and justified when you judge.*^{Ps.51:1-4} However, the Blood of Jesus actually cleanses our conscience because instead of covering our sin, Jesus takes our sins away. *But only the high priest entered the inner room, and that only once a year, and never without blood, which he offered for himself and for the sins the people had committed in ignorance. The Holy Spirit was showing by this that the way into the Most Holy Place had not yet been disclosed as long as the first tabernacle was still functioning. This is an illustration for the present time, indicating that the gifts and sacrifices being offered were not able to clear the conscience of the worshiper. They are only a matter of food and drink and various ceremonial washings—external regulations applying until the time of the new order. But when Christ came as high priest of the good things that are now already here, he went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle that is not made with human hands, that is to say, is not a part of this creation. He entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption. The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean. 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.9:7-14}

We can have a good conscience before God and people: *Paul looked straight at the Sanhedrin and said, "My brothers, I have fulfilled my duty to God in all good conscience to this day."*^{Acts.23:1} Pray for us. *We are sure that we have a clear conscience and desire to live honourably in every way.*^{Heb.13:18} Although Paul knew the pain of guilt, he was able to deal with his past and did not live in regret: *For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect.*^{1Cor.15:9-10} *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} If we heed Solomon's advice, we can live a life with no regret: *Not only was the Teacher wise, but he also imparted knowledge to the people. He pondered and searched out and set in order many proverbs. The Teacher searched to find just the right words, and what he wrote was upright and true. The words of the wise are like goads, their collected sayings like firmly embedded nails—given by one shepherd. Be warned, my son, of anything in addition to them. Of making many books there is no end, and much study wearies the body. Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the duty of all mankind. For God will bring every deed into*

judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil.^{Heb.12:9-14} As Mike Petzer said, *For the Christian, there is no such thing as a low self-esteem, only a low esteem of the finished work of Jesus!* So let's make every effort to enter God's rest as we remember our Creator and all that He has done for us.

Questions

What does “Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy” mean?

What does prosperity mean for a Christian?

Can a Christian, serve God and be rich?

What is the main difference between the Old Covenant and the New Covenant?

How can we deal with the guilt of our sins?

Puritan 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; Your Spirit has made known to me Your reconciliation in Jesus; Your Spirit has taught me to believe it; and Your Spirit 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.

Sunday 25th November Ps.92

What to do in times of trouble: *You are my God, and I will praise you; you are my God, and I will exalt you. Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; for his mercy endures forever.*^{Ps.118:28-29}

Last week we said that for the Christian, there is no sacred/secular divide—our lives are dedicated to God 24/7. And so the command “Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy” does not mean we rest from our work on the 7th day of the week but that we enjoy God's rest every day of the week: *There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; for anyone who enters God's rest also rests from their works, just as God did from his. Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will perish by following their example of disobedience.*^{Heb.4:9-11} Living under the New Covenant is very different from living under the Old Covenant. Under the Old Covenant, sin was between people and God and so people had to confess their sin before they could come to God—and if they were ceremonially unclean, they had to stay away from God until they were clean again. Under the New Covenant, Jesus is between us and God and so we confess Jesus when we come to God: *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} *For this reason Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance—now that he has died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant.*^{Heb.9:15} We don't undergo special preparations or religious cleansing before we approach God because we are already spiritually clean by His Word: *You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.*^{Jn.15:3-4} We don't need assistance from a priest because we have Jesus interceding for us. *But Jesus lives forever, so he serves as a priest forever. That is why he is always able to save those who come to God through him. He can do this because he always lives and intercedes for them.*^{Heb.7:24-25} We don't go on a pilgrimage because we already have access to heaven: *And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus.*^{Eph.2:6} Now we can come immediately to God to get

the help we need. *Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.*^{Heb.4:14-16} There is a similar principle for living in God's blessings. When trouble comes our way, we don't have to do anything out of the ordinary—we just keep focused on Jesus and what He has accomplished: *Let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.*^{Heb.12:1-2} *So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.*^{2Cor.4:16-18} God already knows what we need, so we shouldn't worry about our problems but bring them to Him: *Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear... For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.*^{Matt.6:25-34} *Before they call I will answer; while they are still speaking I will hear.*^{Is.65:24}

When we went through a tough time, we learnt an important lesson from the story about Esther—we called it “*the Esther Principle*”—**Prepare, Praise, Praise again, and Petition.**

Prepare. The Jews were about to be annihilated: *Then Haman said to King Xerxes, “There is a certain people dispersed among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom who keep themselves separate. Their customs are different from those of all other people, and they do not obey the king's laws; it is not in the king's best interest to tolerate them. If it pleases the king, let a decree be issued to destroy them, and I will give ten thousand talents of silver to the king's administrators for the royal treasury.”*^{Est.3:8-9} When this was brought to Esther's attention, the first thing she did was to focus everyone's attention on God to make sure they were in fellowship with Him—she called a fast: *Then Esther sent this reply to Mordecai: “Go, gather together all the Jews who are in Susa, and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my attendants will fast as you do. When this is done, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish.”*^{Est.4:15-16} For the Christian, fasting is not about food but focus. In the early Church, when they prayed and fasted, there was no delay whilst they stopped eating—they immediately acted: *Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust.*^{Acts.14:23} Jesus said that we can't fast if the Bridegroom is with us. *They said to him, “John's disciples often fast and pray, and so do the disciples of the Pharisees, but yours go on eating and drinking.” Jesus answered, “Can you make the friends of the bridegroom fast while he is with them? But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; in those days they will fast.”*^{Lk.5:33-35} Jesus, who is our Bridegroom, is always with us! Even under the Old Covenant, fasting was not just about giving up food but about focusing on God: *“But even now,” declares the LORD, “return to me with all your heart—with fasting, crying, and mourning.” Tear your hearts, not your clothes. Return to the LORD your God. He is merciful and compassionate, patient, and always ready to forgive and to change his plans about disaster. Who knows? He may reconsider and change his plan and leave a blessing for you. Then you could give grain offerings and wine offerings to the LORD your God.*^{Joel.2:12-14} Before we bring our requests to God we should prepare ourselves by focusing on Him and check that we are in fellowship with Him—but whether we have troubles or not, it is good practice to do a regular check-up on our spiritual health to confirm that we are in the faith. *Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you—unless, of course, you fail the test? And I trust that you will discover that we have not failed the test.*^{2Cor.13:5-6}

Praise. Once Esther had prepared herself and her people by focusing on God, she did not immediately bring her request to the king but invited him to a banquet. *"If it pleases the king," replied Esther, "let the king, together with Haman, come today to a banquet I have prepared for him."*^{Est. 5:4} God is Omniscient—all knowing—and He is not waiting on us to inform Him of events through our prayers! God already knows all about us—and He has already prepared a solution to our situation! Faith is believing God, enjoying Him and staying in fellowship with Him—faith is trusting God about everything, including when everything seems to be going wrong! Our priority is to worship God and participate in God's banquet: *He brought me to the banqueting house, And his banner over me was love.*^{Sof. 2:4} *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} And we are to bring offerings of praise and thanksgiving to the banquet! *Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that openly profess his name.*^{Heb. 13:15} *I will sacrifice a freewill offering to you; I will praise your name, LORD, for it is good.*^{Ps. 54:6} We enter God's presence with praise: *Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise; give thanks to him and praise his name.*^{Ps. 100:4}

Praise again. When Esther and the king were enjoying the banquet, the king asked Esther what she wanted and instead of telling the king how bad her situation was, she asked the king to attend another banquet: *"Bring Haman at once," the king said, "so that we may do what Esther asks."* *So the king and Haman went to the banquet Esther had prepared. As they were drinking wine, the king again asked Esther, "Now what is your petition? It will be given you. And what is your request? Even up to half the kingdom, it will be granted."* Esther replied, *"My petition and my request is this: If the king regards me with favour and if it pleases the king to grant my petition and fulfil my request, let the king and Haman come tomorrow to the banquet I will prepare for them. Then I will answer the king's question."*^{Est. 5:5-8} Too often we think that God must act immediately or it will be too late, but God is outside of time and He can even create time if necessary. God is Omnipotent (all-potent or powerful)—and there is nothing that God cannot do: *Jesus replied, "What is impossible with man is possible with God."*^{Lk. 18:27} *Ah, Sovereign LORD, you have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and outstretched arm. Nothing is too hard for you.*^{Jer. 32:17} God is never in a hurry—God is always on time and what He does is always at the right time. Even Jesus was born at just the right time, so that He fitted into God's plan precisely and exactly: *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} If we think our situation is insurmountable, imagine what it was like for Esther—she, her family and all her nation were about to be annihilated—but Esther didn't panic or think she had to tell the king immediately! Praise and thanksgiving prepares the way for God to show His salvation: *He who sacrifices thank offerings honours me, and he prepares the way so that I may show him the salvation of God.*^{Ps. 50:23}

Petition. Eventually Esther presented her request to the king—and her enormous problem was sorted! *So the king and Haman went to Queen Esther's banquet, and as they were drinking wine on the second day, the king again asked, "Queen Esther, what is your petition? It will be given you. What is your request? Even up to half the kingdom, it will be granted."* Then Queen Esther answered, *"If I have found favour with you, Your Majesty, and if it pleases you, grant me my life—this is my petition. And spare my people—this is my request."*^{Est. 7:1-3} *Then the king extended the gold sceptre to Esther and she arose and stood before him. "If it pleases the king," she said, "and if he regards me with favour and thinks it the right thing to do, and if he is pleased with me, let an order be written overruling the dispatches that Haman son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, devised and wrote to destroy the Jews in all the king's provinces."*^{Est. 8:4-5} We need to see difficulties as opportunities for God rather than problems for us—then we will be able to enjoy our journey with God as we see His kingdom unfold in our life. *Expect a miracle every day, expect a miracle when you pray. If you expect it, God will make a way, to perform a miracle for you each day.* A kingdom is the king's domain—and God's

king-dom is His domain, His dominion, His realm, the place where has authority. However, God's Kingdom is not a political kingdom but a spiritual kingdom—the rule of Christ in our hearts. Once, *having been asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, Jesus replied, "The kingdom of God does not come with your careful observation, nor will people say, 'Here it is,' or 'There it is,' because the kingdom of God is within you."*^{Lk.17:20-21} Pilate then went back inside the palace, summoned Jesus and asked him, "Are you the king of the Jews?" "Is that your own idea," Jesus asked, "or did others talk to you about me?" "Am I a Jew?" Pilate replied. "Your own people and chief priests handed you over to me. What is it you have done?" 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.18:33-37} God's kingdom is within us, it is Christ's domain in our heart and demonstrated by righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. *For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.*^{Rom.14:17} *For the kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power.*^{1Cor.4:20} Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our "God is a consuming fire."^{Heb.12:28-29} We present our requests to God with thanksgiving, not fear, panic or desperation: *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}

Jesus has overcome the world (and it's problems), and so when troubles come we can be at peace as we trust Him: *Jesus replied to them, "Now you believe.... I've told you this so that my peace will be with you. In the world you'll have trouble. But cheer up [be brave and courageous]! I have overcome the world."*^{Jn.16:31-33}

Here are 3 ABC don'ts and 3 ABC do's to remember when trouble comes—and also when trouble has gone!

1) **Don't get Angry:** Anger is an emotion and if it is not controlled, it will lead us into sin. *Anger is cruel, and wrath is like a flood, but jealousy is even more dangerous.*^{Pron.27:4}

2) **Don't Blame others** (and certainly not God): God is always right because He is God—but God is also good and can't be contaminated with evil: *You are good, and what you do is good;*^{Ps.119:68} *God can't be tempted by evil. And he doesn't tempt anyone... Every good and perfect gift is from God. It comes down from the Father. He created the heavenly lights. He does not change like shadows that move*^{Jas.1:13-17} *Woe to (what sorrow awaits; how terrible it will be for) anyone who argues with his Maker!*^{Is.45:9}

3) **Don't Complain:** Complaining is a criticism of God and how He is handling our situation! *And don't grumble as some of them did... These things happened to them as examples for us. They were written down to warn us... If you think you are standing strong, be careful not to fall.*^{1Cor.10:10-11}

1) **Do Adore Jesus** (Worship): To love God is the first call on our life. Loving God means that we adore Him—we appreciate and enjoy Him, we take delight in Him and say good things about Him. Love involves our emotions as well as our will. *The most important commandment is this: you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength.*^{Mk.12:29-30}

2) **Do Believe Jesus:** To believe is to trust—we trust God because we have total confidence in Him and that confidence is based on what we know of God. The more we know God, the easier it is to trust Him—and the harder it is to not trust Him! Trust is active not passive and is the basis of a happy and contented life: *May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.*^{Rom.15:13}

3) **Do Confess Jesus:** Confessing Jesus is simply believing with our heart and repeating with our lips who Jesus is, and what He has accomplished for us; it is believing with our heart and

repeating with our lips God's own declaration of who we are and what we have in Christ; it is believing with our heart and repeating with our lips what God says about us, our sins and everything included in our redemption. "*Like father, like son*" and we should be like our heavenly Father! *You think like a man—you don't think like God!*^{Mk.8:33} *Your thoughts concerning God are too human.*^{Martin Luther} What we say will affect how we live and because we are Believers, we should think, talk, live and give like Believers. What we confess with our lips will dominate us and so we must make our lips do their duty and make them harmonize with the Word of God. We should fill our lips with God's Word and make them say what God says about us and not allow them to say anything to the contrary! So let's remember the "*Esther principle*" **Prepare, Praise, Praise again, Petition** and see our difficulties as opportunities for God to work a miracle rather than a problem for us to worry about.

Questions

Why do we have difficulties?

What value does fasting have?

How do we feast from the abundance of God's house?

What can we learn from the way Esther saved Israel?

Do our words affect the way we live?

Puritan Prayer: 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 You give, let it draw out greater love to You.

December 2024

In God we trust: *Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and He will direct your paths.* Prov.3:5-6

Thought for the Month: Treat people as equally valuable, but treat ideas as if some are better than others, because they are. Classic tolerance requires that every person be free to express their ideas without fear of abuse or reprisal, not that all views have equal validity, merit, or truth. G.Koukl

Sunday 1st December Ps.93 Luke 1

God hears our prayer. *Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard.* Lk.1:13

Last week we looked at prayer and I mentioned the Esther Principle (interestingly the Book of Esther is the only book in the Bible that doesn't mention God by name!!!). When Esther had a problem, she focused on God and hosted 2 banquets before presenting her petition to the king: **Prepare, Praise, Praise again, Petition.** This is a good principle to apply when you can anticipate a difficulty coming in the future but some problems just pounce on us and we need to do something immediately! James says that we should consider these problems as “pure joy”—not because they are enjoyable or fun but because they will develop our faith. *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.* Jas.1:2-4 By very definition, Believers, believe—and so all Christians have faith. We can't please God without faith. Heb.11:6 and God gives us the faith to be saved. *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 But if we are going to mature, our faith must grow. Spiritual maturity is the ability to trust God in all circumstances, whether things are going well for us or not going well; whether we are happy or sad, whether we have plenty or nothing, whether we are healthy or sick. And unlike faith, maturity is not a given but learnt: *I rejoiced greatly in the Lord that at last you renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you were concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it. I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all this through him who gives me strength.* Phil.4:11-13 When James instructs us to consider trials as joy, he also tells us to pray: *Consider it a sheer gift, friends, when tests and challenges come at you from all sides. You know that under pressure, your faith-life is forced into the open and shows its true colours. So don't try to get out of anything prematurely. Let it do its work so you become mature and well-developed, not deficient in any way. If you don't know what you're doing, pray to the Father. He loves to help. You'll get his help, and won't be condescended to when you ask for it. Ask boldly, believingly, without a second thought. People who “worry their prayers” are like wind-whipped waves. Don't think you're going to get anything from the Master that way, adrift at sea, keeping all your options open.* Jas.1:2-8 James' phrase “fall into” trials is the same phrase that Luke uses in the story of the Good Samaritan when the man “fell among” thieves: *A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead.* Lk.10:30 This man had no choice about the situation—it came upon him suddenly and unexpectedly. When we face those sort of trials we don't have time to **Prepare, Praise, Praise again, Petition** like Esther did—we need to send an “arrow” prayer to God like Nehemiah did. The king expected an immediate answer from Nehemiah when he asked him why he looked despondent—and so Nehemiah prayed and answered the king in one breath! *Then I prayed to the God of heaven, and I answered the king...* Neh.2:4-5 Eliezer also found that God answered immediately: *Before I finished praying in my heart... [the answer came]* Gen24:45 [I remember a particular incident when I needed an immediate answer to a practical problem: My horse ran off when I was by myself in the middle of

Dartmoor—I prayed and felt that I should return to the horsebox about 7 miles away. When I reached the lorry, the horse was waiting for me!]

But if like Esther we have time to prepare for prayer, or like Nehemiah we have to offer an arrow prayer, we need to know that God hears our prayer. *I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life. This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us—whatever we ask—we know that we have what we asked of him.*^{1Jn.5:13-15} If we are righteous (right with God), we know that God hears our prayers and they are effective: *The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.*^{Jas.5:16} Yes, God hears our prayers and they please Him: *May my prayer be set before you like incense; may the lifting up of my hands be like the evening sacrifice.*^{Ps.141:2} *And when he had taken it, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb. Each one had a harp and they were holding golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. And they sang a new song: “You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth.”*^{Rev.5:8-10} But the prayers of the unrighteous are detestable to God: *If anyone turns a deaf ear to my instruction, even their prayers are detestable.*^{Prov.28:9} *The LORD detests the sacrifice of the wicked, but the prayer of the upright pleases him.*^{Prov.15:8} *The world is full of so-called prayer warriors who are prayer-ignorant. They're full of formulas and programs and advice, peddling techniques for getting what you want from God. Don't fall for that nonsense. This is your Father you are dealing with, and he knows better than you what you need. With a God like this loving you, you can pray very simply. Like this: Our Father in heaven, Reveal who you are...*^{Matt.6:7-9}

Zechariah was told that his prayer had been heard, but he could never have guessed what the result of his prayers would be. *Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord.*^{Lk.1:13-15} However, when John was born, Zachariah gained an insight into his son's future: *And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace.*^{Lk.1:76-79} Zechariah's prayers were instrumental in the implementation of God's plan of salvation, which God had devised before Adam had sinned—and even before He created the world: *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} And that plan was that His Son—the Word of God—would become human and die for the sins of the world: *the Lamb's book of life, the Lamb who was slain from the creation of the world. Whoever has ears, let them hear.*^{Rev.13:8-9} *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. (John testified concerning him. He cried out, saying, “This is the one I spoke about when I said, ‘He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.’”)*^{Jn.1:13-14} *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} John's ministry was to prepare the way for Jesus by preaching repentance—telling people to get right with God: *“A voice of one calling in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him. Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth. And all people will see God's salvation.’”* John said to the crowds coming out to be baptized by him, *“You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up*

children for Abraham. The axe is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.^{”Lk.2:2-9}

The OT prophets spoke about Elijah coming to prepare the way for Messiah: “See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes. He will turn the hearts of the parents to their children, and the hearts of the children to their parents,”^{Mal.4:5-6} Some of the Jews were erroneously expecting Elijah to be resurrected and come in person to prepare the way for the Messiah but John assured them that he was not Elijah nor was he the Prophet (Messiah): *The Jews of Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask John who he was. John gave witness to them. He did not try to hide the truth. He spoke to them openly. He said, “I am not the Christ.” They asked him, “Then who are you? Are you Elijah?” He said, “I am not.” “Are you the Prophet we’ve been expecting?” they asked. “No,” he answered. They asked one last time, “Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?” John replied, using the words of Isaiah the prophet. John said, “I’m the messenger who is calling out in the desert, ‘Make the way for the Lord straight.’” Some Pharisees who had been sent asked him, “If you are not the Christ, why are you baptizing people? Why are you doing that if you aren’t Elijah or the Prophet we’ve been expecting?” “I baptize people with water,” John replied. “But One is standing among you whom you do not know. He is the One who comes after me. I am not good enough to untie his sandals.”*^{”Jn.1:19-27}

However, although John was not the literal prophet Elijah from the OT (who had been dead for 100’s of years), he was the Elijah that Malachi prophesied about (many prophesies contain symbolic descriptions and so should not necessarily be interpreted literally—especially the Book of Revelations): *As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus instructed them, “Don’t tell anyone what you have seen, until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.” The disciples asked him, “Why then do the teachers of the law say that Elijah must come first?” Jesus replied, “To be sure, Elijah comes and will restore all things. But I tell you, Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but have done to him everything they wished. In the same way the Son of Man is going to suffer at their hands.” Then the disciples understood that he was talking to them about John the Baptist.*^{Matt.17:9-13} *From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been subjected to violence, and violent people have been raiding it. For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John. And if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come. Whoever has ears, let them hear. [Since the days of John the Baptist, the kingdom of heaven has been advancing with force. And forceful people are taking hold of it. All the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John came—For a long time now people have tried to force themselves into God’s kingdom. But if you read the books of the Prophets and God’s Law closely, you will see them culminate in John, teaming up with him in preparing the way for the Messiah of the kingdom.]*^{Matt.11:12-15} John was great in God’s sight: *Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord.*^{Lk.1:14-15} However, John was the last of the OT prophets and the least of us in the Kingdom of God (under the New Covenant) is greater than him: *Truly I tell you, among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.*^{Matt.11:11} Now the Kingdom of God has come, we have a better covenant: *Because of this oath, Jesus has become the guarantor of a better covenant.*^{Heb.7:22} In the New Covenant, our sins are forgiven, eradicated, remised, removed: *Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, “This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and remission [forgiveness] of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.”*^{Lk.24:45-48} In the New Covenant, Jesus never leaves us: *And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.*^{Matt.28:20} And the Holy Spirit never leaves us either: *It’s in Christ that you, once you heard the truth and believed it (this Message of your salvation), found yourselves home free—signed, sealed, and delivered by the Holy Spirit. This signet from God is the first instalment on what’s coming, a reminder that we’ll get everything God has planned for us, a praising and glorious life.*^{Eph.1:13-14} In the New Covenant we have better promises: *But in fact the ministry Jesus*

has received is as superior to theirs as the covenant of which he is mediator is superior to the old one, since the new covenant is established on better promises.^{Heb.8:6} And we have a better hope: For it is declared: "You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek." The former regulation is set aside because it was weak and useless (for the law made nothing perfect), and a better hope is introduced, by which we draw near to God.^{Heb.7:17-}

¹⁹ John preached a baptism of repentance: And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.^{Mk.1:4} We have a baptism of the Holy Spirit: 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." Then John gave this testimony: "I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him. I would not have known him, except that the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, 'The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is he who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.' I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God."^{Jn.1:29-34} The Baptism of the Holy Spirit is the power of God in the Person of the Holy Spirit, who gives us the ability to be Jesus' witness and also to counsel us, to explain Jesus to us and to lead us into God's truth. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.^{Acts.1:8} When the Counsellor comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father, he will testify about me.^{Jn.15:26} I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth.^{Jn.16:12-13} Jesus said that the Holy Spirit would gush out of Believers—which is one of the ways that true Believers can be identified: 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}

Yes, God does hear the prayer of a Believer, whether we have little faith or lots of faith, whether we have time to prepare ourselves before we present our requests or whether we send an arrow prayer to God. When we pray in the Name of Jesus, all of heaven listens, all of heaven stands to attention and everyone rushes to do the bidding of that Name. But God answers our prayers in the way He chooses and we need to be mature enough to accept God's answers and God's timing—and if we know God intimately, we will never doubt Him or His timing. However, our prayers should always be presented with thanksgiving: The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.^{Phil.4:5-7}

Questions

What makes prayer effective?

Are planned prayers more effective than quick prayers?

What was John the Baptist's ministry?

Why did John say he wasn't Elijah but Jesus did say he was Elijah?

Why was John the Baptist the greatest of the OT prophets?

What makes us greater than John the Baptist?

Puritan Prayer: 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.

Sunday 8th December Ps.95 Lk.1:26-56

The Lord is with you. Lk.1:28

When the angel said to Mary: *"Greetings, you who are highly favoured! The Lord is with you,"* she was perplexed and wondered what sort of greeting this was. The phrase: *"The Lord is with you"* was awesome in the true meaning of the word—full of awe; overwhelming; breath-taking—but the next announcement was even more overwhelming: *Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favour with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end.* Because the story has become so familiar to us, we can easily miss the enormity of its implications—that the eternal and immortal God would humble Himself and become a human being like us and yet retain His Deity. This was a unique event, because nothing like this had ever happened before—it was a true miracle, an intervention by God that over-ruled the normal events of life. Not only was God with Mary but God was also within Mary! No wonder Mary asked how it would happen! The angel replied: *The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. For nothing is impossible with God [For no word from God will ever fail].* Lk.1:35-37 However, what happened to Mary as she became the "home" of Jesus, now happens to all Believers—we become the "home" of Jesus. God isn't just with us but He is also within us: *If you love me, obey my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, who will never leave you. He is the Holy Spirit, who leads into all truth. The world cannot receive him, because it isn't looking for him and doesn't recognize him. But you know him, because he lives with you now and later will be in you. No, I will not abandon you as orphans—I will come to you.* Jn.14:15-18 *Christ in you, the hope of glory.* Col.1:27 *Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you?* 1Cor.3:16 *Those who are controlled by their flesh can't please God. But your flesh does not control you. The Holy Spirit controls you. The Spirit of God lives in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to Christ. Christ lives in you. So your body is dead because of sin. But your spirit is alive because you have been made right with God. The Spirit of the One who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you. So the God who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your bodies, which are going to die. He will do this by the power of his Spirit, who lives in you.* Rom.8:8-11

We should never underestimate the miracle of New Birth—people who are spiritually dead are made spiritually alive: *But God is so rich in mercy, and he loved us so much, that even though we were dead because of our sins, he gave us life when he raised Christ from the dead. (It is only by God's grace that you have been saved!) For he raised us from the dead along with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms because we are united with Christ Jesus.* Eph.2:4-6 When Jesus spoke to Nicodemus about new birth, He explained that in order to see God's Kingdom we must be born twice—born first naturally as a human baby and then born again spiritually as a Christian. And there is no other way to be part of God's Kingdom: *Jesus replied, "I assure you, no one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit. Humans can reproduce only human life, but the Holy Spirit gives birth to spiritual life. So don't be surprised when I say, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows wherever it wants. Just as you can hear the wind but can't tell where it comes from or where it is going, so you can't explain how people are born of the Spirit."* Jn.3:5-8 As we review Mary's conception of Jesus, we can see a parallel in our conversion when God comes to be inside of us.

The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.

Conversion is a work of God—the Holy Spirit convicts us, converts us and changes us: *But in fact, it is best for you that I go away, because if I don't, the Advocate won't come. If I do go away, then I will send him to you. And when he comes, he will convict the world of its sin, and of God's righteousness, and of the coming judgment. The world's sin is that it refuses to believe in me. Righteousness is available because I go to the Father, and you will see me no more. Judgment will come because the ruler of this world has already been judged. There is so much more I want to tell you, but you can't bear it now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own but will tell you what he has heard. He will tell you about the future. He will bring me glory by telling you whatever he receives from me.*^{Jn.16:7-14} We are incapable of saving ourselves because we are spiritually dead: *When you were stuck in your old sin-dead life, you were incapable of responding to God. God brought you alive—right along with Christ! Think of it! All sins forgiven, the slate wiped clean, that old arrest warrant cancelled and nailed to Christ's Cross.*^{Col.2:13-14} In fact without God's help, we cannot even choose God: *You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last.*^{Jn.15:16} And we know that God has chosen us because when we heard the Gospel, the Holy Spirit has convicted us and we believed: *For we know, brothers and sisters loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not simply with words but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction.*^{1Thess.1:4-5} And Jesus has saved 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} Here is a saying that you can trust. It should be accepted completely. *Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.*^{1Tim.1:15}

So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God.

When God saved us through the New Birth, we became a New Creation: *Anyone who believes in Christ is a new creation. The old is gone! The new has come! It is all from God. He brought us back to himself through Christ's death on the cross. And he has given us the task of bringing others back to him through Christ.*^{2Cor.5:17-18} We became a child of God: *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.1:12-14} We also received a new nature—a holy nature: *But now He has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in His sight, without blemish and free from accusation.*^{Col.1:22} *God is the God who gives peace. May he make you holy through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept free from blame. May you be without blame from now until our Lord Jesus Christ comes. The One who has chosen you is faithful. He will do all these things.*^{1Thess.5:23-24}

For nothing is impossible with God.

A more literal translation is “no word of God is void of power” and so every word of God is pregnant with divine power to achieve what God intends! God's Words are creative! The universe was created when God spoke and we were also re-created when God spoke: *For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.*^{2Cor.4:6} But God didn't created the world and leave it completely to its own devices—God sustains the world by His Word: *In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.*^{Heb.1:1-3} And it is by His Word that God sustains us: *Even to your old age and grey hairs I am he, I am he who will sustain you. I have made you and I will carry you; I will sustain you and I will rescue you.*^{Is.46:4} *Sustain me according to your promise,*

and I will live... I long for your salvation, O LORD, and your law is my delight. Let me live that I may praise you, and may your laws sustain me.^{Ps.119:116;174-175} *Cast your cares on the LORD and he will sustain you; he will never let the righteous fall.*^{Ps.55:22} Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"^{Matt.4:4} We have full confidence in God's Word—both the Living Word (Jesus Christ) and the written Word (what He has said as recorded in the Scriptures)—because every Word from God is full of power. God's Word can never fail because each one is are pregnant with life: *The LORD will fulfil [his purpose] for me; your love, O LORD, endures forever.*^{Ps.138:8} *I cry out to God Most High, to God, who fulfils [his purpose] for me. He sends from heaven and saves me.*^{Ps.57:2-3} *Continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfil his good purpose.*^{Phil.2:12-13}

The Holy Spirit has come on us and the power of the Most High has overshadowed us. Because Christ is within us, we are now God's Temple—the place where He dwells and reigns. We are living stones being built into a spiritual building by the Holy Spirit. *So you are no longer strangers and outsiders. You are citizens together with God's people. You are members of God's family. You are a building that is built on the apostles and prophets. They are the foundation. Christ Jesus himself is the most important stone in the building. The whole building is held together by him. It rises to become a holy temple because it belongs to the Lord. And because you belong to him, you too are being built together. You are being made into a house where God lives through his Spirit.*^{Eph.2:19-22} *As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him—you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.*^{1Pet.2:4-5} **We are now holy because we are born again and we are called the children of God.** So let's live like children of God. **For nothing is impossible with God—every Word of God has power within it to fulfil God's purpose.** Let's continue to trust God in the large things of life as well as the little things of life. And let's make our response to God the same as Mary's: *I am the Lord's servant, may it be to me as you have said... My soul magnifies the Lord, And my spirit has rejoiced in God my Saviour... For He who is mighty has done great things for me, And holy is His name.*^{Lk.1:38-49} Yes! **Christ is in us, He is the hope of glory.**^{Col.1:27}

Questions

What is the difference between the Son of God (Jesus) and sons of God (Christians)? *(Some people did accept him. They believed in his name. He gave them the right to become children of God.)*^{Jn.1:12}

Why can we say that we are holy when we are not sinless? *(But now He has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in His sight, without blemish and free from accusation.)*^{Col.1:22}

What power does God's Word have? *(no word of God is void of power)*^{Lk.1.37}

How is Christ in a Believer? *(Christ in you, the hope of glory.)*^{Col.1:27}

Puritan Prayer: 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 15th December. Ps.96 Lk.2:1-21

What's in a name? *Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.*^{Lk.2:11} The King James Bible was published in 1611 when William Shakespeare was 46 and in Psalm 46, the 46th word from the beginning is “*shake*” (*though the mountains shake with the swelling thereof.*^{Ps.46:3}) and the 46th word from the end is “*spear*” (*and cutteth the spear in sunder;*^{Ps.46:9})! This has led some people to speculate that William Shakespeare may have been involved in the translation of the King James Bible (or possibly one of the translators wanted to allude to him). Nevertheless, Shakespeare is widely regarded as the greatest writer in the English language and his plays have been translated into every major living language. In his play, Romeo and Juliet, Shakespeare wrote: *What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet.* Although that may be true of a rose, when it comes to Jesus, His name is very important: *Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*^{Phil.2:9-11} *The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven. So he became as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs.*^{Heb.1:3-4} *I am writing to you, dear children, because your sins have been forgiven on account of his name.*^{1Jn.2:12} *But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.*^{1Cor.6:11} *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} *I will bow down toward your holy temple and will praise your name for your love and your faithfulness, for you have exalted above all things your name and your word.* *When I called, you answered me; you made me bold and stout-hearted.*^{Ps.138:2-3} The name “Jesus” (which is the same word as “Joshua”) means “Saviour”: *Joseph, descendant of David, don't be afraid to take Mary as your wife. She is pregnant by the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus [He Saves], because he will save his people from their sins.*^{Matt.1:20-21} Actually, all the names of Jesus are important because they describe aspects of His ministry. *I will praise your name for your love and your faithfulness, for you have exalted above all things your name and your word.*^{Ps.138:2} And because our words have consequences, every word we use is also important: *But here is what I tell you. On judgment day, people will have to account for every careless word they have spoken. By your words you will be found guilty or not guilty.*^{Matt.12:36-37} Actually, all the names of Jesus are important because they describe aspects of His ministry. *I will praise your name for your love and your faithfulness, for you have exalted above all things your name and your word.*^{Ps.138:2} And because our words have consequences, every word we use is also important: *But here is what I tell you. On judgment day, people will have to account for every careless word they have spoken. By your words you will be found guilty or not guilty.*^{Matt.12:36-37} When people say that something is different from reality, they are doing more than bring confusion—they are lying! This is especially true when they say that God's standards have changed and today we have different moral and spiritual standards from those of the early Church: *How terrible it will be for those who say that what is evil is good! How terrible for those who say that what is good is evil! How terrible for those who say that darkness is light.*^{Is.5:20} And so when people say that all religions are the same—then that is a lie: *Before me, there was no other god at all. And there will not be any god after me. I am the one and only LORD. I am the only one who can save you.*^{Is.43:10-11} When people say that you can come to God anyhow and anyway you like—then that is a lie: *Jesus answered, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”*^{Jn.14:6} When people say that God will forgive everyone—whether they believe and trust Him or not—then that is a lie: *Those who believe in him won't be condemned. But those who don't believe are already condemned because they don't believe in God's only Son... Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life. Instead, he will see*

God's constant anger.^{Jn.3:18;36} When people say that “*alternative lifestyles*” are acceptable lifestyles—lifestyles such as drunkenness, adultery, fornication, homosexuality, lying, cheating, etc.—then that is a lie: *Don't you know that evil people will not receive God's kingdom? Don't be fooled. Those who commit sexual sins will not receive the kingdom. Neither will those who worship statues of gods or commit adultery. Neither will men who are prostitutes or who commit homosexual acts. Neither will thieves or those who always want more and more. Neither will those who are often drunk or tell lies or cheat. People who live like that will not receive God's kingdom. Some of you used to do those things. But your sins were washed away. You were made holy. You were made right with God. All of that was done in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.*^{1Cor.6:9-11} We live at a time where people accumulate information and think that is truth but facts are not the same as truth. Facts are a collection of information that produce evidence. Truth is how God see things—it is evidence seen from the divine perspective. Reading books give us an insight into the author’s mind. Reading the Bible gives us insight into God’s mind.

God is holy and so we are expected to be holy too: *The one who chose you is holy. So you should be holy in all that you do. It is written, “Be holy, because I am holy.”*^{1Pet.1:15-16} The Old Testament part of our Bible contains some very draconian rules and penalties in order to show the holiness of God and severity of sin—including the consequences of breaking God’s laws. But those rules and penalties were temporary—they were only until the New Covenant was implemented: *By calling this covenant “new,” he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and outdated will soon disappear.*^{Heb.8:13} However, although the OT penalties for breaking those rules were only for the Jews who were under the old Law, , the principles of the moral laws of righteous godly living still remain for today—rules such as: don’t take God’s Name in vain; don’t cheat; don’t lie; don’t commit adultery; don’t steal; don’t murder; etc. The old Law became obsolete when Jesus introduced the new law of Grace and Mercy—and so Mary’s Child was given the name Jesus because He came to save us from the penalty of breaking God’s laws and to bring us into His Family: *Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. Therefore anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. 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.5:17-20} But then the right time came. God sent his Son. A woman gave birth to him. He was born under the authority of the law. He came to set free those who were under the law. He wanted us to be adopted as children with all the rights children have. Because you are his children, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts. He is the Holy Spirit. By his power we call God “Abba.” Abba means Father.^{Gal.4:4-6} Wesley penned the sentiments of this Scripture in his hymn “Hark the herald angels sing”: *Born that man no more may die, Born to raise the sons of earth, Born to give them second birth.*

Although some of the teachings of the Church have become distorted over the years to include a lot of myths and superstitions—especially around then nativity of Jesus—the faith as originally given to the apostles is still sound and timeless: *Paul wrote to you about, using the wisdom God gave him... Some things in his letters are hard to understand. Ignorant people and people who aren't sure of what they believe distort what Paul says in his letters the same way they distort the rest of the Scriptures. These people will be destroyed.*^{2Pet.3:16} The Spirit says clearly that in later times some believers will desert the Christian faith. *They will follow spirits that deceive, and they will believe the teachings of demons. These people will speak lies disguised as truth. Their consciences have been scarred as if branded by a red-hot iron. They will try to stop others from getting married and from eating certain foods. God created food to be received with prayers of thanks by those who believe and know the truth. Everything God created is good. Nothing should be rejected if it is received*

with prayers of thanks. The word of God and prayer set it apart as holy.^{2Tim.4:1-5} So we have a responsibility to examine the Church's teachings and check them against the Scriptures: *They were very willing to receive God's message, and every day they carefully examined the Scriptures to see if what Paul said was true.*^{Acts.17:11} And we should contend for the true faith. Dear friends, although I was very eager to write to you about the salvation we share, I felt I had to write and urge you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints.^{Jude:3} In the past, slavery was not only condoned but actually promoted by some parts of the Church (the church of the establishment—not the Church of Believers) but the NT Bible clearly describes slave trading as “*ungodly, sinful and contrary to sound doctrine.*” *We know that the law is good if it is used properly. We also know that the law isn't made for godly people. It is made for those who break the law. It is for those who refuse to obey. It is for ungodly and sinful people. It is for those who aren't holy and who don't believe. It is for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for adulterers and perverts, for slave traders and liars and perjurers—and for whatever else is contrary to the sound doctrine. True teaching agrees with the glorious good news of the blessed God. He trusted me with that good news.*^{1Tim.1:8-11} Some of the Church's teaching about women have clearly been at odds with the NT teaching and practice—such as forbidding women to speak and insisting they wear hats. This passage clearly shows that women were expected to pray and share in public worship: *Every man who covers his head when he prays or speaks what God has revealed dishonours the one who has authority over him. Every woman who prays or speaks what God has revealed and has her head uncovered while she speaks dishonours the one who has authority over her.*^{1Cor.11:4-5}

Our Christian faith is based on fact of Mary having a son called Jesus who is “*God with us*”: *The virgin is going to have a baby. She will give birth to a son. And he will be called Emmanuel. The name Immanuel means “God with us.”*^{Matt.1:22} Any teaching (or teacher) that denies Jesus Christ has come as a human being, is wrong and should be refuted: *Many people who deceive others have gone into the world. They refuse to declare that Jesus Christ came in flesh and blood. This is the mark of a deceiver and an antichrist. Be careful that you don't destroy what we've worked for, but that you receive your full reward. Everyone who doesn't continue to teach what Christ taught doesn't have God. The person who continues to teach what Christ taught has both the Father and the Son.*^{2Jn.1:7-9} And any teaching (or teacher) that denies Jesus Christ is not God should also be refuted: *So I want you to know that no one speaking by God's Spirit says, “Jesus is cursed.” No one can say, “Jesus is Lord,” except by the Holy Spirit.*^{1Cor.12:3} Although false teachings and false teachers will come, we must build ourselves up in the most holy faith by praying in the power of the Holy Spirit: *But you, my dear friends, must remember what the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ predicted. They told you that in the last times there would be scoffers whose purpose in life is to satisfy their ungodly desires. These people are the ones who are creating divisions among you. They follow their natural instincts because they do not have God's Spirit in them. But you, dear friends, must build each other up in your most holy faith, pray in the power of the Holy Spirit, and await the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will bring you eternal life. In this way, you will keep yourselves safe in God's love.*^{Jude:17-21} And we must also study God's Word so that we are credible in our doctrine and not blown around by any false doctrine: *Then we will no longer be little children, tossed and carried about by all kinds of teachings that change like the wind.*^{Eph.4:14}

What's in the Name of Jesus? Everything! And yet what we believe about Jesus is as important if not more important that the Name—which is why Paul gave Timothy this instruction: *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.*^{2Tim.2:15} Poor theology is hard but good theology is easy; poor theology will wear you out but good theology will keep you spiritually alert and alive; poor theology is stressful but good theology is restful; poor theology wastes time but good theology saves time! The Gospel is simple, settled and spiritual—if we get our doctrine right, our faith becomes supernaturally natural. Jesus' birth was part of God's purpose to save us: *Today in the*

town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.^{Lk.2:11} Let's follow the Shepherd's example and *spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child.*^{Lk.2:17} And then honour God in the way we think, speak and act as we live as people that Jesus has saved.

Questions

Why is the name of Jesus important?

Are all the OT laws still relevant for us today?

And if the OT laws are not relevant, how do we choose which laws are relevant?

Does it matter what name we call God?

How do we know which Bible stories are factual history and which are allegories?

Does it matter if we distort the Bible stories (such as Jesus' Nativity)?

Puritan Prayer. O Son of God and Son of Man, You were incarnate, You suffered, You rose and You 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, greater than that which keeps the stars in their courses and greater than that which gives life to all creatures.

Sunday 22nd December Christmas Carols

Peace on earth. *Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.*^{Lk.2:14}

After the angel announced Jesus' birth to the shepherds, a great company of angels joined in praising God: *And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.*^{Lk.2:13-14} This declaration of praise to God seems like a travesty, a parody or a mockery because there is no peace on earth and there has not been any peace on earth—not before the angels made that announcement or afterwards! Peace in heaven—yes, but not peace on earth!! Each year the International Day of Peace is observed around the world on 21 September. The UN General Assembly declared this as a day devoted to strengthening the ideals of peace, through observing 24 hours of non-violence and cease-fire. However, achieving true peace entails much more than laying down arms for a single day and there continues to be wars and rumours of war. Benjamin Disraeli returned from the Congress of Berlin in 1878 after the Russian-Turkish war, stating: "*Lord Salisbury and myself have brought you back peace — but a peace I hope with honour.*" But there was no lasting peace and the Balkans became a fermenting ground of unrest, leading to WWI. Neville Chamberlain returned from Munich in September 1938 and made the now famous (or infamous) remark "*Peace for our time!*" about the Anglo-German Declaration, but within a year, Germany had invaded Poland, leading to World War II. However, the greatest destroyer of peace and life was not Hitler with his 6 million holocaust victims, nor was it Stalin with his 15-20 million victims but Mao Zedong with his "Great Leap Forward" from 1958 to 1962, which resulted at least 45 million deaths (some put it at over 60 million deaths)! But not all strife, turbulence and pain come from man-made intervention, for instance, the Spanish 'Flu at the end of WWI resulted in up to 50 million deaths, and more recently Covid19, which resulted (directly or indirectly) in over 7 million deaths. Nevertheless, the angels' declaration of "*peace on earth*" was not just an aspiration but praise to God and so it is true (because we can only worship God in truth: *God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth.*^{Jn.4:24}). However, what the angels actually said was: *Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests [or peace among those with whom he*

is pleased.] The good news of Christmas is that we can have peace on earth now, as well as peace in heaven later—but this only applies to those with whom God is pleased with and those His favour rests on! We cannot please God without 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} And so, although the hope of peace that the angels brought was for all people and for all time—it is only for those who worship Jesus as the Son of God and trust God by taking Him at His word. **Peace** is spelt **P-E-A-C-E** which we can use as a mnemonic: **P**ardon; **E**nd of hostilities; **A**cceptance; **C**hrist; **E**ternal life.

P–Pardon: God pardons us from all our sins. With our sins forgiven, we can live with Him—starting now and continuing into eternity. But the pardon came with a price—and that price was Jesus dying in our place so that we could live. *Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.*^{Is.53:4-6}

E–End of hostilities: When we are pardoned, the hostilities ends between us and God—we are emancipated from sin because our sins are expunged, they are completely forgiven and removed! *Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, “This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.”*^{Lk.45:47}

A–Acceptance: The reason we have peace with God is because of Jesus’ death on the Cross: *The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation... 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.1:15-20} *To the praise of the glory of His grace, by which He made us accepted in the Beloved. In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace.*^{Eph.1:6-8}

C–Christ: The word means “*Anointed One*” and is the description of God’s promised Deliverer, the Saviour. Throughout history leading up to Jesus’ birth, God had promised a Deliverer, someone who would emancipate His people from slavery. Unfortunately, most people were expecting a political saviour who would deliver them from the dominion of other kings and governments. And so when Jesus was born, they knew where He would be born but didn’t understand why He was born. *“Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him.” When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. When he had called together all the people’s chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. “In Bethlehem in Judea,” they replied, “for this is what the prophet has written.”*^{Matt.2:2-5} However, although Jesus was born king of the Jews, He wasn’t a political king over a portion of geographical land in the Middle East, but the spiritual King over the whole world (which He had created anyway). All those who accept His authority, become members of His family and loyal citizens of His Kingdom.

E–Eternal life: Jesus’ Kingdom is an internal Kingdom, but unlike the kingdoms of this world that rise and fall, His Kingdom is an eternal Kingdom that will never end. *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. [The passionate commitment of the LORD of Heaven’s Armies will make this happen!]*^{Is.9:6-7} All those who believe on the Name of Jesus inherit eternal life and reign with King Jesus for all eternity. *For God so loved the*

world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.^{Jn.3:16} *You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth.*^{Rev.5:10} *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} That is the true meaning of “peace on earth” and also the real meaning of Christmas.

Puritan Prayer. 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 29th December.

How was your Christmas? It came and went so quickly—and yet for some it is still to come! The Eastern Churches (Orthodox, Coptic, etc.) celebrate Christmas on the 7th January next year because they use the old Julian Calendar established by Julius Caesar in 46BC—just 9 years after he landed at Walmer! Under the Julian Calendar, the last day of the year was March 24th with 25th March (Lady Day) being the first day of the new year. When Pope Gregory XIII introduced the Gregorian Calendar in AD1582, they had to lose 10 days in order to keep the calendar in line with the solar system. This was just after the Henry VIII had broken away from the Roman Catholic church and so England refused to accept the new “Catholic” calendar until 1752. The Anglo-Saxons new year started on 25th December as this was their Winter Solstice, but mostly the new year started in March. From 1087 to 1155 the English year began on 1st January, then from 1155 to 1751 on 25th March and back to 1st January in 1752 with the introduction of the Gregorian Calendar. The year 1751 began on 25th March and ended on 31st December 1751, with 1752 starting on 1st January. They had to lose 11 days (which is why the Tax year starts on April 5th as the Government didn’t want to lose any revenue!), and so Wednesday 2nd September 1752 was followed by Thursday, 14th September 1752! The time difference between the 2 calendars is now 13 days, which is why the Eastern Church celebrates Christmas on 7th January—and by the year 2100 the difference will be 14 days! But whenever we celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ, we think of the things we enjoy—family reunions, time off, food, the exchanging of gifts. These things aren’t bad, and it’s not wrong to rejoice in them, but when Christmas time is *just* these things, the most important part of Christmas is missing. It is good to remember the real reason for Christmas at this time of the year and there are catch-phrases about the Christian Christmas to remind us: *Christmas/sacred or Christ/massacred—where do you draw the line; Jesus, the reason for the season* (actually, *sin* is the reason for the season!); *Christmas begins with Christ; Christmas is not about giving, it's about a Gift!* But we need remember the “reason for the season” throughout the whole year. C.S. Lewis says in “Mere Christianity”, “*Aim at Heaven and you will get earth ‘thrown in’: aim at earth and you will get neither.... We shall never save civilisation as long as civilisation is our main object. We must learn to want something else even more.*” It is important to lift our gaze from earth to Heaven, to take our focus from trees, lights, and presents and fix our gaze on the higher reality those things point to—which is Christ. *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} 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}

One of the ways we do this is by spending time with God in His Word. When we turn to the pages of Scripture, we are confronted with the awesome and true claim that the baby in Bethlehem is God incarnate—God became human. Scripture doesn't allow us to dismiss Jesus as some kind of holiday gimmick. It won't allow us to strip Jesus of His authority: *"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.5:12-14} Another example is *Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world.* ^{Heb.1:1-2} Here the author is saying that God spoke in the Old Testament days through prophets, then verse two starts with a *"but."* That pause sets us up for a very important point: Now God has spoken to us in His Son. God's relationship with man has changed. God hasn't changed, but how He relates to us has. Now, in the last days, the Word of God has come not merely by the lips of a prophet, but in the form of God's own Son, the truer and greater Prophet, *"the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature"*. ^{Heb.1:3} And He has been appointed *"the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world."* God's Son created all things—without Him, nothing was made. This means that the one who became the baby in that manger is the one who caused everything to exist, and everything is His. He is the uncaused cause, the explanation needed by physicists and cosmologists to explain where everything came from. The answers to the questions most plaguing scientists aren't found in elite universities and their state-of-the-art laboratories. The answers are found wrapped in rags, in a manger. The real Christmas story is not a fairy-tale or a myth and Christians are not simple-minded or stupid when they commit themselves to following the Christ who was laid in a manger. That Baby was (and still is), the reason for the way the world is. The mystery of the universe finds its beginning in Jesus, the God-man—and Christmas was always the plan. The first Christmas gift was the eternal Word, the Cause of all creation, entering the creation to rescue all creation. God gave to mankind the agent of rescue to save humanity and set the cosmos right again. This is where our gaze should be focused.

We also need to share what we believe because it is in the sharing that we get understanding: *I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith, so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ.* ^{Phile.6} That is why fellowship is so important. Christians are a family of Believers. God is our Father, Jesus is our Elder Brother and we are family: *God has made everything. He has acted in exactly the right way. He is bringing his many sons and daughters to share in his glory. To do so, he has made the One who saved them perfect because of his sufferings. 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.2:10-11} Fellowship means sharing—which requires being together and interacting. We are a prophetic people and prophesy involves edification, exhortation and encouragement: *But the one who prophesies speaks to people for their strengthening, encouraging and comfort.* ^{1Cor.14:3} This involves edification, exhortation and encouragement on a social level, such as chatting about health, family, work, etc., but it also includes edification, exhortation and encouragement on a spiritual level, such as chatting what we have learnt about Jesus, about our salvation, about how we are trusting God so that worry and anxiety no longer troubles us. We are spirit, soul and body, and

we need to take care of each part of us. *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. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it.*^{1Thess. 5:23-24} Our spirit is our God-conscious part, the part of us that yearns for God and where worship starts: *God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth.*^{Jn. 4:24} Our spirit is made new at conversion. *I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.*^{Ezek. 36:26-27} 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. *This is a trustworthy saying.*^{Tit. 2:4-8} Our soul is our mind or personality—and we renew our mind by the Scriptures that are quickened by the Holy Spirit. *Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word.*^{Eph. 5:25-26} Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.^{Rom. 12:1-2} God is always near and when we pray with thanksgiving, His peace guards both our heart and our mind: *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. Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.*^{Phil. 4:4-8}¹⁹⁵⁰

While lights, trees, and presents are fantastic parts of Christmas celebrations, the thing that makes this the “*most wonderful time of the year*” is God’s ultimate gift to humanity: Jesus, the uncreated Creator. Jesus, the one of whom we sing, “*Hail the Heaven-born Prince of Peace! Hail the Sun of Righteousness! Light and life to all he brings. Risen with healing in his wings... Mild He lays His glory by, born that man no more may die, Born to raise the sons of earth, born to give them second birth.*” This is what Christmas and Christianity is all about.

Puritan Prayer. 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 will 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, to receive Him, to possess Him, to love Him, and to bless Him in my thoughts, words and 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.

Theme for the year: In God we trust!

January: *In You, LORD my God, I put my trust. I trust in You; do not let me be put to shame, nor let my enemies triumph over me. No one who hopes in You will ever be put to shame.* Ps.25:1-3

Thought for the Month: Worrying is carrying tomorrow's load with today's strength-carrying two days at once. It is moving into tomorrow ahead of time. Worrying does not empty tomorrow of its sorrow; it empties today of its strength. *Corrie ten Boom*

February: *Do not let your hearts be troubled. You trust in God; trust 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?* Jn.14:1-2

Thought for the Month: If you are born again, you are a child of God. Never tear yourself out of that relationship and the righteousness of God by saying that you are dirty or unclean—Jesus' blood has cleansed you and His life has been delivered to you! It is alright to sing that as an unregenerate but it is not the experience of the sons and daughters of God. *John G Lake*

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

Thought for the Month:

Truth and godliness belong together. Truth is a living thing; when it grips our minds, it changes our lives. If we claim to know the truth, then the Bible would require us to prove our claim by the evidence of a way of life matching the truth. *Alec Motyer*

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

Thought for the Month: Christianity is not based on a mystical revelation or self-inspired philosophy but it is deeply rooted in history. In fact, it is the only religious system I can think of that depends on a historical event (the resurrection of Jesus) being real—not fake—news. *Alisa Childers*

May: *Now this I know: The LORD gives victory to his anointed. He answers him from His heavenly sanctuary with the victorious power of His right hand. Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the LORD our God.* Ps.20:6-7

Thought for the Month: Whatever the Holy Spirit touches, the Holy Spirit changes. So it is normal that the Holy Spirit will bring some changes, even in our feelings, in our emotions, in our way of expressing ourselves. It is normal when we first approach the Holy Spirit that there should be a reaction of our laughter, of tears, of jumping for joy, or speaking in tongues. *Raniero Cantalamessa*

June: *May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in Him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.* Rom.15:13

Thought for the Month: The thought of God stirs a person so deeply that he cannot be content unless he praises Him—because He made us for Himself and our hearts find no peace until they rest in Him. *Augustine of Hippo*

July: *My salvation and my honour depend on God; He is my mighty rock, my refuge. Trust in Him at all times, you people; pour out your hearts to Him, for God is our refuge.* Ps.62:7-8

Thought for the Month: Jesus says that to experience the Holy Spirit is like to be born again. It's a new birth in the sense that everything comes alive. The Holy Spirit doesn't change anything and yet He changes everything. He doesn't add anything to what Jesus has already said and instituted, but he makes all Jesus has said and done become alive today. *Raniero Cantalamessa*

August: *May Your unfailing love come to me, LORD, Your salvation, according to Your promise; then I can answer anyone who taunts me, for I trust in Your word.* Ps.119:41-42

Thought for the Month: Triumphant prayer is almost impossible where there is neglect of the study of the Word of God. Prayer that is born of meditation upon the Word of God is the prayer that soars upward most easily to God's listening ears. *R.A.Torrey*

September: *Those who trust in the LORD are like Mount Zion, which cannot be shaken but endures forever. As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the LORD surrounds His people both now and forevermore.* Ps.125:1-2

Thought for the Month: We should be able to build into our life the things that have true foundations in the Scripture. Of course, there are some things concerning both our personal life and also church life, that are not mentioned in the New Testament, and here we must be careful that we depend upon our sanctified reasoning faculties and righteous judgment. *George Jeffreys*

October: *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.* Is.30:15

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

November: *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.* Is.12:2

Thought for the Month: The most basic level of Christianity is to be blessed—the highest level of Christianity is to be a blessing! *I will bless you... you will be a blessing.* ^{Gen.12.2} It's not God's plan for our life but our life for God's plan. *Andrew Corbett*

December: *Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will direct your paths.* Prov.3:5-6

Thought for the Month: Treat people as equally valuable, but treat ideas as if some are better than others, because they are. Classic tolerance requires that every person be free to express their ideas without fear of abuse or reprisal, not that all views have equal validity, merit, or truth. *Greg Kouss*

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' "The Mystery of the Last Supper")
A.D.33 April Fri. 3 rd	Crucifixion of Jesus
c A.D.35	Conversion of Paul Acts 9
<A.D.37	<i>Christianity came to Britain. ***</i>
A.D.37-41	<i>Reign of Caligula</i>
A.D.41-54	<i>Reign of Claudius</i>
c A.D.44	<i>Death of Herod Agrippa 1</i>
< A.D.50	Letter of James
A.D.48-49	Paul's 1 st missionary journey
A.D.49/50	Jerusalem Conference Acts.15
A.D.50	Paul's 2 nd missionary journey
A.D.50-52	Paul at Corinth
A.D.51	1 & 2 Thessalonians from Corinth
A.D.52	Galatians from Corinth
A.D.54	Paul's 3 rd missionary journey
A.D.54 -68	<i>Reign of Nero</i>
A.D.54-57	Paul at Ephesus
A.D.57	1Corinthians from Ephesus
A.D.57	2Corinthians from Macedonia
A.D.57/58	Romans from Corinth
A.D.58	Paul's arrest at Jerusalem
A.D.58-60	Paul's imprisonment at Cæsarea
A.D.60-61	Paul winters at Malta
A.D.61	Paul arrives at Rome
A.D.61-63	Paul's imprisonment at Rome
A.D.62	Colossians, Ephesians, Philemon from Rome
A.D.63	Philippians from Rome

A.D.63-65	Paul's release & further ministry
A.D.63	1 Timothy & Titus
A.D.63-64	Hebrews (possibly Barnabas)
<i>A.D.64</i>	<i>Herod's Temple finished</i>
<A.D.65	Matthew, Mark, Luke, Acts
<A.D.65	Revelation****
A.D.64	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.

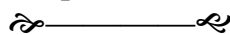
666 = six hundred and sixty-six, not six, six, six. It is the numerical value of “*Caesar Nero*”

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. 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).



Covenant

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'*ab*'am, and God became known as the God of Abraham. Abraham's wife Sarai became known as Sar'*ab*

Christian Guidelines

Make the Master proud of you by being good citizens. Respect the authorities, whatever their level; they are God's emissaries for keeping order. It is God's will that by doing good, you might cure the ignorance of the fools who think you're a danger to society. Exercise your freedom by serving God, not by breaking the rules. Treat everyone you meet with dignity. Love your spiritual family. Revere God. Respect the government. ^{1Pet.2:13-17[TM]}

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 also 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.*

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.

Forgiveness is unconditional (because it is by grace); Restoration is conditional on repentance. which involves at least a determination to change Forgiveness is a clean slate; restoration is keeping the slate clean. Forgiveness is mending what was broken; Restoration is making it work again.



Some people have a very distorted view of salvation, believing that salvation was the result of human effort to accept the grace of God. This usually leads them to believe that salvation could be relinquished if a believer sinned and so, if a sin was not repented of it would cancel out a person's salvation. Salvation is entirely by grace—our efforts do not save us.

The Bible only lists one unforgiveable sin: the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit (the rejection of the Holy Spirit's work of regeneration). No-one can determine whether someone is saved or damned, but we can determine from Scripture that *all who come unto Me I will in no wise cast out.* ^{Jn.6:37}

The grace of God covers more sin and human failure than semi-pelagians (someone who believes that salvation is faith in Christ plus our efforts to be righteous) know! The Biblical doctrine of the grace of God destroys the notion that suicide or any other sin is unforgiveable! This does not necessarily mean that everyone who professes faith in Christ and commits suicide dies in a regenerated state (saved). But it at the least counters the idea that suicide automatically causes a person's salvation to be forfeited. And at the very least, we can be assured that genuine salvation is not easily lost. Remember *I am absolutely sure that not even death or life can separate us from God's love. Not even angels or demons, the present or the future, or any powers can do that. Not even the highest places or the lowest, or anything else in all creation can do that. Nothing at all can ever separate us from God's love because of what Christ Jesus our Lord has done.* ^{Rom.8:38-39}

Should we read the Bible literally?

Well, it depends on what you mean by literal. Of course, Christians have historically believed that the entire Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, is the inspired and authoritative Word of God. This means that it communicates objective truth that isn't meant to be interpreted subjectively. But reading it literally doesn't mean taking *everything in it* literally. The Bible employs figures of speech like metaphor, simile, euphemism, hyperbole, and personification. It is made up of sixty-six books that were written in different time periods by different authors, who were communicating through different genres. Some books of the Bible are history (like many books in the Old Testament such as Joshua, Judges, and Ruth), and others contain law codes (like Deuteronomy and Leviticus). Some are made up of poetry (like Psalms and Song of Solomon) while others communicate general principles of wisdom (Ecclesiastes and Proverbs). Some are instructive (like Paul's epistles), and some are books of prophecy (like Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel). According to the *Merriam-Webster* dictionary, the word *literal* does not always mean exact equivalence. It's also defined as: "*adhering to fact or to the ordinary construction or primary meaning of a term or expression; free from exaggeration or embellishment; characterized by a concern mainly with facts.*" In other words, reading literally means believing that the Bible communicates literal truth, but not always in a literal way. (*The Deconstruction of Christianity* by Alisa Childers and Tim Barnett)

