Deal Pentecostal Church Sermon Outlines 2025

Daily Prayer

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!

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January

Remember. *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." Jude 17-18*

Thought for the Month: 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

Sunday 5th January Ps.98

Nice sermon, Vicar!

The word "*Vicar*" when used in a religious way is used for a Church minister although its roots are not religious. "*Vicar*" (like "*vice*") means "*deputy*" or "*representative*"—anyone acting as an agent for someone else. In the Roman Catholic church, "*Vicar of Christ*" is a title for bishops and in particular, the pope, but the C2nd Church Father, Tertullian, used the term "*the Vicar of Christ*" in reference to the Holy Spirit, meaning that as Christ is not physically performing miracles in the Church, the Holy Spirit acts on his behalf (as his "*Vicar*"), performing miracles and preventing the Church from error—which is what Jesus said would happen: *But I tell you the truth: It is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Counsellor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you.*[Jn.16:7] Jesus is now in heaven at the right hand of the Fathe: *But from now on, the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the mighty God.*[Lk.22:69] When Jesus ascended to heaven, He sent the Holy Spirit as His "*deputy*" or representative, to continue the work that He began. However, unlike Jesus who could only be in one place at a time, the Holy Spirit is not restricted by physical limitations—and the Holy Spirit dwells <u>in us</u>, not just <u>with us</u>. *If you love me, you will obey what I command. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you <u>another Counsellor</u> to be with you forever—the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you.*[Jn.14:15-18] And we should see life from that perspective: *So if you're serious about living this new resurrection life with Christ, act like it. Pursue the things over which Christ presides. Don't shuffle along, eyes to the ground, absorbed with the things right in front of you. Look up, and be alert to what is going on around Christ—that's where the action is. See things from his perspective.*[Col.3:1-2]

However, the Holy Spirit is not the only "*vicar*" of Christ. Every genuine Christian is a follower of Christ and acts as His agent or "*deputy*". This makes every Believer a "*vicar*" of Christ because we are Jesus' representatives in the world. *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] *If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you. This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.*[Jn.15:7-8] Christians represent Christ to the world! *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: <u>In this world we are like Jesus</u>.*[1Jn.4:16-17] Paul wrote: *Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ.*[1Cor.11:1] We may not feel like a good representative of Jesus Christ and with our natural ability we are not! Jesus Christ is holy and we are we are not holy; He is righteous and we are not righteous; He is pure and we are not pure! He is without sin and we are sinners! But that is the whole point of the Gospel—the Word of God became human so He could die for us and make us like Him. *The Word became a human being. He made his home with us. We have seen his glory. It is the glory of the one and only Son. He came from the Father. And he was full of grace and truth.*[Jn.1:14] *So God has put everything under him. Everything is under his control. We do not now see everything under his control. But we do see Jesus already given a crown of glory and honour. He was made a little lower than the angels. He suffered death. By the grace of God, he tasted death for everyone. That is why he was given his crown. 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. He says, "I will announce your name to my brothers and sisters. I will sing your praises among those who worship you." Again he says, "I will put my trust in him." And again he says, "Here I am. Here are the children God has given me." Those children have bodies made out of flesh and blood. So Jesus became human like them in order to die for them. By doing that, he could destroy the one who rules over the kingdom of death. I'm talking about the devil. Jesus could set people free who were afraid of death. All their lives they were held as slaves by that fear. It is certainly Abraham's children that he helps. He doesn't help angels. So he had to be made like his brothers in every way. Then he could serve God as a kind and faithful high priest. And then he could pay for the sins of the people by dying for them. He himself suffered when he was tempted. Now he is able to help others who are being tempted.[Heb.2:8-18]

Good theology makes Christianity easy but poor theology makes Christianity hard! If we fail to understand the basics of our faith we will waste our time and energy on what the Bible calls "*acts that lead to death*" or "*useless rituals*". *Therefore let us leave the elementary teachings about Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again the foundation of repentance from acts that lead to death, [from useless rituals] and of faith in God, instruction about baptisms, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. And God permitting, we will do so.*[Heb.6:1-3] *How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, [from useless rituals] so that we may serve the living God! 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.9:14-15] Once we are a Chrisitan, we are made right in God's sight (actually, it is the other way around, once we are made right in God's sight, we are a Christian)! In our natural state we were not worthy to approach God but we are no longer in that unregenerate condition because we are born-again. We are a new creation and have been made right with God: *Christ didn't have any sin. But God made him become sin for us. So we can be made right with God because of what Christ has done for us.*[2Cor.5:21] And because we are right with God, we come boldly and cheerfully into His presence—with no sense of shame or guilt: *Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.*[Heb.4:16] *Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise; give thanks to him and praise his name.*[Ps.100:4] Guilt and remorse is the result of sin and we have been forgiven by God Himself: *For by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy. The Holy Spirit also testifies to us about this. First he says: "This is the covenant I will make with them after that time, says the Lord. I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds." Then he adds: "Their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more." And where these have been forgiven, sacrifice for sin is no longer necessary.*[Heb.10:14-18] *And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior 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.*[1Jn.4:14-18] Martin Luther wrote: *Remorse before Calvary is of God; remorse after you have been to Calvary is of the devil. Repent of your sin, yes; but do not make your sin a subject for long and melancholy meditation. Why should I cheat God by spending my time and energy on remorse? I am greater than my sins.*

Communion is a spiritual meal that reminds us that our sins have been forgiven and expunged through the New Covenant. Although the bread and wine are physical, they are an allegory, or an illustration of something spiritual: *What you must solemnly realize is that every time you eat this bread and every time you drink this cup, you reenact in your words and actions the death of the Master. You will be*

drawn back to this meal again and again until the Master returns. You must never let familiarity breed contempt… So, my friends, when you come together to the Lord's Table, be reverent and courteous with one another... It is a spiritual meal—a love feast.[1Cor.11:26-34] The bread of Communion is a physical reminder of Christ's body that was broken for us so we can be made holy and free from accusation: *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] *While they were eating, Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take and eat; this is my body."*[Matt.26:26] The wine of Communion is a physical reminder of the New Covenant made in Jesus' blood (*i.e.* His death). *Then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the new covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.*[Matt.26:27-28]

The various Christian traditions interpret "*This is my body*" differently. Roman Catholics take this literally and claim that the bread and wine actually becomes the body and blood of Christ. [This is called "*Transubstantiation*" and asserts that the *'substance'* (the reality within) the bread and the wine is *'transformed'* into the substance of the body and blood of Christ (called the "*Real Presence*") leaving only the *'accidents'* (or superficial properties—what you could see, touch or taste) unchanged.] Lutherans hold that the literal body and blood of Christ are present "*in, with, and under*" the bread and wine (something like the way water is present in a sponge). [This is called "*Consubstantiation"* and asserts that God is really present in the bread and wine at the prayer of consecration but without any change to the substance of the emblems.] Anglicans assert that the bread and wine are "*effectual signs of grace*" (not just symbolical or mere remembrance) and that Christ's spiritual presence ("*real presence*") is experienced in the hearts of believers when the grace of the sacrament is received by faith, uniting recipients to Christ in heaven and on earth. The Salvation Army began as a mission do not share the bread and wine at all—neither do they baptize! Their Founders felt that many Christians had come to rely on the outward signs of spiritual grace rather than on grace itself and much of what passed for Christianity was primarily an observance of outward ritual. When people either relegate Jesus' direct commands of Communion and Baptism to a talisman-cum-hellfire insurance or reject them altogether, it looks very similar to the Jews of Jesus time: *When you cling blindly to your own traditions you completely miss God's command. Then, indeed, you have perfected setting aside God's commands for the sake of your tradition.*[Mk.7:8-9] However, most Evangelicals accept that the bread and wine emblems not sacraments—that they are a tangible symbol of the New Covenant and remind us that Christ is not only with us but also within us. In the same way that the Old Covenant Passover was celebrated to remind the Israelites of their emancipation from slavery, so the New Covenant communion is celebrated to remind us of our emancipation from slavery to sin: *But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you have come to obey from your heart the pattern of teaching that has now claimed your allegiance. You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness… But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.*[Rom.6:17-23] The idea of a "*sacrament*" (something physical that imparts spiritual benefit to its recipients) still resonates with many Christians—even evangelical Christians. But actually the only real "*sacrament*" is faith—that simple yet profound trust in God and His Son Jesus Christ: *The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.*[Gal.5:6] *No one can please God without faith. Whoever goes to God must believe that God exists and that he rewards those who seek him.*[Heb.11:6]

Faith imparts salvation, both the salvation from the eternal consequences of sin (life eternal) and also the salvation from the present consequences of sin (life enjoyable). *God's grace has saved you because of your faith in Christ. Your salvation doesn't come from anything you do. It is God's gift. It is not based on anything you have done. No one can boast about earning it. God made us. He created us to belong to*

Christ Jesus. Now we can do good things. Long ago God prepared them for us to do.[Eph.2:8-10] *We belong with those who have faith and are saved.*[Heb.10:39] *From infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures. They have the power to give you wisdom so that you can be saved through faith in Christ Jesus.*[2Tim.3:15] God cleans our conscience and removes the guilt of sin. *Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful.*[Heb.10:19-23] That is why we must grasp the reality of Jesus' death on the cross.

Theologically, Jesus' death is called a "*vicarious death*", which means that Jesus' death was *representative* or *substitutionary*—He died in our place and exchanged our sin for His righteousness: *He suffered the things we should have suffered. He took on himself the pain that should have been ours. But we thought God was punishing him. We thought God was wounding him and making him suffer. But the servant was pierced because we had sinned. He was crushed because we had done what was evil. He was punished to make us whole again. His wounds have healed us. All of us are like sheep. We have wandered away from God. All of us have turned to our own way. And the LORD has placed on his servant the sins of all of us.*[Is.53:4-6]

The bread and wine of Communion reminds us that we are emancipated from sin and so we need to harmonize our thinking and vocabulary with what Jesus accomplished on the Cross and also with what God says about us. John G Lake wrote: *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.* 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!*

At His vicarious death on the cross, Jesus exchanged our sin for His righteousness, but He is now seated at the Father's right hand in heaven. From there, He has sent the Holy Spirit as His "*Representative*" to continue His work through us and so we too are also His "*representatives*" here on earth! *Holy Spirit flow through me and make my life what it ought to be! Holy Spirit flow out from me, that others may somehow see You in me.* As we embark on another calendar year, let's make it our aim to think, talk, give and live as Believers who represent Jesus Christ with honour and dignity.

Questions

Why is the Holy Spirit the "*Vicar of Christ*"?

How do we deputise for Jesus Christ?

Why is it important to properly understand the basic doctrines of Christianity?

Does it matter what we believe about the bread and wine of Communion?

What is a "*sacrament*"?

How do we receive spiritual benefit or grace?

Puritan Prayer. 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. You have led me to place all my nature and happiness in oneness with Christ; in having thought and mind centred only on Him; in being like Him in communicating good to others. This is my heaven on earth, but I need the force, energy and impulses of Your Spirit to carry me on my way to the New Jerusalem. Here it is my duty to be as Christ in this world, to do what He would do, to live as He would live, to walk in love and meekness—then He will be known and I will have peace in death.

Jesus—a stepping stone or a stumbling stone? *Careful! I've put a huge stone on the road to Mount Zion, a stone you can't get around. But the stone is me! If you're looking for me, you'll find me on the way, not in the way.*[Rom.9:33]

Marmite is advertised with the slogan: *love it or hate it*! And there are lots of things in life that polarise people—but whilst it is good to have convictions, most matters are not important enough to fall out over. We can disagree without being disagreeable! However, there are some things that are non-negotiable and Paul wrote to the Church at Corinth explaining that sometimes there must be divisions: *But in the following instructions, I cannot praise you. For it sounds as if more harm than good is done when you meet together. First, I hear that there are divisions among you when you meet as a church, and to some extent I believe it. But, of course, there must be divisions among you so that you who have God's approval will be recognized! When you meet together, you are not really interested in the Lord's Supper. For some of you hurry to eat your own meal without sharing with others. As a result, some go hungry while others get drunk. What? Don't you have your own homes for eating and drinking? Or do you really want to disgrace God's church and shame the poor? What am I supposed to say? Do you want me to praise you? Well, I certainly will not praise you for this!*[1Cor.11:17-22] Some of the people were behaving selfishly and ignoring the other members of the Church—which is Christ's Body. By dishonouring other Believers, we dishonour Jesus Himself. *We love because he first loved us. If anyone says, "I love God," yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother.*[1Jn.4:19-21] *The Master, Jesus, on the night of his betrayal, took bread. Having given thanks, he broke it and said, This is my body, broken for you. Do this to remember me. After supper, he did the same thing with the cup: This cup is my blood, my new covenant with you. Each time you drink this cup, remember me. What you must solemnly realize is that every time you eat this bread and every time you drink this cup, you re-enact in your words and actions the death of the Master. You will be drawn back to this meal again and again until the Master returns. You must never let familiarity breed contempt. If you give no thought (or worse, don't care) about the broken body of the Master when you eat and drink, you're running the risk of serious consequences. That's why so many of you even now are listless and sick, and others have gone to an early grave. If we get this straight now, we won't have to be straightened out later on. Better to be confronted by the Master now than to face a fiery confrontation later. So, my friends, when you come together to the Lord's Table, be reverent and courteous with one another. If you're so hungry that you can't wait to be served, go home and get a sandwich. But by no means risk turning this Meal into an eating and drinking binge or a family squabble. It is a spiritual meal—a love feast.*[1Cor.11:23-34] We gave our allegiance to Jesus by confessing Him as Lord and any defamation of the character of Jesus Christ is not only hurtful, but it is also a slight on us! To some, Jesus is the aroma of life and is precious, but to others, Jesus is the aroma of death—He has become offensive. *In Christ, God leads us from place to place in one perpetual victory parade. Through us, he brings knowledge of Christ. Everywhere we go, people breathe in the exquisite fragrance. Because of Christ, we give off a sweet scent rising to God, which is recognized by those on the way of salvation—an aroma redolent with life. But those on the way to destruction treat us more like the stench from a rotting corpse. This is a terrific responsibility. Is anyone competent to take it on?*[2Cor.2:14-16] For us, Jesus is the highest authority and His Name is above all names—His Name is like anointment poured forth or honey from the comb—we often use these Scripture references in the songs we use. But for many other people, Jesus is just a swear word and instead of being the Way, He gets in the way; instead of being a Rock in which to take refuge, He is a stumbling stone over which they trip. *Christ is the living Stone. People did not accept him. But God chose him. God places the highest value on him. You also are like living stones. As you come to him you are being built into a house for worship. There you will be holy priests. You will offer spiritual sacrifices. God will accept them because of what Jesus Christ has done. In Scripture it says, "Look! I am placing a stone in Zion. It is a chosen and very valuable stone. It is the most*

important stone in the building. The one who trusts in him will never be put to shame." The stone is very precious to you who believe. But to people who do not believe, "The stone the builders did not accept has become the most important stone of all." And, "It is a stone that causes people to trip. It is a rock that makes them fall." They trip and fall because they do not obey the message. That is also what God planned for them. But God chose you to be his people. You are royal priests. You are a holy nation. You are a people who belong to God. All of this is so that you can sing his praises. He brought you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people. But now you are the people of God. Once you had not received mercy. But now you have received mercy.[1Pet.2:4-10]

When Jesus was taken to the Temple at just over a month old, practically everyone who saw Him, only saw a young baby—but Simeon saw beyond the natural and into the spiritual. Simeon had been waiting all his life for the Messiah and when He saw Jesus, he recognised Him as the promised Deliverer—and so he broke into a hymn of praise to God: *Lord, now You are letting Your servant depart in peace, according to Your word; for my eyes have seen Your salvation which You have prepared before the face of all peoples, a light to bring revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of Your people Israel.*[Lk.2:28-32] Simeon was described as *righteous and devout… and waiting for the consolation of Israel.* He was also someone who knew the Holy Spirit: *the Holy Spirit was on him and it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Messiah.* What a reputation to have! The Holy Spirit's presence with Simeon was tangible and real. The Holy Spirit didn't just make Simeon "*nice*" or even wise, but gave him spiritual insight into what was happening and flowed through him to speak prophetically to those he met! And because Simeon recognised Jesus as the Messiah, the promised Saviour, the Holy Spirit gave him peace and contentment. Simeon knew that he had fulfilled God's purposes for him and now he was ready to meet his Maker. What is more impractical than working hard all your life and getting paid with nothing more than an expensively framed death certificate? *As long as you did what you felt like doing, ignoring God, you didn't have to bother with right thinking or right living, or right anything for that matter. But do you call that a free life? What did you get out of it? Nothing you're proud of now. Where did it get you? A dead end. But now that you've found you don't have to listen to sin tell you what to do, and have discovered the delight of listening to God telling you, what a surprise! A whole, healed, put-together life right now, with more and more of life on the way! Work hard for sin your whole life and your pension is death. But God's gift is real life , eternal life, delivered by Jesus, our Master.*[Rom.6:20-23] We all have to face death sometime, but if we are at peace with God, the date and time is not important. *There's a proper time and way for people to do everything. That's true even though a person might be suffering greatly. No one knows what lies ahead. So who can tell a person what's going to happen? He can't stop the wind from blowing. And he doesn't have the power to decide when he will die.*[Eccl.8:6-8] Simeon had a relationship with God that included a 2 way dialogue—God spoke to Simeon and Simeon spoke to God. Simeon's relationship was built on trust and so, like Mary, he was blessed *because he believed that the Lord would do what he said.*[Lk.1:45]

When Simeon prophesied about people falling and rising, he was speaking about spiritual death and spiritual life, because He was referring to Jesus' resurrection (the Greek word for *"to rise"* is "*anastasis*" which means "*resurrection*"): *This child is going to cause many people in Israel to fall and to rise. God has sent him. But many will speak against him.*[Lk.2:34] Jesus would cause many to people to rise again in newness of life but first they have to recognise that they are dead! The Christian life begins with dying because we have to be dead before we can rise to new life: *We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection. For we know*

that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin—because anyone who has died has been freed from sin.[Rom.6:2-7]

Jesus said there were 2 kinds of deaths and 2 kinds of resurrections—a spiritual death and resurrection (which is conversion) and a physical death followed by the final resurrection: *What I'm about to tell you is true. Anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He will not be found guilty. He has crossed over from death to life. What I'm about to tell you is true. A time is coming for me to give life. In fact, it has already begun. The dead will hear the voice of the Son of God. Those who hear it will live. The Father has life in himself. He has also allowed the Son to have life in himself. And the Father has given him the authority to judge. This is because he is the Son of Man. Do not be amazed at this. A time is coming when all who are in the grave will hear his voice. They will all come out of their graves. Those who have done good will rise and live again. Those who have done evil will rise and be found guilty.*[Jn.5:24-29] The spiritual death and resurrection of conversion happens now—when people hear Jesus' call: *A time is coming for me to give life. In fact, it has already begun. The dead will hear the voice of the Son of God. Those who hear it will live.* Physical death is followed by the final resurrection, which happens later—at the end of history: *A time is coming when all who are in the grave will hear his voice. They will all come out of their graves. Those who have done good will rise and live again. Those who have done evil will rise and be found guilty.* In the Book of Revelation, Jesus also refers to the 1st resurrection (of spiritual new-birth) and the 2nd second death (of eternal damnation): *He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death.*[Rev.2:11] *Blessed and holy are those who have part in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with him… Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death. If anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.*[Rev.20:6-15]

Jesus said that His own physical death was a like a Seed planted in the ground that would produce many more seeds: *Jesus replied, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to receive glory. What I'm about to tell you is true. Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only one seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. Anyone who loves his life will lose it. But anyone who hates his life in this world will keep it and have eternal life. Anyone who serves me must follow me. And where I am, my servant will also be. My Father will honour the one who serves me."*[Jn.12:23-26] It is only through Jesus' death that we live! However, as Simeon said, *many will speak against him.* The very people who should have received Jesus as the true Messiah, rejected Him—including the High Priest, and other chief priests in Jerusalem. Although they knew the Scriptures, they did not know God, which is why Judaism under the Sadducees was referred to as Sodom, Egypt, Babylon, prostitute: *the great city—which is figuratively called Sodom and Egypt—where also their Lord was crucified.*[Rev.11:8] *One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and said to me, "Come, I will show you the punishment of the great prostitute, who sits by many waters… The woman you saw is the great city that rules over the kings of the earth… the great city of Babylon will be thrown down, never to be found again… In her was found the blood of prophets and of God's holy people, of all who have been slaughtered on the earth."*[Rev.17:1;18;21;24]

But for those who do receive Jesus, He has become the most important building block in their lives: *Christ is the living Stone. People did not accept him. But God chose him. God places the highest value on him. You also are like living stones. As you come to him you are being built into a house for worship. There you will be holy priests. You will offer spiritual sacrifices.*[1Pet.2:4-6] Jesus is a Rock, a huge stone that is either in the way or becomes the way! *How can we sum this up? All those people who didn't seem interested in what God was doing actually embraced what God was doing as he straightened out their lives. And Israel, who seemed so interested in reading and talking about what God was doing, missed it. How could they miss it? Because instead of trusting God, they took over. They were absorbed in what they themselves were doing. They were so absorbed in their "God projects" that they didn't notice God right in front of them, like a huge rock in the middle of the road. And so they stumbled into him and went sprawling. Isaiah (again!) gives us the metaphor for pulling*

this together: Careful! I've put a huge stone on the road to Mount Zion, a stone you can't get around. But the stone is me! If you're looking for me, you'll find me on the way, not in the way.[Rom.9:30-33] When we see Jesus as the Stone who is the Way, He becomes a Rock of refuge from which comes the life-giving water of the Holy Spirit: *See, a king will reign in righteousness and rulers will rule with justice. Each one will be like a shelter from the wind and a refuge from the storm, like streams of water in the desert and the shadow of a great rock in a thirsty land.*[Is.32:1-2] *But [Joseph's] bow remained steady, his strong arms stayed limber, because of the hand of the Mighty One of Jacob, because of the Shepherd, the Rock of Israel.*[Gen.49:24] *But the LORD has become my fortress, and my God the rock in whom I take refuge.*[Ps.94:22] *Do not tremble, do not be afraid. Did I not proclaim this and foretell it long ago? You are my witnesses. Is there any God besides me? No, there is no other Rock; I know not one.*[Is.44:8] *For I do not want you to be ignorant of the fact, brothers and sisters, that our ancestors were all under the cloud and that they all passed through the sea. They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. They all ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ.*[1Cor.10:1-4] It is only in Jesus that we can see God's glory: *Then the LORD said, "There is a place near me where you may stand on a rock. When my glory passes by, I will put you in a cleft in the rock and cover you with my hand until I have passed by. Then I will remove my hand and you will see my back; but my face must not be seen."*[Ex.33:21-23] *The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth… No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.*[Jn.1:14-18]

So, the question is, who is Jesus to you? Do you love Him or hate Him? Is He a just Child in a Christmas manger or Christ the Lord? Is He a stone that's in the way or the Stone who has become the Way? Is He a stepping-stone or a stumbling-stone? When we affirm that Jesus as the Rock of our Salvation and the One who causes us to rise, then, like Simeon, we will both live in peace and depart in peace because we have seen the Saviour.

Questions

Should there be differences in the Church?
Can we be different without being divisive?
Why is Jesus referred to as a "stone" or a "rock"?
How did Simeon recognise the Baby Jesus as the Messiah?
How does Jesus cause people to fall and rise?

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

Sunday 19th January Ps.100. Luke 3

True Religion: *Prove by the way you live that you have repented of your sins and turned to God.Lk.3:8*

Christianity is a heart religion and if our religion is not from the heart, it will be a curse instead of a blessing! Just saying the right words is not enough because saying words that we don't mean is hypocrisy—and all of us will have to give an account for the words we say: *But I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned.*[Matt.12:36-37] Religion is defined as the *service and worship of God* and our English word comes from the Latin *Religio—"re" (again)* and "*lego" (to read, choose, or consider carefully)*—and so *"religion"* literally means *"respect for sense of right, a moral obligation, reverence for deity"*. For some people, the term "*religion*" reminds them of the

hypocrisy of formal rituals but pure religion is good and godly—it is the impure religion of external ritual without any internal change that is worthless: *Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves, and their religion is worthless. Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.*[Jas.1:26-27] The external ritual without any internal change is an impure religion and mere superstition that will lead to death: *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 [useless rituals], so that we may serve the living God!*[Heb.9:14] There are many Hebrew words for "*praise*" or "*bless*" but one of them is "*barak*" and it can also mean "*curse.* If someone is only going through the rituals of religion, such as singing the songs or saying the religious words without meaning them, then it is no longer a blessing but a "*curse*". "*Barak*" is used in Psalm 103 for "*praise*": *Praise [barak] the LORD, my soul; all my inmost being, praise his holy name. Praise [barak] the LORD, my soul, and forget not all his benefits.*[Ps.103:1-2] Job would offer sacrifices on behalf of his children in case their religion was superficial and so the word "*barak*" is used for "*curse*" instead of "*praise*". *His sons used to hold feasts in their homes on their birthdays, and they would invite their three sisters to eat and drink with them. When a period of feasting had run its course, Job would make arrangements for them to be 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.1:3-5] Of course, false religion is always false religion, and even if adherents of false religion are sincere, they will still be sincerely wrong! Paul explains that the Jews were zealous and sincere but still wrong about their religion: *Dear brothers and sisters, the longing of my heart and my prayer to God is for the people of Israel to be saved. I know what enthusiasm they have for God, but it is misdirected zeal. For they don't understand God's way of making people right with himself. Refusing to accept God's way, they cling to their own way of getting right with God by trying to keep the law. For Christ has already accomplished the purpose for which the law was given. As a result, all who believe in him are made right with God.*[Rom.10:1-4]

John the Baptist brought reality to religion by preaching that Jesus was the Messiah and that the long awaited Kingdom of God was imminent: *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.'*[Matt.3:1-3] He also declared that Jesus was the Sacrificial Lamb who would take away the sins of the world: *The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Look! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! He is the one I was talking about when I said, 'A man is coming after me who is far greater than I am, for he existed long before me.' I did not recognize him as the Messiah, but I have been baptizing with water so that he might be revealed to Israel."*[Jn.1:29-31] The Kingdom of God is a spiritual kingdom and to be a citizen of God's Kingdom, you must be born again: *Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again."*[Jn.3:3] And this new-birth is a spiritual re-birth: *Jesus answered, "Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."*[Jn.3:5-8]

By now, we should all know about the Kingdom of God, that it is the rule and authority of Jesus in our hearts, but still need to be reminded of the facts and also what it means to be a citizen of heaven—the theory and practice of our theology! *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 spiritual re-birth of Christianity is an internal transformation that affects the way we live. John said that people should *prove by the way you live that you have repented of your sins and turned to God.*[Lk.3:8] In other words, true religion involves repentance. The word "*repentance*" means "*to change your mind*", but Christian repentance is more than just changing our thinking—it is changing our thoughts so they agree with God! *They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.*[1Thess.1:9-10] And, as Isaiah says: *Woe to those who quarrel with their Maker.*[Is.45:9] The Bible is God's mind in a book—and all that we need to know about God is already available to us in the Scriptures. *Look to God's instructions and teachings! People who contradict his word are completely in the dark. They will go from one place to another, weary and hungry. And because they are hungry, they will rage and curse their king and their God. They will look up to heaven and down at the earth, but wherever they look, there will be trouble and anguish and dark despair. They will be thrown out into the darkness.*[Is.8:20-22]

Of course, when there is repentance of sin, there may often be great sorrow because you cannot be aware of God's holiness and purity without feeling unclean and unworthy! But when God re-births us, He makes us brand-new and we are spiritually alive and clean! Our whole life is turned around—not upside down but the right side up! Our outlook changes and our attitude changes—instead of worrying about our old natural state, we affirm our new spiritual state. *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! Christ didn't have any sin. But God made him become sin for us. So we can be made right with God because of what Christ has done for us.*[2Cor.5:16-21] This transition from being (and feeling) guilty, to being ready and willing to obey God is what Isaiah experienced: *"How terrible it is for me!" I cried out. "I'm about to be destroyed! My mouth speaks sinful words. And I live among people who speak sinful words. Now I have seen the King with my own eyes. He is the LORD who rules over all." A seraph flew over to me. He was holding a hot coal. He had used tongs to take it from the altar. He touched my mouth with the coal. He said, "This has touched your lips. Your guilt has been taken away. Your sin has been paid for." Then I heard the voice of the Lord. He said, "Who will I send? Who will go for us?" I said, "Here I am. Send me!"*[Is.5:5-8]

However, an outward show of sorrow and remorse is not the same as repentance—in fact, sorrow without God leads to death, not life! *Your sorrow led you to repentance. For you became sorrowful as God intended and so were not harmed in any way by us. Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death.*[2Cor.7:9-10] Both king Saul and king David disobeyed God—Saul by rebellion and stubbornness, David by adultery and murder. Two sinners and two responses to the challenge of their sin—one wanted to keep his reputation with the people and one wanted to keep his reputation with God! One was rejected and one was accepted. *But Samuel replied [to Saul] "What is more pleasing to the LORD: your burnt offerings and sacrifices or your obedience to his voice? Listen! Obedience is better than sacrifice, and submission is better than offering the fat of rams. Rebellion is as sinful as witchcraft, and stubbornness as bad as worshiping idols. So because you have rejected the command of the LORD, he has rejected you as king." Then Saul admitted to Samuel, "Yes, I have sinned. I have disobeyed your instructions and the LORD's command, for I was afraid of the people and did what they demanded… Then Saul pleaded again, "I know I have sinned. But please, at least honour me before*

the elders of my people and before Israel by coming back with me so that I may worship the LORD your God." So Samuel finally agreed and went back with him, and Saul worshiped the LORD.[1Sam.15:22-31] *Then Nathan said to David, "You are that man! ...Why, then, have you despised the word of the LORD and done this horrible deed? For you have murdered Uriah the Hittite with the sword of the Ammonites and stolen his wife. From this time on, your family will live by the sword because you have despised me by taking Uriah's wife to be your own. "This is what the LORD says: Because of what you have done, I will cause your own household to rebel against you. I will give your wives to another man before your very eyes, and he will go to bed with them in public view. You did it secretly, but I will make this happen to you openly in the sight of all Israel." Then David confessed to Nathan, "I have sinned against the LORD." Nathan replied, "Yes, but the LORD has forgiven you, and you won't die for this sin. Nevertheless, because you have shown utter contempt for the word of the LORD by doing this, your child will die."*[2Sam.12:7-14] *Have mercy on me, O God, because of your unfailing love. Because of your great compassion, blot out the stain of my sins. Wash me clean from my guilt. Purify me from my sin. For I recognize my rebellion; it haunts me day and night. Against you, and you alone, have I sinned; I have done what is evil in your sight. You will be proved right in what you say, and your judgment against me is just… Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me. Then I will teach transgressors your ways, so that sinners will turn back to you.*[Ps.51:1-13] David's son died, and then Solomon was born to Bathsheba, but their next son was called *Nathan*—I think he was named after the prophet Nathan who was bold and brave enough to challenge David and bring him to repentance! *David reigned in Jerusalem thirty-three years, and these were the children born to him there: Shammua, Shobab, Nathan and Solomon. These four were by Bathsheba daughter of Ammiel.*[1Chron.3:4-6]

But it is not only OT kings who need to stay true to God's Word and commands—we all do, and especially those who oversee the local church. *Write this letter to the angel of the church in Sardis. This is the message from the one who has the sevenfold Spirit of God and the seven stars: "I know all the things you do, and that you have a reputation for being alive–but you are dead. Wake up! Strengthen what little remains, for even what is left is almost dead. I find that your actions do not meet the requirements of my God. Go back to what you heard and believed at first; hold to it firmly. Repent and turn to me again. If you don't wake up, I will come to you suddenly, as unexpected as a thief. "Yet there are some in the church in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes with evil. They will walk with me in white, for they are worthy. All who are victorious will be clothed in white. I will never erase their names from the Book of Life, but I will announce before my Father and his angels that they are mine. "Anyone with ears to hear must listen to the Spirit and understand what he is saying to the churches.*[Rev.3:1-6] Jack Hibbs in his book "*Living in the Daze of Deception*" writes: *Some churches that are more concerned with being culturally relevant than scripturally sound. The pure, unadulterated gospel has been taken hold of and abused by those whose calling is to amuse. The word gospel implies repentance, but the issue of sin and call to repentance are the very things apostates feel must be avoided in their messages. New ways of interpreting Scripture have led to a new, powerless dynamic in the church.* T.L.Osborn used to emphasise that religion spiritualizes God, whereas Jesus humanises God. Religion keeps people away from God, whereas Christianity unites people with God through Jesus. Religion is man's attempt to get to God, whereas Christianity is God coming to the people in Jesus. Religion is a ritual, a dogma, a ceremony, whereas Christianity is a relationship with God through Jesus Christ. Religion is following a set of rules, whereas Christianity is following Jesus Christ.

Even though impure religion and false religion are the opposite of faith, religion that is based on repentance and new-birth is good and godly as well as being Biblical. God wants us to serve Him and worship Him—within the beauty of holiness: *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 into his courts. Worship the LORD in the splendour of his holiness; tremble before him, all the earth.[Ps.96:7-9] We have a spiritual and moral obligation to reverence God and honour Him—after all, He created us to give Him glory and to serve Him. *You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honour and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being.*[Rev.4:11] *The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work [serve or worship] and take care of it.*[Gen.2:15] But as James reminds us, *Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.*[Jas.1:27] When John preached repentance it was clearly a challenging and convicting message—but he delivered it in a positive way because Luke records that he "*exhorted*" people rather than harangued them. *And with many other words John exhorted the people and proclaimed the good news to them.*[Lk.3:18]

Religion is good but only when it is pure and faultless; impure religion is a deception and gives false hope—and even the *religion* of Christianity can be like that if there is no repentance or genuine faith in Jesus Christ. We need true knowledge and we also need true faith—knowledge gives us information, but faith gives us transformation. All religions except Christianity are based on works—what we do—but true Christianity is about what Christ has done for us. No other religion except Christianity has any factual evidence to verify their claims but Christianity is based on the fact of Jesus' resurrection—that He died and rose from the grave. The evidence of Jesus' resurrection was verified by hundreds of people who actually witnessed the risen Jesus plus millions of people since who have affirmed that Jesus has changed their lives by making peace between them and God. *Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, forbearance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness is intended to lead you to repentance? But because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God's wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed. God "will repay each person according to what they have done." To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honour and immortality, he will give eternal life. But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger. There will be trouble and distress for every human being who does evil: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile; but glory, honour and peace for everyone who does good: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For God does not show favouritism.*[Rom.2:4-11]. Yes, God's kindness leads us to repentance and saves us from the coming wrath—that is true religion.

Questions

Why is religion common to all of humanity?
What makes Christianity unique amongst all religions?
What is repentance?
Why is repentance integral to true religion?
What was John the Baptist's mission?
Why was John the Baptist the last of the Old Covenant prophets?

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

Sunday 26th January. Ps.101 Lk.4

What is your favourite Scripture?

There are so many great portions of Scripture that it is difficult to decide which would be my favourite but there are some portions of Scripture that have particular resonance with us—they were a blessing to us in assurance, inspiration or comfort. And of course, we accept that the whole Bible is the Word of God, and with good reason—Jesus had a similar view of Scripture: *Jesus replied, "You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God.*[Matt.22:29] *We know that Scripture is always true.*[Jn.10:35] *But the Scriptures must be fulfilled.*[Mk.14:29] However, some parts of the Bible are more relevant to our faith than others and some parts of the Bible are easier to understand than others. *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] Nevertheless we take the whole Bible as God's revelation to us of His plan of salvation through Jesus Christ. *But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.*[2Tim.3:14-17] And so we take the Bible as our final authority on matters of faith and conduct: *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).* As we saw last week, if we don't agree with God and His Word we are completely in the dark: *Woe to those who quarrel with their Maker.*[Is.45:9] *Look to God's instructions and teachings! People who contradict his word are completely in the dark. They will go from one place to another, weary and hungry. And because they are hungry, they will rage and curse their king and their God. They will look up to heaven and down at the earth, but wherever they look, there will be trouble and anguish and dark despair. They will be thrown out into the darkness.*[Is.8:20-22]

In the video series of "*Praying with the Bible*" by Don Whitney that we have watched together, he said that "*there is a Psalm for every season of our life*". But we shouldn't restrict our resources to the Psalms—there are many Scripture verses that we should embed into our hearts and minds so that we can draw on them in times of trouble and use them as a spiritual energy boost or a weapon against spiritual and mental attacks. *Reverence for the LORD is pure, lasting forever. The laws of the LORD are true; each one is fair. They are more desirable than gold, even the finest gold. They are sweeter than honey, even honey dripping from the comb. They are a warning to your servant, a great reward for those who obey them.*[Ps.19:9-11] *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. [God means what he says. What he says goes. His powerful Word is sharp as a surgeon's scalpel, cutting through everything, whether doubt or defence, laying us open to listen and obey.]*[Heb.4:12]

Jesus used just three scriptures to resist the devil's attacks—*then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.*[Matt.4:11]

Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man does not live on bread alone. [Deut.8:3]'"
Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Worship the Lord your God and serve him only. [Deut.6:13]'"
Jesus answered, "It says: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test. [Deut.6:16]'"

Now that Jesus has defeated the devil by His death on the cross, we have no excuse for not using Scripture to destroy the enemy's deceptive lies. The Word of God is powerful weapon that can demolish every lie and argument against God. *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.6:17-18] *These are the words of him who has the sharp, double-edged sword… you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth.*[Rev.2:12-16] *The weapons we use in our fight are not made by humans. Rather, they are powerful weapons from God. With them we destroy people's defences, that is, their arguments and all their intellectual arrogance that oppose the knowledge of God. We take every thought captive so that it is obedient to Christ.*[2Cor.10:4-5] However, we should remember that Scripture doesn't become the Sword of the Spirit until it is in our heart as well as our head! Scripture is not a magic formula and just quoting Bible verses does not release the power of God: *A group of Jews was traveling from town to town casting out evil spirits. They tried to use the name of the Lord Jesus in their incantation, saying, "I command you in the name of Jesus, whom Paul preaches, to come out!" Seven sons of Sceva, a leading priest, were doing this. But one time when they tried it, the evil spirit replied, "I know Jesus, and I know Paul, but who are you?" Then the man with the evil spirit leaped on them, overpowered them, and attacked them with such violence that they fled from the house, naked and battered.*[Acts.19:13-16] For the Scripture to become the Word of God, we need to believe (trust) in Jesus, God's Son and have Scripture in our heart as well as our head: *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… But do not think I will accuse you before the Father. Your accuser is Moses, on whom your hopes are set. If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me. But since you do not believe what he wrote, how are you going to believe what I say?*[Jn.5:37-47] The Word of God must be embedded in our heart. *I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you.*[Ps.119:11]

Scripture 1) Man does not live on bread alone. We need to constantly remind ourselves of who we really are because the rest of the world is in denial and rejects both our Creator and our obligation to Him. We are more than just a body made up of chemicals and we are also more than just an animal with only a body and mind—we are spiritual beings made in the image of God, consisting of **spirit, soul and body**: *May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.*[1Thess.5:23] If we ignore the spiritual part of us, we will easily be dominated by mere human logic and the natural senses of sight, sound, smell, touch and taste. *Make sure no one takes you captive. They will try to capture you by using false reasoning that has no meaning. Their ideas depend on human teachings. They also depend on the basic things the people of this world believe. They don't depend on Christ.*[Col.2:8] *Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, love for the Father is not in them. For everything in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but whoever does the will of God lives forever.*[1Jn.2:15-17] But God's Word (the Scriptures in our heart) is our spiritual food that will strengthen and nourish our whole person: *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. Let love and faithfulness never leave you; bind them around your neck, write them on the tablet of your heart… This will bring health to your body and nourishment to your bones*[Prov.3:1-8] *My son, pay attention to my words. Open your ears to what I say. Do not lose sight of these things. Keep them deep within your heart because they are life to those who find them and they heal the whole body. Guard your heart more than anything else, because the source of your life flows from it.*[Prov.4:20-23]

Scripture 2) Worship the Lord your God and serve him only. A "*god*" is something that is worshiped and treated as a deity—and this can be an idol made of wood or stone, an animal, a person, or even an activity such as eating or sport. Those who worship idols are in rebellion against God. *Into your hands I commit my spirit; deliver me, LORD, my faithful God. I hate those who cling to worthless idols; as for me, I trust in the LORD.*[Ps.31:5-6] *Jeshurun grew fat and kicked; filled with food, he became heavy and sleek. He abandoned the God who made him and rejected the Rock his Saviour. They made*

him jealous with their foreign gods and angered him with their detestable idols. They sacrificed to demons, which are not God—gods they had not known, gods that recently appeared, gods your fathers did not fear. You deserted the Rock, who fathered you; you forgot the God who gave you birth. The LORD saw this and rejected them because he was angered by his sons and daughters. "I will hide my face from them," he said, "and see what their end will be; for they are a perverse generation, children who are unfaithful. They made me jealous by what is no god and angered me with their worthless idols.[Deut.32:15-21] When we became a Christian, we transferred our allegiance and loyalty to Jesus by confessing Him as 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.*[Rom.10:9-10] Jesus is now the highest authority in our life and if we give undue reverence or homage to anything or anyone else, we are treating them as a "god" and dishonour our true Lord. *There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.*[Eph.4:4-6] *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] *On that day living water will flow out from Jerusalem, half of it east to the Dead Sea and half of it west to the Mediterranean Sea, in summer and in winter. The LORD will be king over the whole earth. On that day there will be one LORD, and his name the only name.*[Zech.14:8-9]

Scripture 3) Do not put the Lord your God to the test. God has given us the Holy Spirit to lead, guide and counsel us, so we can live honourable lives and make good, wholesome and sound decisions. Of course, we are still human with weaknesses and failures, but by God's grace and our own perseverance, we are maturing—when we fall, we don't give up but get up and learn from our mistakes: *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. Therefore let us move beyond the elementary teachings about Christ and be taken forward to maturity.*[Heb.5:13-6:1] God has given us spiritual sense and also common sense so we can apply His Word to our daily life: *Lord, deal with me in loving-kindness, and teach me, your servant, to obey; for I am your servant; therefore give me common sense to apply your rules to everything I do.*[Ps.119:124-125] Although God's Word contains promises for us, we are not to be presumptuous or use them to our own advantage. When the Jews were hungry in their wilderness travels, God supernaturally gave them bread (manna) to eat, but when Jesus was hungry He did not use His deity to His own advantage. However, when the crowds were hungry, Jesus multiplied the loaves on at least 2 occasions: *Aware of their discussion, Jesus asked, "You of little faith, why are you talking among yourselves about having no bread? Do you still not understand? Don't you remember the five loaves for the five thousand, and how many basketfuls you gathered? Or the seven loaves for the four thousand, and how many basketfuls you gathered?*[Matt.16:8-10] We are to have the same mindset as Jesus: *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.*[Phil.2:5-6] God Word is God's Will but we should never dishonour God by putting Him to the test. God never tries to prove to us He is God; we must trust not test—and anyway God won't oblige! God does performs miracles but never to convince critics—He is known only by faith.

But whatever your favourite Scripture is, don't treat it as just a nice platitude or a sentimental memory evoker! Remember that every Word of God has intrinsic life and power within it and God will use it to fulfill His purpose: *My word, which comes from my mouth, is like the rain and snow. It will not come back to me without results. It will accomplish whatever I want and achieve whatever I send it to*

do.[Is.55:11] As we take the Bible seriously and read with understanding, we will grow spiritually and our walk with God will become more blessed as we trust Him.

There's within my heart a melody, Jesus whispers sweet and low,
Fear not, I am with thee, peace, be still, in all of life's ebb and flow.
Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, sweetest Name I know, fills my every longing, keeps me singing as I go.

Yes! 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 the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe.*[1Thess.2:13]

Questions

What do we mean by "the Word of God"?
Why do we believe that the Bible is the Word of God?
How can we understand what the Bible means?
Is the Bible the only way God communicates with us?
Does it matter which translation of the Bible we use?
How is God's Word our spiritual food?
Why must we only God?
Why mustn't we test God?

Puritan 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.

February:

Remember. *Remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of their way will save them from death and cover over a multitude of sins.Jas.5:20*

Thought for the Month: 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. *K. D.Johnson*

Sunday 2nd February Ps.103:1-12. Luke 5

Just do it! *Simon answered, "Master, we've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything. **But because you say so, I will** let down the nets."*

When Blue Ribbon Sports (BRS) changed its name to Nike, Inc., the company adopted the Swoosh as its official logo alongside the trademark "*Just Do It*". Today the logo and trademark of Nike are synonymous, but the "*Just Do It*" concept is not just for wearing sports clothes—"*Just Do It*" is the very core of what faith is: *The body without the spirit is dead. In the same way, faith without good works is dead.*Jas.2:26 *We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully.*Rom.12:6-8 And it is sin if we don't do it! *Remember, it is sin to know what you ought to do and then not do it.*Jas.4:17

The most important doctrine of the Christian faith is Jesus' death and resurrection: *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 Without Jesus' death and resurrection, we have nothing and we are nothing—or as Paul puts it so succinctly: *if Christ has not been raised, then all our preaching is useless, and your faith is useless. And we apostles would all be lying about God–for we have said that God raised Christ from the grave... And if Christ has not been raised, then your faith is useless and you are still guilty of your sins. In that case, all who have died believing in Christ are lost! And if our hope in Christ is only for this life, we are more to be pitied than anyone in the world. But in fact, Christ has been raised from the dead. He is the first of a great harvest of all who have died.*2Cor.15:14-20

But even though Jesus' death and resurrection is foundational to the Christian faith, if we don't "*just do it*"—if we don't act on what we say we believe and let it change our lives, then we don't really believe it! I was brought up in a church that taught "*particular redemption*" or '*limited atonement'* which is the belief that the atonement of Christ is restricted to those chosen by God from eternity. It is true that Christians are "*the Elect*"—that we have been called and predestined by God: *When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honoured the word of the Lord; and all who were appointed for eternal life believed.*Act.13:48 *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.*Eph.1:3-5 *I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit —fruit that will last.*Jn.15:15-16 *One of those listening was a woman from the city of Thyatira named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth. She was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message. When she and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home. "If you consider me a believer in the Lord," she said, "come and stay at my house." And she persuaded us.*Act.16:14-15 *So too, at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace. And if by grace, then it cannot be based on works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace.*Rom.11:5-6

But is also true that it is **our** responsibility to believe in Jesus as God's Son and our Saviour: *He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.*[Jn.1:12-13] **We** have to make our minds up about who Jesus is and then act on it. *As was his custom, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that the Messiah had to suffer and rise from the dead. "This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Messiah," he said. Some of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a large number of God-fearing Greeks and quite a few prominent women.*[Acts.17:2-4] Although God chose us, we must still choose Him! *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. You became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering with the joy given by the Holy Spirit. And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. The Lord's message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia—your faith in God has become known everywhere. Therefore we do not need to say anything about it, for they themselves report what kind of reception you gave us. They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.*[1Thess.1:4-10] When Jesus died on the cross, He died for everyone, not just for those who believe: *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.***[2Jn.2:1-2] If you only hear about God's ability to save but not your own responsibility to believe, you will not have any real hope. No! we must believe and choose life over death: *But when they believed Philip as he proclaimed the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women.*[Acts.8:12] *This day I call the heavens and the earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live and that you may love the LORD your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him. For the LORD is your life.*[Deut.30:19-20]

Most religious heresies come from ignorance of the Bible—they are truths that are taken out of context or in isolation from the rest of Scripture. That is why we need to know the whole counsel of God and not restrict our reading to favourite verses of Scripture. But even when people read and study the Scriptures, if they don't really believe Jesus, the Bible remains a book instead of the Word of God. *The Father who sent me has himself given witness about me. You have never heard his voice. You have never seen what he really looks like. And his word does not live in you. This is because you do not believe the One he sent. You study the Scriptures carefully. You study them because you think they will give you eternal life. The Scriptures you study give witness about me. But you refuse to come to me and receive life.*[Jn.5:37-40] The Word of God is intrinsically sharp and bares our heart before God. *God means what he says. What he says goes. His powerful Word is sharp as a surgeon's scalpel, cutting through everything, whether doubt or defence, laying us open to listen and obey. Nothing and no one is impervious to God's Word. We can't get away from it—no matter what.*[Heb.4:12-13] The Word of God is real spiritual food and the source of true wisdom. *My son, pay attention to what I say; turn your ear to my words. Do not let them out of your sight, keep them within your heart; for they are life to those who find them and health to one's whole body. Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it.*[Prov.4:20-23] *I have not departed from your laws, for you yourself have taught me. How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!*[Ps.119:102-103] *Gracious words are a honeycomb, sweet to the soul and healing to the bones.*[Prov.16:24] Spiritual food comes from a spiritual source. *Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.*[Matt.4:4] But we still have to eat the spiritual food for it to benefit us! *Jesus said to them, "Very truly I tell you, it is not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is the bread that comes down from heaven and gives*

life to the world." "Sir," they said, "always give us this bread." Then Jesus declared, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty… Jesus said to them, "Very truly I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day. For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so the one who feeds on me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven. Your ancestors ate manna and died, but whoever feeds on this bread will live forever."[Jn.6:32-58] Ignorance leads to error and spiritual ignorance leads to spiritual error. *Jesus replied, "You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God.*[Matt.22:29] The antidote to error is truth—but when people don't act on the truth, it means that they don't really believe it. It is said that the sign of insanity is repeatedly doing the same things but expecting a different result. However, when it comes to obeying God, we can and we should do the same thing and whether or not we see a different result. Faith is trusting and obeying God—and there is a great blessing in believing what God says: *You are blessed because you believed that what the Lord said would really happen.*[Lk.1:45] The response of Peter to Jesus summarises this simple faith. *Simon answered, "Master, we've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything. But* ***because you say so, I will*** *let down the nets."*

Believing in Jesus Christ is just the beginning of our new life with God and God has made provision for us to grow and develop in our faith. First of all He comes and resides in us by the Holy Spirit. But He has also given us a home—the Church. The Church is not a building but the Family of God, the meeting together of fellow Believers. The word "*Church*" in the NT is the Greek word "*ekklesia*" (ἐκκλησία) from where we get "*ecclesiastical*" and is defined as: "*a gathering of citizens called out from their homes into some public place for the purpose of deliberating*" (to deliberate means to discourse or debate with action taken after careful consideration). Of course, we can and should reverence God at home; we can and should worship God at home; we can and should read the Scriptures at home; we can and should pray at home, but Church is doing this together with other Believers—people who are born-again by the Word of God and by the Holy Spirit, people who have received Jesus as Lord and Saviour and are citizens of heaven: *For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God.*[1Pet.1:23] *But our citizenship is in heaven.*[Phil.3:20] *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.*[Eph.2:19-20] And when we meet together, we meet in public with a specific purpose—which is to hear the Word of God, talk about what we have heard and then respond by taking action after careful consideration! John Chrysostom, one of the early Church Fathers (344-407) wrote: *For such a long a time now, we have been meeting together at church, enjoying the blessing of a most sacred fellowship, within which is treasured up great value. And shall we go back home again just the same as we came, with none of our sins corrected? If that is our case, what has been the point of our coming here*? If we are to stay blessed and enjoy fellowship with God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit, we need to read the Scriptures with understanding, accept what God says and put God's Word into practice. *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.*[Matt.7:24-25] *Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.*[Jas.1:22] *Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.*[Phil.4:9] Like the Ethiopian, we need people to come alongside us and explain what the Bible really means—not with spurious, superstitious conspiracy theories but the simple message of Jesus, the Son of God who died for our sins and rose again for our

justification. *Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. "Do you understand what you are reading?" Philip asked. "How can I," he said, "unless someone explains it to me?" So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. 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.8:30-34]
Once we have heard what God has said about His Son from the Scriptures, we need to act on it and, like Peter, do what He says. That means repent—which is changing our minds to agree with God about everything, including what God says about Himself and how we worship Him, about ourselves, our past, our present and our future. That is why we need to know the Scriptures—but we also need to make our lips do their duty and only let them say what God says about us and our situation. This is not mind-over-matter or wishful thinking but coming to terms with reality as God sees it—and remember, God never lies!
God has given us practical helps to remind us of who He is and who we are—the Church (the gathering of Believers who meet to deliberate on God's Kingdom), the Ordinances of Baptism and Communion, and even public prayer. So let's encourage one another to keep doing what Jesus says as we worship and pray, study and share together—it is called Fellowship! *I was very glad when they said to me, "Let us go up to the house of the LORD." Jerusalem, our feet are standing inside your gates. Jerusalem is built like a city where everything is close together. The tribes of the LORD go there to praise his name. They do it in keeping with the law he gave to Israel.*[Ps.122:1-4]
Questions
What is salvation?
How are we saved?
Why do some people find the Bible difficult to understand?
How can we know what God thinks about something?
What is the Church?
Is it possible to stay both sensible and spiritual?
Puritan Prayer. Help me to see how in everything, Your will is good and even when Your will crosses mine, teach me to be pleased with it. Grant me to feel You in fire, and food and every providence—and to see that Your many gifts and creatures are but Your hands and fingers taking hold of me. You are the bottomless fountain of all good. I give myself to You out of love, for all I have or own is Yours—my goods, family, church, self—to do with as You will. Honour Yourself by me and by all that is mine. If it be consistent with Your eternal counsels, the purpose of Your grace and the great ends of Your glory, then bestow upon me the blessings of Your comforts—and if not, then let me resign myself to Your wiser determinations.

Sunday 9th February Ps.103:11-22. Luke 6

What sort of tree are you? *A tree is identified by its fruit… What you say flows from what is in your heart.*[Lk.6:44-45]
There are many references to trees in the Bible—starting with the Garden of Eden: *The LORD God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground—trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.*[Gen.2:9] Adam was told to care for the trees and he could eat from any of them except one: *The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. And the LORD God commanded the man, "You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die."*[Gen.2:15-17] Although the 2 trees in the middle of the

Garden were real trees, they were also an allegory of the choice of obedience (an allegory is a story to illustrate a spiritual truth—a parable). When Adam and Eve ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, they were choosing to disobey God and they reaped the consequences of spiritual death (that is, separation from God). There was also a fig tree in the garden and Adam and Eve made coverings for themselves from its leaves. Those fig leaves then became an allegory of human religion—someone's attempt to be acceptable before God—and it didn't work! Those fig leaves didn't provide a covering for Adam and Eve or remove their guilt before God then, and human religion cannot remove a person's guilt before God now! At the introduction of the New Covenant, Jesus cursed the fig tree and its leaves withered to show that human religion or any religion of works including Judaism (Old Covenant) is finished. No more temple, no more sacrifice, no more priest, no more holy-days or Sabbaths because the New Covenant has superseded the Old Covenant and made it redundant. *The next day as they were leaving Bethany, Jesus was hungry. Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to find out if it had any fruit. When he reached it, he found nothing but leaves, because it was not the season for figs. Then he said to the tree, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again." And his disciples heard him say it. On reaching Jerusalem, Jesus entered the temple courts and began driving out those who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves, and would not allow anyone to carry merchandise through the temple courts. And as he taught them, he said, "Is it not written: 'My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations' ? But you have made it 'a den of robbers.' " … In the morning, as they went along, they saw the fig tree withered from the roots. Peter remembered and said to Jesus, "Rabbi, look! The fig tree you cursed has withered!"* Mk.11:12-21 The Old Covenant (Judaism) never worked because it could never cleanse the conscience—it only covered up sin (atoned) never removed sin. *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… 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.9:8-14 The only way to deal with the guilt of sin is to be forgiven by God—which means accepting God's provision. In the Genesis story, God provided animal skins as a covering. *The LORD God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them.* Gen.3:21 This again is an allegory and illustrates the spiritual truth of Jesus' vicarious death. The many animal sacrifices that were later part of the Old Covenant were fulfilled in the one single perfect Offering of the Lamb of God which took away the sins of the world: *The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! This is the one I meant when I said, 'A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.' I myself did not know him, but the reason I came baptizing with water was that he might be revealed to Israel." Then John gave this testimony: "I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him. And I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, 'The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.' I have seen and I testify that this is God's Chosen One."* Jn.1:29-34

But returning to today's story of *A tree is identified by its fruit.* Lk.6:45 We are expected to produce good fruit because God has made us a good tree—and even when we are old, we should still produce good fruit: *But the godly will flourish like palm trees and grow strong like the cedars of Lebanon. For they are transplanted to the LORD's own house. They flourish in the courts of our God. Even in old age they will still produce fruit; they will remain vital and green. They will declare, "The LORD is just! He is my rock! There is no evil in him!"* Ps.92:12-15 So what sort of fruit are we expected to produce? Fruit is our character and we should produce the fruit of the Spirit—the character of the Holy Spirit: *But*

the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.[Gal.5:22-25] Our character is not the veneer that we want people see but the real us that manifests when we are under pressure. When someone is been born-again, they are made righteous. *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] So now we have an obligation to live righteous lives (lives that are right with God, or in harmony with God). *Don't you know that when you offer yourselves to someone to obey him as slaves, you are slaves to the one whom you obey—whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness? But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you wholeheartedly obeyed the form of teaching to which you were entrusted. You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness.*[Rom.6:16-18] We have the same righteousness (holiness) as Jesus because He exchanged our sin for His righteousness. *God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*[2Cor.5:21] When read the Scriptures and see what it says about us—redeemed, righteous, holy children of God—we must not go away and forget what God says about us. Instead we should carefully consider our new nature and live like the redeemed, righteous, holy children of God that we are. *My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires. Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you. Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it—he will be blessed in what he does.*[Jas.1:19-25] We are now heavenly people and citizens of heaven: *But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ.*[Phil.3:20] *Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household.*[Eph.2:19] *The first man was of the dust of the earth; the second man is of heaven. As was the earthly man, so are those who are of the earth; and as is the heavenly man, so also are those who are of heaven. And just as we have borne the image of the earthly man, so shall we bear the image of the heavenly man.*[1Cor.15:47-49] If we only listen to these things but don't act on them, we don't really believe them. We need the information and the transformation—which comes from hearing **and** believing Electrical appliances only work if they are plugged in and switched on! If we are going to work, we too must be plugged in and also switched on! We are "*plugged in*" at conversion but we must also be "*switched on*" by being consciously connected with the Holy Spirit (that is what faith does). However, as James says, we soon forget, and so we need to persuade ourselves that we are right with God—not because of what we do but because of who we are. We are a new creation and the old has gone (the Old Covenant and our old life together with its guilt and behaviour). *Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth. This is how we know that we belong to the truth and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence [lit. persuade our hearts]: If our hearts condemn us, we know that God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. Dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God and receive from him anything we ask, because we keep his commands and do what pleases him. And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us.*[1Jn.3:18-23] We need to persuade our hearts that we are right before God. God knows everything and He is greater than our feelings and if our conscience condemns us, we must reassure ourselves that God is greater than our conscience. Righteousness is much more than being right with God (which we are by

grace through faith)—righteousness is God's life in us. Christ now lives *in* us as well *with* us: *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… which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.*[Col.1:25-27] We are right with God because our righteousness is imputed to us by God and also imparted to us by God.

We are no longer regarded as "*sinners*" by God. *But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.*[Rom.5:8] This verse makes it quite clear that although we were sinners, because Christ has died for us, we are no longer sinners (even though we may still sin). So the term "*sinner*" in the New Testament, is not a description of what people do, but of who people are—we may still sin but are no longer called sinners. Also, the term "*righteous*" does not primarily refer to what people do, but to what Believers are through faith in Christ. Sinners may do good things, but this does not make them righteous, and righteous people may do bad things, but this does not make them sinners. Both the terms "*sinners*" and "*righteous*" are primarily used in the New Testament as statements of identity, not descriptions of action or behaviour. Actions do and will follow, but external actions cannot change these internal realities. We cannot undo our original sinful condition by doing good because we did not become a sinner by doing evil. Our wrong (evil) actions merely flowed out of our nature—what we possessed by our natural birth and our inherited contamination from Adam's sin. But the converse is also true—we cannot lose through doing wrong what we did not get through doing right! It is gained or lost through one of two births provided by one of two men—either Adam or Christ. Salvation is received through faith and does not come by means of good works and therefore cannot be lost through the doing of bad works. It is futile to think that by doing good, we can eradicate what we did not get through doing wrong. The unsaved person is not lost because of what they have done, but because of what they are. The lost state of a person is not solved through right actions, because it did not come through wrong actions. It was a fact of natural birth and can only be undone by a supernatural birth. *In reply Jesus declared, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again." "How can a man be born when he is old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!" Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."*[Jn.3:3-8]

And so, what sort of tree are you? Your conversation, your confession, will identify who you really are. *A tree is identified by its fruit… What you say flows from what is in your heart.*[Lk.6:44-45] Depending on where your home is you will either flourish or flounder. *But the godly will flourish like palm trees and grow strong like the cedars of Lebanon. For they are transplanted to the LORD's own house. They flourish in the courts of our God. Even in old age they will still produce fruit; they will remain vital and green. They will declare, "The LORD is just! He is my rock! There is no evil in him!"*[Ps.92:12-15] Of course, we should not be so spiritually minded that we are no earthly good (that sort of "*spirituality*" is not actually spiritual at all but just religious—a ritualistic religiosity that has no real spiritual benefit!). Wisdom is the application of knowledge and Jesus is the embodiment of wisdom: *A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit. The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him—the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of might, the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the LORD—and he will delight in the fear of the LORD. He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes, or decide by what he hears with his ears; but with righteousness he will judge the needy, with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth.*[Is.11:1-4] Jesus is our wisdom: *It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption.*[1Cor.1:30] Jesus gives us words and wisdom: *And so you will bear testimony to me. But make up*

your mind not to worry beforehand how you will defend yourselves. For I will give you words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict.[Lk.21:13-15] And so we can now live lives that are worthy of God through the Holy Spirit's wisdom and insight: *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.*[Col.1:9-10] God's wisdom is practical and enables us to excel at what we do! *Then the LORD said to Moses, "See, I have chosen Bezalel son of Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah, and I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with wisdom, with understanding, with knowledge and with all kinds of skills— to make artistic designs for work in gold, silver and bronze, to cut and set stones, to work in wood, and to engage in all kinds of crafts.*[Ex.31:1-5]

So let's determine that we will not only hear the Word of God but put it into practice, being fully persuaded that we are right with God because of what Jesus accomplished on the cross. And if we ever feel condemned, we now know what to do—we put our heart at rest by looking at ourself in the Scripture and then go away and live as children of God who are redeemed, righteous and holy not as mere natural humans who are guilty, unholy sinners!

Questions

What is an allegory?
How did Adam and Eve deal with their guilt?
How did God deal with Adam and Eve's guilt?
How do we produce fruit?
What sort of fruit should we bear?
Why is it important to agree with God?

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

Sunday 16th February Ps.104:1-15. Luke 7

Healthy, Wealthy and Wise! *But wisdom is proved right by all her children.*[Lk.7:35]

Last week we looked at the allegory of the Trees in the Garden of Eden (allegories, fables and parables are stories to illustrate something moral or spiritual). Today we are looking at a proverb—which is a short sentence to illustrate wisdom or advice. The Bible has many proverbs and a whole book of them too! But we should learn what are proverbs, what are parables, what are precepts, what are premises and what are promises because not everything in the Bible is a promise—and God's promises are only ours "*in Christ Jesus*". *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] The proverb *"Early to bed and early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise!"* was first printed in 1639 but an earlier version was around in the 1400s: "*As the olde englysshe prouerbe sayth in this wyse. Who soo woll ryse erly shall be holy helthy & zely.*" (The word "*zely*" has become "*silly*" but in the 1400s it meant "*auspicious*", "*fortunate*" or "*blessed*"!) Of course, it takes more than going to bed early and getting out of bed early the next morning to become healthy, wealthy and wise. However, if we go to be late and get up late every morning, we are likely to be the opposite!

Nevertheless, regardless of what any proverb says about health, wealth and wisdom, these are qualities of life that we all aspire to! And the Bible has a lot to say about them too—but we must be careful to define these words accurately or we will spend our life searching for the unattainable!

Health: God is our Healer: *for I am the LORD, who heals you.*[Ex.15:26] *He sent out his word and healed them; he rescued them from the grave.*[Ps.107:20] Jesus went around healing the sick. *Jesus went preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people.*[Matt.4:23] *Jesus went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him.*[Acts 10:38] *He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed.*[1Pet.2:24] And Jesus hasn't changed *Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.*[Heb.13:8] Jesus still heals sick people—as many of us can affirm. Most of us here can recall times when we were sick, we called on the Name of Jesus and we were healed as a direct result of prayer—either immediately or progressively. And our Church website has these testimonies where anyone can read how God has changed our lives. However, we have also had occasions when we prayed fervently and saw no tangible change to our situation. God won't withhold any good thing from us: *He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?*[Rom.8:32] But prayer is not a means to persuade God to give us what we want and Christians are not guaranteed perfect physical health—however, we do expect to live better, happier and healthier lives than non-Christians. *Although a wicked person who commits a hundred crimes may live a long time, I know that it will go better with those who fear God, who are reverent before him.*[Eccl.8:12] There are obvious benefits to living disciplined, restrained and wholesome lives compared to excessive, unrestrained, debauched lives! We consist of spirit, soul and body: *May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.*[1Thess.5:23] And good health includes our mental health as much as our physical health and one affects the other: *Dear friend, I pray that you may enjoy good health and that all may go well with you, even as your soul is getting along well.*[3Jn.2] It is easy to feel despondent when our body is in pain and it is in those times especially that we must ensure that our spirit is in charge. Our mind is very powerful—for good and for bad and mental health is as important, probably more important, than our physical health. Psychosomatic illnesses are real and can be very debilitating because they don't have an obvious cause—their physical symptoms are worsened or complicated by mental factors. However, we should always remember that the Holy Spirit who dwell in us is God Himself is joined to our spirit: *But whoever is united with the Lord is one with him in spirit.*[1Cor.6:17] And so our spirit is stronger than our soul (mind) and our body! We must never let our body or soul dominate our life—we must make sure that our spirit is in charge: *My bones suffer mortal agony as my foes taunt me, saying to me all day long, "Where is your God?" Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God.*[Ps.42:10-11] Remember, our spirit comes from an incorruptible seed and is united with God's Spirit: *For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable [incorruptible], through the living and enduring word of God.*[1Pet.1:23] Praise (saying good words about God) is an important factor in our spiritual, mental and physical health: *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]

Wealthy: Too often we think of wealth and prosperity in terms of money but Jesus makes it clear that it is not our physical assets that make us rich but our relationship with God—our spiritual assets: *Then he said to them, "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions [life is not measured by how much you own]." 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] True prosperity is having eternal wealth—the blessing of sins forgiven: *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.4:7-8] *Whoever conceals their sins does not prosper, but the one who confesses and renounces them finds mercy. Blessed is the one who always trembles before God, but whoever hardens their heart falls into trouble.*[Prov.28:13-14] We are now citizens of heaven: *But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ.*[Phil.3:20] And the currency of heaven is faith not £ sterling! *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.*[Is.55:1-2] When Simon tried to buy favour from God, Peter had harsh words for him: *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. Perhaps he will 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] Paul gave some direct teaching on money (rather than just spiritual riches): *Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work. As it is written: "They have freely scattered their gifts to the poor; their righteousness endures forever." Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness. You will be enriched in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God. This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of the Lord's people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God. Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, others will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone else. And in their prayers for you their hearts will go out to you, because of the surpassing grace God has given you. Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!*[2Cor.9:6-15] Paul's teaching was not academic theory but borne out of experience: *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. Yet it was good of you to share in my troubles.*[Phil.4:10-15] But the amount of money we have is not what gets God's attention—it is what we do with it that counts. Jesus said that the poor widow's little was more than the rich peoples' lot: *As Jesus looked up, he saw the rich putting their gifts into the temple treasury. He also saw a poor widow put in two very small copper coins. "Truly I tell you," he said, "this poor*

widow has put in more than all the others. All these people gave their gifts out of their wealth; but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on." Lk.21:1-4 And so, we are to use worldly wealth wisely and for the good of the Kingdom: *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 one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.* Lk.16:8-13

Wise: Wisdom is the application of knowledge—what we do with what we know. Jesus said that *wisdom is proved right by all her children.* Lk.7:35 In other words, the proof of the pudding is in the eating because knowledge is merely theory until it is acted on. Other Bible versions translate this verse: *Opinion polls don't count for much, do they? The proof of the pudding is in the eating. But God is wise and good. Wise people understand and they show that God is right. But wisdom is acknowledged as righteous by all her children. Nevertheless, the wisdom of God will be proven true by the expressions of godliness in everyone who follows me.* Godly wisdom is portrayed in the Bible as the Tree of Life: *Blessed are those who find wisdom, those who gain understanding, for she is more profitable than silver and yields better returns than gold. She is more precious than rubies; nothing you desire can compare with her. Long life is in her right hand; in her left hand are riches and honour. Her ways are pleasant ways, and all her paths are peace. She is a tree of life to those who take hold of her; those who hold her fast will be blessed.* Prov.3:13-18 *The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life, and the one who is wise saves lives.* Prov.11:30 *Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a longing fulfilled is a tree of life.* Prov.11:30 And that Tree of Life is Jesus (who is the embodiment of Wisdom): *It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption.* 1Cor.1:30 The 1st Adam was denied access to the Tree of Life because of his disobedience but we have access to that Tree of Life (Jesus Christ) because our sins have been forgiven and expunged: *Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.* Rev.2:7 *Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever.* Rev.22:1-5 *Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life and may go through the gates into the city.* Rev.22:14 As we saw last week, knowing about God—even about righteousness and holiness—is of little value if we immediately go away and forget what we have seen about ourselves in the Scripture. *Humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you. Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it—he will be blessed in what he does.* Jas.1:21-25 When we read about ourself in the Scriptures, we need and remember what we have read—and we do this by meditation. Non-Christian meditation (either secular or religious) encourages you to empty your mind, but Christian meditation is about filling your mind—not with just anything but with good things and especially the Word of God. *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. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.[Phil.4:8-9] *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] *"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."*[Is.59:20-60:1] To understand more about God and spiritual matters, we must think on the Word of God and ponder what we have read (or as the Psalmist says—"*Selah*"), because revelation comes from meditation: *Reflect on what I am saying, for the Lord will give you insight into all this.*[2Tim.2:7] And then talk about your faith, what you believe: *I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith [what you believe], so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ.*[Phile.6]

So, if we are going to be truly wealthy, healthy and wise, we must do more than just going to bed early and rising early, we must go to the Scriptures: *Look to God's instructions and teachings! People who contradict his word are completely in the dark. They will go from one place to another, weary and hungry.*[Is.8:20-21] Remember what God says about us and live according to the principles of God's Kingdom. We may have to repeat the lessons we have taken but we must never give up—and remember, it takes practice to do get it right: *By now you should be teachers. Instead, you still need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word. You need milk, not solid food. All those who live on milk lack the experience to talk about what is right. They are still babies. However, solid food is for mature people, whose minds are trained by practice to know the difference between good and evil.*[Heb.5:12-14]

Questions

Does our spiritual health affect our mental and physical health?
What can we do to stay as healthy as possible?
How should we measure wealth?
What should our attitude be towards money?
Define wisdom
How can we become wise?

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

Sunday 23rd February Ps.104:16-35. Luke 8

How does your garden grow? *The seed is the word of God.Lk.8:11*

Mary, Mary, quite contrary, how does your garden grow? With silver bells and cockle shells and pretty maids all in a row. This nursery rhyme is not actually about Mary's garden at all but about the persecution of Christians during Queen Mary's reign in the C16th. After Mary's half-brother Edward VI died, Lady Jane Grey succeeded the throne but was deposed after 9 days by Mary and she made the Protestant Church of England Roman Catholic again, plunging England into turmoil—hence *Mary, Mary, quite contrary*! Altogether nearly 300 Protestants were executed in Mary's reign but this must be seen the context of the general persecution of Protestant Christians in that era as many Protestants were executed during the reigns of Henry VIII,

Edward VI, Elizabeth I, James I, Charles I and Charles II—so much for "Christian England"!! Steven Gardiner was appointed Bishop of Winchester and Lord Chancellor and crowned Mary as Queen on 1st October 1553—thus *garden* refers to Bishop Gardiner. The *cockle shells, silver bells and maids* are all forms of torture or execution. Mary was also the theme of another nursery rhyme: *Three Blind Mice See how they run, see how they run; They all ran after the farmer's wife, Who cut off their tails with a carving knife; Did you ever see such a thing in your life, As three blind mice?*. The 3 blind mice refer to the Bishops of Worcester, Oxford and Canterbury (Latimer, Ridly and Cranmer), who Mary had executed. Latimer, Ridly were burnt at the stake at Oxford in October 1555 just outside the city walls and Cranmer was burnt at the same place 6 months later. As Latimer was about to die he said: *"Play the man, Master Ridley; we shall this day light such a candle, by God's grace, in England, as I trust shall never be put out."*

Nevertheless, the question*: How does your garden grow?* is still a relevant question. When Jesus told the parable of the Sower, it was to explain the Kingdom of God. *His disciples asked him what this parable meant. He said, "The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of God has been given to you, but to others I speak in parables, so that, " 'though seeing, they may not see; though hearing, they may not understand.'*[Lk.8:9-10] However, the Kingdom of God will not be completely revealed until Jesus returns and death is destroyed: *For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. But each in turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him. Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death.*[1Cor.15:22-26] Bishop Latimer understood this and hoped it would be in his time. He said: "*It may come in my days, old as I am, or in my children's days, the saints shall be taken up to meet Christ in the air, and so shall come down with Him again*". But until Jesus returns, the Kingdom if God is here in part. Nevertheless, God's Kingdom is not just something for the hereafter but is here right now—here on this earth today in a very real way: *This, then, is how you should pray: " 'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.*[Matt.6:9-13] *Once, on being asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, Jesus replied, "The coming of the kingdom of God is not something that can be observed, nor will people say, 'Here it is,' or 'There it is,' because the kingdom of God is within you.*[Lk.17:20-21] The Kingdom of God is the reign of Christ and He reigns in people's hearts not through political regimes: *Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now my kingdom is from another place."*[Jn.18:36]

The parable of the Sower is about the Kingdom of God and consists of 3 main components—the seed, the ground and the harvest: *A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path; it was trampled on, and the birds ate it up. Some fell on rocky ground, and when it came up, the plants withered because they had no moisture. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up with it and choked the plants. Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up and yielded a crop, a hundred times more than was sown.*[Lk.8:5-8]

Seed. The seed is the Word of God. The Word of God is our spiritual food: *Man shall not live on bread alone, but on <u>every word that comes from the mouth of God.</u>*[Matt.4:4] The Word of God is also a mirror in which we can see ourself: *Humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you. Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and, <u>after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like</u>. But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, <u>not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it</u>—he will be blessed in what he does.*[Jas.1:21-25] An important part of maturing in our faith, is to see ourself in the Scriptures and then

remembering who we really are—who God says we are. Jesus saw Himself in the Scriptures: *He said to them, "How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.*[Lk.24:25-27] We too, need to see ourselves in the Scriptures and then live accordingly. We need know the difference between pre-conversion and post-conversion and remember that all those who are in Christ are now a new Creation and the old has gone—along with their sins! *Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation.*[2Cor.5:17-19] Luther said: *Remorse before Calvary is of God; remorse after you have been to Calvary is of the devil. Repent of your sin, yes; but do not make your sin a subject for long and melancholy meditation. Why should I cheat God by spending my time and energy on remorse? I am greater than my sins. You think like a man instead of thinking like God. Your thoughts concerning God are too human!"* But if we ever do feel condemned, we need to know how to set our heart at rest: *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. Dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God and receive from him anything we ask, because we keep his commands and do what pleases him. And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us. The one who keeps God's commands lives in him, and he in them. And this is how we know that he lives in us: We know it by the Spirit he gave us.*[1Jn.3:19-24] God is greater than our conscience and we can trust Him to keep His Word! But we must have God's Word in our heart and our mouth: *Keep this Book of the Law always on your lips; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful. Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go.*[Josh.1:8-9]

Ground. The ground is people's hearts. Our heart can be either our spirit or our soul. Although our spirit and soul are distinct, the term "*heart*" can be used for either of them. Our spirit is the God-conscious part of us—the part that died through Adam's disobedience but is made alive through Jesus' obedience. Our soul is our natural person, our *psyche*—and includes our will, emotions and intellect. Our will is in our soul but God's will is in our spirit—our body is God's Temple but He dwells in our spirit. *Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in your midst.*[1Cor.3:16] *But whoever is united with the Lord is one with him in spirit… 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.6:17-20] Praise and thanksgiving are decisions of our will in our soul: *Praise the LORD, my soul; all my inmost being, praise his holy name. Praise the LORD, my soul, and forget not all his benefits…*[Ps.103:1-2] *Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise; give thanks to him and praise his name.*[Ps.100:4] Praise and thanksgiving releases God's will but saying bad words and being ungrateful will quench God's will: *Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. Do not quench the Spirit.*[1Thes.5:16-19] (Praise is saying good words—*doxology* and *benediction* both mean "*good words*"—and thanksgiving is showing appreciation and gratitude). In Jesus' parable there was trampled ground, rocky ground, weedy ground and good ground—and fortunately for us, Jesus explained what they represented: *This is the meaning of the parable: The seed is the word of God. Those along the path are the ones who hear, and then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved. Those on the rocky ground are the ones who receive the word with joy when they hear it, but they have no root. They believe for a while, but in the time of testing they fall away. The seed that fell among thorns stands for those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked*

by life's worries, riches and pleasures, and they do not mature. But the seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop.[Lk.8:11-15]

Harvest. Sometimes (it often seems like most times!) when we sow good seed, we see no result—but we should keep sowing because we are guaranteed a harvest, regardless of the circumstances or what we see. *Whoever watches the wind will not plant; whoever looks at the clouds will not reap. As you do not know the path of the wind, or how the body is formed in a mother's womb, so you cannot understand the work of God, the Maker of all things. 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.*[Eccl.11:4-6] The harvest is righteousness: *Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness. You will be enriched in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God.*[2Cor.9:10-11] *God disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it. Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees. "Make level paths for your feet," so that the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed.*[Heb.12:10-15] *Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. But if you harbour bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. Such "wisdom" does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice. But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.*[Jas.3:13-18] And righteousness comes from faith—from trusting Jesus: *"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.4:2;23-25] Faith comes from hearing the Word of God: *Consequently faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the preached word of Christ.*[Rom.10:17] But not everyone who hears the Word with their physical ears actually hears it with their spiritual ears. *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.4:2] *You are permitted to understand the secrets of the Kingdom of Heaven, but others are not. To those who listen to my teaching, more understanding will be given, and they will have an abundance of knowledge. But for those who are not listening, even what little understanding they have will be taken away from them. That is why I use these parables, For they look, but they don't really see. They hear, but they don't really listen or understand. This fulfils the prophecy of Isaiah that says, 'When you hear what I say, you will not understand. When you see what I do, you will not comprehend. For the hearts of these people are hardened, and their ears cannot hear, and they have closed their eyes–so their eyes cannot see, and their ears cannot hear, and their hearts cannot understand, and they cannot turn to me and let me heal them.'*[Matt.13:11-15] Some people are like the Pharisees and Sadducees who don't believe and won't believe—and if they see a miracle it is on the wrong day! Other people are like the crowds of Jesus' time who believe in Jesus and even receive miracles—they have started out on the path and are seed eaters but they don't produce fruit. But Disciples are different—they are seed-sowers as well as seed-eaters because they hold fast 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] Even when life is difficult, we are to keep sowing because we will reap happy harvest: *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] *Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.*[Jas.3:18] *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]

Christianity is a personal religion not a proxy religion—we cannot believe on behalf of someone else. Even though other people let the seeds be snatched away or don't mature, we must ensure that we cultivate the ground of our own heart so that we mature and produce a good harvest. *As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path; it was trampled on, and the birds ate it up. Some fell on rocky ground, and when it came up, the plants withered because they had no moisture. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up with it and choked the plants. Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up and yielded a crop, a hundred times more than was sown.*[Lk.8:12-15] *But the seed falling on good soil refers to <u>someone who hears the word and understands it.</u> This is the one who produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.*[Matt.13:23]

So, how does your garden grow? We have good seed—we read and hear, study and share, pray and preach the Word of God. And we have good ground—our hearts are open and receptive, watered and warmed by the Holy Spirit. So there is nothing else for us to do in order to reap a good harvest—except chase the birds away and weed the garden! Good seed in good soil will grow by itself: *This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. <u>All by itself the soil produces grain</u>—first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come.*[Mk.4:26-29]

Christianity is easy! Jesus has set us free from the curse that we inherited from Adam of life being hard work! Of course, life is still work but our spiritual life is now a joy. Our relationship with God is enjoyable instead of being wearisome.

Questions

In what way is God's kingdom like a garden?
How is the Word of God like a seed?
How is our heart like the ground?
What sort of harvest can we expect?
What can we do to produce the best harvest?

Puritan Prayer. In the path of life, we have a refuge from the storm, a fountain for sin and a fullness that is accessible to all. Grant us always to know that to walk with Jesus makes all other interests a shadow and a dream. Keep us from intermittent attention to eternal things. Save us from the delusion of those who fail to go far in religion—who are concerned but not converted, who have another thought but not a new one, who have light, zeal and confidence, but not Christ. Let us judge our Christianity, not only by our dependence upon Jesus, but by our love to Him, our conformity to Him and our knowledge of Him. Give us a religion that is both real and progressive, that lives and works in the Spirit and that profits by Your correction.

March:

Remember. *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.8:18*

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 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 come alive today. *R. Cantalamessa*

Sunday 2nd March Ps.105:1-8;40-45 Luke 9:1-36

This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him. Lk.9:36

Christians are followers of Christ! Although this sounds obvious, it seems to be far from obvious to most people—including many people who attend church. When you see how Christianity is portrayed in the media, Jesus Christ is rarely mentioned, let alone a personal trust in Him. The usual portrayal of Christians (especially vicars!) is that they are effeminate social workers who are busy organising jumble sales and garden parties! This may well be because most Churches are not presenting Christianity as the Bible does. Christianity is not about doing good or even about being good but believing that Jesus is God's Son and our Saviour: *Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.*[Mk.16:16] *Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For on him God the Father has placed his seal of approval." Then they asked him, "What must we do to do the works God requires?" Jesus answered, "The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent."*[Jn.6:27-29] Most other religions are about follow a set of teachings initiated or promoted by their leader—but Christianity is about following Christ Himself not about following His teachings. *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] At both the beginning and end of His ministry, Jesus told Peter to follow Him: *As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. "Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will send you out to fish for people." At once they left their nets and followed him.*[Matt.4:18-21] *Then [Jesus] said to [Peter] "Follow me!" Peter turned and saw that the disciple whom Jesus loved was following them. (This was the one who had leaned back against Jesus at the supper and had said, "Lord, who is going to betray you?") When Peter saw him, he asked, "Lord, what about him?" Jesus answered, "If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? You must follow me."*[Jn.21:19-22] Someone can know all about Jesus' teachings (and even quote them accurately) or even be a theologian but if they do not believe in Jesus as God's Son and their Saviour—if they are not born-again—then they are not a Christian. *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. 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 they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.*[Jn.3:16-18] Be cautious of testimonies. Mike Petzer used the illustration of an axe-man who used to killed Grannies but now helps them across the road. "*I'm glad you've changed, I'm glad you're nice now—but are you saved? If you are not born-again, you are just a nicer person who is going to hell!!!"* Testimonies are good and they can be useful but only if they are about Jesus—what He has done for you—not what you have done (past or present)! We are a prophetic people but prophesy is about giving a good testimony of Jesus: *For it is the Spirit of prophecy who bears testimony to Jesus [For the essence of prophecy is to give a clear witness for Jesus].*[Rev.19:10]

When Jesus introduced the New Covenant, the Believers were either all Jews or converts to Judaism (Proselytes). The Temple was still functioning and the Believers met there for the main

Jewish Festivals along with all the unbelieving Jews (remember the High Priest was a Sadducee who *say that there is no resurrection, and that there are neither angels nor spirits.*[Acts.23:8]*)* They also met for fellowship in the local Synagogues or homes.. *They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.*[Acts.2:42-47] *Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem.*[Acts.9:1-2] *Meanwhile a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was a learned man, with a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures. He had been instructed in the way of the Lord, and he spoke with great fervour [with fervour in the Spirit] and taught about Jesus accurately, though he knew only the baptism of John. He began to speak boldly in the synagogue. When Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they invited him to their home and explained to him the way of God more adequately.*[Acts.18:24-26] The Jewish Believers in Jesus believed everything that was in the Old Covenant but were distinct from the others Jews because they believed that Jesus was the promised Christ (Messiah)—and because they believed that Jesus is the only Way to God, they were called "*Followers of the Way*": *Then Paul said: "I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city. Under Gamaliel I was thoroughly trained in the law of our fathers and was just as zealous for God as any of you are today. I persecuted the followers of this Way to their death, arresting both men and women and throwing them into prison, as also the high priest and all the Council can testify.*[Acts.22:3-5] *However, I admit that I worship the God of our ancestors as a follower of the Way, which they call a sect. I believe everything that is in accordance with the Law and that is written in the Prophets, and I have the same hope in God as these men themselves have, that there will be a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked. So I strive always to keep my conscience clear before God and man.*[Acts.24:14-16] When the Believers were persecuted by the non-believing Jews, they dispersed across the Roman Empire, taking the Gospel with them and telling non-Jews as well as Jews about Jesus the Christ. It was in Antioch (in modern day Turkey), where both Jewish and non-Jewish Believers had integrated together as Church, that the term "*Christian*" was first used: *Now those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen travelled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, telling the message only to Jews. Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, 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. News of this reached the ears of the church at Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. When he arrived and saw the evidence of the grace of God, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord. Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. So 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] And within 20 years, the term "*Christian*" was commonplace: *Then Agrippa said to Paul, "Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?"*[Acts.26:28]

Although we are primarily followers of Christ, God the Father spoke loudly and clearly to all who were present that they should listen to His Son—on at least 2 occasions. *As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."*[Matt.3:16-17] *This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him.*[Lk.9:36] And because the Scriptures are the only reliable record of what Jesus has said, we should take careful notice of

what they say—not just to be informed but most especially to be transformed. We are transformed by renewing our minds through the Word of God: *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] *Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.*[Eph.5:25-27] *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]

How many times to do you hear "*bless you*!" To be blessed is to be at peace, to be happy, to be joyful, to be contented. When Jesus taught about the Kingdom of God, He gave a list of values or characteristics of people in His Kingdom and each one is defined as being blessed. *"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*[Matt.5:1-12] Another Translation puts it this way: *"God blesses those who are poor and realize their need for him, for the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs. God blesses those…* The blessing is not just from hearing but in doing what God says: *[Jesus] replied, "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it."*[Lk.11:28] *"Now then, my children, listen to me; blessed are those who keep my ways. Listen to my instruction and be wise; do not disregard it. Blessed are those who listen to me, watching daily at my doors, waiting at my doorway. For those who find me find life and receive favour from the LORD. But those who fail to find me harm themselves; all who hate me love death."*[Prov.8:32-36] Breaking bread together in remembrance of Jesus is a very practical way of hearing and obeying—as is being baptised into His Name as a Believer (which is also integral to a good conscience): *and this water [the flood in Noah's time] 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.3:21-22]

Jesus is wisdom personified (wisdom in a Person) *It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption.*[1Cor.1:30] And Wisdom is the Tree of Life: *Blessed are those who find wisdom, those who gain understanding, for she is more profitable than silver and yields better returns than gold. She is more precious than rubies; nothing you desire can compare with her. Long life is in her right hand; in her left hand are riches and honour. Her ways are pleasant ways, and all her paths are peace. She is a tree of life to those who take hold of her; those who hold her fast will be blessed.*[Prov.3:13-18] *The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life, and the one who is wise saves lives.*[Prov.11:30] *Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a longing fulfilled is a tree of life.*[Prov.11:30] Although Adam was excluded from that Tree of Life, Believers now have access to it—and all its benefits: *Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.*[Rev.2:7] *Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their*

foreheads. There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever.[Rev.22:1-5]
Yes! Jesus is worth listening to—so let's hear what He has to say and then obey Him by doing what He says!
Questions
What is a Christian?
What does it mean to follow Christ?
Why did the early Believers struggle to accept non-Jews into the Church?
Why should we listen to Jesus?
How does Jesus speak to us?
What is Jesus saying to us?
Puritan Prayer: God of all Sovereignty, Your greatness is unsearchable, Your Name is most excellent and Your glory is magnificent. Ten thousand minister to You, ten thousand times ten thousand stand before You. We come boldly to Your throne because we will find grace to help us when we need it most—and we will receive Your mercy. Let us see Your hand in the instruments of our grief—rejoicing in Your over-ruling providence. Let not our weeping hinder sowing, nor our sorrow hinder duty. While living in a world of change let us seek the abiding City—the New Jerusalem.

Sunday 9th March Ps.106:1-5;43-48 Luke 9:37-62

What is a successful Christian? *For it is the one who is least among you all who is the greatest.Lk.9:48*
Last week we looked at who a Christian is and stated that a Chrisitan is someone who follows Christ—Christ-I-an. But a Christian is much more than just a follower of Christ—a Christian is under Christ's authority because they confess that Jesus is Lord; a Christian is indwelt by God Himself in the Person of the Holy Spirit; a Christian is a member of God's Family—God is their Father, Jesus is their Elder Brother, the Holy Spirit is their Counsellor; a Christian is credited with Jesus' righteousness and is now righteous (right with God); a Christian is a citizen of heaven and belongs to God's Kingdom; a Christian has died to their old life and has been made alive with Christ; a Christian has eternal life; a Christian is an Ambassador for Christ; a Christian has the mind of Christ… the list is almost endless!
We were made in God's image but that image was marred by Adam's sin but a Christian is remade in God's image at conversion. God is holy, pure and righteous—and Christians are also to be holy, pure and righteous: *But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: "Be holy, because I am holy."*[1Pet.1:15] However, we are incapable of always doing right, let alone being right but God gives His righteousness to all who will believe Him. What God did for Abraham, 1000's of years ago, He does today—God credits as righteous all those who place their trust in Him: *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." … 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... 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… 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. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God.*[Rom.4:1-5:2] God's righteousness was integral to Paul's ministry: *Several days later Felix came with his wife Drusilla, who was Jewish. He*

sent for Paul and listened to him as he spoke about faith in Christ Jesus. As Paul talked about righteousness, self-control and the judgment to come, Felix was afraid and said, "That's enough for now! You may leave. When I find it convenient, I will send for you." At the same time he was hoping that Paul would offer him a bribe, so he sent for him frequently and talked with him.[Acts.24:24-25] And if we are going to become a successful Christian—that is, a mature Christian—we need to be acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. *We have much to say about this, but it is hard to make it clear to you because you no longer try to understand. In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil. Therefore let us move beyond the elementary teachings about Christ and be taken forward to maturity, not laying again the foundation of repentance from acts that lead to death, and of faith in God, instruction about cleansing rites, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. And God permitting, we will do so.*[Heb.5:11-6:3] We need to be convinced that God imputes righteousness to us and also imparts righteousness to us—that we are legally right in God's sight and also actually right in His sight.

Being successful in the Kingdom of God is not the same as being successful in the kingdom of this world. Society sees success as having excess—lots of money, lots of "stuff", lots of holiday, lots of… everything, but God sees success as being faithful: *Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!*[Matt.25:23] Faithfulness can mean reliable and also full of faith—we need to be both. In God's Kingdom, faith, hope and love are the most important qualifications, together with reliability and humility. *And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love. Follow the way of love and eagerly desire gifts of the Spirit, especially prophecy.*[1Cor.13:13-14:1] *Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins. Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling. Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms. If anyone speaks, they should do so as one who speaks the very words of God. If anyone serves, they should do so with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen.*[1Pet.4:8-11] *Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found faithful.*[1Cor.4:2] Of course, we must do our part but we should never forget that it is God who gives us the ability to work and it is God who makes things grow: *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.*[Deut.8:17-18] *What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe—as the Lord has assigned to each his task. I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. The one who plants and the one who waters have one purpose, and they will each be rewarded according to their own labour. For we are co-workers in God's service; you are God's field, God's building. By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as a wise builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should build with care. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. If anyone builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, their work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each person's work. If what has been built survives, the builder will receive a reward. If it is burned up, the builder will suffer loss but yet will be saved—even though only as one escaping through the flames.*[1Cor.3:5-15] We should be faithful, virtuous, informed, disciplined, patient, pious, godly, loving Believers but if these characteristics are not visible it is because we have forgotten that God has forgiven us of all our sin: *His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine*

nature, having escaped the corruption in the world caused by evil desires. For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love. For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. But whoever does not have them is nearsighted and blind, forgetting that they have been cleansed from their past sins. Therefore, my brothers and sisters, make every effort to confirm your calling and election. For if you do these things, you will never stumble, and you will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.[2Pet.1:3-11] Those who are forgiven much, will love much: *"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. Then he turned toward the woman and said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet. 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 so, we who have been <u>forgiven everything,</u> should love God with <u>all</u> our heart, soul, mind and strength: *The most important [commandment] 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]God will not give up on us if we fall or fail but will continue what He started: *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] *In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.*[Phil.1:4-6] We have been forgiven all of our sin and if we do fall or fail, we haven't lost our salvation because we have an Advocate who acts on our behalf: *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]

A successful Christian is a mature Christian but maturity is more than just <u>knowing</u> the theology of our faith—maturity is <u>living</u> the theology of our faith. We are New Covenant Believers and the New Covenant is superior in every way to the Old Covenant—we have better promises and better premises: *Because of this oath, Jesus has become the guarantor of a better covenant.*[Heb.7:22] *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. 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.*[Heb.8:6] The commands of the Old Covenant were absolute—they <u>all</u> had to be kept <u>completely</u>: *If <u>you fully obey the LORD</u> your God and carefully follow <u>all</u> 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… However, <u>if you do not obey the LORD</u> your God and do not carefully follow <u>all</u> his commands and decrees I am giving you today, all these curses will come on you and overtake you: You will be cursed in the city and cursed in the country. Your basket and your kneading trough will be cursed. The fruit of your womb will be cursed, and the crops of your land, and the calves of your herds and the lambs of your flocks. You will be cursed when you come in and cursed when you go out.*[Deut.281:1-19-7] The Old Covenant Believers had atonement for sins (atonement means covering and although their sins were covered over, the sins and the guilt of those sins, were still there) but we have the forgiveness of sins—our sins are expunged, remised, removed and obliterated—God says that

he doesn't even remember them!). That is why the least in the Kingdom of God is greater than the greatest of the Old Covenant prophets: *After John's messengers left, Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed swayed by the wind? If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear expensive clothes and indulge in luxury are in palaces. But what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written: " 'I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.' I tell you, among those born of women there is no one greater than John; yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he."*[Lk.7:24-28]

Although we have the fulfilment of the Old Covenant promises, we also have an obligation to live by the principles of the New Covenant—which Jesus showed us by His example: *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] King Jesus, the Word of God who was with God in the beginning and who is God, came as a Servant to serve: *Jesus called them together and said, "You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."*[Mk.10:42-45] *Jesus said to them, "The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority over them call themselves Benefactors. But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who is at the table? But I am among you as one who serves. You are those who have stood by me in my trials. And I confer on you a kingdom, just as my Father conferred one on me, so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom and sit on thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.*[Lk.22:25-30] Subjects of King Jesus are to follow His example and live by the principles of His Kingdom: *I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. Very truly I tell you, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.*[Jn.13:15-17] *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. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. 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.2:1-11] *But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his immense patience as an example for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life. Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honour and glory for ever and ever. Amen.*[1Pet.1:16-17]

What is a successful Christian? A successful Christian is someone who believes in Jesus and then exhibits the character of Jesus. *Then they asked him, "What must we do to do the works God requires?" Jesus answered, "The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent."*[Jn.6:28-29] *To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.*[1Pet.2:21] *Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it.*[Lk.11:28] *The revelation from Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, who testifies to everything he saw—that is, the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ.*

Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near.[Rev.1:1-3]

Questions

What are the core values of God's Kingdom?
What does God consider as successful?
How can we live as successful Christians?
How is the New Covenant better than the Old Covenant?
What does "*righteousness*" mean?
How do Christians become righteous?

Puritan Prayer: While living in a world of change let us seek the abiding City—the New Jerusalem. Be with us to our journey's end that we may glorify You in death as we do in life. We bless You for Your preservation, Your supplies and Your mercies. To You, the keeper of souls, we commit all we are and all we have. May no evil befall us, no sickness come nigh us and no horror disturb us! May our conscience be clear, our hearts pure and our sleep sweet! Now, with the innumerable company who neither slumber nor sleep, we join in ascribing blessing, honour, glory and power to the Lamb upon the throne, for ever and ever. Amen.

Sunday 16th March Ps.107 Luke 10

hat is the greatest success we can ever achieve? *Then Jesus said, "Yes, now go and do the same."*[Lk.10:37]

Two weeks ago we asked: "*What is a Christian*?" and concluded that a Christian is someone who follows Christ. People may follow Jesus' teaching and even become a theologian, but if they don't follow Jesus, they cannot legitimately call themselves a Chrisitan; it has to be I following Christ—Christ-I-an. A Christian follows Christ—it is that simple. But of course, it has profound implications and far reaching consequences. First of all, to follow Christ, one has to believe that He is alive, not a dead person from history—and so to follow Christ, one has to believe God raised Jesus from the dead. And then, if we follow Christ, we have to acknowledge that He is in charge and submit to His authority. Paul sums it up 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. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved.*[Rom.10:9-10]

Then last week we asked: "*What is a successful Christian?*" and concluded that a successful Chrisitan is someone who is great in God's estimation. God's values are very different from the world's values (actually it is the world's values that are different from God's values!) *What people value highly is detestable in God's sight.*[Lk.16:15] And to be great in the Kingdom of God, one has to be a servant who serves: *Jesus called them together and said, "You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."*[Mk.10:42-45] Jesus came as a Servant and left us an example: *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.2:1-11] True followers of Christ follow His example and are servants: *Above all, love each other deeply, because love*

covers over a multitude of sins. Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling. Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms. If anyone speaks, they should do so as one who speaks the very words of God. If anyone serves, they should do so with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen.[1Pet.4:8-11] *Jesus said to them, "The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority over them call themselves Benefactors. But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who is at the table? But I am among you as one who serves. You are those who have stood by me in my trials. And I confer on you a kingdom, just as my Father conferred one on me, so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom and sit on thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.*[Lk.22:25-30]

So, if Christians follow Christ and successful Christians are servants, what is the greatest success we can ever achieve? The world honours success with accolades and awards. Probably the most famous awards for success are the Nobel Prizes which annually recognize those who "*conferred the greatest benefit to humankind*". The Nobel Prizes are named after Alfred Nobel (1833–1896), a Swedish chemist, inventor, engineer and businessman who invented dynamite and bequeathed his fortune to establish the Nobel Prizes. Apparently, the idea of the Prizes began when Ludvig Nobel (Alfred's brother) died, and several newspapers published an obituary of Alfred in error. One French newspaper condemned him for his invention of military explosives—stating: "*Le marchand de la mort est mort*" ("*The merchant of death is dead*"), and went on to say, "*Dr. Alfred Nobel, who became rich by finding ways to kill more people faster than ever before, died yesterday*." Upon reading the obituary Alfred was appalled at the idea that he would be remembered in this way and decided to posthumously donate the majority of his wealth to found the Nobel Prize to leave behind a better legacy. The prizes were first awarded in 1901, marking the fifth anniversary of Alfred Nobel's death and the original Nobel Prizes covered five fields: physics, chemistry, physiology or medicine, literature, and peace, as specified in Nobel's will. A sixth prize, the Prize in Economic Sciences, was established in 1969 by Sveriges Riksbank (Sweden's central bank) in memory of Alfred Nobel. Except in extraordinary circumstances, such as war, all six prizes are given annually. Each recipient, known as a laureate, receives a green gold medal plated with 24 karat gold, a diploma, and a monetary award. As of 2023, the Nobel Prize monetary award is 11,000,000 kr, (US$1,035,000 or £799,434). The medal shows Nobel in profile with "*NAT. MDCCCXXXIII-OB. MDCCCXCVI"* which is his year of birth, 1833 (NAT) and year of death, 1896 (OB). But regardless of whether world recognises us as "*successful*", we need to ensure that God sees us as successful. God made us in His image and intended that we fellowship with Him (that is we are in harmony and unity with Him) but Adam sinned and destroyed that relationship. To regain that fellowship with God and live eternally with Him is the greatest success we can ever achieve. To stay out of fellowship with God and lose our life for eternity is the greatest failure we can ever achieve! Eugene Peterson makes the comment: *The unbeliever is the most impractical person. For what is more impractical than working hard all your life and getting paid with nothing more than an expensively framed death certificate?* Jesus said: *What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit their very self?*[Lk.9:25] We are spiritual people because we are made in God's image and so our spirit is eternal—just as God is eternal. *What do workers gain from their toil? I have seen the burden God has laid on the human race. He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end. I know that there is nothing better for people than to be happy and to do good while they live. That each of them may eat and drink, and find satisfaction in all their toil—this is the gift of God. I know that everything God does will endure forever; nothing can be added to it and nothing taken from it. God does it so that people will*

fear him.[Eccl.3:9-14] When we breath our last breath, our mortal life has ended but we still exist because our spirit does not disintegrate into nothing—spirit is eternal and we return to our Maker: *Remember [your Creator]—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.*[Eccl12:6-7] And we each have to give an account for the life we have lived: *'As surely as I live,' says the Lord, 'every knee will bow before me; every tongue will acknowledge God.' " So then, each of us will give an account of ourselves to God.*[Rom.14:11-12] Although Solomon recognised that God would judge us all—both the righteous and the wicked—he didn't have the advantage of living after Jesus' resurrection or the advantage of the completed Scriptures and so he wasn't sure about what happens after death: *I said to myself, "God will bring into judgment both the righteous and the wicked, for there will be a time for every activity, a time to judge every deed." I also said to myself, "As for humans, God tests them so that they may see that they are like the animals. Surely the fate of human beings is like that of the animals; the same fate awaits them both: As one dies, so dies the other. All have the same breath; humans have no advantage over animals. Everything is meaningless. All go to the same place; all come from dust, and to dust all return. Who knows if the human spirit rises upward and if the spirit of the animal goes down into the earth?" So I saw that there is nothing better for a person than to enjoy their work, because that is their lot. For who can bring them to see what will happen after them?*[Eccl.3:17-20] But we can know—and do know—what happens after our final breath. We have the completed Scriptures and we know that after Jesus died, He rose again as the first-fruit from the dead. *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. For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. But each in turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him.*[1Cor.15:19-23] *For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labour for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far.*[Phil.1:21-23] *Anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honour the one who serves me.*[Jn.12:25-26]

And so we come to the question: *What must I do to inherit eternal life?* When someone asked Jesus that question, He referred him to the Bible: *On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" "What is written in the Law?" he replied. "How do you read it?"*[Lk.10:25-26] In the story about Lazarus and the rich man, Jesus explained that the Bible has all the answers we need about life and death: *"He answered, 'Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my family, for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.' "Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.' " 'No, father Abraham,' he said, 'but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.' "He said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.'*[Lk.16:27-31] Isaiah also had a high view of God's Word: *Look to God's instructions and teachings! People who contradict his word are completely in the dark. They will go from one place to another, weary and hungry. And because they are hungry, they will rage and curse their king and their God. They will look up to heaven and down at the earth, but wherever they look, there will be trouble and anguish and dark despair. They will be thrown out into the darkness.*[Is.8:21-22] The man who asked Jesus how to inherit eternal life, answered his question from the Bible and replied that we must love God and love our Neighbour: *He answered, " 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind'; and, 'Love your neighbour as yourself.'" "You have answered correctly," Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live."*[Lk.10:27-28] Jesus then explained who our Neighbour is by telling the story of the Good Samaritan. No one can inherit eternal life by loving other people and being a good

neighbour to them. Eternal life is a free gift to those who believe: *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. 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 they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.*[Jn.3:16-18] We inherit eternal life by loving God (by "love" we mean: honour, cherish, obey, respect and reverence) and also loving (honouring, cherishing, obeying, respecting and reverencing) His Son, Jesus Christ: *Peace to the brothers and sisters, and love with faith from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Grace to all who love our Lord Jesus Christ with an undying love.*[Eph.6:23-24] **Jesus is the Neighbour we are to love if we are to inherit eternal life!** It was Jesus who found us dying and bleeding on the Jericho road: *For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.*[Lk.19:10] Jericho is east of Jerusalem which means that the man had his back to the place God where God met people and in Bible symbolism, people always faced west to meet with God. Abraham pitched his tent between Bethel and Ai: *From there he went on toward the hills east of Bethel and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east. There he built an altar to the LORD and called on the name of the LORD.*[Gen.12:8] The Tabernacle was pitched with the entrance on the east (so people faced west when the met God). The Temple was built with the entrance on the east. The glory of God left the Temple through the east Gate and returned from the east: *Then the glory of the LORD departed from over the threshold of the temple and stopped above the cherubim. While I watched, the cherubim spread their wings and rose from the ground, and as they went, the wheels went with them. They stopped at the entrance of the east gate of the LORD's house, and the glory of the God of Israel was above them.*[Ezek.10:18-19] *Then the man brought me to the gate facing east, and I saw the glory of the God of Israel coming from the east. His voice was like the roar of rushing waters, and the land was radiant with his glory.*[Ezek.43:1-2]] It was Jesus who poured in the oil and the wine (oil signifies the healing and anointing of the Holy Spirit). It was Jesus who took us to a place of safety—the Church. It was Jesus who paid our debt. It was Jesus who said He would return for us: *Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me. My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. You know the way to the place where I am going.*[Jn.14:1-4]

What is the greatest success we can ever achieve? The answer is clearly eternal life—and this is a free gift that is received when we love God and His Son (our Neighbour) passionately and purposefully. However, the instruction Jesus gave at the end of the Good Samaritan story was not to just love our Neighbour but also to *go and do the same.*[Lk.10:37] Christians doesn't just know about Jesus but they also learn from Him and obey Him with a passionate commitment and contentment, so let's continue to love (honour, cherish, obey, respect and reverence) Jesus and live like Jesus did by following His example.

Questions

How do we inherit eternal life?
What does it mean to love God?
What does it mean to love our neighbour?
What was significant about the places in the story of the Good Samaritan?
How does the Good Samaritan help the robbed man?
How does Jesus help us?

Puritan Prayer: O God my exceeding joy, singing Your praises uplifts my heart for You are a fountain of delight and You bless the soul that joys in You. You are in Jesus, the object of inexpressible joy. I take exceeding pleasure in the thought of You and I will at all times rest myself in Your excellences, Your goodness and Your loving-kindness. Give me the sweet results of faith in my secret character and in my public life. Cast cords of love around my thoughts for You hold me and will never let me go. May the Saviour's wounds sway me more than the sceptre of princes. Let me love You with a love that covers and swallows up all, that I may not violate my chaste union with the Beloved.

Sunday 23rd March Ps.108 Luke 11:1-28

The Disciples' Prayer (1): *Our Father who is in heaven…*

Over the last few weeks we have discussed what a Christian is, how to be a successful Christian and the greatest success a person can ever achieve. But underlying all these discussions is a personal relationship with God and, as with all relationships, this involves communication. *God communicates with us through His Word and we communicated with God through His Word. 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.*[D.Bonhoeffer]

The facts of life are fairly simple: because of Adam's sin, all his descendant are born separated from God—but all attempts to re-connect with God have failed. God is holy and because we are unholy, we cannot approach God by our own efforts—it would be like trying to approach a furnace without the protective clothing! But God hasn't left us to our own devices—God stepped in and made a way to restore humanity with Him. God became human and dealt with the sins of the human race. *The LORD looked and was displeased that there was no justice. He saw that there was no one, he was appalled that there was no one to intervene; so his own arm achieved salvation for him, and his own righteousness sustained him. He put on righteousness as his breastplate, and the helmet of salvation on his head;*[Is.59:15-17] Humanity is made holy through the humanity of God incarnate—and when the Son took our humanity, God conquered the devilish tyrant and freed us. *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. He says, "I will announce your name to my brothers and sisters. I will sing your praises among those who worship you." Again he says, "I will put my trust in him." And again he says, "Here I am. Here are the children God has given me." Those children have bodies made out of flesh and blood. So Jesus became human like them in order to die for them. By doing that, he could destroy the one who rules over the kingdom of death. I'm talking about the devil. Jesus could set people free who were afraid of death. All their lives they were held as slaves by that fear. It is certainly Abraham's children that he helps. He doesn't help angels. So he had to be made like his brothers in every way. Then he could serve God as a kind and faithful high priest. And then he could pay for the sins of the people by dying for them. He himself suffered when he was tempted. Now he is able to help others who are being tempted.*[Heb.2:11-18] But until we are made righteous, we remain separated from the righteous God—which means that even our religion is detestable to God: *The LORD detests the sacrifice of the wicked, but the prayer of the upright pleases him… The LORD is far from the wicked, but he hears the prayer of the righteous.*[Prov.15:8;29] *If anyone turns a deaf ear to my instruction, even their prayers are detestable.*[Prov.28:9] That is why we must be born-again: *Jesus replied, "What I'm about to tell you is true. No one can see God's kingdom without being born again."*[Jn.3:3] But when we are born-again, we are immediately qualified to participate in God's family: *giving joyful thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of his holy people in the kingdom of light. For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.*[Col.1:12-14] *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] A Christian has been changed from death to life; from bad to good, , from stranger to friend, from alien to citizen—and this is all from God. It was God who redeemed us, it was God to qualified us, it was God who justified us. Before Jesus came, the only way to God was through a priest, by careful preparation and with a blood sacrifice. But because Jesus is now our Priest, our Mediator—the Person between us and God—we come to God with boldness and confidence rather than with fear and trepidation. Jesus is not only the Way but He is the only Way to God. *Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.*[Jn.14:6] *Christ Jesus our Lord. In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence.*[Eph.3:12] *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] *Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water.*[Heb.10:19-22] And so, now have open access to God, our prayers are powerful and effective. *The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.*[Jas.5:16] God heard Jesus' prayers because of His reverent submission: *Then Jesus looked up and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me."*[Jn.11:21] *During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered.*[Heb.5:7-8] And God will hear our prayers when we reverently submit to Him: *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.*[1Jn.5:13-14] However, we should remember that what Jesus has done for us, we don't need to do—because of Jesus' agonising intercession, our intercession is joyful: *He poured out his life unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors. For he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors. "Sing, barren woman, you who never bore a child; burst into song, shout for joy, you who were never in labour; because more are the children of the desolate woman than of her who has a husband," says the LORD. "Enlarge the place of your tent, stretch your tent curtains wide, do not hold back; lengthen your cords, strengthen your stakes… I will have compassion on you," says the LORD your Redeemer. "To me this is like the days of Noah, when I swore that the waters of Noah would never again cover the earth. So now I have sworn not to be angry with you, never to rebuke you again. Though the mountains be shaken and the hills be removed, yet my unfailing love for you will not be shaken nor my covenant of peace be removed," says the LORD, who has compassion on you.*[Is.53:12-54:10]

Prayer is never simply a matter of talking to God. It is trusting Him with our concerns. There are many times when we are anxious about children, family, and friends. There is often much that we worry about—their spiritual well-being, schooling, health, friendships, living arrangements, and work. Needless to say, our anxious thoughts are seldom productive and frequently only serve to intensify our level of worry. In seeking to transform anxiety into prayer, it is not simply a matter of talking to God instead of talking to ourselves, for that may simply result in talking anxiously to God. Rather we are challenged to recognize the limitations of our worrying and the possibilities of what God can do. Prayer isn't a "*spare wheel*" we pull out when we're in trouble—prayer is a "*steering wheel*" that directs us along the right path throughout our

life. When we lose hope and think it's the end, God smiles and says, "*It's just a bend, not the end*". In Jesus' instruction on prayer, He said that it is not how long or how loud we pray to God but whether we come to God as our heavenly Father. "*Worry is a vote of no confidence in God!!*" And if we are God's children, we can confidently trust Him to care for us—and panic or over-anxiety are symptoms of lack of trust (unbelief). *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.*[Ps.119:165-166] *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… LORD, you establish peace for us; all that we have accomplished you have done for us.*[Is.26:3-12] *The fruit of that righteousness will be peace; its effect will be quietness and confidence forever. My people will live in peaceful dwelling places, in secure homes, in undisturbed places of rest. Though hail flattens the forest and the city is levelled completely, how blessed you will be, sowing your seed by every stream, and letting your cattle and donkeys range free.*[Is.32:17-20] The prayer that Jesus taught His Disciples is a template that we can use as a basis for our own prayers and covers all the main points we need for a working relationship with God. *And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. This, then, is how you should pray: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one for yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.*[Matt.6:7-13]
When we pray to God, we are to come to Him as His children and address Him as "*Our Father*". This is so different from the Jews of the Old Covenant who were afraid to even speak God's Name in case they mis-pronounced it! When we were born again, we were born into God's family and God will provide for us like a Father. *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.6:31-34] *"Which of you, if your son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!*[Matt.7:9-11] And because we are praying to God, we have confidence that He has all the power and authority to answer our prayers! Our heavenly Father is "*God most high*" and "*God most nigh*" because He also lives in our hearts. *For this is what the high and exalted One says—he who lives forever, whose name is holy: "I live in a high and holy place, but also with the one who is contrite and lowly in spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite.*[Is.57:15] But even though God is nigh, He is still God and we are to reverence His Name—*hallowed be Your Name*. God's Name isn't just a tittle but represents everything about Him—God's Name explains who He is. When Moses asked God what His Name was, God replied: "I am who I am!" The Egyptians worshiped their imagined deities who were limited by their names—for instance, the sun god had no jurisdiction over the moon or the earth! But God doesn't need a name because there is only one God and He is never restricted by His Name because He is Lord of all: *Moses said to God, "Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' Then what shall I tell them?" God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I AM has sent me to you.' " God also said to Moses, "Say to the Israelites, 'The LORD, the God of your fathers—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob—has sent me to you.' "This is my name forever, the name you shall call me from generation to generation.*[Ex.3:13-15] And because God is Lord of all, we should pray that His Kingdom comes, *i.e.,* that His will is done—not just in the future but now, today, where we live. God's Kingdom is a spiritual Kingdom, not a political kingdom.

Jesus answered, "My kingdom doesn't belong to this world. If my kingdom belonged to this world, my followers would fight to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. My kingdom doesn't have its origin on earth." Pilate asked him, "So you are a king?" Jesus replied, "You're correct in saying that I'm a king. I have been born and have come into the world for this reason: to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to me."[Jn.18:33-37] God's Kingdom is the reign of Jesus in people's hearts. *The Pharisees asked Jesus when the kingdom of God would come. He answered them, "People can't observe the coming of the kingdom of God. They can't say, 'Here it is!' or 'There it is!' You see, the kingdom of God is within you."*[Lk.17:20-21] *Listen then to what the parable of the sower means: When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in their heart.*[Matt.13:18-19] The theme of John the Baptist's preaching was that God's Kingdom was coming: *In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the Desert of Judea and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near."*[Matt.3:1-2] This was also the theme of Jesus's early preaching: *From that time on Jesus began to preach, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near."*[Matt.4:17] And then Jesus changed His emphasis and said that the Kingdom of God had come—but would come more fully after the Holy Spirit was sent. *From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing, and forceful men lay hold of 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. He who has ears, let him hear.*[Matt.11:12-15] *He said to them, "I can guarantee this truth: Some people who are standing here will not die until they see the kingdom of God arrive with power."*[Mk.9:1]

When we become a Chrisitan we become a citizen of God's Kingdom under the rule of King Jesus: *For, as I have often told you before and now say again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a 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.4:18-21] *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. Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's 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.2:17-20] The values of God's Kingdom are the same as the values of God—that is, His character: *But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.*[Gal.5:19-23] *For the kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power.*[1Cor.4:20] *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 let's stay in fellowship with God, respecting Him as our heavenly Father as well as the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. He has all authority and all power but is also a gracious and compassionate God who loved (and loves) us so much that He gave His one and only Son. Yes! To remember this will fill us with inexpressible joy: *Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls.*[1Pet.1:8-9] No wonder Jesus taught us to pray: *Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.*

Questions

What is prayer?
To whom should we address our prayers?
Does it matter how we pray?
Does God always hear our prayers?
What sort of Kingdom is God's Kingdom?
What are the responsibilities of belonging to God's Kingdom?

Puritan Prayer: O Lord God, there is no blessing we implore but that You are able to give, have promised to give and have already given, to countless multitudes like ourselves. May we be willing to receive the supply of our need from Your bounty—to this end convince us of sin and soften our hard hearts so we may look with wonder, submission and delight to the provision You have made in the salvation of sinners, for the glory of Your Name. You give us a hope that makes us not ashamed, a love that excites to holy obedience, a joy in You that is our strength and a faith in Your Son who loved us and died for us. May we persevere in duty (even when we are not fully conscious of You), wait upon You and keep Your ways, living continually as on the brink of eternity. We are at Your disposal for the duties and events of life, submitting our preferences to Your wisdom and will. May we know the blessedness of people whose strength is in You and in whose hearts are the highways to heaven.

Mothering Sunday 30th March Ps.110. Matt.6.

The Disciples' Prayer (2): *Our Father who is in heaven…*

Last week we started to look at the Disciple's Prayer (often called "*the Lord's Prayer*") and said that prayer is communication with God and, although God is in heaven, He is also in our heart—"*God most high*" and "*God most nigh*". *For this is what the high and exalted One says—he who lives forever, whose name is holy: "I live in a high and holy place, but also with the one who is contrite and lowly in spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite.*[Is.57:15] Everyone prays at some time in their life (even if they profess to not believe in any "god" at all) but if we are to have any assurance that God hears our prayer, we must come to Him as His child—which is why Jesus taught us to address God as "*our Father*". And even an unbeliever will be heard if they come humbly to God in repentance and ask His forgiveness (which is the only way to become a child of God): *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.10:11-13]

There are many types of prayer, such as praise, petition and intercession; there is public prayer where people pray together, either collectively or individually, one at a time or all together; there is personal prayer where there is no one but the person and God. But however, we pray, we must have faith in God and we must pray with thanksgiving. *But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.*[Matt.6:6] *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. You spoke by the Holy Spirit…*[Acts.4:24-25] *I urge, then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people— for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. This is good, and pleases God our Savior, who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.*[1Tim.2:1-4] *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] When we know that we are right with God, we can pray in the confidence that God hears our prayers and that our prayers are effective: *The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.*[Jas.5:16] *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.*[1Jn.5:13-14]

Give us today our daily bread. Christians are followers of Christ and as such we are dependent on God for absolutely everything—from the breath that we breathe to the bread that we eat. We realise that whatever we are able to do, is only because of the life, strength and

ability God has given us. *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… LORD, you establish peace for us; all that we have accomplished you have done for us.*[Is.26:3-12] By asking God for our daily needs we are reminding ourselves of our dependence on God and, following Jesus' example, we should give thanks for our daily food as well as asking for it! *Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke them.*[Lk.9:16] *When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them.*[Lk.24:30] Paul publicly gave thanks for his food: *After he said this, he took some bread and gave thanks to God in front of them all. Then he broke it and began to eat.*[Acts.27:35] But when Jesus taught us to ask daily for bread, He was meaning much more than the physical food we eat—we are also dependent on God for our spiritual food: *After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. The tempter came to him and said, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread." Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"*[Matt.4:2-4] Our spiritual food is God's Word and God's Work: *I have not departed from the commands of his lips; I have treasured the words of his mouth more than my daily bread.*[Job.23:12] *Meanwhile his disciples urged him, "Rabbi, eat something." But he said to them, "I have food to eat that you know nothing about." Then his disciples said to each other, "Could someone have brought him food?" "My food," said Jesus, "is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work. Don't you have a saying, 'It's still four months until harvest'? I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest.*[Jn.4:31-35] And the most important work God wants us to do is to believe in Jesus: *Jesus answered, "Very truly I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw the signs I performed but because you ate the loaves and had your fill. Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For on him God the Father has placed his seal of approval." Then they asked him, "What must we do to do the works God requires?" Jesus answered, "The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent."*[Jn.6:26-29]

And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. J Jesus did not mean that God will only forgive our sins if we forgive other people's sins—our sins are forgiven because Jesus paid the price for our rebellion, not because we did something nice or good. *The God of our ancestors raised Jesus from the dead—whom you killed by hanging him on a cross. God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Savior that he might bring Israel to repentance and forgive their sins. We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him.*[Acts.5:30-32] *If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.*[1Jn.1:9] In any case, the price of forgiveness is too high for any of us to pay—which is why God paid the price for us: *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] *Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed.*[Is.53:4-5] When Jesus came to earth to redeem us, He also left an example for us to follow—He showed us how to live by being obedient to His Father and then enabled us to live as children of God: *Jesus saw their faith. So he said to the man, "Son, your sins are forgiven." Some teachers of the law were sitting there. They were thinking, "Why is this fellow talking like that? He's saying a very evil thing! Only God can forgive sins!" Right away Jesus knew what they were thinking. So he said to them, "Why are you thinking these things? Is it easier to say to this man, 'Your sins are forgiven'? Or to say, 'Get up, take your mat and walk'? I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins." Then Jesus spoke to the man who could not walk. "I tell you," he said, "get up. Take your mat and go home." The man got up and took his mat. Then he walked away while everyone watched. All the people were amazed. They praised God and said, "We have never seen anything like this!"*[Mk.2:5-12] Jesus not only forgave sins but He also forgave the sinners as well—including His executioners: *Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do*

not know what they are doing." And they divided up his clothes by casting lots.[Lk.23:24] *When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. "He himself bore our sins" in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; "by his wounds you have been healed." For "you were like sheep going astray," but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.*[1Pet.2:23-25] This is how one translation paraphrases "*forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors*": *In prayer there is a connection between what God does and what you do. You can't get forgiveness from God, for instance, without also forgiving others. If you refuse to do your part, you cut yourself off from God's part.*[Matt.6:14-15]

And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one. The NIrV translates thus: *Keep us from falling into sin when we are tempted. Save us from the evil one.*[Matt.6:13] Another version like this: *And don't let us yield to temptation, but rescue us from the evil one. Keep us safe from ourselves and the devil.* Temptation is not sin unless we yield to it. Martin Luther commented that you cannot stop swallows flying around your head but you can stop them nesting in your hair! The devil has had thousands of years' experience in deceiving people and if we are going to be an overcomer, we need to know how to use the Scriptures properly if we are going to defeat his deceptions. The devil is not omnipotent or omniscient and still makes the most simple of errors—the most common error he makes is that he ignores God and His Word. Whilst the devil may know the stories in the Scriptures, he doesn't know the power of the Scriptures or he would have given up by now! And the devil's minions (including people who consciously or unconsciously work for him) don't understand the Scriptures either! *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] We are all tempted in one way or another—especially to take the easy way out of difficult situations but the devil's lies can be thwarted by using God's Word: *[Jesus] was hungry. The tempter came to him and said, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread." Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'*[Matt.4:2-4] David knew the power of the Word of God against sin: *I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you.*[Ps.119:11] Even Eliphaz realised the value of God's Word in a person's heart: *Submit to God and be at peace with him; in this way prosperity will come to you. Accept instruction from his mouth and lay up his words in your heart.*[Job.22:21-22] And we too can defeat the devil's lies with God's Word. Physical weapons can never win spiritual battles and we cannot defeat the devil with garlic, water, candles, or any other superstition talisman! When God's Word is in our mouth it is called a sword because of its effectiveness! *I turned around to see the voice that was speaking to me. And when I turned I saw… someone like a son of man… and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, and coming out of his mouth was a sharp, double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance.*[Rev.1:12-16] The Word of God will demolish the strongholds in our mind. These strongholds are the lies and deception about God, ourself, our past, our present, our future—in fact anything that opposes God and His truth: *For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.*[2Cor.10:3-5] God has put His Laws in our minds: *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] But we have an obligation to access those laws! A pond or ditch will fill up with silt and rubbish if it is not cleaned out regularly and our mind (soul) will do the same. *Therefore rebuke them sharply, so that they will be sound in the faith and*

will pay no attention to Jewish myths or to the merely human commands of those who reject the truth. To the pure, all things are pure, but to those who are corrupted and do not believe, nothing is pure. In fact, both their minds and consciences are corrupted. They claim to know God, but by their actions they deny him. They are detestable, disobedient and unfit for doing anything good.[Tit.1:13-16] If we don't regularly clean our minds with the Word of God, our conscience will be corrupted but the rubbish it accumulates and we will be robbed of the Truth: *Therefore, with minds that are alert and fully sober, set your hope on the grace to be brought to you when Jesus Christ is revealed at his coming.*[1Pet.1:13] *These are the things you are to teach and insist on. If anyone teaches otherwise and does not agree to the sound instruction of our Lord Jesus Christ and to godly teaching, they are conceited and understand nothing. They have an unhealthy interest in controversies and quarrels about words that result in envy, strife, malicious talk, evil suspicions and constant friction between people of corrupt mind, who have been robbed of the truth and who think that godliness is a means to financial gain. But godliness with contentment is great gain.*[1Tim.6:2-6] *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] *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]

For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen. Another version puts it this way: *You're in charge! You can do anything you want!* When we pray we should always remember that God is Omnipotent—He can do anything! *You are the God who performs miracles; You display your power among the peoples.*[Ps.77:14] We should think about what we ask God for—and then expect Him to do even greater things. *Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.*[Eph.3:21-22] God doesn't just have the power but He also has the glory! We need that touch of heaven in every area of our life and not just when we come together as Church. If we bring God's tangible presence into our paid time and our play time, our home life and our work life as well as our Church life, we really will be God's Ambassadors, who honourably and faithfully represent our Heavenly Father.

Questions

What sort of prayers are there?
Why should we ask God for daily bread?
Is God's forgiveness conditional or unconditional?
What is temptation?
How does God deliver us from the evil one?
Is there anything that God cannot do?
What can we do to bring heaven to earth?

Puritan Prayer: Sovereign Lord, Your will is supreme in heaven and earth, and all beings are creatures of Your power. You are the Father of our spirits—Your inspiration gives us understanding and Your providence governs our lives. But, Lord, we were sinners in Your sight; You judged us so, and if we deny it we make You a liar. Yet in Christ, we are reconciled to You. Give us the ear of faith to hear You, the eye of faith to see You, the hand of faith to receive You, the appetite of faith to feed upon You; that we might find in You light, riches, honour and eternal life. You are the inviting One—may we hearken to You. You are the Almighty Instructor—teach us to live for You. Possess our minds with the grandeur of Your perfections. Your love to us in Jesus is firm and changeless. Nothing can separate us from Your love, and in the enjoyment of Your love nothing can make us miserable. Preserve us from all hypocrisy

and formality in religion. Enable us to remember what You are and what we are; to recall Your holiness and our unworthiness; to approach You boldly, yet clothed with humility. Let us never forget Your patience, wisdom, power, faithfulness and care—and let us never cease to respond to Your invitations.

April:

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

Thought for the Month: When we pray "*in Jesus' name*," we acknowledge that our prayers depend on Jesus Christ. 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. Jesus Christ Himself is the Foundation, the Word of God, who always lives to intercede for us. *K.D.Johnson*

Sunday 6th April Jonah 2. Lk.11:29f

The sign of Jonah. *For as Jonah was a sign to the Ninevites, so also will the Son of Man be to this generation.*[Lk.11:30]

Much of the OT history is allegorical—the recorded historical events illustrate God's plan of salvation for mankind through Jesus Christ. Some of the stories seem harsh and some improbable—until you understand their purpose. T*his 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.*[Rom.4:4-25] *For it is written in the Law of Moses: "Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain." Is it about oxen that God is concerned? Surely he says this for us, doesn't he? Yes, this was written for us.*[1Cor.9:9] The story of Jonah is allegorical because he was a sign that pointed to Jesus' death and resurrection: *Then some scribes and Pharisees said, "Teacher, we want you to show us a miraculous sign." He responded, "The people of an evil and unfaithful era look for a miraculous sign. But the only sign they will get is the sign of the prophet Jonah. Just as Jonah was in the belly of a huge fish for three days and three nights, so the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth for three days and three nights.*[Matt.12:38-40]

Jonah was a prophet from the village of Gath Hepher, near Nazareth in the northern kingdom of Israel and is mentioned in the Book of Kings: *Jeroboam son of Jehoash king of Israel became king in Samaria, and he reigned forty-one years. He did evil in the eyes of the LORD and did not turn away from any of the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat, which he had caused Israel to commit. He was the one who restored the boundaries of Israel from Lebo Hamath to the Sea of the Arabah, in accordance with the word of the LORD, the God of Israel, spoken through his servant Jonah son of Amittai, the prophet from Gath Hepher.*[2Kgs.14:24-25] Jonah is best remembered for his encounter with the "whale" which rescued him when he was thrown overboard during a violent storm. But the story begins with "*the Word of the Lord*"! *The word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai: "Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me." But Jonah ran away from the LORD.*[Jon.1:1-3] When God speaks, we need to take notice—and God has spoken to us through His Son.[Heb.1:1-3]

The people of Nineveh were Assyrians who were beyond barbaric. We have seen the evil and cruelty of ISIS and Hamas but the Assyrians were worse! But when Jonah eventually preached to the people of city of Nineveh they responded to God's Word and so God did not destroy them at that time. *When Jonah's warning reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust. This is the proclamation he issued in Nineveh: "By the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let people or animals, herds or flocks, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. But let people and animals be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish."*[Jon.3:6-9] Little wonder that the Jews refused to believe that any good could come out of Nazareth—they didn't count Jonah as a prophet because he evangelised the evil enemy! *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.*[Jn.1:45]

Jonah prophesied during the reign of Jeroboam II [2Kg.14:23-28] who ruled in Israel (the northern kingdom) from 782 to 753 B.C. Jeroboam was the grandson of Jehoahaz, who ruled in Israel from 814 to 798 B.C. Because of the sins of Jehoahaz, Israel was oppressed by the Arameans.[2Kg.13:3] But because of the Lord's great compassion,[2Kg.13:4;23] Israel was spared destruction and delivered from this oppression.[2Kg.13:5] This deliverance came through a "*saviour*" or deliverer,[2Kg.13:5] who was Adad-nirari III (810-783 B.C.), king of Assyria. Jeroboam's father, Jehoash (798-782 B.C.), capitalized on this freedom from Aramean oppression and began to expand Israel's boundaries, recapturing towns taken during the reign of Jehoahaz.[2Kg.13:25] Though Jeroboam *did what was evil in the sight of the LORD,*[2Kg.14:24] he nevertheless expanded Israel even farther than his father did, matching the boundaries in the days of David and Solomon;[2Kg.14:25]; this was "a*ccording to the word of the LORD , the God of Israel, which he spoke by his servant Jonah the son of Amittai, the prophet, who was from Gath-hepher.*"[2Kg.14:25] Thus Jonah witnessed firsthand the restorative compassion of God extended to his wayward people, which was why he was reluctant to preach to the people of Nineveh. Nineveh (modern-day Mosul in Iraq) was founded by Nimrod[Gen.10:11] and is situated at the confluence of the Tigris and Khoser rivers. In around 1000 B.C., Nineveh became a royal city containing public squares, parks, botanical gardens and even a zoo. One of the great archaeological finds of the period is the library of King Ashurbanipal[Ez.4:10] (669-627 B.C.).

Like the man going from Jerusalem to Jericho (with his back to God) who fell into trouble, when Jonah turned his back on God, he also fell into trouble. A great storm arose and was about to swamp the ship that Jonah was on. Interestingly there are 2 people who are mentioned who slept through a storm—Jonah and Jesus! *Then the LORD sent a great wind on the sea, and such a violent storm arose that the ship threatened to break up. All the sailors were afraid and each cried out to his own god. And they threw the cargo into the sea to lighten the ship. But Jonah had gone below deck, where he lay down and fell into a deep sleep. The captain went to him and said, "How can you sleep? Get up and call on your god! Maybe he will take notice of us so that we will not perish."*[Jon.1:4-6] *A furious squall came up, and the waves broke over the boat, so that it was nearly swamped. Jesus was in the stern, sleeping on a cushion. The disciples woke him and said to him, "Teacher, don't you care if we drown?" He got up, rebuked the wind and said to the waves, "Quiet! Be still!" Then the wind died down and it was completely calm. He said to his disciples, "Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?" They were terrified and asked each other, "Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!"*[Mk.4:37-41] Jonah was running from God and Jesus was resting in God. Not everyone who seems to be coping with life's problems are at peace with God! Some people manage to appear calm when actually they are in rebellion because their conscience has been seared: *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. If you point these things out to the brothers and sisters, you will be a good minister of Christ Jesus, nourished on the truths of the faith and of the good teaching that you have followed.*[1Tim.4:1-6] However, God know those who are His and He will never let us go. *Nevertheless, God's solid foundation stands firm, sealed with this inscription: "The Lord knows those who are his," and, "Everyone who confesses the name of the Lord must turn away from wickedness."*[2Tim.2:19] *Being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.*[Phil.1:6] This was true of Jonah and, even when he was running away from God, Jonah remembered who he was: *I am a Hebrew and I worship the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the land.*[Jon.1:9] Elihu told Job that God was firm in His purpose: *Elihu continued: "Bear with me a little longer and I will*

show you that there is more to be said in God's behalf. I get my knowledge from afar; I will ascribe justice to my Maker. Be assured that my words are not false; one who has perfect knowledge is with you. "God is mighty, but despises no one; he is mighty, and firm in his purpose.[Job.36:1-5] Job later declared the same—that God will fulfil His purpose: T*hen Job replied to the LORD: "I know that you can do all things; no purpose of yours can be thwarted. You asked, 'Who is this that obscures my plans without knowledge?' Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know. "You said, 'Listen now, and I will speak; I will question you, and you shall answer me.' My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes."*[Job.42:1-6] David also recognised the Omnipotence of God and declared: *The LORD foils the plans of the nations; he thwarts the purposes of the peoples. But the plans of the LORD stand firm forever, the purposes of his heart through all generations.*[Ps.33:10-11] *I cry out to God Most High, to God, who fulfils [his purpose] for me.*[Ps.57:2] Jonah found out the hard way that God fulfils His purpose and not even the raging sea could thwart God's plan: *Now the LORD provided a huge fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.*[Jon.1:17]

Because Jonah was a sign that pointed to Jesus' death and resurrection, he probably died inside the fish's belly but regardless of what happened inside the fish, Jonah was alive on the 3rd day! Although this dramatic encounter with death impacted Jonah enough to prompt him to obey God's commission, he did it reluctantly. How different from the New Covenant where God writes His Law on our hearts and gives us a willing spirit: *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] *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] The Holy Spirit changes us from inside out and gives us a willing spirit: *Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.*[Ps.51:8] We obey God because we want to, not because we are made to—which is why the Psalmist writes: *I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you with my loving eye on you. Do not be like the horse or the mule, which have no understanding but must be controlled by bit and bridle or they will not come to you.*[Ps.32:8-9] When we obey God willingly, we enjoy the blessings of God's kingdom: *If you are willing and obedient, you will eat the good things of the land;*[Is.1:19] Jesus said that rebellious people seek a sign—and clearly, in this context the people were not really looking for any real evidence for faith but an excuse to reject Jesus and so to reject God. *Jesus said, "This is a wicked generation. It asks for a miraculous sign, but none will be given it except the sign of Jonah. For as Jonah was a sign to the Ninevites, so also will the Son of Man be to this generation. The Queen of the South will rise at the judgment with the men of this generation and condemn them; for she came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon's wisdom, and now one greater than Solomon is here. The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now one greater than Jonah is here.*[Lk.11:29-32] In the story of Lazurus, Jesus said that not even someone returning from the dead would persuade rebellious people to believe: *Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.' " 'No, father Abraham,' he said, 'but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.' "He said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.' "*[Lk.16:29-31] However, the cross of Christ is more powerful that man's rebellious heart and when Jesus is preached, people do repent: *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. 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.1:20-25] *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]

Jonah was a sign that Jesus is the Messiah—God's Promised Redeemer and Deliverer: *A wicked and adulterous generation looks for a miraculous sign, but none will be given it except the sign of Jonah.*[Matt.16:4] And Jonah is still an important sign for us today because Jesus has died for our sins and has risen again for our justification. *Jesus was handed over to die for our sins. He was raised to life in order to make us right with God.*[Rom.4:25]

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 men 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)

So let's stay encouraged that we really do have a Redeemer who died for us and rose again—but unlike Jonah, Jesus loved us unconditionally and rose from the dead victorious, never to die again.

Questions

What does "Messiah" (Christ) mean?

In what way is Jonah a sign that Jesus is the Messiah

Should Christian seek a "sign" from God?

Why does God save bad people?

Why do some people respond to the Gospel and others don't?

Puritan Prayer. O Lord, we live here as fish in a vessel of water with only enough to keep us alive—but in heaven we shall swim in the ocean. Here we have a little air in us to keep us breathing—but in heaven we shall have sweet and fresh gales; Here we have a beam of sun to lighten our darkness, a warm ray to keep us from freezing—but in heaven we shall live in light and warmth for ever. Our natural desires are corrupt and misguided and it is Your mercy to destroy them. Our spiritual longings are of Your planting and You will water and increase them—quicken our hunger and thirst after the realm above. Here we can have the world—but in heaven we shall have You in Christ. Here is a life of longing and prayer—but in heaven there is assurance without suspicion, asking without refusal. Here are gross comforts, more burden than benefit—but in heaven there is joy without sorrow, comfort without suffering, love without inconstancy, rest without weariness. Give me to know that heaven is all love, where the continual viewing of Your beauty keeps the soul in continual transports of delight. Give me to know that heaven is all peace, where error, pride, rebellion and passion raise no head. Give me to know that heaven is all joy, the end of believing, fasting, praying, mourning, humbling, watching, fearing, repining—and lead me to it soon!

Sunday 13th April Ps.111. Church AGM

(Our Annual Report and Accounts are available on the Church Website under Church History)

Our Church's Vision is Jesus: *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.*[Heb.3:1] *Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith.*[Heb.12:2] But what do we mean when we say "J*esus is our Vision*? And how do we implement this vision? The first question to ask is: What is Jesus like? And the answer is: He is full of grace and truth: *The Word became a human being. He made his home with us. We have seen his glory. It is the glory of the one and only Son. He came from the Father. And he was full of grace and truth.*[Jn.1:14] Therefore, if we are to fix our eyes on Jesus, we must fix our eyes (thoughts and intentions) on grace and truth.

And if we fix our eyes on Jesus, we will worship Him because He is God—and to worship God we must worship in spirit and truth: *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] Which is why our Church focuses on spiritual life and upholding the truth. Life and Truth are to be found in Jesus: *Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.*[Jn.14:6] And so we intentionally and deliberately focus our Church activities on connecting with God through Jesus and in harmony with the Holy Spirit. We endeavour to say and sing the truth about God and about ourselves—our past, present and future. We are New Covenant Believers who are living in the benefits of Jesus' death, resurrection and ascension and so we need to think like that, speak like that and act like that. Our praise and prayers should reflect and promote the New Covenant truth of the completed work of Jesus, not ape the world, either in sentiment or style. When Jesus said "*It is finished*" it was not a cry of despair or defeat but a declaration of Victory! We need to know which side of Calvary we are—whether we are we pre-Calvary or post-Calvary; whether we are born-again and a child of God or whether we are still in our sins! Martin Luther said: *Remorse before Calvary is of God; remorse after you have been to Calvary is of the devil. Repent of your sin, yes; but do not make your sin a subject for long and melancholy meditation. Why should I cheat God by spending my time and energy on remorse? I am greater than my sins.* John G Lake made a similar comment: *If you are born again, you are a son of God. And for you to tear yourself out of your sonship, your relationship and the righteousness of God and put yourself over in the reality of death and tell God you are dirty, unclean, that His blood has not cleansed you, and His life has not been delivered to you it is a monstrous thing. It is alright to sing that as an unregenerate but it is not the experience of the sons and daughters of God.* That is why the teaching about righteousness is so important— righteousness was the theme of much of Paul's preaching: *Several days later Felix came with his wife Drusilla, who was a Jewess. He sent for Paul and listened to him as he spoke about faith in Christ Jesus. As Paul discoursed on righteousness, self-control and the judgment to come, Felix was afraid and said, "That's enough for now! You may leave. When I find it convenient, I will send for you."*[Acts.24:24-25]

It is important that we maintain a good confession by stating what God says about us and not what we think or feel about ourselves. F.F.Bosworth used to say: *Make your lips do their duty; fill them with the Word. Make them say what God says about your situation. Don't allow them to say anything to the contrary.* Christianity is called a "*confession*." W*herefore, holy brethren, partakers of a heavenly calling, consider the Apostle and High Priest of our confession, even Jesus.*[Heb.3:1] *"Confession"* in the Greek 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."* Confession means to believe and say what God says about us, our sins, our past, our present and our future. Confession is affirmation of the Bible truth that we have embraced. Confession is believing with our heart and repeating with our lips God's own declaration of who we are and what we have in Christ. Confession is faith's way of

expressing itself. We are told to *"consider Christ Jesus the Apostle and High Priest of our confession."* As our High Priest, Jesus acts on our behalf according to what we confess, when it is in accordance with God's Word. Salvation comes through confessing Jesus as Lord: *"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] But if we have a bad confession—if we say that we are no good, a failure, a wretched sinner, or if our confession is worry, anxiety, unbelief—it is blasphemy (even if we don't realise it!) because we are denying the finished work of Jesus. We are saying that Jesus death on the Cross wasn't quite enough to make us whole, that we are still in our sins, that Jesus is not Lord over our situation. The New Covenant is so much better than the Old Covenant because it is complete, it is effective, it is eternal and it works! As New Covenant Believers, we reflect Jesus' glory: *And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.*[2Cor.3-18] A more literal translation is: *We all, with unveiled faces, are looking as in a mirror at the glory of the Lord and are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory; this is from the Lord who is the Spirit.* The glory of the Lord is in Jesus—who is within us: *To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. He is the one we proclaim, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ.*[Col.1:27-28] What are you seeing within yourself? Do you see sin and unworthiness or do you see Jesus? We are to contemplate and reflect the glory of God—which is now in us—and make that our confession, especially in our prayers and praise, including our singing. True worship is spiritual and always expresses the truth—therefore, if we don't say the same as God says we are not confessing Jesus and so we are not worshiping God!! The Bible says that we are of heaven. *The first man was of the dust of the earth; the second man is of heaven. As was the earthly man, so are those who are of the earth; and as is the heavenly man, so also are those who are of heaven. And just as we have borne the image of the earthly man, so shall we bear the image of the heavenly man.*[1Cor.15:47-49] And so we must think, talk and act like the heavenly people we are.

The biggest problem with most people is that they are not fully persuaded about what God says about them. *Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth. 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. Dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God and receive from him anything we ask, because we keep his commands and do what pleases him. And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us.*[1Jn.3:18-23] A more literal translation of vs 19 is: *And by this we know that we are of the truth, and shall assure [lit. persuade] our hearts before Him.* When we can persuade our heart about what God says about us we will speak and act like the citizen of heaven that we really are. God knows everything and even if we feel guilty, He is greater than our feelings; if our conscience condemns us, we will be reassured because He is greater than our conscience. We need to persuade our heart that we are right before God, but righteousness is not just about being right with God—righteousness is the very life of God within us because Jesus is our Righteousness: *God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*[2Cor.5:21] *It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption.*[1Cor.1:30] Righteousness is not just imputed to us (given to us in theory), righteousness is also imparted to us (given to us in reality). God counts us as righteous because we are righteous—and because our righteousness is actually Jesus living within us, we have the ability to live righteously too. Mike Petzer says: *the Law of Moses sees a debt*

to be paid; the Law of Christ sees the finished work of Jesus. The Law of Moses supresses the old life; the Law of Christ expresses the new life. That is why we take Paul's instruction to Timothy seriously: *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] *Be diligent in these matters; give yourself wholly to them, so that everyone may see your progress. Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers.*[1Tim.4:15-16]

We aim to help people become Bible-literate. But we don't need to know the exact chapter and verse of every Scripture—and in any case these division are relatively modern additions to the Bible. Whilst the OT was divided into sections to make easier reading, the chapters we have in our Bible today were introduced in the C13th and the verses were added C16th—the English Geneva Bible published in 1560, was the first Bible to have both chapters and verses and these are now universally accepted in practically all languages. But we should know what God has said and how to find where it is in the Scriptures so we can check it out for ourselves (like the Bereans![Acts17:11]). We need to have revelatory knowledge of Scripture not just academic knowledge—we need to understand God's mind not just look at the facts! Someone once described the Bible as God's mind in a book! And so, when we say that our Church's Vision is Jesus, we mean that we aim to say the same as Jesus says about ourselves, that we are thinking, talking and acting as Believers because we confess Jesus as Lord, that we are living in harmony with the Holy Spirit (who is also called "the Spirit of Jesus"). This Scripture summarises what our Church's vision means: *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. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.*[Col.3:15-17]

Questions

What is Jesus like?

How important is it that our praise and prayers harmonise with the New Covenant?

What does it mean to be righteous?

Why does it matter if we doubt what God has done for us?

How can we build our faith?

Why is it important that God's Word dwells in us?

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

Easter Sunday 20th April Ps.24

Christ… the unseen Guest at every meal, the silent listener to every conversation. *"What are you talking about as you walk along?" "About Jesus of Nazareth," they replied.*[Lk.24:17-19]

In the King's Easter message he said: "*On Maundy Thursday, Jesus knelt and washed the feet of many of those who would abandon Him. His humble action was a token of His love that knew no bounds or boundaries and is central to Christian belief. The love He showed when He walked the Earth reflected the Jewish ethic of caring for the stranger and those in need, a deep human instinct echoed in Islam and other religious traditions,*

and in the hearts of all who seek the good of others. The abiding message of Easter is that God so loved the world – the whole world – that He sent His son to live among us to show us how to love one another, and to lay down His own life for others in a love that proved stronger than death... There are three virtues that the world still needs – faith, hope and love. And the greatest of these is love. It is with these timeless truths in my mind, and my heart, that I wish you all a blessed and peaceful Easter."

Of course Jesus Christ is foundational to the Christian faith (and also to any relationship with God!), but it is Jesus' death and resurrection on which our faith stands or falls. Jesus' example and ministry were important but until He died for our sins and rose again, no one could be saved. The king's Easter message was good but failed to mention the "*reason for the season*" which was to save us from our sin ("*Jesus*" means "*Saviour*"). It was Jesus' death that saves us but it was His resurrection that justified us: *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.4:24-25] *Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel.*[2Tim.2:8] *Brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the good news I preached to you. You received it and have put your faith in it. Because you believed the good news, you are saved. But you must hold firmly to the message I preached to you. If you don't, you have believed it for nothing. What I received I passed on to you. And it is the most important of all. Here is what it is. Christ died for our sins, just as Scripture said he would. He was buried. He was raised from the dead on the third day, just as Scripture said he would be.*[1Cor.15:1-4] *If you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.*[Rom.10:9]

The Jews of Jesus' time had pinned their hope on the Messiah for their redemption and their emancipation from Roman oppression—in fact there had been several people who had professed to be "*the messiah*" but they all came to nothing. And when Jesus was born, very few people actually believed that He was the promised Messiah—even though He directly and indirectly fulfilled the Messianic prophecies. *He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him.*[Jn.1:11] There were however some like Simeon who were waiting with anticipation for the Messiah: *Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Messiah.*[Lk.2:25-26]) But most of the religious leaders were completely disconnected from God and resisted Him at every opportunity. The Jewish national government (called *Sanhedrin*) was controlled by the Sadducees under the leadership of the High Priest, but the Sadducees did not even accept there was a spiritual dimension to life. *The high priest and all his companions were Sadducees.*[Acts.5:17] *The Sadducees say that people will not rise from the dead. They don't believe there are angels or spirits either.*[Act.23:8] *Jesus was warning them against what the Pharisees and Sadducees taught.*[Matt.16:12] The Jewish leaders were so opposed to God that they eventually crucified Jesus out of envy, just as Jesus had said they would: *"Listen to another parable: There was a landowner who planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a winepress in it and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and moved to another place. When the harvest time approached, he sent his servants to the tenants to collect his fruit. "The tenants seized his servants; they beat one, killed another, and stoned a third. Then he sent other servants to them, more than the first time, and the tenants treated them the same way. Last of all, he sent his son to them. 'They will respect my son,' he said. "But when the tenants saw the son, they said to each other, 'This is the heir. Come, let's kill him and take his inheritance.' So they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. "Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" "He will bring those wretches to a wretched end," they replied, "and he will rent the vineyard to other tenants, who will give him his share of the crop at harvest time." Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the Scriptures: " 'The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvellous in our eyes' ? "Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be*

taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit. Anyone who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; anyone on whom it falls will be crushed." When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard Jesus' parables, they knew he was talking about them. They looked for a way to arrest him, but they were afraid of the crowd because the people held that he was a prophet.[Matt.21:33-46] And even when the Jewish leaders knew that Jesus was the promised Messiah, they refused to accept Him because they wanted emancipation from the Romans not from their sin: *At dawn the elders of the people met together. These included the chief priests and the teachers of the law. Jesus was led to them. "If you are the Christ," they said, "tell us." Jesus answered, "If I tell you, you will not believe me" …They all asked, "Are you the Son of God then?" He replied, "You are right in saying that I am."*[Lk.22:66-70] *"Would you like me to release to you this 'King of the Jews'?" Pilate asked. (For he realized by now that the leading priests had arrested Jesus out of envy.) But at this point the leading priests stirred up the crowd to demand the release of Barabbas instead of Jesus. Pilate asked them, "Then what should I do with this man you call the king of the Jews?" They shouted back, "Crucify him!"*[Mk.15:9-13] The Believers were also expecting a political Messiah who would deliver them from Rome's oppression, rather than a spiritual Messiah who would deliver them from satan's oppression—so it was not surprising that the Disciples found it difficult to accept that Jesus would have to die. *Then Jesus began to tell them that the Son of Man must suffer many terrible things and be rejected by the elders, the leading priests, and the teachers of religious law. He would be killed, but three days later he would rise from the dead. As he talked about this openly with his disciples, Peter took him aside and began to reprimand him for saying such things. Jesus turned around and looked at his disciples, then reprimanded Peter. "Get away from me, Satan!" he said. "You are seeing things merely from a human point of view, not from God's."*[Mk.8:31-33] And even after His resurrection, Jesus' Disciples still expected a political kingdom: *So when the apostles were with Jesus, they kept asking him, "Lord, has the time come for you to free Israel and restore our kingdom?"*[Acts.1:8] But Jesus' Kingdom was (and still is) a spiritual kingdom—not a political or geographical kingdom. *My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now my kingdom is from another place.*[Jn.18:36] *The coming of the kingdom of God is not something that can be observed, nor will people say, 'Here it is,' or 'There it is,' because the kingdom of God is in your midst.*[Lk.17:20-21] *I tell you, I will not drink from this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom.*[Matt.26:29] God's Kingdom is the reign of Christ in our hearts: *For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.*[Rom.14:17] But Christ's reign could not fully come until He had completed His ministry of reconciling mankind to God by dying for our sins, rising from the dead and returning to His Father. *When he appeared in human form, he humbled himself in obedience to God and died a criminal's death on a cross. Therefore, God elevated him to the place of highest honour and gave him the name above all other names, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue declare that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*[Phil.2:7-11] Jesus' death and resurrection is a theme that runs right through the OT, either directly through prophesy such as in Job, the Psalms, Isaiah—or indirectly through historical events such as Abraham and Isaac, Jonah, *etc. He was given a grave with those who were evil. But his body was buried in the tomb of a rich man. He was killed even though he hadn't harmed anyone. And he had never lied to anyone. The LORD says, "It was my plan to crush him and cause him to suffer. I made his life a guilt offering to pay for sin. But he will see all of his children after him. In fact, he will continue to live. My plan will be brought about through him. After he suffers, he will see the light that leads to life. And he will be satisfied.*[Is.53:9-11] *That is why my heart is glad and my soul rejoices. My body rests securely because you do not abandon my soul to the grave or allow your holy one to decay.*[Ps.16:9-10] *I know that my Redeemer lives. In the end he will stand on the earth. After my skin has been destroyed, in my body I'll still see God. I myself will see him with my own eyes. I'll see him, and he won't be a stranger to me. How my heart longs for that day!*[Job.19:25-27] *A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah.*

For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.[Matt.12:39-40] *"Take your son, your only son–yes, Isaac, whom you love so much–and go to the land of Moriah. Go and sacrifice him as a burnt offering on one of the mountains, which I will show you." …"Stay here with the donkey," Abraham told the servants. "The boy and I will travel a little farther. We will worship there, and then we will come right back."*[Gen.22:2-5] Because the Bible is a spiritual Book, these prophecies about Jesus were not understood or accepted by people in Jesus' time until their spiritual eyes were opened—and it is the same today. Until our spiritual eyes are opened, the Bible remains just like many other books—a book with great stories and great ideals. But when our spiritual eyes are opened, the Bible becomes a Book about God and His plan of Salvation through Jesus' death and resurrection: *He said to them, "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms." Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, "This is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high."*[Lk.24:44-49]

The Bible records at least 8 people being raised from the dead (3 or 4 in the OT—1 through Elijah and 2 through Elisha and probably Jonah was too—and 5 people in the NT—3 by Jesus, 1 through Paul and another through Peter). But these people were only "*resuscitated*"—their bodies were revived and they died again at a later date. But when Jesus rose from the dead, His body was resurrected as an immortal body that would never die again! Although Jesus' resurrected body had flesh and bones that could be touched, He could appear through locked doors and then disappear again; He ate real food and yet did not need to eat; His clothes were real and yet not made of natural material; He physically ascended to heaven in full view of those watching. And because Jesus was seen after His resurrection by over 500 people at one time,[1Cor.15:6] our faith in Jesus is based on verified fact not fanciful hearsay. The foundation of our faith is Jesus' resurrection and because this is a verifiable fact, we can have complete assurance that we are saved from our sin. *We have preached that Christ has been raised from the dead… And if Christ has not been raised, what we preach doesn't mean anything. Your faith doesn't mean anything either. More than that, we would be lying about God. We have given witness that God raised Christ from the dead… And if Christ has not been raised, your faith doesn't mean anything. Your sins have not been forgiven. Those who have died believing in Christ are also lost. Do we have hope in Christ only for this life? Then people should pity us more than anyone else. But Christ really has been raised from the dead.*[1Cor.15:12-20] And Jesus' resurrection also guarantees our future resurrection too: *He is the first of all those who will rise… This is what Scripture says: "The first man, Adam, became a living being." The last Adam became a life-giving spirit. I'm telling you a mystery. Not all of us will die, but we will all be changed. It will happen in an instant, in a split second at the sound of the last trumpet. Indeed, that trumpet will sound, and then the dead will come back to life. They will be changed so that they can live forever. This body that decays must be changed into a body that cannot decay. This mortal body must be changed into a body that will live forever. When this body that decays is changed into a body that cannot decay, and this mortal body is changed into a body that will live forever, then the teaching of Scripture will come true: "Death is turned into victory! Death, where is your victory? Death, where is your sting?"*[1Cor.15:45-55]

After Jesus rose from the dead, He returned to His Father and sent the Holy Spirit to earth to continue His ministry. Jesus opened the Scriptures to His Disciples, and the Holy Spirit opens the Scriptures for us today. Jesus listened to the Disciples' conversation: *What are you talking about as you walk along?" "About Jesus of Nazareth," they replied.*[Lk.24:17-19] And the Holy Spirit listens to our conversation today, which is why including God in our conversation is an essential part

of Christian fellowship—and it also has a feel-good factor too! *Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?*[Lk.24:32] *My heart grew hot within me, and as I meditated, the fire burned.*[Ps.39:3] **Yes, Christ is the unseen Guest at every meal and the silent listener to every conversation, so let's welcome Him as our Risen Lord and give Him the reverence that He is due.**

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

Questions.
What Jesus was like before His resurrection (*i.e.* in His mortal body).
What Jesus is like after His resurrection (*i.e.* in His immortal body).
Why is Jesus' resurrection important?
How do you imagine the final resurrection will be like?
How can we prepare for that final resurrection?

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.

Sunday 27th April Ps.112 Jn.21:1-19

Jesus said: Do you truly love me?[Jn.21:16]

There have been some phenomenal accomplishments throughout history. The Seven Wonders of the Ancient World were incredible achievements: Great Pyramid (the only one that still exists), Colossus of Rhodes, Hanging Gardens of Babylon, Lighthouse of Alexandria, Mausoleum at Halicarnassus, Statue of Zeus at Olympia, Temple of Artemis at Ephesus. And there are also some modern great achievements that are probably even greater than those ancient Wonders—achievements such as electricity, radio, television, space travel, the internet, chemotherapy, and the list could go on and on! But none of these achievements, regardless of how great and incredible they are, can compare with loving God respectfully, personally, purposefully, passionately and powerfully. To love God is the greatest success that anyone can achieve: *"Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" Jesus replied: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."*[Matt.22:36-40] Moses had commanded the people to love God—and to help them remember this instruction he told them to talk about it, write it on their doors and teach it to

their children for generations to come: *Israel, listen to me. The LORD is our God. The LORD is the one and only God. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul. Love him with all your strength. The commandments I give you today must be in your hearts. Make sure your children learn them. Talk about them when you are at home. Talk about them when you walk along the road. Speak about them when you go to bed. And speak about them when you get up. Write them down and tie them on your hands as a reminder. Also tie them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses. Also write them on your gates.*[Deut.6:4-9] But what does it mean to "*love*" God? Love can have many meanings, such as: to love your spouse; to love your children; to love your friends; to love your enemies. These "*loves*" all use different meanings of the word "*love*". To love your spouse means to cherish, honour, respect and to give yourself unreservedly to your spouse—to seek their very best. To love your children means to provide and care for them, to help them to be the very best they can be, and to be there when they need you. To love your friends means to support them and befriend them because you enjoy their company. To love your enemies means to forgive them and be kind to them—even though you may not enjoy their company! We can also love our pets; love our home; love our work; love our hobbies; love our food—and these "*loves*" all use different meanings of the word "*love*", as well as having different degrees of emotion and commitment. Even though loving God will involve similar attributes of love as those other *loves*, to love God surpasses all other loves.

The 2 Bible references mentioned previously state that we should **love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength.** This means that we are to **love God respectfully** (because He is God), **passionately** (from our heart), **personally** (with our soul), **purposefully** (with our mind) and **powerfully** (with our strength)—and of course, love is an emotion and so we will love God joyfully, cheerfully and willingly. But until we experience God's love, we will never even begin to understand what true love is because God is love: *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 Savior 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.*[1Jn.4:13-19]

To love God means that we will respect God. Some Bible versions translate "*fear*" as "*respect*": *Fear the LORD, you his saints, for those who fear him lack nothing. [You people of God, have respect for the LORD. Those who respect him have everything they need.]* [Ps.34:9] True love for God does not make us afraid of Him and although God is "o*ur Father, who is in heaven*", we will always respect Him as "*Almighty God*". The closest example of God's love for us (and of our love for God) is the relationship of marriage. *Husbands, love your wives. Love them just as Christ loved the church. He gave himself up for her. He did it to make her holy. He made her clean by washing her with water and the word. He did it to bring her to himself as a brightly shining church. He wants a church that has no stain or wrinkle or any other flaw. He wants a church that is holy and without blame. In the same way, husbands should love their wives. They should love them as they love their own bodies. Any man who loves his wife loves himself. After all, people have never hated their own bodies. Instead, they feed and care for their bodies. And that is what Christ does for the church. We are parts of his body. As the Scriptures say, "A man leaves his father and mother and is joined to his wife, and the two are united into one." This is a great mystery, but it is an illustration of the way Christ and the church are one.*[Eph.5:25-32] In the Marriage Service, the bride is asked: *will you live together in marriage according to God's laws? Will you respect him, love him, comfort him, honour and keep him, in sickness and in health and, forsaking all other, keep only unto him as long as you both shall live?* Thus to *love God* means to *respect, comfort (communicate with, speak good words), and honour God—and be together (for*

ever). And of course, we love God joyfully, cheerfully and willingly, as well as respectfully, passionately, personally, purposefully and powerfully.

To love God means that we will love others. Loving God puts us under an obligation to love others. *Owe nothing to anyone–except for your obligation to love one another. If you love your neighbour, you will fulfil the requirements of God's law. For the commandments say, "You must not commit adultery. You must not murder. You must not steal. You must not covet." These–and other such commandments–are summed up in this one commandment: "Love your neighbour as yourself." Love does no wrong to others, so love fulfils the requirements of God's law.*[Rom.13:8-10] If we love God, we will love everything that is God's, including His family—because love is an emotion as well as a commitment, we will enjoy being with God's people. *You learned about the Good News from Epaphras, our beloved co-worker. He is Christ's faithful servant, and he is helping us on your behalf. He has told us about the love for others that the Holy Spirit has given you.*[Col.1:7-8] When we love God, we will enjoy seeing others grow in their faith (their trust) and we will do all we can to help them become mature Christians—we feed and shepherd God's sheep. *"Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?" "Yes, Lord," Peter replied, "you know I love you." "Then feed my lambs," Jesus told him. Jesus repeated the question: "Simon son of John, do you love me?" "Yes, Lord," Peter said, "you know I love you." "Then take care of my sheep," Jesus said. A third time he asked him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter was hurt that Jesus asked the question a third time. He said, "Lord, you know everything. You know that I love you." Jesus said, "Then feed my sheep.*[Jn.21:15-17] Because Jesus' instruction to Peter is recorded in the Scriptures, it applies to us today—which means that we should care for Christian brothers and sisters by feeding and taking care of them. We will feed and care for others practically as we are able, but we will especially feed and care for others spiritually by praying for them and encouraging them to trust God and grow into mature Believers. A mature Christian is able to trust God in difficult times because they have learnt to trust Him in the good times. But a mature Christian will also help others to trust God—"*what I have received from the Lord, I pass on to you*"!!. *All praise to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is our merciful Father and the source of all comfort. He comforts us in all our troubles so that we can comfort others. When they are troubled, we will be able to give them the same comfort God has given us. For the more we suffer for Christ, the more God will shower us with his comfort through Christ. Even when we are weighed down with troubles, it is for your comfort and salvation! For when we ourselves are comforted, we will certainly comfort you. Then you can patiently endure the same things we suffer. We are confident that as you share in our sufferings, you will also share in the comfort God gives us.*[2Cor.1:3-7]

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

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

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

Questions

Why do you think that the exact number of fish caught (153) is recorded?
Why did Jesus single Peter out from the other Disciples?
Can you find any Biblical evidence that Peter was leader of the early Church?
What does it mean to "*follow*" Jesus?
What does it mean to "*feed my sheep*"?
How do we feed Jesus' sheep?

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!

May

Remember. *I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers, because I hear about your love for all his holy people and your faith in the Lord Jesus. Phile.4-5*

Thought for the Month: When we pray, we must hold fast and believe that God has heard our prayer. It was for this reason that the ancients defined prayer as an *Ascensus mentis ad Deum*—the ascent of the mind to God! *Martin Luther*

Sunday 5th May Ps.113. Jn.20:24-31

T If faith is all important, where are you getting your faith from?

The source of faith is Scripture. *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.20:31]

The quote "*Ignorance is bliss, 'tis folly to be wise!*" is often used to excuse lack of knowledge, failure to learn, or even poor education—but that is not it means! The quote comes from Thomas Gray's poem, "*Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College*" (1742) and summarises what had been previously said in the poem—that misfortunes will come in their own good time and it would be cruel to inflict them on young people before they are ready to bear them. Whilst this may be true of somethings (and especially today when the government is intent on brainwashing young children with "*social relationships*" education), when it comes to spiritual matters, ignorance is not bliss and wisdom is certainly not folly, because there are eternal consequences if we get it wrong! There is no excuse for spiritual ignorance—we don't have to be ignorant about God: *The truth about God is plain... God has made it plain. Ever since the world was created it has been possible to see the qualities of God that are not seen. I'm talking about his eternal power and about the fact that he is God. Those things can be seen in what he has made. So people have no excuse for what they do.*[Rom.1:19-20] And we don't have to be ignorant about death either: *Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope. We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him.*[1Thes.4:13-14] And because God has explained what happens when Believers die, we can face death with a peace that non-Christians can never understand.

The Bible is a spiritual book because it gives us insight into the spiritual world that we can never learn from theory or science or even from experience. As Isaiah so succinctly explains: *Here I am. Here are the children the LORD has given me. We are signs and reminders to Israel from the LORD who rules over all. He lives on Mount Zion. Some will tell you to ask for advice from people who get messages from those who have died. Others will tell you to ask for advice from people who talk to the spirits of the dead. But those people only whisper. Their words are barely heard. So shouldn't you ask for advice from your God? Why should you get advice from dead people to help those who are alive? 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. But there won't be any more sadness for those who were suffering. In the past the LORD brought shame on the land of Zebulun. He also brought shame on the land of Naphtali. But in days to come he will honour Galilee, where people from other nations live. He will honour the land along the Mediterranean Sea. And he will honour the territory east of the Jordan River. The people who are now living in darkness will see a great light. They are now living in a very dark land. But a light will shine on them… A child will be born to us. A son will be given to us. He will rule over us. And he will be called Wonderful Adviser and Mighty God. He will also be called Father Who Lives Forever and Prince Who Brings Peace. The authority of his rule will continue to grow. The peace he brings will never end. He will rule on David's throne and over his kingdom. He*

will make the kingdom strong and secure. His rule will be based on what is fair and right. It will last forever. The LORD's great love will make sure that happens. He rules over all.[Is.8:18-9:7]

Some people distort Scripture to mean anything but what God intended, and these people are called ignorant. *Paul's letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction.*[2Pet.3:16] However, even Believers can *act* like ignorant people if they are embittered or ignore what God has recorded in Scripture for our benefit. *For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.*[Rom.15:4] *When my heart was grieved and my spirit embittered, I was senseless and ignorant;*[Ps.73:21-22] *I am the most ignorant of men; I do not have a man's understanding. I have not learned wisdom, nor have I knowledge of the Holy One.*[Prov.30:2-3] But God doesn't want us to be ignorant—which is why the Scriptures were written: *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… This is the disciple who gives witness to these things. He also wrote them down. We know that his witness is true.* [Jn.20:30-31;21:24] And although the Scriptures are spiritual, God has made a way for us to understand spiritual matters—it is called new-birth, which comes through repentance: *Therefore since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by man's design and skill. In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead.*[Acts.17:29-31]

Of course, the Bible is published by people and people are capable of making mistakes and here are some accidental Printers' errors!

Printers (instead of Princes) have persecuted me.[Ps.119.161] The Printers Bible 1702

Blessed are the place-makers (peace-makers).[Matt.5.9] The Place-Makers Bible 1562:

Thou shalt not be afraid for the bugges (terror) by night.[Ps.91.5] The Bug Bible 1551

Is there no treacle (balm) in Gilead?[Jer.7.22] The Treacle Bible 1568

Know ye not that the unrighteous shall inherit (not inherit) the kingdom or God.[1Cor.6.9] The Unrighteous Bible

They sewed fig leaves together and made themselves breeches (aprons).[Gen.3.7] The Breeches Bible

There are murderers (murmurers).[Jude16] The Murderers Bible 1801

He that hath ears to ears, (hear) let him hear.[Matt.11.15] The Ears to Ears Bible 1810

The parable of the vinegar (vineyard)[Lk.20]—headline. The Vinegar Bible 1717

If any man come to me, and hate not … his own wife (life).[Lk.14.26] The Wife-hater Bible 1810

Do (do not) commit adultery.[Ex.20.14] The Wicked Bible 1631 (The printer was fined £300 for omitting the word "*not*". All copies were ordered to be destroyed by Charles I.)

However, an error is not the same as ignorance and those typos were quickly corrected by the printers. But it is surprising how often people make basic errors by just quoting others without checking the Bible for themselves. Jesus said that if we don't know the Scriptures and God's power, we are in error: *You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God.*[Matt.22:29] The first sin was the result of doubting what God said: *Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden'?" The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, but God did say, 'You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.' " "You will not certainly die," the serpent said to the woman.*[Gen.3:1-4] Isaiah warned against quarrelling with God: *Woe to those who quarrel with their Maker.*[Is.45:9]

Here are five common mis-quotes of the Bible.

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

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

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

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

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

However, these five common misquotes are not doctrinal and they won't affect our relationship with God. **But these five "3:16s" of the Bible are doctrinal** and will affect our relationship with God:

John 3:16: *For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.* [**Genesis 3:15** is also worth remembering—it is called the *protoevangelium*—the 1st mention of the Gospel: *And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.*[Gen.3:15]]

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jesus: The **solution** is that God acted to become a man Himself in Jesus to rescue man.
Cross: Jesus gave Himself as a payment for the crimes man committed—and He did this by dying on the cross. This is what Theologians call *substitutionary or vicarious atonement*. God paid, in the person of Jesus, to rescue man. And those who respond to the offer of pardon by putting their trust in Jesus the **God-Man**, receive a complete pardon which they didn't deserve—and that's an act of mercy and grace.
Resurrection: However, the story does not end there because there is the **resolution** to the Story, which is **the final Resurrection**. **The good news** about the **final resurrection** is that **everyone lives for ever!** And **the bad news** about the **final resurrection** is that **everyone lives for ever!** Our story of reality does not end with: "*they all lived happily ever after*" because there is a coming day of judgement where the righteous will rise to eternal life and peace—and the unrighteous will rise to eternal death and punishment. Those who humble themselves, surrender to God and submit to the Righteous King will receive **perfect mercy** because they have accepted God's forgiveness. It will be as God had originally intended for us to live – in perfect harmony, peace and joy, for ever and for ever. But those who those who refuse God's forgiveness and continue in their rebellion will receive **perfect justice** in their punishment for every sin they have committed against their rightful owner. Now immortal human beings, they will be banished forever to a place of punishment, torment, and interminable isolation from God for their crimes—and the torment is real and terrible. Both conditions—peace or punishment—last for eternity, for ever and for ever. These are the two options that we are faced with in the **final resurrection**: **perfect mercy or perfect justice** but the choice is made now!
So, the question remains: how do we get faith—real God-faith. Faith is a simple trust in God, a conviction that God is true to Himself and to what He has said—and this comes from hearing God's Word: *Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ.*[Rom.10:17] The essence of faith is believing what God has said about His Son. If we do believe what God has said about His Son, we have eternal life, which means, when we breath our last breath, we will still be very much alive because we will be with Christ. And that is why the Bible was written! *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.20:31] God is good, His Word is true and it works in my life!
Questions
Why is it important to know what the Bible teaches?
Is all of the Bible meant to be interpreted literally?
How can we know what is a literal prophesy, what is a promise and what is a premise?
Is there a difference between the Word of God and the Bible?
How do we get faith?
How do we get spiritual wisdom?
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. Thank you my God that You hear me and that You do for me more than I can ask, think or dream.

Sunday 11th May Ps.114

The Gospel is Simple, Settled and Spiritual

The Gospel is absolutely foundational to the Christian faith because it has the power to save everyone who believes: *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] So what is the Gospel? The word "*Gospel*" (εὐαγγέλιον) literally means "*good message*" (*eu*=good and *aggelion*=angel or messenger) and the good message is **salvation** (salvation from our sins) and **righteousness** (being right with God) through Jesus Christ. The name "*Jesus*" actually means salvation and the only way we can be saved from our sins is through Jesus Christ: *Joseph, 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] *It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed. 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.4:10-12] This good message explains God's mercy and God's grace. Mercy means that God does not give us what we do deserve (eternal separation from God, *i.e.* damnation). Grace means that God does give us what we don't deserve (eternal union with God, *i.e.* salvation). God planned our salvation before sin entered 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] But our salvation wasn't enacted until Jesus became a human being: *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] *Now Adam is a symbol, a representation of Christ, who was yet to come. But there is a great difference between Adam's sin and God's gracious gift. For the sin of this one man, Adam, brought death to many. But even greater is God's wonderful grace and his gift of forgiveness to many through this other man, Jesus Christ. And the result of God's gracious gift is very different from the result of that one man's sin. For Adam's sin led to condemnation, but God's free gift leads to our being made right with God, even though we are guilty of many sins. For the sin of this one man, Adam, caused death to rule over many. But even greater is God's wonderful grace and his gift of righteousness, for all who receive it will live in triumph over sin and death through this one man, Jesus Christ. Yes, Adam's one sin brings condemnation for everyone, but Christ's one act of righteousness brings a right relationship with God and new life for everyone. Because one person disobeyed God, many became sinners. But because one other person obeyed God, many will be made righteous.*[Rom.5:14-19]

The Gospel is Simple. God is Omnibenevolent—He is absolutely and completely holy, perfect and good—but no one can live up to God's standards. *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] Jesus did not teach some altruistic philosophy based on emotional and subjective theory. Jesus taught reality (*i.e.* the truth as God sees it) by showing us who God is—He said: *Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father.*[Jn.14:9] Jesus is exactly the same essence as God the Father: *The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word.*[Heb.1:3] And even though Jesus was the very best of Teachers, still no one is able to follow His teachings completely because we all have a flawed nature (actually we inherited a sinful nature that is spiritually dead which is why we must be born again). But even after we are born-again, we are incapable of achieving perfection in our behaviour this side of heaven: *I don't mean to say that I have already achieved these things or that I have already reached perfection. But I press on to possess that*

perfection for which Christ Jesus first possessed me. No, dear brothers and sisters, I have not achieved it, but I focus on this one thing: Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead, I press on to reach the end of the race and receive the heavenly prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us.[Phil.3:12-14] *If we claim we have no sin, we are only fooling ourselves and not living in the truth. But if we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all wickedness. If we claim we have not sinned, we are calling God a liar and showing that his word has no place in our hearts… I am writing this to you so that you will not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate who pleads our case before the Father. He is Jesus Christ, the one who is truly righteous. He himself is the sacrifice that atones for our sins–and not only our sins but the sins of all the world.*[1Jn.1:8-2:2] So, being a real Christian is not just hard, it is impossible by our own efforts—which is why Jesus came. He lived a perfect life, exchanged our sins for His righteousness, our death for His life. So now, we don't have to go on a pilgrimage to find God or have some extreme spiritual status to be accepted by Him—God is closer than our hands and our feet because He is in our heart and our mouth: *For Moses writes that the law's way of making a person right with God requires obedience to all of its commands. But faith's way of getting right with God says, "Don't say in your heart, 'Who will go up to heaven?' (to bring Christ down to earth). And don't say, 'Who will go down to the place of the dead?' (to bring Christ back to life again)." In fact, it says, 'The message is very close at hand; it is on your lips and in your heart.' And that message is the very message about faith that we preach.*[Rom.10:5-8] So, although it is impossible to live a perfect life, Christianity is easy because through faith, God makes us right as a free gift: *Say the welcoming word to God—"Jesus is my Master"—embracing, body and soul, God's work of doing in us what he did in raising Jesus from the dead. That's it. You're not "doing" anything; you're simply calling out to God, trusting him to do it for you. That's salvation. With your whole being you embrace God setting things right, and then you say it, right out loud: "God has set everything right between him and me!" Scripture reassures us, "No one who trusts God like this—heart and soul—will ever regret it." It's exactly the same no matter what a person's religious background may be: the same God for all of us, acting the same incredibly generous way to everyone who calls out for help. "Everyone who calls, 'Help, God!' gets help."*[Rom.10:9-13] And faith comes from hearing God's Word: *Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message and the message is heard through the word about Christ. [The point is, Before you trust, you have to listen. But unless Christ's Word is preached, there's nothing to listen to.]*[Rom.10:17] Yes, the Gospel is simple—it is uncomplicated and yet it is very profound!

The Gospel is Settled. As Jesus was dying on the cross, He exclaimed "*It is finished*" meaning that there was nothing else for Him to do—His mission was accomplished. *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.1:3] Unlike the priests of Judaism who never finished their work, Jesus' sacrifice was only made once—and then He sat down because His work was completed: *For Christ did not enter a sanctuary made with human hands that was only a copy of the true one; he entered heaven itself, now to appear for us in God's presence. Nor did he enter heaven to offer himself again and again, the way the high priest enters the Most Holy Place every year with blood that is not his own. Otherwise Christ would have had to suffer many times since the creation of the world. But he has appeared once for all at the culmination of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself. Just as people are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him. The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming—not the realities themselves. For this reason it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship. Otherwise, would they not have stopped being offered? For the worshipers would have been cleansed once for all, and would no longer have felt guilty for their sins. But those sacrifices are an annual reminder of sins. It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins… Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins.*

But when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God.[Heb.9:24-10:1-12] The "*finished work of Jesus*" is much more than a doctrinal statement because if we really believe it, we will live in the benefits of what Jesus has done instead of trying to get God's attention or gain favour with Him. Good theology makes Christianity enjoyable but poor theology makes Christianity hard work! Too many Christians spend their time and energy trying to do what Jesus has already done for us. They are not "*rightly dividing*" the Word of God and they are living in a sort of "*christianised*" form of Old Covenant religion by observing "*holy*" days, eating "*holy*" food (or not eating—fasting), visiting "*holy*" places (or pilgrimages), wanting a priest to mediate with God on their behalf—and their hymns, songs and prayers reflect their deception. *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] *But God gave you new life together with Christ. He forgave us all of our sins. He wiped out the written Law with its rules. The Law was against us. It opposed us. He took it away and nailed it to the cross. He took away the weapons of the powers and authorities. He made a public show of them. He won the battle over them by dying on the cross. So don't let anyone judge you because of what you eat or drink. Don't let anyone judge you about holy days. I'm talking about special feasts and New Moons and Sabbath days. They are only a shadow of the things that were going to come. But what is real is found in Christ.*[Col.2:13-17] Yes, the Gospel is settled—it is finished and yet we are still being changed!

The Gospel is Spiritual. Christianity is not only the one true religion (which makes all other religions false religions) but Christians are the only truly blessed people! Christianity makes us prosperous—not because all Christians have an abundance of worldly wealth but because all Christians have an abundance of spiritual wealth. The whole earth belongs to God and we are joint heirs with Christ! But whilst many Christians have little of this world's possessions, <u>all</u> Christians have been blessed with <u>every spiritual blessings</u>: *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] Whilst this is true, not all Christians know this—at least they don't all believe this! Even though <u>all</u> Christians <u>are already blessed</u> with every spiritual blessing in Christ, some are still <u>living with the same mindset as unbelievers</u> and *acting* as if they were still in the world—with the world's values and the world's problems! *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 <u>acting like mere humans</u>?*[1Cor.3:1-3] All the time we live as children we are no different from a slave: *What I am saying is that as long as the heir is a child, he is no different from a slave, although he owns the whole estate. He is subject to guardians and trustees until the time set by his father. So also, when we were children, we were in slavery under the basic principles of the world. But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons. Because you are 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 a son; and since you are a son, God has made you also an heir.*[Gal.4:1-7] A child (literally a "*non-talker*") is someone who does not talk about being right with God because they don't understand who they are! *Anyone who lives on milk, being still an <u>infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness</u> [unskilful in the word of righteousness; is inexpert in the word of righteousness; does not want to learn about living a godly life; lack the experience to talk about what is right]. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.*[Heb.5:13-14] These immature Christians are easily unsettled and deceived by any fad or new idea: *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. <u>Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and</u>*

blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ.[Eph.4:11-15] But mature Christians see the spiritual dimension of God's Kingdom and are at peace with God (and also with themselves) in every and any situation. Maturity is not a gift from God but the result of learning to trust Him: *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] Mature Christians recognise that God's Kingdom is real but spiritual, not political: *Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now my kingdom is from another place."*[Jn.18:36] Mature Christians have learnt about the economy of God's Kingdom and recognise true riches: *Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions.*[Lk.12:15] *"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 one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you 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 others, but God knows your hearts. What people value highly is detestable in God's sight.*[Lk.16:10-15] Yes, the Gospel is spiritual—it is supernatural and yet very natural because it affects every part of our life.

The Gospel is simple yet profound; it is settled yet still changing us; it is spiritual—supernatural yet natural. And because the Gospel is simple, settled and spiritual, we can all partake of God's great salvation—not just to get us into heaven but also to live in God's Kingdom now. God's Kingdom is righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit: *For the Kingdom of God is not a matter of what we eat or drink, but of living a life of goodness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. If you serve Christ with this attitude, you will please God, and others will approve of you, too. So then, let us aim for harmony in the church and try to build each other up.*[Rom14:17-19] And when we live by God's rules, under the authority of His Word, nothing can make us stumble: *Great peace have those who love your law, and nothing can make them stumble.*[Ps.119:165] No wonder God calls this "*good news*"!!!

Questions

In what way is Christianity hard?
In what way is Christianity easy?
What is the Gospel?
How is the Gospel settled?
How is the Gospel spiritual?

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.

Sunday 18th May Ps.115

Good theology makes Christianity enjoyable but poor theology makes Christianity hard!

We commissioned to make disciples of Jesus Christ and a disciple is a follower, an apprentice. God's intention is that we help people become like Jesus but if we don't know what He is like, we will always struggle to fulfil our Commission. Christian maturity is growing up; it is becoming like Jesus; it is being able to stand firm in our faith. Most if not all problems we face are due to poor theology—and so the most if not all solutions to our problems, are found in good theology! *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] Theology is the study of God (*Theos*=God and *logos*=word or study) and whilst theology can be an academic study at university, for the Christian, theology should simply be correctly understanding the basics about God and the world as He sees it. And no matter what situation we face, God has something constructive to say about what we should think, what we should say and how we should respond—and we disagree with God at our peril! Biblical prayer is fellowshipping with God by focussing our attention on Him, asking Him what He thinks and seeing how we can be involved in His plans. And we can know what God thinks about situations we face because we have the Bible—which is God's mind in a book! The Christian faith is grounded in the belief that the Scriptures have been given to us by God to be our all-sufficient rule for faith and practice. *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] The Elim Doctrinal Statement puts it this way: *We believe the Bible, as originally given, to be without error, the fully inspired and infallible Word of God and the supreme and final authority in all matters of faith and conduct.* If we do not accept the Scriptures as our point of reference for spiritual and moral values, we are no different from the rest of creation. Behaviour in the animal kingdom is unrestrained because they have no accountability and therefore no right and wrong. Humanity is different because we are created in God's image and He has given us the responsibility to rule over creation: *Then God said, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground." So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground."*[Gen.1:26-28] But with the commission of subduing and ruling the earth comes accountability—we have been given rules to live by. In the OT, the basic spiritual and moral rules were simple and clear: *I am the LORD your God… Do not put any other gods in place of me. Do not make statues of gods that look like anything in the sky or on the earth or in the waters. Do not bow down to them or worship them… Do not misuse the name of the LORD your God. The LORD will find guilty anyone who misuses his name. Remember to keep the Sabbath day holy… Honor your father and mother. Then you will live a long time in the land the LORD your God is giving you. Do not commit murder. Do not commit adultery. Do not steal. Do not give false witness against your neighbour. Do not long for anything that belongs to your neighbour. Do not long for your neighbour's house, wife, male or female servant, ox or donkey.*[Ex.20:2-17] And these basic rules of life are summarised in the royal law of loving God and loving our neighbour: *The most important commandments 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.*[Matt.12:29-31] *Yes indeed, it is good when you obey the royal law as found in the Scriptures: "Love your neighbour as yourself." But if you favour some people over others, you are*

committing a sin. You are guilty of breaking the law. For the person who keeps all of the laws except one is as guilty as a person who has broken all of God's laws. For the same God who said, "You must not commit adultery," also said, "You must not murder." So if you murder someone but do not commit adultery, you have still broken the law. So whatever you say or whatever you do, remember that you will be judged by the law that sets you free. There will be no mercy for those who have not shown mercy to others. But if you have been merciful, God will be merciful when he judges you.[Jas.2:8-13] *All of Moses' Teachings are summarized in a single statement, "Love your neighbour as you love yourself." But if you criticize and attack each other, be careful that you don't destroy each other. Let me explain further. Live your life as your spiritual nature directs you. Then you will never follow through on what your corrupt nature wants. What your corrupt nature wants is contrary to what your spiritual nature wants, and what your spiritual nature wants is contrary to what your corrupt nature wants. They are opposed to each other. As a result, you don't always do what you intend to do. If your spiritual nature is your guide, you are not subject to Moses' laws.*[Gal.5:14-18] When God breathed His breath into Adam, He gave Him spiritual life, including a conscience with a built-in moral compass—and even though our conscience is tainted, we instinctively know right from wrong (although often choose wrong over right). And the Bible is clear that we will all have to give an account to God for our choices—the way we lived, for how we have thought, spoken and acted: *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.5:10] *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.12:38-37] *Therefore, since Christ suffered in his body, arm yourselves also with the same attitude, because whoever suffers in the body is done with sin. As a result, they do not live the rest of their earthly lives for evil human desires, but rather for the will of God. For you have spent enough time in the past doing what pagans choose to do—living in debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing and detestable idolatry. They are surprised that you do not join them in their reckless, wild living, and they heap abuse on you. But they will have to give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead. For this is the reason the gospel was preached even to those who are now dead, so that they might be judged according to human standards in regard to the body, but live according to God in regard to the spirit.*[1Pet.4:1-6] *Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.*[Heb.4:13] And if we will have to give an account for the way we live, we should be careful to live right lives—which is why need to have good Theology so we know what God expects from us! We need to know the basics about God, mankind, Jesus, the Cross and the resurrection—and the Church has a commission to teach people about God accurately, practically and simply: *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] But for the Church to teach about God accurately, there must be called and trained servants of the Church who understand about doctrine and especially the Word of God: *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] *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] *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. If you point these things out to the brothers and sisters, you will be a good minister [servant] of Christ Jesus, nourished on the truths of the faith and of the good teaching that you have followed.*[1Tim.4:4-6]

We saw last week that God is Omnibenevolent—completely holy, good and righteous—however, no one is able to live up to God' standard of perfection. But the good message of Christianity is that God makes us right (holy and perfect in His sight) by faith through His free

gift of grace: *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.*[Eph.2:8-9] We can't earn our way into heaven so God has opened up the way for us to come to Him by giving us a "*free pass*"—but this is conditional on trusting Him. The Gospel is spiritual and at conversion God gives us a new spirit (which is what being born-again means) and writes His laws on that new spirit. *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] *The days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant… 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… 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.8:11-13] That means every Christian has a renewed conscience that prompts us to obey God. But because our soul (psyche) is still being saved, we need to check our conscience (our deepest thoughts and emotions) against God's Word, the Scriptures. *Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls.*[1Pet.1:8-9] Although we are made right in God's sight and we are called "*holy*" or "*saints*", we are still capable of <u>acting</u> like mere humans instead of the children of God that we are. Our thoughts determine our behaviour and if we think about our old way of life (which is called the "*flesh*" or "*carnal thinking*") we will easily slip into that old way of life: *What you learned was the truth about Jesus. You were taught not to live the way you used to. You must get rid of your old way of life. That's because it is polluted by longing for things that lead you down the wrong path. You were taught to be made new in your thinking. You were taught to start living a new life. It is created to be truly good and holy, just as God is. So each of you must get rid of your lying. Speak the truth to your neighbour. We are all parts of one body. Scripture says, "When you are angry, do not sin." Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry. Don't give the devil a chance. Those who have been stealing must never steal again. Instead, they must work. They must do something useful with their own hands. Then they will have something to give to people in need. Don't let any evil talk come out of your mouths. Say only what will help to build others up and meet their needs. Then what you say will help those who listen. Do not make God's Holy Spirit sad. He marked you with a seal for the day when God will set you completely free.*[Eph.4:21-30] That is why God told the Israelites not to go back to Egypt—and even though they didn't physically return, in their hearts they did go back to Egypt because they lived in slavery to sin: *The king, moreover, must not acquire great numbers of horses for himself or make the people return to Egypt to get more of them, for the LORD has told you, "You are not to go back that way again."*[Deut.17:16] *But our ancestors refused to obey Moses. Instead, they rejected him and in their hearts turned back to Egypt.*[Acts.7:39] It is important we only say what God says about us, that we make our lips do their duty, that we fill them with God's Word and don't allow them to say anything to the contrary. God wants us to believe with our heart and say with our lips all that He says about us—that our identity is in Christ; that our redemption is complete; that we are freed from satan's dominion over us through Jesus' death on the cross. Calvary wiped out of everything connected with the old life and we are a "*new creation*." Calvary was our "*Emancipation Proclamation"* from everything outside the will of God, and so we should never act as slaves to sin or satan but live as free people! *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.*[2Cor.5:17-19] J.G.Lake said: *If you are born again, you are a son of God. And for you to tear yourself out of your sonship, your relationship and the*

righteousness of God and put yourself over in the reality of death and tell God you are dirty, unclean, that His blood has not cleansed you, and His life has not been delivered to you it is a monstrous thing. It is alright to sing that as an unregenerate but it is not the experience of the sons and daughters of God.

Yes the Gospel is simple and we should never let Theology make Christianity complicated. School children used to end a note with *KISS* (*Keep It Simple Stupid)* meaning that if it you made it complicated, you were stupid! Never let it be said of us that we are considered stupid because we have made Christianity complicated! Trust and obey, for there is no other way to be happy in Jesus but to trust an obey. And remember, God's Word works in those who believe: *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.*[1Thess2:13]

Questions

Why do many people find Christianity hard?

Why is it important to "*rightly divide the Word of God*"?

How can we keep our faith simple?

Why did God tell the Israelites to never go back to Egypt?

Why should we be careful what we listen to?

Puritan Prayer: 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, that I may know my union with Jesus and enjoy constant fellowship with Him. By Your Spirit may I daily live to You and may I daily rejoice in Your love. May I daily find Your love to me to be the same as Your love 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 25th May Ps.8

O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! Ps.8:9

Last week we talked about God's creation and the difference between the animal kingdom and mankind—that animals are not accountable for their actions. Nature is red in tooth and claw because there is no "*moral code*" in the animal kingdom—there is no right or wrong, good or evil for birds and animals. Although God created animals, He did not make them in His image—it was only man that God made in His image: *Then God said, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground." So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground."*[Gen.1:26-28] Animals have a soul—they have a personality with emotions, the ability to learn and the ability to make choices—but they have no spirit or conscience and they have no responsibility or accountability. Like animals, we have a soul—a personality with emotions, the ability to learn and the ability to make choices—but we also have a spirit and a conscience and we have responsibility and accountability. Our soul is made up of our emotions, our will and our intellect—it is the place of decision, where we make our choices—but our spirit is the part of us that is conscious of God. When Adam sinned, his spirit died (that is, he was separated from God) and all Adams

descendants inherited a dead spirit—which is why we have to be born again to be united with God. God dwells in our spirit, which is His Temple (the place where we meet God). Although our will is in our soul, God's will is in our spirit, which is why we need to make our soul submissive to 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] Praise and thanksgiving are decisions of our will and so are from our soul: *Praise the LORD, my soul; all my inmost being, praise his holy name. Praise the LORD, my soul, and forget not all his benefits…*[Ps.103:1-2] *Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise; give thanks to him and praise his name.*[Ps.100:4] Praise and thanksgiving release God's will (and refusing to give praise or thanks to God quenches God's will): *Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. Do not quench the Spirit.*[1Thes.5:16-19] When we became a Christian, God gave us new, born-again spirit that is holy and it is where the Holy Spirit resides: *But whoever is united with the Lord is one with him in spirit.*[1Cor.6:17] *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] Our spirit came from God and will return to Him because our spirit is eternal: *God has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the hearts of men.*[Eccl.3:11] *This is the word of the LORD concerning Israel. The LORD, who stretches out the heavens, who lays the foundation of the earth, and who forms the spirit of man within him.*[Zech.12:1] *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.*[Eccl.12:6-7] Out of all the physical creation, only mankind will give an account to God for how they have lived their lives: *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.5:10] *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.12:38-37] If we don't understand the difference between animals and people we will be caught up in the emotion of the sentimental deception that has gripped a large part of society. Poor theology leads to all sorts of error including the deceptive fad of veganism—which the Bible refers to as "*teaching of demons*"! *Now the Holy Spirit tells us clearly that in the last times some will turn away from the true faith; they will follow deceptive spirits and teachings that come from demons. These people are hypocrites and liars, and their consciences are seared. They will say it is wrong to be married and wrong to eat certain foods. But God created those foods to be eaten with thanks by faithful people who know the truth. Since everything God created is good, we should not reject any of it but receive it with thanks. For we know it is made acceptable by the word of God and prayer.*[1Tim.4:1-4] God's kingdom is not about food but pleasing God: *For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and receives human approval.*[Rom.14:17-18]

God is holy and wants us to be holy: *So you must live as God's obedient children. Don't slip back into your old ways of living to satisfy your own desires. You didn't know any better then. But now you must be holy in everything you do, just as God who chose you is holy. For the Scriptures say, "You must be holy because I am holy."*[1Pet.1:14-16] We are not defiled by what is in our stomach but by what is in our heart: *Then Jesus called to the crowd to come and hear. "All of you listen," he said, "and try to understand. It's not what goes into your body that defiles you; you are defiled by what comes from your heart. " Then Jesus went into a house to get away from the crowd, and his disciples asked him what he meant by the parable he had just used. "Don't you understand either?" he asked. "Can't you see that the food you put into your body cannot defile you? Food doesn't go into your heart, but only passes through the stomach and then goes into the sewer." (By saying this, he declared that every kind of food is acceptable in God's eyes.) And then he added, "It is what comes from inside*

that defiles you. For from within, out of a person's heart, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, wickedness, deceit, lustful desires, envy, slander, pride, and foolishness. All these vile things come from within; they are what defile you."[Mk.7:14-23] We are not more spiritual if we do or don't eat meat and not less spiritual if we do or don't eat meat because food is physical not spiritual and all food is holy: *So then, about eating food sacrificed to idols: We know that "An idol is nothing at all in the world" and that "There is no God but one." For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as indeed there are many "gods" and many "lords"), yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live. But not everyone possesses this knowledge. Some people are still so accustomed to idols that when they eat sacrificial food they think of it as having been sacrificed to a god, and since their conscience is weak, it is defiled. 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.8:4-8] *"I have the right to do anything," you say—but not everything is beneficial. "I have the right to do anything"—but not everything is constructive. No one should seek their own good, but the good of others. Eat anything sold in the meat market without raising questions of conscience, for, "The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it."*[1Cor.10:23-26] Our physical diet is a personal preference not a spiritual thermometer! *You say, "Food for the stomach and the stomach for food, and God will destroy them both."*[1Cor.6:13] *Since you died with Christ to the elemental spiritual forces of this world, why, as though you still belonged to the world, do you submit to its rules: "Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!"? These rules, which have to do with things that are all destined to perish with use, are based on merely human commands and teachings. Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence.*[Col.2:20-23] Nevertheless, as the pinnacle of God's creation we have a responsibility to follow God's instructions with respect and reverence—we are to use creation not abuse it. *Your love, LORD, reaches to the heavens, your faithfulness to the skies. Your righteousness is like the highest mountains, your justice like the great deep. You, LORD, preserve both people and animals. How priceless is your unfailing love, O God! People take refuge in the shadow of your wings.*[Ps.36:5-7] *The righteous care for the needs of their animals, but the kindest acts of the wicked are cruel.*[Prov.12:10] *But the LORD said, "You have been concerned about this plant, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. And should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left—and also many animals?"*[Jon.4:10-11] We are stewards of God's creation and our children and their children for generations to come will inherit the result of our stewardship. But this earth will eventually come to an end. *By God's word the heavens and earth of today are being reserved for fire. They are being kept for the day when God will judge. Then ungodly people will be destroyed. 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. On that day fire will destroy the heavens. Its heat will melt everything in them. But we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth. Godliness will make its home there. All of this is in keeping with God's promise.*[2Pet.3:7-13] However, God's Word will never pass away. *Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away. Be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness and the anxieties of life, and that day will close on you suddenly like a trap. For it will come on all those who live on the face of the whole earth.*[Lk.21:33-35] There is more to life than the beautiful and majestic physical creation around us—there is a spiritual life with the beauty and majesty of the Creator Himself. We are spiritual

beings created for God's pleasure: *You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honour and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being.*[Rev.4:11] And until we '*love the Lord our God with all our heart and with all our soul and with all our mind*' we will always be frustrated, fretful, anxious, stressed and unsettled—or as Augustine of Hippo so succinctly puts it: *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.* Solomon experienced God in a very personal way but then went his own way and rebelled against God. During his back-slidden time, Solomon realised that life had no real purpose and life was meaningless without God. *The words of the Teacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem: "Meaningless! Meaningless!" says the Teacher. "Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless." What do people gain from all their labours at which they toil under the sun? … All things are wearisome, more than one can say. The eye never has enough of seeing, nor the ear its fill of hearing. What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun.*[Eccl.1:1-9] And Solomon concluded his reflections with this advice: *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"—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… 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.*[Eccl.12:1-14]

This present environment that God has prepared for us is wonderful—but it will pass away. However, the future environment that God has prepared for us is even more wonderful and will never pass away. That is why we must make every effort to be ready for our eternal home by becoming like Jesus now—being like Him in our thoughts, words and actions. We start on that journey with our new-birth but then we must continue our journey by paying attention to God, learning from Him and becoming like Him. When we set our heart on something, we focus our attention on it, we think about it, we dream about it and let our imagination loose on it. When we focus our attention on God and His Kingdom, we think about God and His Kingdom, we dream about God and His Kingdom and let our imagination loose on God and His Kingdom—and as we become animated about God and His glory, we are changed to become more like Him. *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. Our faces are not covered with a veil. We all display the Lord's glory. We are being changed to become more like him so that we have more and more glory. And the glory comes from the Lord, who is the Holy Spirit.*[2Cor.3:16-18]

As we think about the spiritual, eternal and glorious creation, we will anticipate our arrival more and more—and the difficulties of this present time will become less and less important. *You have been raised up with Christ. So think about things that are in heaven. That is where Christ is. He is sitting at God's right hand. Think about things that are in heaven. Don't think about things that are on earth. You died. Now your life is hidden with Christ in God. Christ is your life. When he appears again, you also will appear with him in heaven's glory.*[Col.3:1-4]

Heaven is a wonderful place, filled with glory and grace.
I want to see my Fathers face; yes heaven is a wonderful place.
Heaven is a beautiful place, filled with glory and grace
I want to see my Saviours face; yes heaven is a beautiful place.

Questions

Why did God create the world together with all its flora and fauna?
What responsibility does mankind have for the earth and environment?
What does the Bible say about the food we can eat?

How important is it to look after our physical life?
How can we look after our spiritual life?

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 the 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.

June:

Remember. *We always thank God for all of you and continually mention you in our prayers. We remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labour prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. 1Thessalonians 1:2-3*

Thought for the Month: Remorse before Calvary is of God; remorse after you have been to Calvary is of the devil. Repent of your sin, yes; but do not make your sin a subject for long and melancholy meditation. Why should I cheat God by spending my time and energy on remorse? I am greater than my sins. *Martin Luther*

Sunday 1st June Ps.116

May I never lose the wonder! *The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word.*[Heb.1:3]

We are following Greg Koukl's "*Story of Reality*" where he describes reality as the way God sees things. We all have an opinion about life and our opinion is based on our upbringing and our experience. As children, our experience is very limited but as we develop, we discover that life is much, much bigger than our own personal domain. In fact, there is a vast universe out there that is completely integrated with everything from the smallest atom to the largest galaxy wonderfully inter-dependent and synchronised! David wrote: *LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory in the heavens.*[Ps.8:1] And yet people ignore God! People see creation but refuse to acknowledge the Creator—and also ignore God's rules! But the wonder of this universe leaves people without any excuse for ignoring God: *God shows his anger from heaven. It is against all the godless and evil things people do. They are so evil that they say no to the truth. The truth about God is plain to them. God has made it plain. Ever since the world was created it has been possible to see the qualities of God that are not seen. I'm talking about his eternal power and about the fact that he is God. Those things can be seen in what he has made. So people have no excuse for what they do.*[Rom.1:18-20] No wonder God will bring this universe to an end and usher in a new heaven and new earth where there is no sin or corruption. *I saw a new heaven and a new earth. The first heaven and the first earth were completely gone. There was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem. It was coming down out of heaven from God. It was prepared like a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. I heard a loud voice from the throne. It said, "Now God makes his home with people. He will live with them. They will be his people. And God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or sadness. There will be no more crying or pain. Things are no longer the way they used to be." He who was sitting on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" Then he said, "Write this down. You can trust these words. They are true."*[Rev.21:1-5] That is why we need to ensure our view of this world—our world-view—is true. If we base our world-view on our experience it will be so limited that at the very least it will be incomplete and at worst it will be false. But if we base our world-view on God's world-view it will be true. Our understanding and our choices have eternal consequences because God is eternal and we are also eternal. Greg explains that every world-view has these four elements: 1. How things began—ultimate reality (**Creation**). 2. How things went wrong (**Fall**). 3. How to fix what went wrong (**Redemption**). 4. How things get worked out (**Restoration**). And these 4 elements make up the Christian story—which can be summarised in these 5 words. **God, Man, Jesus, Cross, Resurrection**. The Christian story is a true story and starts a long, long time ago, long before Jesus was born. Unlike many stories which start with "*Once upon a time…*" (which usually means that no one knows when it started because it is a fairy tale or a myth), the Christians story starts with "*In the beginning God…*" and this story is true.

Truth is not a subjective concept, *i.e.* the way we see life—such as "*coffee is good because I like coffee*"; this may be true for me but it is not necessarily true for you! Many people believe that all will be well when they die because want it to be but they ignore what God says about the subject. Truth is the way God sees things and God's truth is personified in Jesus: *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 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.' ") Out of his fullness we have all received grace in place of grace already given. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.*[Jn.1:14-17] Pilate asked Jesus what truth was but refused to accept Truth personified—who was standing right in from of him: *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." "What is truth?" retorted Pilate.*[Jn.18:37-38] The Holy Spirit is also Truth and teaches us about Truth—and most especially about the Person of Truth, Jesus: *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 the truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will glorify me because it is from me that he will receive what he will make known to you.*[Jn.16:12-14] By learning about Jesus and holding to His teachings, we will know the truth—and it is knowing the truth that sets us free: *To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."*[Jn.8:31-32] And even though we know about Jesus and hold to His teachings, we still need reminding of them: *So I will always remind you of these things, even though you know them and are firmly established in the truth you now have. I think it is right to refresh your memory as long as I live in the tent of this body.*[2Pet.1:12]

We live at a time when there has never been so much information available and yet there is so little knowledge! And with all this information there is also misinformation—even the BBC's so called "*fact-check*" is regularly proven to be wrong—which is why so many people are sceptics and cynics! People accumulate information and think that their information is truth but facts are not the same as truth. Facts are a collection of information that produce evidence—which people interpret however they like! But truth is that evidence seen from the divine perspective—truth is how God sees things! God in His wisdom and generosity has given us insight into His world and into His mind through the Bible, into which He has breathed His life: *God has breathed life into all of Scripture. It is useful for teaching us what is true. It is useful for correcting our mistakes. It is useful for making our lives whole again. It is useful for training us to do what is right. By using Scripture, a man of God can be completely prepared to do every good thing.*[2Tim.3:16-17] Just as reading a book gives us insight into the author's mind, so reading the Bible gives us insight into God's mind—and we do have the mind of Christ: *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.2:12-16]

The Christian story starts with God. God created everything, including the most valuable thing in all creation: man—but something went wrong. So God set up a rescue plan and in His plan, God entered into the world that He created by becoming a man: Jesus. *The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth,*

visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. 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. 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]
The name "*Jesus*" or "*Joshua*" (it is the same word in Hebrew) is a common Jewish name and means "*Saviour*"—which is why Joseph was told to call Mary's baby by this name: *The angel said, "Joseph, son of David, don't be afraid to take Mary home as your wife. The baby inside her is from the Holy Spirit. She is going to have a son. You must give him the name Jesus. That is because he will save his people from their sins."*[Matt.1:20-21] Every human baby that is born is a brand new person and completely unique—there is no store of baby spirits in heaven waiting to be implanted into a prospect mother, and neither is there any recycling of old people into baby bodies! The Church of Latter Day Saints (Mormons) believe that every person's spirit is eternal and therefore pre-existed with God from all eternity—they state: *We believe that we existed before this earth began, living with God as His children in spirit form. Like a parent sending their child off to school, our Heavenly Father sent each of us here so we could gain a physical body and learn and grow to become more like Him before someday returning to live in His presence*. Buddhists believe that animals and people are in a never ending cycle of re-incarnation where our spirits are recycled and returned to a different body—maybe human, animal or bird. These ideas are not only wrong but defy any sort of credibility—and yet there are thousands of Mormons and possibly millions of Buddhists who defy logic and are convinced of their beliefs. Although Jesus or Joshua is a common name and there are many Jesuses or Joshuas, there is only one Jesus Christ, the Son of God. *For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.*[Jn.1:17-18] *God loved the world so much that he gave his one and only Son. Anyone who believes in him will not die but will have eternal life.*[Jn.3:16]
Unlike humans who are brand-new at conception, Jesus pre-existed together with the Father and the Holy Spirit: *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. 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] When Jesus was born of Mary, He added humanity to His Deity: *"Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favour with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end." "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?" The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God.*[Lk.1:30-35] *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]
[N.B. Jesus' ancestry via Joseph,[Matt.1:1-16] His step father, goes back through Solomon and David and includes Jehoiachin, of whom Jeremiah prophesied that none of his descendants would ever sit on David's throne: *This is what the LORD says: "Record this man as if childless, a man who will not prosper in his lifetime, for none of his offspring will prosper, none will sit on the throne of David or rule anymore in Judah."*[Jer.22:30] But Jesus' ancestry vis Mary,[Lk.3:23-38] goes back through Nathan and David, thus making Jesus a legitimate heir to David's throne!]
In Greek mythology, there are "*demi-gods*" who are (supposedly) half god and half human; the Roman Emperors thought they were "*gods*" and insisted on being worshiped as a deity; but Jesus was neither half God-half human nor a misguided human who thought He was God. Jesus was (and still is) totally God and totally human. Kathryn Kuhlman said "*Jesus is as much*

God as if He wasn't Man and as much man as if He wasn't God". In the one Person of Jesus the Messiah there were two natures: His undiminished deity and His true humanity—we call this the *Hypostatic Union* (*hypostasis* means individual personhood). This is important because Jesus never ceased being God but as the Son of Man, He laid aside His glory and privileges of deity—but not deity itself. The NIV (2011) Bible puts it this way: *Have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.*[Phil.2:5-7] If Jesus wasn't God, He could never take away the sins of the world—and if Jesus wasn't Man, He could never die in our place: *But we do see Jesus, who was made lower than the angels for a little while, now crowned with glory and honour because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone. 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... Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil— and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death. For surely it is not angels he helps, but Abraham's descendants. For this reason he had to be made like them, fully human in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.*[Heb.2:9-18]

The Nicene Creed, which was compiled at a Conference in Nicea, near Constantinople in A.D. 325, and has been the accepted fundamentals of the Christian faith ever since, puts it like this: *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.*

Jesus lived the life that we should have lived and then made a trade—He traded His life for ours! *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]

Who is Jesus? *"You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Jesus replied, "You are blessed, Simon son of Jonah, because my Father in heaven has revealed this to you. You did not learn this from any human being.*[Matt.16:16-17]

Why did Jesus come? *Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost."*[Lk.19:9-10]

How did Jesus bring salvation? *He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. For you were like sheep going astray, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.*[1Pet.2:24-25]

May I never lose the wonder,
Oh, the wonder of Your mercy.
I will sing Your hallelujahs. Hallelujah, Amen!

Next week we continue with the story as we look at the Cross

Questions
God is Spirit and invisible so how can we know what He is like?
What is truth?
What is the difference between information and knowledge?
Who is Jesus?
Why did Jesus come?
How did Jesus bring salvation?
Puritan Prayer: I bless You that You will keep the sinner that You have loved and that You will not forsake him—else I would never get to heaven! I wrong the work of grace in my thought if I deny my new nature and my eternal life. If Jesus were not my Righteousness and Redemption, I would sink into the lowest hell by my misdoings, my shortcomings, my unbelief and my unlove. If Jesus were not my Sanctification by the power of His Spirit, there is no limit to sin I might commit. 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 8th June Ps.117

The Cross. *But God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.*[Gal.6:14]
We are looking at the Christian story—which can be summarised in these 5 words: **God, Man, Jesus, Cross, Resurrection**. Unlike many stories which start with "*Once upon a time…*" (which usually means that no one knows when it started because it is a fairy tale or a myth), the Christian story starts with "*In the beginning God…*" —and the Christian story is a true story! Last week we looked at Jesus—who is Truth personified and this week we are looking at the Cross.
The cross has become a recognisable symbol of Christianity and in many Church traditions, a depiction of a cross (or even a replica cross) is the focal point in their buildings and services. However, some non-conformist Churches (including ours) have no visible portrayal of a cross because their focus is not on the accoutrements or accessories of religious tradition but on Jesus alone. When the Reformers tried to return to the basics of the early Church, they rejected the relics, rituals, popes, priests, indulgencies, icons and crosses and emphasized Scripture, Faith, Grace, Christ and God's glory, and used these 5 "*Solas"* as their rallying call ("*sola"* mean is Latin for "*alone*" or "*only*"):
Sola Scriptura (*Scripture alone*): the Bible alone is our highest authority.
Sola Fide (*Faith alone*): we are saved through faith alone in Jesus Christ.
Sola Gratia (*Grace alone*): we are saved by the grace of God alone.
Solus Christus (*Christ alone*): Jesus Christ alone is our Lord, Saviour, and King.
Soli Deo Gloria (*To the glory of God alone*): we live for the glory of God alone.
But regardless of whether we have a depiction of a cross or not, we need to understand the relevance of the cross and like Paul, we should glory in the cross of Jesus: *But God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.*[Gal.6:14] For the people of Jesus' time, the cross was an instrument of execution where people died from suffocation after hours, sometimes days, of extreme pain and torture. Nails were hammered into a persons' hands and feet to keep them impaled whilst they died. And so, the cross became a symbol of torture not veneration—which made Jesus' teaching about following Him all the more poignant: *Anyone who loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves their son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. Whoever does not take up their cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds their life*

will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake will find it.[Matt.10:37-39] *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. What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what they have done. Truly I tell you, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom."*[Matt.16:24-28]

Jesus' ministry (including His death on a cross), was prefigured by the types and shadows of the Old Covenant religion. *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. 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.2:13-17] Perhaps the most well-known type of Jesus' death on the cross was the 1st Passover when, in order to avoid the judgement that was coming on the Egyptians, the Israelites killed an adult male lamb and painted its blood on the doorposts: *This month is to be for you the first month, the first month of your year. Tell the whole community of Israel that on the tenth day of this month each man is to take a lamb… The animals you choose must be year-old males without defect, and you may take them from the sheep or the goats. Take care of them until the fourteenth day of the month, when all the members of the community of Israel must slaughter them at twilight. Then they are to take some of the blood and put it on the sides and tops of the doorframes of the houses where they eat the lambs. That same night they are to eat the meat roasted over the fire, along with bitter herbs, and bread made without yeast… Eat it in haste; it is the LORD's Passover. On that same night I will pass through Egypt and strike down every firstborn of both people and animals, and I will bring judgment on all the gods of Egypt. I am the LORD. The blood will be a sign for you on the houses where you are, and when I see the blood, I will pass over you. No destructive plague will touch you when I strike Egypt.*[Ex.12:1-13] This dramatic action prefigured the death of Jesus as the Lamb of God which saves us from God's judgement on sin when we personally place ourselves under God's protection. Another OT reference to the Cross is seen in the instruction that anyone who was hung on a tree was cursed. This prefigured Jesus becoming a curse for us in order for us to receive His blessings: *Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who is hung on a 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]

Those types and illustrations of the Old Covenant were fulfilled in Jesus' death on the cross and because we have the real thing we so we no longer need copies. When Jesus died, He took away our sins to make us right with God. Our trust in Jesus makes us right with God—we are justified with no guilt or shame. And God will never hold our sins against us because our sins are forgiven and God no longer remembers them: *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.8:10-13] We are saved by Jesus' death on the cross—saved from our sins and from God's wrath against those sins. *I am writing to you, dear children, because your sins have been forgiven on account of his name.*[1Jn.2:12] *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] The Gospel informs us of God's

salvation and even though it comes with God's power, we have to reach out and receive it—salvation is appropriated by faith. *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] That means that although God has done everything He can to save us, we still need to receive this Gospel—the facts are the ingredients but it is faith that makes it work for us. *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.*[1Cor.15:1-5] We see this with the Israelites who left Egypt in a literal cloud of signs and wonders—but they didn't mix the facts with faith: *We belong to Christ if we hold firmly to the faith we had at first. But we must hold to it until the end. It has just been said, "Listen to his voice today. If you hear it, don't be stubborn. You were stubborn when you opposed me." Who were those who heard and refused to obey? Weren't they all the people Moses led out of Egypt? Who was God angry with for 40 years? Wasn't it with those who sinned? They died in the desert. What people did God promise with an oath that they would never enjoy the rest he planned for them? Wasn't it those who didn't obey? So we see that they weren't able to enter. That's because they didn't believe. God's promise of enjoying his rest still stands. So be careful that none of you fails to receive it. The good news was preached to our people long ago. It has also been preached to us. The message they heard didn't have any value for them. They didn't combine it with faith. Now we who have believed enjoy that rest.*[Heb.3:14-4:3] *Scripture says, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." How can they call on him unless they believe in him? How can they believe in him unless they hear about him? How can they hear about him unless someone preaches to them? And how can anyone preach without being sent? It is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!" But not all the people of Israel accepted the good news. Isaiah says, "Lord, who has believed our message?" So faith comes from hearing the message. And the message that is heard is the word of Christ. But I ask, "Didn't the people of Israel hear?" Of course they did. It is written, "Their voice has gone out into the whole earth. Their words have gone out from one end of the world to the other."*[Rom.10:13-18]

Those who are saved discover that their names are already pre-recorded in the Book of Life: *Yes, and I ask you, my true companion, help these women since they have contended at my side in the cause of the gospel, along with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life.*[Phil.4:3] *All inhabitants of the earth will worship the beast—all whose names have not been written from the creation of the world in the book of life belonging to the Lamb who was slain.*[Rev.13:8] *One of the seven angels.. said to me, "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… I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendour into it. On no day will its gates ever be shut, for there will be no night there. The glory and honour of the nations will be brought into it. Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life.*[Rev21:9-27] On Judgement Day, our names are checked against the Book of Life. *Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. The earth and the heavens fled from his presence, and there was no place for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books. The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and each person was judged according to what they had done. Then death and Hades*

were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death. Anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire.[Rev.20:11-15] *The one who is victorious will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out the name of that person from the book of life, but will acknowledge that name before my Father and his angels. Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.*[Rev.3:5-6]

But even though our sins are forgiven, we will still have to give an account for the way we have spoken and lived *Then those who feared the LORD talked with each other, and the LORD listened and heard. A scroll of remembrance was written in his presence concerning those who feared the LORD and honoured his name.*[Mal.3:16] *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.' " So then, each of us will give an account of ourselves to God.*[Rom.14:10-12] *For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of. A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him. But I tell you that everyone will have to give account on the day of judgment for every empty word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned.*[Matt.12:34-37] That means we should be careful how we live because there are consequences for bad living and unbelief: *Be merciful to those who doubt; save others by snatching them from the fire; to others show mercy, mixed with fear—hating even the clothing stained by corrupted flesh.*[Jude.22-23] *By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as a wise builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should build with care. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. If anyone builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, their work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each person's work. If what has been built survives, the builder will receive a reward. If it is burned up, the builder will suffer loss but yet will be saved—even though only as one escaping through the flames.*[1Cor.3:10-15]

For a fuller explanation of The Day of Judgement read Mike Petzer's book The Miracle of Judgement (available from our website)

Yes! The Cross is integral to our faith and its symbolism has changed from an instrument of death to an instrument of life. But no depiction of Jesus hanging on the Cross can ever portray the full extent of His suffering for our salvation. The 2 criminals who were crucified with Jesus suffered the same physical torture as Jesus but Jesus suffered the spiritual torture of paying for our sins. This real pain and torture was what we should have endured for all eternity—but Jesus has set us free. No wonder there is fullness of joy for us in God's presence. There is a word that should summarise our response—and that word is: **Hallelujah!**

Questions

Should Christians consider any days or objects as holy?

Why is the Cross important for Christians?

Which Old Covenant rituals or festivals portrayed Jesus' crucifixion?

How was Jesus' crucifixion different from the others who were crucified?

Even though Jesus died for the sins of the world, why isn't everyone saved?

What will we be judged for on the Day of Judgement?

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, greater 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 15th June Ps.118:14-29 Fathers' Day

I believe in the resurrection of the dead![Acts.24:21]

The Christian Story is the greatest story ever told and although it is a true story, for many people it is just that—a story. But for those who have placed their trust in Jesus, the Christian Story has become their story! The 5 main themes of the Christian story are: **God, Man, Jesus, Cross, Resurrection** and we started the story with God, who is one unity: *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] And yet The One God consists of 3 Persons—Father, Son and Holy Spirit: *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.*[Matt.28:19] *When all the people were being baptized, 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] Basil of Caesarea (A.D. 330-79) explained that the Father, Son and Spirit are not the Same Person: *What better way to unsettle the faith of the majority, than the allegation that some of us consider Father, Son, and Holy Spirit to be all the same person? We frankly affirm that there are different persons within Deity. Sabellius, however, foresaw our belief on this matter and he confused the issue by saying that God is only one person, but that Scripture describes Him as different persons depending on context. According to Sabelius, sometimes God is called Father, whenever this is necessary; sometimes He is called Son, when He acts for humanity in the plan of salvation; sometimes He is called Spirit, when the situation demands that name. We, however, say that Father, Son, and Spirit, while one in essence, are yet three full and perfect persons. How can we offer plain, unquestionable proof of this? May that celebrated doctrine of our fathers always be confessed among us with outspoken courage, destroying the infamous heresy of Arius and building up the churches in sound doctrine—I mean the doctrine that confesses the Son to be of one essence with the Father, and the Holy Spirit ranked and worshipped with them, equal in honour! [Sabellius taught that the "persons" of the Trinity were really just one person acting in three different ways.]* God the Son is the Word of God and God through His Word, created everything and through His Word He also sustains everything. Although God established principles or natural laws, such as physics, time, gravity, *etc.,* God can over-rule those laws at any time He chooses; we call this a miracle—and God excels in miracles. *You are the God who performs miracles; you display your power among the peoples.*[Ps.77:14] God is Sovereign and He can't be dictated to and neither can He be manipulated—but He does respond to faith—and God answers prayer. God even performs miracles when we pray, but even though our prayers are powerful, we can't <u>make</u> Him do anything! How ever God is gracious and He always hears our prayer. *The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.*[Jas.5:16] *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. Dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God and receive from him anything we ask, because we keep his commands and do what pleases him. And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us. The one who keeps God's commands lives in him, and he in them. And this is how we know that he lives in us: We know it by the Spirit he gave us.*[1Jn.3:19-24] *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] God hears every prayer of a Believer but His answers come in a variety of ways: some prayers are answered in a natural way, such as circumstances coming together at the right time, our body healing itself or with the help of doctors and medicines; some prayers are answered in a supernatural way with divine timing, unusually quick healing or even a creative miracle; and some prayers are answered many days or even years later—but always at God's right time. However, although God hears our prayers and answers our prayers, He is not obliged

to answer our prayers in the way we expect or at the time of our choosing! *But who are you, a human being, to talk back to God? "Shall what is formed say to the one who formed it, 'Why did you make me like this?' " Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for special purposes and some for common use?*[Rom.9:20-21] But whatever God does is right and in line with His character: *Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?"*[Gen.18:25] *At the end of that time, I, Nebuchadnezzar, raised my eyes toward heaven, and my sanity was restored. Then I praised the Most High; I honoured and glorified him who lives forever. His dominion is an eternal dominion; his kingdom endures from generation to generation. All the peoples of the earth are regarded as nothing. He does as he pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth. No one can hold back his hand or say to him: "What have you done?" At the same time that my sanity was restored, my honour and splendour were returned to me for the glory of my kingdom. My advisers and nobles sought me out, and I was restored to my throne and became even greater than before. Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and exalt and glorify the King of heaven, because everything he does is right and all his ways are just. And those who walk in pride he is able to humble.*[Dan.4:34-37] In the Christian story, after "God", we came to "Man" and we saw how man messed up God's paradise by rebelling against Him but God had a plan to redeem man from his sin and restore him into fellowship with his Maker. God's plan of salvation was Jesus the Son of God who became the Son of Man by adding humanity to His deity. Jesus the Word of God was born of Mary, lived in obedience to His parents (both His heavenly Father and earthly mother and step-father) and died on a cross: *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] *Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel.*[2Tim.2:8] And it was through Jesus' death on the Cross that we now 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]

But that is not the end of our Story—the Story that began with God now ends with God. There is a resurrection coming when God will wrap up this world and start again. When God restores this world to His Paradise, only those who qualify will be able to enter in—those who don't qualify will be cast into utter darkness and torment—for ever and ever. Thankfully, it is not up to us to qualify but God Himself qualifies us! *And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, and joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light.*[Col.1:10-12] Peter writes very clearly about how this will happen: *Dear friends, this is now my second letter to you. I have written both of them as reminders. I want to stir you up to think in a way that is pure. I want you to remember the words the holy prophets spoke in the past. Remember the command our Lord and Saviour gave through your apostles. First of all, here is what you must understand. In the last days people will make fun of the truth. They will laugh at it. They will follow their own evil longings. They will say, "Where is this 'return' he promised? Everything goes on in the same way it has since our people of long ago died. In fact, it has continued that way since God first created everything." Long ago, God's word brought the heavens into being. His word separated the earth from the waters. And the waters surrounded it. But those people forget things like that on purpose. The waters also flooded the world of that time. It was destroyed. By God's word the heavens and earth of today are being reserved for fire. They are being kept for the day when God will judge. Then ungodly people will be destroyed. 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. On that day fire will destroy the heavens. Its heat will melt everything in them. But we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth. Godliness will make its home there. All of this is in keeping with God's promise. Dear friends, I know you are looking forward to that. So try your best to be found pure and without blame. Be at peace with God. Remember that while our Lord is waiting patiently to return, people are being saved.[2Pet.3:1-15]

At this final resurrection, everyone will give an account for how they have lived and why they have lived the sort of life they did—but most importantly, we all will give an account for what we have thought about God's Son, Jesus Christ. *Do not work for food that spoils. Work for food that lasts forever. That is the food the Son of Man will give you. God the Father has put his seal of approval on him." Then they asked him, "What does God want from us? What works does he want us to do?" Jesus answered, "God's work is to believe in the One he has sent."*[Jn.6:27-29] *Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven. Only those who do what my Father in heaven wants will enter. Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord! Lord! Didn't we prophesy in your name? Didn't we drive out demons in your name? Didn't we do many miracles in your name?' Then I will tell them clearly, 'I never knew you. Get away from me, you who do evil!'*[Matt.7:21-23] *Then those who feared the LORD talked with each other, and the LORD listened and heard. A scroll of remembrance was written in his presence concerning those who feared the LORD and honoured his name.*[Mal.3:16] *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.' " So then, each of us will give an account of ourselves to God.*[Rom.14:10-12] *For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of. A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him. But I tell you that everyone will have to give account on the day of judgment for every empty word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned.*[Matt.12:34-37] Those whose names are written in God's Book of Life will enter into God's new paradise: *He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.*[Rev.2:7] *Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. The earth and the heavens fled from his presence, and there was no place for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books. The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and each person was judged according to what they had done. Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death. Anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire.*[Rev.20:11-15] *When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. 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… Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels… Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.*[Matt.25:31-46]

If we are still alive at the time of that final resurrection, our bodies will be changed to immortal bodies, and if we have already died, we will receive a new body that is immortal: *I declare to you, brothers and sisters, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. 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."[1Cor.15:50-54] When we see Jesus, we will be like 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.3:2-3] But before that great and final Day of Resurrection, there is another resurrection that Jesus spoke about—it is when we are raised to new life with Christ at conversion. The 1st resurrection is for those who are spiritually dead and the 2nd resurrection is for those who are physically dead and in their graves. In other words, the 1st resurrection is conversion when we are born again and the 2nd resurrection is that final resurrection when those who have died physical and were buried are resurrected with an immortal body: *"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. For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself. And he has given him authority to judge because he is the Son of Man. "Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out—those who have done what is good will rise to live, and those who have done what is evil will rise to be condemned. By myself I can do nothing; I judge only as I hear, and my judgment is just, for I seek not to please myself but him who sent me.J*[n.5:25-30]

Yes, the Christian Story is a true story with an ending that is yet to happen. And so the big question that we should all be asking is: "What am I going to do with this information?" When people accumulate information, they think that their information is truth but facts are not the same as truth. Facts are a collection of information that can produce evidence—and people interpret that evidence from their own perspective! But real truth is evidence seen from the divine perspective—truth is how God sees things! That is why we should take the Chrisitan Story seriously and view it from God's perspective—because Jesus said to those who believed Him: *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]

Questions

Can we really expect a miracle from God?
Does God answer every prayer we pray?
Why is it important to know what God says about the future?
Why is a new-birth essential be a citizen of heaven?
What will happen at the final resurrection?
Does anyone have a 2nd chance?

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 22nd June Ps.119:1-8 Acts 1

Don't just stand there—do something! *Why do you stand here looking into the sky?*[Acts.1:11]

Although we may often use the phrase: "*Don't just sit there—do something!*" the Quakers say the opposite: "*Don't just do something—sit there!*" Quakers (or "Friends" as they are often called) were founded by George Fox during the English Civil War (1642–1651) and at one time they numbered more than 1% of the population of England and Wales. Quakers were originally pacifist evangelical believers and in reaction to the formal religion of the Church of England, they taught that to practice religion there was no need for churches, rituals, holy days, or sacraments, rather, religion should be something you lived and acted out every day. Their belief that all humans are equal and deserving of equal treatment and respect, led many Quakers into political and social reform as well as being model employers—Barclays, Lloyds, and Friends Provident banks, Clark Shoes, and the chocolate firms: Cadbury, Rowntree and Fry were all founded by Quakers. The name "*Quaker*" or "*Shaker*" came from their practice of wait in silence until the Holy Spirit moved upon them—and they still meet for "*silent worship*" today (but without the moving of the Holy Spirit!). Unfortunately, like so many other radical groups, the Quakers put their experience above Scripture and relied on their "*inner light*" rather than the Bible for their guidance, believing that *there is that of God in everyone.* Sadly, they have deviated from their evangelical roots and are now so liberal that you would be hard pressed to see the difference between them and Buddhists! For instance, this is from the Quaker website: *So can an atheist be a Quaker? Sure! Especially if you're the kind of atheist who specifically doesn't believe in the Abrahamic God—or, by extension, any personification of the divine. (*https://quaker.org/do-quakers-believe-in-god*).*

Of course, there is a valid place for silent meditation, however, Christian meditation is filling your mind, not emptying your mind—and filling your mind with good and godly things, especially the Word of God, which is our spiritual food. *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] *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.4:8] But we should do more than just think about good things—we should talk about them and live them: *Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it.*[Josh.1:8] *Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.*[Phil.4:9] *Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it.*[Lk.11:28] *Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.*[Jas.1:22] Most people are far too busy and spend their time rushing around without achieving anything of consequence. But being busy is not the same as being productive and we should aim to be effective rather than efficient. Winnie the Pooh had a good philosophy—albeit not a very productive one! "*sometimes I sits and thinks, and sometimes I just sits.*" Jesus commended Mary for sitting and thinking: *Mary sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. But Martha was busy with all the things that had to be done. She came to Jesus and said, "Lord, my sister has left me to do the work by myself. Don't you care? Tell her to help me!" "Martha, Martha," the Lord answered. "You are worried and upset about many things. But only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better. And it will not be taken away from her."*[Lk.10:39-42] Thinking time is good—it is what the Psalmists call "*Selah*" which means reflect on what you have read—ponder that paragraph!

Everyone has seasons when they reflect on life—especially in times of tragedy—but we should ensure that we see life from God's perspective because that is the only true reality. Ever since the Church began, Christians have asked: *What are the basic truths of the reality of our salvation?* And even though we are firmly established in the faith, we should still remind ourselves of the basic

truths of our salvation: *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] That is why the Early Church formulated Creeds (from Latin *credo* meaning *I believe*). There are some basic "*Creeds*" in the Bible: *Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel.*[2Tim.2:8] *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.8:6] *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, 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.15:3-8] *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] *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]

Outside of the Bible, the Apostles' Creed is the earliest of the Christian Creeds and dates back to the C2nd. It was drawn up to counter the heresies that denied Jesus was truly Man. In A.D. 325 the Council of Nicaea adopted the Nicene Creed to counter the heresy of Arius, who was an Elder in Alexandria, Egypt. Arius taught that God was too perfect to create something like a material world and so the Father created the Son and that the Son, in conjunction with the Father, then proceeded to create the world—in other words, Jesus the Son of God was a created being not eternally God. This heresy still appears today in various forms (including the Jehovah Witnesses), in contrast to the clear meaning of the beginning of John's Gospel: *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] Nicholas, the Bishop of Myra (St Nicolas or "*Santa Claus*") was one of the signatories of the Nicene Creed and he became so angry with Arius at the Council that he physically hit him—which led to Constantine discipling him for his behaviour!

The Apostles' Creed:

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

Cars have an annual *MOT* to check that they are roadworthy and are safe to drive. People have regular "*health MOTs"* to see if they have any obvious health problems. And Christians should also have regular "*faith MOTs*" where they examine themselves to confirm that they are still in the Christian faith: *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. It's not that we*

want to prove that we've passed the test. Rather, we want you to do whatever is right, even if we seem to have failed. We can't do anything against the truth but only to help the truth. We're glad when we are weak and you are strong. We are also praying for your improvement.[2Cor.13:5-9] (note: we should **examine ourself—not examine other people!!!!**) God is the great "I Am", the unchanging One: *Moses said to God, "Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' Then what shall I tell them?" God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I AM has sent me to you.'*[Ex.3:13-14] *I the LORD do not change.*[Mal.3:6] *So don't be misled, my dear brothers and sisters. Whatever is good and perfect is a gift coming down to us from God our Father, who created all the lights in the heavens. He never changes, as a shifting shadow does.*[Jas.1:16-17] And so, when we take stock of our life—and especially our faith—never doubt God's character, faithfulness, love and compassion. Psalm 23 is a great Scripture to remind us of God's Character—it is much more than a Psalm of comfort, it is a statement of confidence: *The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he restores my soul. He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. 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. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.*[Ps.23] It is alright to question our beliefs but we should never believe our questions! Questioning our beliefs should motivate us to find out what God has really said so we can reach out to God in simple faith. But believing our doubts will destroy faith and breed unbelief. Believing our doubts is actually unbelief and a sign of laziness because it means we haven't taken the time and effort to find out what God has recorded in the Scriptures. **The Bible is God's mind in a Book** and if we read the Bible with an attitude of openness and submission to God, we can know what God really thinks and what He has planned for us. Everything God wants us to know is plainly recorded in the Bible—**there are no hidden messages or secret information tucked away in the Bible.** That was the heresy of the Gnostics who believed that salvation could be gained through their "*secret*" knowledge. Faith is based on what God has revealed, not on what is hidden: *I serve the church. God appointed me to bring all of his word to you. That word contains the mystery that has been hidden for many ages. But now it has been made known to God's people. God has chosen to make known to them the glorious riches of that mystery. He has made it known among those who aren't Jews. And here is what it is. Christ is in you. He is your hope of glory. We preach about him. With all the wisdom we have, we warn and teach everyone. When we bring them to God, we want them to be perfect as people who belong to Christ. That's what I'm working for. I work hard with all of Christ's strength. His strength works powerfully in me.*[Col.1:25-29] Seeing God's perspective of life and the truth of what He has said, requires us to wait on the Lord: *Wait for the LORD; be strong and take heart and wait for the LORD.*[Ps.27:14] *Be still. Be patient. Wait for the LORD to act. Don't be upset when other people succeed. Don't be upset when they carry out their evil plans.*[Ps.37:7] But waiting doesn't mean doing nothing! Of course, there is a time to sit at Jesus' feet—like Mary who *sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said.*[Lk.10:39] But there is also a time for action. When Moses told the Israelites to stand still, God told them to get moving! *As Pharaoh approached, the Israelites looked up, and there were the Egyptians, marching after them. They were terrified and cried out to the LORD… Moses answered the people, "Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the LORD will bring you today. The Egyptians you see today you will never see again. The LORD will fight for you; you need only to be still." 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.*[Ex.14:10-16] After witnessing Jesus' transfiguration, Peter wanted to wait there and soak up the atmosphere (as we would): *As the men were leaving Jesus, Peter spoke up. "Master," he said to him, "it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters. One will be for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah."*

He didn't really know what he was saying.[Lk.9:33] After Jesus had ascended to heaven, the Disciples wanted to wait there (as we would): *Men of Galilee why do you stand here looking at the sky? Jesus has been taken away from you into heaven. But he will come back in the same way you saw him go.*[Acts.1:11] But Jesus told His Disciples to wait **<u>until</u>** they had received the Gift of the Holy Spirit: *"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." So when they met together, they asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" He said to them: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."*[Acts.1:4-8] After they had received the Holy Spirit they were **to go** into the whole world: *He said to them, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation.*[Mk.16:15] *All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations…*[Matt.28:18-19] Even our waiting for Jesus to return is an active wait, not a passive wait—we are to welcome other Believers and serve God while we wait: *The believers themselves report the kind of welcome you gave us. They tell about how you turned away from statues of gods to serve the living and true God. They tell about how you are waiting for his Son to come from heaven. God raised him from the dead. He is Jesus. He saves us from God's anger, and his anger is sure to come.*[1Thess.1:9-10]

So, don't just sit there—do something! Let's make sure we aren't just passively *sitting here* or *standing looking into the sky* but that we are **actively waiting** for Jesus—that we are **doing** what He told us to do: *But we are citizens of heaven. And we can hardly wait for a Saviour from there. He is the Lord Jesus Christ. He has the power to bring everything under his control. By his power he will change our earthly bodies. They will become like his glorious body.*[Phil.3:20-21] And while we wait, let's have regular "*spiritual check-ups*"—and we will pass the test if we know that Christ is within us.[2Cor.13:5-9]

Questions

Why should we study the Bible?
Should Christians practice meditation?
How should we respond to the word "*Selah*" in the Psalms?
Why did Jesus commend Mary for doing nothing? *(Lk.10:39-42)*
How can we give ourself a spiritual check-up*? (2Cor.13:5)*
What should we be doing as we wait for Jesus to return?

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.

Sunday 29th June Ps.119:9–16 Acts 2

This is that: *In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Holy Spirit on all people.*[Acts.2:17]

The Bible was written with one purpose in mind—to explain God's plan of salvation for mankind and that plan of salvation is Jesus: *Jesus told him, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one can come to the Father except through me.*[Jn.14:6] *No one else can save us. Indeed, we can be saved only by the power of the one named Jesus and not by any other person.*[Acts.4:12] The Law that was given to Moses under the Old Covenant (with all its rules and regulations) pointed to this wonderful plan of salvation in Jesus: *You search the Scriptures because you think they give you eternal life. But the Scriptures point to me!*

Yet you refuse to come to me to receive this life.[Jn.5:39-40] So when Jesus completed God's plan of salvation, those rituals of the Old Covenant became obsolete: *This is the covenant I will make with Israel after that time, says the Lord. I will put my laws in their minds. I will write them on their hearts. I will be their God. And they will be my people… By calling this covenant "new," he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and outdated will soon disappear.*[Heb.8:10-13] However, there is a direct link between the Old Covenant's laws and the New Covenant's liberty. When Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt, their status changed from a horde of nobodies to a holy nation, from disorganised slaves to organised citizens—and the turning point was **Passover**. At that first Passover, each Israelite family killed a lamb and painted its blood on the door-posts of their houses before going inside to eat the lamb. When judgement came on Egypt, the Lord "*passed-over*" every house with blood on the door-posts and the family inside that house was saved from death. *On that same night I will pass through Egypt and strike down every firstborn of both people and animals, and I will bring judgment on all the gods of Egypt. I am the LORD. The blood will be a sign for you on the houses where you are, and when I see the blood, I will pass over you. No destructive plague will touch you when I strike Egypt.*[Ex.12:12-13] This event was then celebrated each year as a reminder that God had saved them from death, emancipated them from slavery and established them as a nation. Many hundreds of years later, another "*Lamb*" appeared: *The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!*[Jn.1:29] This Lamb was killed at the festival of Passover and resulted in people being saved from spiritual death, being emancipated from spiritual slavery and being established as a spiritual nation. *For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed.*[1Cor.5:7] *But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.*[Rom.6:22-23] *But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.*[1Pet.2:9-10]

Unlike the other nations around them, Israel didn't need a king or a ruler because God was their King and Ruler. They weren't "*monarchists*" ruled by a monarch; they weren't a "*republic*" ruled by their citizens; they weren't "*socialists*" where production and distribution of goods are owned and controlled collectively; they weren't "*communists*" where everything is owned collectively—the new nation of Israel was a "*theocracy*" under God's protection. Sadly, they soon rejected God as their King: *Now then, stand still and watch this great thing the LORD is going to do right before your eyes. Isn't the wheat being harvested today? I will call on the LORD, and he'll send thunder and rain. Then you will realize what a wicked thing you did in the LORD's presence when you asked for a king." Then Samuel called on the LORD. That day the LORD sent thunder and rain so that all the people feared the LORD and Samuel very much. All the people pleaded with Samuel, "Pray to the LORD your God for us so that we will not die. We have added another evil thing to all our other sins by asking for a king." "Don't be afraid," Samuel told the people. "You did do all these evil things. But don't turn away from the LORD. Instead, serve the LORD wholeheartedly. Don't turn away to follow other gods. They can't help or rescue you, because they don't exist.*[1Sam.12:16-21]

Fifty days after Passover—at **Pentecost**—God gave the Israelites the **Law** for guidance on how to live honourably and reverently as God's people. *Now obey me completely. Keep my covenant. If you do, then out of all of the nations you will be my special treasure. The whole earth is mine. But you will be a kingdom of priests to serve me. You will be my holy nation.*[Ex.19:5-6] God had asked Moses to go up a mountain where He spoke directly to him amidst thunder, lightning, fire and smoke—which absolutely terrified the people: *They said to Moses, "Speak to us yourself. Then we'll listen. But don't let God speak to us. If he does, we'll die." Moses said to the people, "Don't be afraid. God has come to put you to the test. He wants you to have respect for him. That will keep you from sinning."*[Ex.20:19-20] But whilst God

was giving His laws to Moses and writing them down on a stone tablet, the people rebelled against God by making a golden calf which they then worshipped—and this resulted in God punishing them leaving 3000 people dead. *The Levites did as Moses commanded. About 3,000 of the people died that day… The next day Moses said to the people, "You have committed a terrible sin. But now I will go up to the LORD. Maybe if I pray to him, he will forgive your sin."*[Ex.32:28-30] Earlier, God had changed their patriarch's name from Jacob to Israel (which means "*God fights*") as a constant reminder that as the **Children of Israel**, God would fight for them and give them victory. However, God has standards and to teach the people who God was and what His standards were, He gave them rules: *I am the LORD. I brought you up out of Egypt to be your God. So be holy, because I am holy.*[Lev.11:45] Much later, Paul explained that the purpose of the Law was to teach about sin and to bring them to faith. *Is there a conflict, then, between God's law and God's promises? Absolutely not! If the law could give us new life, we could be made right with God by obeying it. But the Scriptures declare that we are all prisoners of sin, so we receive God's promise of freedom only by believing in Jesus Christ. Before the way of faith in Christ was available to us, we were placed under guard by the law. We were kept in protective custody, so to speak, until the way of faith was revealed. Let me put it another way. The law was our guardian until Christ came; it protected us until we could be made right with God through faith. And now that the way of faith has come, we no longer need the law as our guardian.*[Gal.3:21-25] *The law code had a perfectly legitimate function. Without its clear guidelines for right and wrong, moral behaviour would be mostly guesswork. Apart from the succinct, surgical command, "You shall not covet," I could have dressed covetousness up to look like a virtue and ruined my life with it. Don't you remember how it was? I do, perfectly well. The law code started out as an excellent piece of work. What happened, though, was that sin found a way to pervert the command into a temptation, making a piece of "forbidden fruit" out of it. The law code, instead of being used to guide me, was used to seduce me. Without all the paraphernalia of the law code, sin looked pretty dull and lifeless, and I went along without paying much attention to it. But once sin got its hands on the law code and decked itself out in all that finery, I was fooled, and fell for it. The very command that was supposed to guide me into life was cleverly used to trip me up, throwing me headlong. So sin was plenty alive, and I was stone dead. But the law code itself is God's good and common sense, each command sane and holy counsel.*[Rom.7:7-12]

However, there was a point to these events—they were illustrations of God's plan of salvation for mankind. **Passover** prefigured Jesus dying on the cross as the Lamb of God. *John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Look! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!*[Jn.1:29] *Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen.*[Acts.4:27-28] The giving of the Law at **Pentecost** (50 days after Passover), prefigured the outpouring of the Holy Spirit when God would write His laws on people's hearts instead of writing them on a stone. And He continues to write them on people's hearts today—our conscience! *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] *The power to do what we do comes from God. He has given us the power to serve under a new covenant. The covenant is not based on the written Law of Moses. It comes from the Holy Spirit.* ***The written Law kills, but the Spirit gives life.*** *The Law was written in letters on stone. Even though it was a way of serving God, it led to death… Since all of that is true, won't the work of the Holy Spirit be even more glorious? The Law that sentences people to death is glorious. How much more glorious is the work of the Spirit! His work makes people right with God. The glory of the old covenant is nothing compared with the far greater glory of the new. The glory of the old is fading away. How much greater is the glory of the new! It will last forever.*[2Cor.3:5-11] In keeping with the type, and to illustrate that ***the written Law kills, but the Spirit gives life***, the same number of people that died on the first Day of Pentecost when Moses received the Law, were saved when Peter preached on the Day of Pentecost when God

gave the Holy Spirit. *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.2:40-41]

The purpose of the Old Covenant (the Law) was to signpost the coming Messiah: *Wherefore the Law was our schoolmaster to bring us to Christ, that we might be made righteous by faith.*[Gal.3:24] And when Jesus came, He introduced a different Covenant—the **New Covenant**: *And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me." In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you.*[Lk.22:19-20] This New Covenant—which replaced the Old Covenant—was established with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost, 50 days after Jesus died as the Passover Lamb.

For the Jews, the Day of Pentecost was also the beginning of their main harvest. Harvest time actually began 2 days after the beginning of Passover when the priests cut the first sheaf of grain, which was then waved before God as an offering. *The LORD's Passover begins at twilight on the fourteenth day of the first month… When you enter the land I am going to give you and you reap its harvest, bring to the priest a sheaf of the first grain you harvest. He is to wave the sheaf before the LORD so it will be accepted on your behalf; the priest is to wave it on the day after the Sabbath.*[Lev23:5-11] This symbolised Jesus rising from the dead—which happened on the same day that the priests were waving their sheaf of firstfruits! *But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.*[1Cor.15:20] But the main harvest began fifty days later when the priests gave an offering to God of two loaves made from the first of the grain harvested: *The day you brought the grain for the wave offering was the day after the Sabbath. Count off seven full weeks from that day. Count off 50 days up to the day after the seventh Sabbath. On that day bring me an offering of your first grain. Bring two loaves of bread that are made with 16 cups of fine flour. They must be baked with yeast. Bring them to me as a wave offering from the first share of your crops. That applies no matter where you live.*[Lev.23:15-17] So, at the same time as the priests were celebrating the beginning of the main harvest, God started His main harvest of souls by sending the Holy Spirit and converting people under the New Covenant! For the Jews, the harvest season continued until the Feast of Tabernacles when they were expected to spend 7 days in "*booths*" (tents) before returning to their permanent home—to remind them that they were nomads for 40 years. *So beginning with the fifteenth day of the seventh month, after you have gathered the crops of the land, celebrate the festival to the LORD for seven days; the first day is a day of rest, and the eighth day also is a day of rest… Live in booths for seven days: All native-born Israelites are to live in booths so your descendants will know that I had the Israelites live in booths when I brought them out of Egypt. I am the LORD your God.*[Lev.23:39-43] And God's spiritual harvest will continue until Jesus returns at the **Final Resurrection** to lead us to our permanent (eternal) home. *Now we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands. Meanwhile we groan, longing to be clothed 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 with our heavenly dwelling, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. Now it is God who has made us for this very purpose and has given us the Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.*[1Cor.5:1-5]

When Peter said: "*This is that*" he meant that the outpouring of the Holy Spirit was the fulfilment of Joel's prophecy and that it is **Harvest Time**! *And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.* [Acts.2:21;Joel.2:32] Right now we are in the main spiritual harvest time: *Jesus said, "My food is to do what my Father sent me to do. My food is to finish his work. You say, 'Four months more, and then it will be harvest time.' But I tell you, open your eyes! Look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest right now. Those who gather the crop are already getting paid. They are already harvesting the crop for eternal life. So those who plant and those who gather can now be glad together. Here is a true saying. 'One plants and another gathers.' I*

sent you to gather what you have not worked for. Others have done the hard work. You have gathered the benefits of their work."[Jn.4:34-38] We are in the "*day of God's grace*" where all who call on the Name of Jesus will be saved: *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] But when Jesus returns, the harvest time will end—so let's keep on working while we can: *The Lord is not slow to keep his promise. He is not slow in the way some people understand it. He is patient with you. He doesn't want anyone to be destroyed. Instead, he wants all people to turn away from their sins.*[2Pet.3:9]

Questions

What was the significance of the Jewish festival of Passover?
What was the significance of the Jewish festival of Pentecost?
What happened on the day of Pentecost? (Acts 2)
What is the Baptism of the Holy Spirit?
What are the "*last days*" that Peter spoke about on the day of Pentecost?

Puritan Prayer: 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. You have led me to place all my nature and happiness in oneness with Christ, in having thought and mind centred only on Him and in being like Him as I communicate good to others. This is my heaven on earth—but I need the force, energy and impulses of Your Spirit to carry me on my way to the New Jerusalem. Here it is my duty to be as Christ in this world, to do what He would do, to live as He would live, to walk in love and meekness—then He will be known and I will have peace in life and in death.

July:

Remember. *Remember Lot's wife! Whoever tries to keep their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life will preserve it. Lk.17:32-33*

Thought for the Month: Prayer is communion with the Father; prayer is pondering what God's Word says about our ideas—and then conforming our concepts to His. Never contemplate that sacred season with demons on your mind 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*

Sunday 6th July 119:17–24 Acts 3

Bring your whole tithe into the storehouse.[Mal.3:10]

We normally think of a tithe as a monetary gift to the Church—usually one tenth of our income. But God's Kingdom uses faith its currency, not 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.*[Is.55:1-3] *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.21:6-7] Of course we need money to pay our bills and our taxes, but God's Kingdom is spiritual and so we should prioritise our spiritual assets more than our monetary assets: *Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For on him God the Father has placed his seal of approval.*[Jn.6:27] Our spiritual life and sustenance come from God's Word: *Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.*[Matt.4:4] And so we should immerse ourself in God's Word by hearing it and putting it into practice: *Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it.*[Lk.11:28] *Submit to God and be at peace with him; in this way prosperity will come to you. Accept instruction from his mouth and lay up his words in your heart.*[Job.22:21-22] *Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ.*[Rom.10:17] *"My food," said Jesus, "is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work.*[Jn.4:34] God created us for fellowship and fellowship is sharing. It is only when we share what God has given to us that we become partakers and participators in His kingdom—and God always gives us enough to share. *Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness. You will be enriched in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God.*[2Cor.9:10-11] But we can only give what we have! Other than our sin and fallen nature, everything else that we have, was given to us 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.*[Deut.8:17-18] *For everything comes from him and exists by his power and is intended for his glory. All glory to him forever! Amen.*[Rom.11:36] Perhaps the only exception to this is our gratitude! We are personally responsible for showing our appreciation—God will not make us thankful! *When one of them saw that he was healed, he turned back and praised God in a loud voice. He quickly bowed at Jesus' feet and thanked him. (The man was a Samaritan.) Jesus asked, "Weren't ten men made clean? Where are the other nine? Only this foreigner came back to praise God." Jesus told the man, "Get up, and go home! Your faith has made you well."*[Lk.17:15-19]

When Peter went to the Temple and saw the lame man, he told him that he would give him what he had. *What I have, I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth…* [Acts.3:6] We too can give in the Name of Jesus Christ because He resides within us—that's what makes us a Christian! *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 was given the name **Emmanuel** because it means that **God is with us**: *and they will call him 'Emmanuel'—which means, 'God with us'.*[Matt.1:23] *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.1:27] When we became a Christian, we acknowledged Jesus was our Lord. *And without the help of the Holy Spirit no one can say, "Jesus is Lord."*[1Cor.12:3] *If you openly declare that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is by believing in your heart that you are made right with God, and it is by openly declaring your faith that you are saved.*[Rom.10:9-10] To say that "*Jesus is Lord*" is to acknowledge Jesus is our Owner and Master. This means that everything we have really belongs to Jesus and has been given to us on loan. *We serve Christ. We are trusted with God's secret truth. Those who have been given a trust must prove that they are faithful.*[1Cor.4:1-2] *God created human beings; he created them godlike, Reflecting God's nature. He created them male and female. God blessed them: "Prosper! Reproduce! Fill Earth! Take charge! Be responsible for fish in the sea and birds in the air, for every living thing that moves on the face of Earth."*[Gen.1:27-28] We are stewards who have been given the charge of looking after God's property responsibly and within the principles of His Kingdom as laid out in the Scriptures. The rules God gave to Moses were for those under the Old Covenant but we are under the New Covenant which has superseded the old and made its rules obsolete.[Heb.8:13] But God's principles don't change—they are the same today as they were under Moses. And God's character doesn't change either—He has always been loving and compassionate: *The LORD, the LORD, a compassionate and merciful God, patient, always faithful and ready to forgive. He continues to show his love to thousands of generations, forgiving wrongdoing, disobedience, and sin.*[Ex.34:6-7] Now that we are born again into God's family, we are to live as God's children—and especially like our Elder Brother, Jesus: *In this world we are like Jesus.*[1Jn.4:17]

Many of our personal characteristics are genetically <u>imprinted</u> in us and come directly from our parents, but most of our values and some characteristics are <u>imparted</u> to us from our family and environment as we grow up. This is also true of our spiritual family—God imprints some characteristics in us when we are born-again, but most of our spiritual values and characteristics are imparted to us as we spend time with God, His Word and His family. Before sending out His disciples, Jesus called them to Himself and then personally imparted His values to them: *Jesus went up on a mountainside and called to him those he wanted, and they came to him. He appointed twelve that <u>they might be with him</u> and that he might send them out to preach and to have authority to drive out demons.*[Mk.3:13-15] Paul was taught by Jesus before he taught others: *The good news I preached is not something a human being made up. No one gave it to me. No one taught it to me. Instead, <u>I received it from Jesus Christ</u>. He showed it to me.*[Gal.1:11-12] *I passed on to you <u>what I received from the Lord</u>.*[1Cor.11:23] *And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable people who will also be qualified to teach others.*[2Tim.2:2] We must be taught by Jesus before we can give to others. And we receive from Jesus by spending time with Him through fellowship—that is by sharing time together in prayer, in study of the Scriptures and with other Believers.

But how is Christ in us? When Jesus ascended to heaven, He joined His Father in a position of authority: *"Men of Galilee," they said, "why do you stand here looking at the sky? Jesus has been taken away from you into heaven. But he will come back in the same way you saw him go."*[Acts.1:11] *You have been raised up with Christ. So think about things that are in heaven. That is where Christ is. He is sitting at God's right hand. Think about things that are in heaven. Don't think about things that are on earth. You died. Now your life is hidden with Christ in God. Christ is your life. When he appears again, you also will appear with him in heaven's glory.*[Col.3:1-4] But although Jesus is in heaven, the Holy Spirit whom Jesus sent, is quite literally within us: *Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God?*[1Cor.6:19] The three Persons of the Trinity—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—are one. God is a "*tri-unity*" and each Person of the Godhead is so in unison and harmony with the other Persons of the Godhead that, although the Holy Spirit resides within us, we can truthfully say that Jesus is also with us and that God the Father is also with us: *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]

Just as Jesus spent time with His 12 Disciples and taught them before sending them out, so the Holy Spirit spends time with us and teaches us: *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] *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] *The power to do what we do comes from God. He has given us the power to serve under a new covenant. The covenant is not based on the written Law of Moses. It comes from the Holy Spirit.*[2Cor.3:5] Even though the Holy Spirit motivates, counsels, and empowers us through our spirit and our conscience, we must take an active role and reciprocate His fellowship. *Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires. 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.5:24-26] However, if we continually resist the Holy Spirit, our conscience can be seared: *Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared, who forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth.*[1Tim.4:1-3] *You people! You won't obey! You are stubborn! You won't listen! You are just like your people of long ago! You always oppose the Holy Spirit! Was there ever a prophet your people didn't try to hurt? They even killed those who told about the coming of the Righteous One.*[Acts.7:51-52] The Jews thought they were honouring God when they persecuted the Church, and Gamaliel told them they were fighting God: *but if it is of God, you cannot overthrow it—lest you even be found to fight against God.*[Acts.5:39] Paul was convinced that he was doing God's will by killing Christians, but Jesus told him he was opposing Him! *"Saul! Saul! Why are you persecuting me?" "Who are you, lord?" Saul asked. And the voice replied, "I am Jesus, the one you are persecuting!* [Acts.9:4-5] *I was well trained by Gamaliel in the law of our people. I wanted to serve God as much as any of you do today. I hurt the followers of the Way of Jesus. I sent many of them to their death.*[Acts.22:3-4] Zeal and enthusiasm are good but they can also be dangerous when misdirected: *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.*[Rom.10:1-3] If we are to stay on God's paths of righteousness, we must balance the leading of the Holy Spirit through our conscience with the leading of the Holy Spirit through the Scriptures. *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.*[Col.3:15-16] We can trust the Holy Spirit's leading because He is God and will lead us into truth. *But when the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own. He will speak only what he hears. And he will tell you what is still going to happen. He will bring me glory by receiving something from me and showing it to you.*[Jn.16:13-14] And the Holy Spirit will never contradict what He has recorded in Scripture, so we must aim to be Bible literate—to understand what the Bible really says rather than what tradition has conditioned us to accept: *The Bereans were very glad to receive Paul's message. They studied the Scriptures carefully every day. They wanted to see if what Paul said was true. So they were more noble than the Thessalonians.*[Acts17:11] In the past God overlooked people's ignorance, but now Jesus has shown us what God is really like, we have no excuse for bad behaviour or for opposing God. *God overlooked people's ignorance about these things in earlier times, but now he commands everyone everywhere to repent of their sins and turn to him. For he has set a day for judging the world with justice by the man he has appointed, and he proved to everyone who this is*

by raising him from the dead.[Acts.17:30-31] But people still need to hear about God's Kingdom and they still need to have explained to them how their sins are forgiven. *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. You are witnesses of these things. I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high."*[Lk.24:45-49] **Jesus' Commission is our Mission:** *All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations…* [Matt.28:18-19] God expects us to point others to Christ, to teach them and impart His values to them—this is our work! *The sacred writings contain preliminary reports by the prophets on God's Son. His descent from David roots him in history; his unique identity as Son of God was shown by the Spirit when Jesus was raised from the dead, setting him apart as the Messiah, our Master. Through him we received both the generous gift of his life and the urgent task of passing it on to others who receive it by entering into obedient trust in Jesus.*[Rom.1:2-5] *Christ is in you. He is your hope of glory. We preach about him. With all the wisdom we have, we warn and teach everyone. When we bring them to God, we want them to be perfect as people who belong to Christ. That's what I'm working for. I work hard with all of Christ's strength. His strength works powerfully in me.*[Col.1:27-29] *I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith, so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ.*[Phile.1:6]

What have we got to give to others? We have Christ, God's Anointed One. So let's bring our whole tithe into the Storehouse and enjoy God's true prosperity by giving God's Anointing—Christ's presence in us—to others through our lips and through our lives!

Questions

What is the currency of God's Kingdom?
What is the most valuable asset that we have?
How do we obtain this asset?
How can we evaluate its worth?
How can we give this asset to others?
Why are some people healed instantly through prayer and others are not healed?

Puritan Prayer: O Father, You have made man for the glory of Yourself and when not an instrument of that glory, he is a thing of nought. No sin is greater than the sin of unbelief—for if union with Christ is the greatest good, then unbelief is the greatest sin. I see that whatever my sin is, yet no sin is like disunion from Christ by unbelief. Lord, keep me from committing the greatest sin in departing from Him, or I can never in this life perfectly obey and cleave to Christ. When You take away my outward blessings, it is sin to not acknowledge, that all that I have is of You; it is sin in not serving You through what I have; it is sin in making myself secure and hardened. Lawful blessings can be my secret idols and can do the most harm—the greatest injury is in the having, and the greatest good is in the taking away. In love, divest me of the dominion of material blessings that I may glorify You the more. In love, remove the fuel of my sin that I may prize the gain of holiness as overbalancing all my losses. The more I love You with a truly gracious love, the more I desire to love You. Keep me from all things that turn to unbelief or lack the felt union with Christ.

Sunday 13th July 119:125–32 Acts 4

True Christian Unity: *All the believers were one in heart and mind.*[Acts.4:32]

The Israelites were called "*the Children of Israel*" because they were just that—the descendants of the patriarch Israel (previously known as Jacob). They went into Egypt as a family of 70 members and 430 years later they left Egypt as a nation of many thousands, but they were still Jacob's descendants—the Children of Israel. The record of their history was recorded in

Scripture to teach us how we Believers—the family of God and followers of Christ—should live. *Everything written long ago was written to teach us so that we would have confidence through the endurance and encouragement which the Scriptures give us.*[Rom.15:5] When Israel was emancipated from slavery and established as a holy nation that belonged to God, it illustrated our emancipation from spiritual slavery and establishment as a holy nation. *But God chose you to be his people. You are royal priests. You are a holy nation. You are a people who belong to God. All of this is so that you can sing his praises. He brought you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people. But now you are the people of God. Once you had not received mercy. But now you have received mercy.*[1Pet.2:9-10] It is we Believers who are God's family—and God chose to make us family before He created the world! *Even before he made the world, God loved us and chose us in Christ to be holy and without fault in his eyes. God decided in advance to adopt us into his own family by bringing us to himself through Jesus Christ. This is what he wanted to do, and it gave him great pleasure.*[Eph.1:4-5] And because we are God's family, we have been blessed with every blessing that heaven has to offer: *Praise the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! Through Christ, God has blessed us with every spiritual blessing that heaven has to offer.*[Eph.1:3] *Praise the LORD, my soul; all my inmost being, praise his holy name. Praise the LORD, my soul, and forget not all his benefits—who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit and crowns you with love and compassion, who satisfies your desires with good things so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.*[Ps.103:1-5]

All Believers have at least 5 things in common: **we have the same Sire** (Father); **Saviour**; **Spirit**; **Scriptures**; **Stop** (destination—heaven)! When we were born-again, God became our heavenly Father and we became the children of God: *But to all who believed him and accepted him, he gave the right to become children of God. They are reborn–not with a physical birth resulting from human passion or plan, but a birth that comes from God.*[Jn.1:12-13] Jesus became our Saviour. *He has saved us and called us to a holy life—not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.*[2Tim1.1:9-10] The Holy Spirit came to reside within us, so we are anointed (authorised and empowered) by God: *But you have received the Holy Spirit, and he lives within you.*[1Jn.2:27] *Through the power of the Holy Spirit who lives within us, carefully guard the precious truth that has been entrusted to you.*[2Tim.1:14] The Scriptures were given to us to teach us about God: *you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.*[2Tim.3:15] And we will join God in heaven after we die! *Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time.*[1Pet.1:3-5]

With so much in common it should be easy for Believers to be of "*one heart and mind*" but unfortunately, we still have the capacity to live as "*mere humans*" rather than as "*sons of God*". *I could not address you as people who live by the Spirit but as people who are still <u>worldly—mere infants</u> 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 <u>worldly</u>? Are you not acting like <u>mere humans</u>? For when one says, "I follow Paul," and another, "I follow Apollos," are you not <u>mere human beings</u>?.*[1Cor.3:1-4] Before we were converted, our nature was opposed to God and we resisted Him rather than respected Him—and even though we may have been kind and morally good, we were blind to spiritual truths. *Some people don't have the Holy Spirit. They don't accept the things that come from the Spirit of God. Things like that are foolish to them. They can't understand them. In fact, such things can't be understood without the Spirit's help.*[1Cor.2:14] But when we were converted, we were

redeemed from that futile life of ignoring God. *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 [from your aimless conduct received by tradition from your fathers], but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect.*[1Pet.1:18-19] However, it is easy for us to slip back into that old way of thinking because our minds can still remember that old life when ignored God and focused on our own will instead of God's will. *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 still 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.*[Jude.1:18-20] But because we are now Believers, should stop following our old natural instincts and instead we should renew our minds: *Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.*[Rom.12:2] This "*renewing of our minds"* is true Biblical "*spiritual warfare*" where we fight against influences that harm our spiritual health. The primary weapon in our spiritual armoury is the **Word of God**—which is also called the "*Sword of the Spirit*". *Put on the helmet of salvation. And take the sword of the Holy Spirit. The sword is God's word.*[Eph.6:17] *The word of God is living and active. It is sharper than any sword that has two edges. It cuts deep enough to separate the soul from spirit. It can separate joints from bones. It judges the thoughts and purposes of the heart. Nothing God created is hidden from him. His eyes see everything. He will hold us accountable for everything we do.*[Heb.4:12-13] The battle we are fighting is in our mind and for our mind—which is why we must fight every thought that opposes or ignores God and make our minds obedient to Christ. We do this by reminding ourselves of God's Word, through reading the Scriptures, by thinking, pondering and absorbing their values, by using God's Word for our prayers and by sharing what we believe about God and His Word with others. We replace our thoughts that ignore God with thoughts that are influenced by God: *Of course we are human, but we don't fight like humans. The weapons we use in our fight are not made by humans. Rather, they are powerful weapons from God. With them we destroy people's defences, that is, their arguments and all their intellectual arrogance that oppose the knowledge of God. We take every thought captive so that it is obedient to Christ.*[1Cor.10:3-5] However, if we are to succeed in the battle for our spiritual health we need to keep our minds clean by washing them with the water of God's Word: *Christ loved the church. He gave himself up for her. He did it to make her holy. He made her clean by washing her with water and the word. He did it to bring her to himself as a brightly shining church. He wants a church that has no stain or wrinkle or any other flaw. He wants a church that is holy and without blame.*[Eph.5:25-27] And we must have the motivation to overcome—to fight and win rather than give up. Our motivation to be overcomers should be our love and loyalty to God and also our respect and reverence for Him, knowing that He wants to say "*well done, good and faithful servant*" to us when we finish our battle. And if we live in harmony with Him and continue to be overcomers, we will hear God say "***well done, good and faithful servant***" to us. (Remember it is our faith that causes us to overcome: *for everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world? Only he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.*[1Jn.5:4-5])

Jesus lived His life in harmony with His Father by submitting to His will: *May your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.* And we too should live our lives in harmony with our Heavenly Father by submitting to His will! But not only should we live in harmony with God, we should also live in harmony with God's family as well: *How wonderful and pleasant it is when brothers live together in harmony! For harmony is as precious as the anointing oil that was poured over Aaron's head, that ran down his beard and onto the border of his robe. Harmony is as refreshing as the dew from Mount Hermon that falls on the mountains of Zion. And there the LORD has pronounced his blessing, even life everlasting.*[Ps.133:1-3] *If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.*[Rom.12:18] *Finally, brothers and sisters, rejoice!*

Strive for full restoration, encourage one another, be of one mind, live in peace. And the God of love and peace will be with you.[2Cor.13:11] *Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord.*[Heb.12:14] However, to live in harmony with God and His family has a cost—we lose our old life! But in return, we gain a new life—and although this new life includes the discipline of serving God (sometimes at the loss of our own comfort and pleasure), it also includes the delight of serving God: *You always show me the path that leads to life. You will fill me with joy when I am with you. You will give me endless pleasures at your right hand.*[Ps.16:11] In our natural family we willingly give up time, sleep and money for the sake of our children—and often at the cost of our personal comfort and pleasure—so why should it be different in our spiritual family? *I am a prisoner because of the Lord. So I am asking you to live a life worthy of what God chose you for. Don't be proud at all. Be completely gentle. Be patient. Put up with one another in love. The Holy Spirit makes you one in every way. So try your best to remain as one. Let peace keep you together. There is one body. There is one Spirit. You were appointed to one hope when you were chosen. There is one Lord. There is one faith and one baptism. There is one God and Father of all. He is over everything. He is through everything. He is in everything. But each one of us has received a gift of grace, just as Christ wanted us to have it.*[Eph.4:1-7]

Unity is not the same as uniformity! We are individuals with individually unique giftings. *Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body.*[1Cor.12:12-13] And we can be united without being identical; we can live in harmony without hurting; we can be different without being divisive. *I appeal to you, dear brothers and sisters, by the authority of our Lord Jesus Christ, to live in harmony with each other. Let there be no divisions in the church. Rather, be of one mind, united in thought and purpose.*[1Cor.1:10] But unity takes grace and humility: *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. Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.*[Rom.15:5-7] *Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.*[Rom.12:16]

William Seymour who was pastor of the Azusa Street Mission said: *Tongues are one of the signs that go with every baptised person but it is not the real evidence of baptism in everyday life—the secret is one accord, one place, one heart, one soul, one mind one prayer… it brings us all into one common family.*

Frank Bartleman, who reported on the Azusa Street revival wrote: *The human soul is naturally lazy toward God. All the weakness of humanity is shown up under the "Pentecostal baptism." We have but one life, one chance. It will pass quickly. Are our spiritual stocks inflated? Better take account… Both Jonah and Balaam had the "gift of prophecy," but were largely graceless men. We need holiness of heart. It is a vital error to substitute light for heat. The devil has no conscience, the "flesh" has no sense. Then why expect them to behave themselves in meeting? We should act and speak as in the immediate, conscious presence of God. Settle all differences before His throne also. Protect others' good name and they will speak well of you. Our influence, for good or evil, sets waves in motion only to break on the shores of eternity. A little push, just at the right time, may hurl a soul to hell, or lift it to Heaven… The Christian life is a "travail." We are on probation until finally delivered. "He must increase, but I must decrease."*

In his book, "*All with One Accord*" (available on our Church Website) Donald Gee wrote: *When so much has been said about unity it is difficult not to be trite. Some people's idea of unity is uniformity. They want us to lose our God-given varieties of temperament and viewpoint in a dead level of stagnant agreement about almost everything, forgetting that strength is in diversity among the members of the body. The unity that is possible lies in mutual respect among those who differ in almost everything except the essentials that unite us in Christ… Finally, we must never forget that unity is a personal matter… My ultimate unity is with my brother, irrespective of whether we belong to the same, or different, outward communions. We do not come together to "make" unity, for it already exists by the grace of God. It only needs to be cherished. Its test is mutual acceptance of the Lordship*

of Jesus Christ. Its energy is in the one baptism in the Holy Spirit that He bestows. Its aim is that "the world may believe." Its supreme secret is participation in what our Lord called "the glory."
Although our unity comes from our shared identity as the children of God, **the way we keep our unity is to work together in the shared mission of Christ's Commission**: *All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations…* [Matt.28:18-19] And as we fulfil our Master's Commission **together**, we will find it easy live in the **unity** that God has purposed for us and that Jesus prayed for us: *Father, I pray that all of them will be one, just as you are in me and I am in you. I want them also to be in us. Then the world will believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory you gave me. I did this so they would be one, just as we are one. I will be in them, just as you are in me. I want them to be brought together perfectly as one. This will let the world know that you sent me. It will also show the world that you have loved those you gave me, just as you have loved me.*[Jn.17:21-23] **To be of one heart and mind with God and His family is true Christian unity! Living like this is the blessed way to live and also the best way to live!** Let's make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit so that we all reach unity in the faith: *Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace… So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ.*[Eph.4:3-15] Then as we walk along the "*tracks of righteousness*" together, goodness and mercy will follow us all the days of our life![Ps.23]

Questions.

What do all Believers have in common?
What is imprinted in us at conversion and what is developed by our choices?
What is the difference between unity and uniformity?
Can we have Christian unity?
Should there be divisions in the Church?
How can we reach unity in the faith?
How do we mature in our faith?

Puritan 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 20th July Ps.138 Acts 5

We must obey God rather than men![Acts.5:29]

The Church was birthed in the expectation that **all** Believers were **Jesus' witnesses—**that they should, could and would testify that Jesus is the Christ, that Jesus had risen from the dead and that Jesus is the only way of salvation. *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] The Greek word for "*witness*" is *"martus"* (μάρτυς) and means "*someone who has information or knowledge*

of something, and so they are able to confirm it" —*i.e.* a personal experience that one can affirm (as in a court of law). Because so many of these "*witnesses*" who testified that Jesus was the Christ were persecuted to the point of death for their testimony, the Greek word for witness (*martus*) became our English word "*martyr*" meaning "*someone who is persecuted or killed for their religious belief*". *They overcame him [the accuser of the brethren] 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.*[Rev.21:11] The early Christians accepted the cost of testifying that Jesus was God's Son—of being a witness—and, like Moses hundreds of years before, they preferred God's commendation to this world's comfort: *[Moses] chose to share the oppression of God's people instead of enjoying the fleeting pleasures of sin. He thought it was better to suffer for the sake of Christ than to own the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking ahead to his great reward.*[Heb.11:25-26] Stephen was the first Christian to die for his witness to Jesus Christ: *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. And Saul approved of their killing him.*[Acts.7:55-8:1] The seed of Stephen's faith was watered with his blood and produced a harvest of righteousness—within a short (albeit troublesome) time, Paul, one of Stephen's murderers was converted and became the highest profile witness the Church has ever had. At Paul's conversion, Jesus told him that being His witness would involve suffering—and it did! *This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.*[Acts.9:15-16] *We don't put anything in anyone's way. So no one can find fault with our work for God. Instead, we make it clear that we serve God in every way. We serve him by holding steady. We stand firm in all kinds of trouble, hard times and suffering. We don't give up when we are beaten or put in prison. When people stir up trouble in the streets, we continue to serve God. We work hard for him. We go without sleep and food. We remain pure. We understand completely what it means to serve God. We are patient and kind. We serve him in the power of the Holy Spirit. We serve him with true love. We speak the truth. We serve in the power of God. We hold the weapons of godliness in the right hand and in the left. We serve God in times of glory and shame. We serve him whether the news about us is bad or good. We are true to our calling. But people treat us as if we were pretenders. We are known, but people treat us as if we were unknown. We are dying, but we continue to live. We are beaten, but we are not killed. We are sad, but we are always full of joy. We are poor, but we make many people rich. We have nothing, but we own everything.*[2Cor:6:3-10] *I have been in prison more often. I have suffered terrible beatings. Again and again I almost died. Five times the Jews gave me 39 strokes with a whip. Three times I was beaten with sticks. Once they tried to kill me by throwing stones at me. Three times I was shipwrecked. I spent a night and a day in the open sea.I have had to keep on the move. I have been in danger from rivers. I have been in danger from robbers. I have been in danger from people from my own country. I have been in danger from those who aren't Jews. I have been in danger in the city, in the country, and at sea. I have been in danger from people who pretended they were believers. I have worked very hard. Often I have gone without sleep. I have been hungry and thirsty. Often I have gone without food. I have been cold and naked.*[2Cor.11:23-27] After Paul's conversion the Church had a few years of relative calm until James was martyred under orders from Herod Agrippa. The persecution of Christians continued from the Jews and then also from the Romans—especially under Nero. The following account was written by the Roman historian Tacitus in his book *Annals* published a few years after the event:

> *Therefore, to stop the rumour [that he had set Rome on fire], he [Emperor Nero] falsely charged with guilt, and punished with the most fearful tortures, the persons commonly called Christians, who were*

[generally] hated for their enormities. Christus, the founder of that name, was put to death as a criminal by Pontius Pilate, procurator of Judea, in the reign of Tiberius, but the pernicious superstition—repressed for a time—broke out yet again, not only through Judea, where the mischief originated, but through the city of Rome also, whither all things horrible and disgraceful flow from all quarters, as to a common receptacle, and where they are encouraged. Accordingly, first those were arrested who confessed they were Christians; next on their information, a vast multitude were convicted, not so much on the charge of burning the city, as of "hating the human race." In their very deaths they were made the subjects of sport: for they were covered with the hides of wild beasts, and worried to death by dogs, or nailed to crosses, or set fire to, and when the day waned, burned to serve for the evening lights. Nero offered his own garden players for the spectacle, and exhibited a Circensian game, indiscriminately mingling with the common people in the dress of a charioteer, or else standing in his chariot. For this cause a feeling of compassion arose towards the sufferers, though guilty and deserving of exemplary capital punishment, because they seemed not to be cut off for the public good, but were victims of the ferocity of one man.

It was during Nero's persecution of Christians that Peter and Paul paid the ultimate price for their witness when they were executed—and the persecution of Christians has continued throughout history. During the Reformation in the C16th a group of Believers tried to return to the values of the early Church—they were described as a "*church of radical Bible readers*" because of their unusual passion for reading the Bible. They emphasised the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit on the Scriptures rather than an academic study and only baptised Believers upon the confession of their faith, rejecting the "*christening*" of infants as a true baptism. This led to their nickname of '*Anabaptist'* meaning '*rebaptizer'*, although they called themselves simply "*Baptists*". Since Justinian's time (A.D. 529) rebaptism was one of the two heresies that carried the death penalty and so these "*Anabaptists*" were persecuted by both Catholics and Protestants—the only difference was how they were killed: the Protestants drowned them and the Catholics burnt them! Most of the early "*Anabaptists"* were killed within 18 months of being baptised! Another great persecution involved the Waldensians who were Bible-believing Christians living in the French/Italian Alps and they had been independent of the Catholic church since the C13th. In 1655 around 1,700 of them were slaughtered at the *Piedmont Easter Massacre* which was so brutal that it aroused indignation throughout Europe. Oliver Cromwell organised international action on their behalf by writing to the Governments involved and threatening military action against France by sending the Navy down to the Mediterranean. Cromwell also called a "*day of solemn fasting and humiliation*" in England and organised collections for the relief of the surviving Waldensians—with a personal contribution of £2,000 out of his own personal funds!

Today there are more than 200 million Believers from over 50 countries who are experiencing high levels of persecution because of their faith in Jesus Christ. The Christian organisation "*Open Doors*" estimates that currently more than 380 million Christians suffer high levels of persecution and discrimination because of their faith—1 in 7 Christians are persecuted worldwide; 1 in 5 Christians are persecuted in Africa; 2 in 5 Christians are persecuted in Asia and last year 4,476 Christians were killed for faith related reasons! This heritage of heroes who have been faithful to the very end should embolden us to obey God rather than man, especially when it comes to our own witness. *Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a huge crowd of witnesses to the life of faith, let us strip off every weight that slows us down, especially the sin that so easily trips us up. And let us run with endurance the race God has set before us. We do this by keeping our eyes on Jesus, the champion who initiates and perfects our faith.*[Heb.12:1-2] And we are embolden when we acknowledge the authority of God's Name and His Word: *I will praise you, O LORD, with all my heart; before the "gods" I will sing your praise. 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. May all the kings of the earth praise you, O LORD, when they hear the words of your mouth. May they sing of the ways of the LORD, for the glory of the LORD is great.[Ps.138:1-5] We should never compromise on the basics of our faith—that Jesus is the only way of salvation: *Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.*[Acts.4:12] that Jesus is the *Saviour… He is Christ the Lord.*[Lk.2:11] That Jesus is *the Christ, the Son of the living God.*[Matt.16:16] That Jesus *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.15:4]

Christianity involves following Christ and at conversion, Christians made a commitment to honour Christ with their lips **and** their lives—regardless of the consequences. *Jesus then told the crowd and the disciples to come closer, and he said: If any of you want to be my followers, you must forget about yourself. You must take up your cross and follow me. If you want to save your life, you will destroy it. But if you give up your life for me and for the good news, you will save it. What will you gain, if you own the whole world but destroy yourself? What could you give to get back your soul? Don't be ashamed of me and my message among these unfaithful and sinful people! If you are, the Son of Man will be ashamed of you when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.*[Mk.8:34-38] Life is made up of choices and the choices we make have consequences, including punishment for doing wrong. If we exceed the speed limit (and get caught) we will have to pay a speeding fine; if we steal (and get caught) we will be punished with a fine or imprisonment—but we are rarely punished for doing right! Occasionally face the dilemma of conflicting man-made laws—Parliament should be the final say on the laws of our country but increasingly we are stifled by other factors including Europe and even Quangos set up by Government that are not accountable to anyone. Interestingly Suella Braverman (former Attorney General and also Foreign Secretary) wrote: *Of course, the legal dimension matters. No serious person would argue otherwise. But law in this context is not absolute; it is interpretive. And when the Attorney General starts using legal advice as a veto on foreign policy, overriding the collective wisdom of Cabinet, the intelligence agencies, the military, and elected ministers, then the tail has started wagging the dog.* However, this world is opposed to God and so it is not surprising that society is often in conflict with God's people over spiritual principles! *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.*[Jas.4:4] And so it is not surprising that we are sometimes punished for doing right! *Suppose people make fun of you because you believe in Christ. Then you are blessed, because God's Spirit rests on you. He is the Spirit of glory. Suppose you suffer. Then it shouldn't be because you are a murderer or a thief. It shouldn't be because you do evil things. It shouldn't be because you poke your nose into other people's business. But suppose you suffer for being a Christian. Then don't be ashamed. Instead, praise God because you are known by that name.*[1Pet.4:14-16] *Remember, it is better to suffer for doing good, if that is what God wants, than to suffer for doing wrong!*[1Pet.3:17]

If we are to live as God's children, we should pray for those who oppose us: *But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven.*[Matt.5:44-45] However, Christianity is not about getting everything right—Christianity is about God counting us right—and this happens when we place our trust and confidence in Him. *Abraham believed God, and God counted him as righteous because of his faith.*[Rom.3:3] But as James points out, faith as a theory is useless—it must be followed up with actions. *You see, his faith and his actions worked together. His actions made his faith complete. And so it happened just as the Scriptures say: "Abraham believed God, and God counted him as righteous because of his faith." He was even called the friend of God. So you see, we are shown to be right with God by what we do, not by faith alone.*[Jas.2:22-24] Although we should always do what is right, the most important thing we can do, is to place our trust in 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] And

when we do what God wants, we should do it in the way God wants! Attitude is everything because God looks at the heart: *The LORD does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.*[1Sam.16:7] *Then all the churches will know that I am the one who searches hearts and minds. I will reward each of you for what you have done.*[Rev.2:23] We should have the same attitude as Jesus: *Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus.*[Phil.2:5] *But suppose you receive a beating for doing wrong, and you put up with it. Will anyone honour you for that? Of course not. But suppose you suffer for doing good, and you put up with it. God will praise you for that. Christ suffered for you. He left you an example. He expects you to follow in his steps. You too were chosen to suffer. Scripture says, "He didn't commit any sin. No lies ever came out of his mouth." People shouted at him and made fun of him. But he didn't do the same back to them. He suffered. But he didn't say that bad things would happen to them. Instead, he trusted in the One who judges fairly.*[1Pet.2:20-23]
God rewarded Jesus for His obedience and God will reward us for our obedience: *There truly is a reward for those who live for God; surely there is a God who judges justly here on earth.*[Ps.58:11] *Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your reward in heaven.*[Lk.6:23] So let's keep following the example of Jesus and our forefathers in the faith, emulating their example and preferring to honour God rather than gain mere man's admiration. **We must obey God rather than men!**[Acts.5:29]

Questions

What is a "witness"?
In what way are we a "witness" to Jesus?
Why are Christians persecuted?
Why does God allow Christians to be persecuted?
Should we be loyal subjects to an ungodly government?
How can we decide what laws should break?

Puritan Prayer: Help me to see how in everything, Your will is good and even when Your will crosses mine, teach me to be pleased with it. Grant me to feel You in fire, and food and every providence—and to see that Your many gifts and creatures are but Your hands and fingers taking hold of me. You are the bottomless fountain of all good. I give myself to You out of love, for all I have or own is Yours—my goods, family, church, self—to do with as You will. Honour Yourself by me and by all that is mine. If it be consistent with Your eternal counsels, the purpose of Your grace and the great ends of Your glory, then bestow upon me the blessings of Your comforts—and if not, then let me resign myself to Your wiser determinations.

Sunday 27th July Ps.119:33-40 Acts 6

Full of faith and of the Holy Spirit.[Acts.6:5]

When internal difficulties first arose in the Church, the apostles looked for people who were *full of faith and of the Holy Spirit.*[Acts.6:5] This phrase *"full of faith and of the Holy Spirit"* is not just an ideal or a goal for "*spiritual*" people but should be the standard for ALL Believers because Believers, believe! Just as walkers walk, runners run and swimmers swim, so Believers believe! It's that simple—if we are not believing, then we are not a Believer! Today people look for talent but the early Church looked for faith. Charisma without character will not last. Giftings may open doors: *A gift opens the way and ushers the giver into the presence of the great.*[Prov.18:16] *Many curry favour with a ruler, and everyone is the friend of one who gives gifts.*[Prv.19:6] But it is faithfulness that keeps the doors open! God wants faithfulness above everything: *Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!*[Matt.25:21;23] Faith is living and grows like a seed: *Then the disciples came to Jesus in private and asked, "Why couldn't we drive [the demon] out?" He replied, "Because you have so little faith. I tell you the truth, 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.17:19-20] Although Jesus told His Disciples they had little faith, little doesn't mean nothing and even those with little don't have too little! *The one who gathered much did not have too much, and the one who gathered little did not have too little.*[2Cor.8:15] For our faith to grow it need difficulties, and sometimes we fall in tough time—but God is holding our hand: *The steps of a man are established by the LORD, when he delights in his way; though he fall, he shall not be cast headlong [or utterly cast down], for the LORD upholds his hand. I have been young, and now am old, yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken or his children begging for bread. He is ever lending generously, and his children become a blessing.*[Ps.37:23-26] We can **PICK OURSELVES UP AND CONTINUE ONWARDS AND UPWARDS!** *Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.*[Phil.3:12-14] Actually, we learn to trust God more when we struggle because we see God intervening in our lives through His care, provision and protection—**when we didn't deserve it!** When we remember how God was with us and how He cared for us in difficult situations, our confidence in Him grows—and when we face our next difficulty, it is easier to trust God. *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. We are pressed on every side by troubles, but we are not crushed. We are perplexed, but not driven to despair. We are hunted down, but never abandoned by God. We get knocked down, but we are not destroyed. Through suffering, our bodies continue to share in the death of Jesus so that the life of Jesus may also be seen in our bodies.*[2Cor.4:7-10] Trust that is tried and tested moves from theory to reality because it is based on both scripture and experience. *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] *And through your faith, God is protecting you by his power until you receive this salvation, which is ready to be revealed on the last day for all to see. So be truly glad. There is wonderful joy ahead, even though you must endure many trials for a little while. These trials will show that your faith is genuine. It is being tested as fire tests and purifies gold–though your faith is far more precious than mere gold. So when your faith remains strong through many trials, it will bring you much praise and glory and honour on the day when Jesus Christ is revealed to the whole world.*[1Pet.1:5-7] God told Isaiah to tell the people: *Do not be afraid, for I have ransomed you. I have called you by name; you are mine. When you go through deep waters, I will be with you. When you go through rivers of difficulty, you will not drown. When you walk through the fire of oppression, you will not be burned up; the flames will not consume you. For I am the LORD, your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour.*[Is.43:1-3] So, as Believers, we can say with David: *Even when I walk through the darkest valley, I will not be afraid, for you are close beside me.*[Ps.23:4]

Until Jesus came, God was either known by His actions (which were mostly judgement) or by His personal communication (which was often to just one person in a generation). The phrase: *the Word of the Lord came to…* is common in the OT but because the Bible was still being written, any understanding of God was at best incomplete. This meant that faith (a personal trust in God) was much harder—although there were many who did believe, just look at Hebrews chapter 11. But when Jesus was born, the Word of God became human and it became much easier to believe and trust in God because He could be seen, touched and heard. *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. God promised everything to the Son as an inheritance, and through the Son he created the universe. The Son radiates God's own glory and expresses the very character of God, and he sustains everything by the mighty power of his command. When he had cleansed us from our sins, he sat down in the place*

of honour at the right hand of the majestic God in heaven. This shows that the Son is far greater than the angels, just as the name God gave him is greater than their names.[Heb.1:1-3] Although Jesus was born as a human, it was a long time ago and over time stories get exaggerated, myths develop, memories fail—so we need a better point of reference than just stories handed down from generation to generation. God organised people to write about the events, revelations and instructions within the lifetime of the people concerned, so it could be verified by those who witnessed it. *Many have attempted to write about what had taken place among us. They received their information from those who had been eyewitnesses and servants of God's word from the beginning, and they passed it on to us. I, too, have followed everything closely from the beginning. So I thought it would be a good idea to write an orderly account... In this way you will know that what you've been told is true.*[Lk.1:1-4] But even though those eye-witness accounts were valid, God put another dimension into their writings to make them Scripture—He inspired the writings by the Holy Spirit: *We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty… And we have the word of the prophets made more certain, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts. Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.*[2Pet.1:16-21] When God breathed His Spirit into the writings of Scripture, He put spiritual life within them so that the very words have intrinsic ability to save people and give them eternal life: *You have known the Holy Scriptures ever since you were a little child. They are able to teach you how to be saved by believing in Christ Jesus. God has breathed life into all of Scripture. It is useful for teaching us what is true. It is useful for correcting our mistakes. It is useful for making our lives whole again. It is useful for training us to do what is right. By using Scripture, a man of God can be completely prepared to do every good thing.*[2Tim.3:15-17]

Jesus is the Living Word of God and is God Incarnate (literally: *God in flesh*) and Scripture is the Written Word of God and is God Inspired. This means that the very words of Scriptures **<u>contain</u>** God's life and so they can be translated into other languages without affecting the spiritual content. This is true even if the translation is not completely accurate (actually it is impossible to accurately translate something from one language into another because of different sentence structures, idioms, *etc.*). The angel said to Mary: *Nothing is impossible with God.* The literal translation of this is found in the ASV: *For no word from God shall be void of power.*[Lk.1:37] What the angel was actually saying to Mary was: **every word from God has intrinsic power within it to achieve what God wants it to.** *The rain and the snow come down from the sky. They do not return to it without watering the earth. They make plants come up and grow. The plants produce seeds for farmers. They also produce food for people to eat. The words I speak are like that. They will not return to me without producing results. They will accomplish what I want them to. They will do exactly what I sent them to do.*[Is.55:10-11] It is the Word of God—both Jesus the Living Word and Jesus within the Written Word—that produces that simple confident trust in God we call faith: *But how can people call for help if they don't know who to trust? And how can they know who to trust if they haven't heard of the One who can be trusted? And how can they hear if nobody tells them? …The point is, Before you trust, you have to listen. But unless Christ's Word is preached, there's nothing to listen to.*[Rom.10:14-17] *Look to God's instructions and teachings! People who contradict his word are completely in the dark.*[Is.8:20] This is why we must encourage one another from the Scriptures: *Everything written long ago was written to teach us so that we would have confidence through the endurance and encouragement which the Scriptures give us. May God, who gives you this endurance and encouragement, allow you to live in harmony with each other by following the example of Christ Jesus.*[Rom.15:4-5] *The message as it has been taught can be trusted. He must hold firmly to it. Then he will be able to use true teaching to comfort others and build them up. He will be able to prove that people who oppose it are wrong.*[Tit.1:9] The devil believes in God and know the Scriptures: *You believe there is one God.*

Good! Even the demons believe that. And they tremble![Jas.2:19] *The devil led him to Jerusalem and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. "If you are the Son of God," he said, "throw yourself down from here. For it is written: " 'He will command his angels concerning you to guard you carefully; they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.'*[Lk.4:9-11] So just believing that God exists or knowing the Scriptures is not enough—we must do what it says! *Humbly accept the word God has planted in your hearts, for it has the power to save your souls. But don't just listen to God's word. You must do what it says. Otherwise, you are only fooling yourselves. For if you listen to the word and don't obey, it is like glancing at your face in a mirror. You see yourself, walk away, and forget what you look like. But if you look carefully into the perfect law that sets you free, and if you do what it says and don't forget what you heard, then God will bless you for doing it.*[Jas 1:20-25] The devil can steal God's Word from our heart but we don't need to let him! We can retain the Word of God if we have a good and noble heart: *This is the meaning of the parable: The seed is the word of God. Those along the path are the ones who hear, and then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved. Those on the rocky ground are the ones who receive the word with joy when they hear it, but they have no root. They believe for a while, but in the time of testing they fall away. The seed that fell among thorns stands for those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by life's worries, riches and pleasures, and they do not mature. But the seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop.*[Lk.8:11-15] Because the Scripture is spiritual (it is about spiritual matters) we need the Holy Spirit to make the spiritual meaning of the words clear to us. *Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law.*[Ps.119:18] *But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.*[Jn.14:26] *Whoever knows what you're thinking and planning except you yourself? The same with God—except that he not only knows what he's thinking, but he lets us in on it. God offers a full report on the gifts of life and salvation that he is giving us. We don't have to rely on the world's guesses and opinions. We didn't learn this by reading books or going to school; we learned it from God, who taught us person-to-person through Jesus, and we're passing it on to you in the same first-hand, personal way. The unspiritual self, just as it is by nature, can't receive the gifts of God's Spirit. There's no capacity for them. They seem like so much silliness. Spirit can be known only by spirit—God's Spirit and our spirits in open communion. Spiritually alive, we have access to everything God's Spirit is doing, and can't be judged by unspiritual critics. Isaiah's question, "Is there anyone around who knows God's Spirit, anyone who knows what he is doing?" has been answered: Christ knows, and we have Christ's Spirit.*[1Cor.2:11-16]

Let's strive to continue to be **full of faith and of the Holy Spirit.**[Acts.6:5] Then like Stephen, we will be a good witness to Jesus and speak with wisdom and beauty from the Holy Spirit: *they could not stand up against the wisdom the Spirit gave him as he spoke… All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel.*[Acts.6:10-15]

Questions

What does "*full of faith and of the Holy Spirit"* mean?
How can we become "*full of faith and of the Holy Spirit"?*
Can we become mature without difficulties?
Why is the Bible called the Word of God?
Why can we trust the Bible?
Why do we need the Holy Spirit to understand the Bible?

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

August:

Remember. *I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now.Phil.1:3-4*

Thought for the Month: 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.*M. Petzer*

Sunday 3rd August Ps.119:41-48 Acts 7

Look! I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God. *Acts.7:56*

The first thing God created was the heavens and the earth—and after God created them, He moulded them and made them to function: *In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth didn't have any shape. And it was empty.*Gen.1:1-2 *So the heavens and the earth and everything in them were completed.*Gen.2:1 Heaven can mean the earth's atmosphere—the sky: *As the rain and the snow come down from heaven.*Is.55:10 *But I tell you truly, many widows were in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a great famine throughout all the land.*Lk.4:25 And heaven can also mean outer space: *And God said, "Let there be lights in the expanse of the heavens to separate the day from the night. And let them be for signs and for seasons, and for days and years, and let them be lights in the expanse of the heavens to give light upon the earth." And it was so.*Gen.1:14-15 *I think about the heavens. I think about what your fingers have created. I think about the moon and stars that you have set in place.*Ps.8:3 But the usual definition of heaven is the residence of God: *As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."*Matt.3:16-17 These three heavens—the sky, outer space and the eternal dwelling place of God—are different and quite distinct. God created the sky and outer space but the 3rd Heaven or Paradise is uncreated and is where God dwells in holiness with His angels: *I know about one of Christ's followers who was taken up into the third heaven 14 years ago. I don't know if the man was still in his body when it happened, but God certainly knows. As I said, only God really knows if this man was in his body at the time. But he was taken up into paradise, where he heard things too wonderful to tell.*2Cor.12:2-4 4 *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. Surrounding the throne were twenty-four other thrones, and seated on them were twenty-four elders. They were dressed in white and had crowns of gold on their heads. From the throne came flashes of lightning, rumblings and peals of thunder. In front of the throne, seven lamps were blazing. These are the seven spirits of God. Also in front of the throne there was what looked like a sea of glass, clear as crystal.*Rev.4:1-6 *Suddenly a large group of angels from heaven also appeared. They were praising God. They said, "May glory be given to God in the highest heaven! And may peace be given to those he is pleased with on earth!" The angels left and went into heaven.*Lk.2:13-15 *An angel from heaven appeared to Jesus and gave him strength.*Lk.22:3 We also know that the devil is not in heaven any more: *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.*Rev.12:10 Although we don't know much about the devil, we do know that we Believers have no need to fear his power or even his person because our names are written in heaven: *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.10:18-20] *How you have fallen from heaven, morning star, son of the dawn! You have been cast down to the earth, you who once laid low the nations! You said in your heart, "I will ascend to the heavens; I will raise my throne above the stars of God; I will sit enthroned on the mount of assembly, on the utmost heights of Mount Zaphon. I will ascend above the tops of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High." But you are brought down to the realm of the dead, to the depths of the pit.*[Is.14:12-15]

The kingdom of God (also called the kingdom of heaven) is the King's domain—the realm of His authority—that Jesus came to establish: *Jesus went into Galilee, where he preached God's Good News. "The time promised by God has come at last!" he announced. "The Kingdom of God is near! Repent of your sins and believe the Good News!"*[Mk.1:14-15] Most of Jesus' ministry was spent explaining what God's kingdom was like: *The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sows good seed… is like a mustard seed… is like yeast.*[Matt.13] When Jesus taught about heaven, He also taught how we can become citizens of that kingdom and be with Him and His Father. *For I have come down from heaven to do the will of God who sent me, not to do my own will. And this is the will of God, that I should not lose even one of all those he has given me, but that I should raise them up at the last day. For it is my Father's will that all who see his Son and believe in him should have eternal life. I will raise them up at the last day.*[Jn.6:38-40] *What I'm about to tell you is true. We speak about what we know. We give witness to what we have seen. But still you people do not accept our witness. I have spoken to you about earthly things, and you do not believe. So how will you believe if I speak about heavenly things? No one has ever gone into heaven except the One who came from heaven. He is the Son of Man.*[Jn.3:11-13] And to teach about God's kingdom, Jesus used stories about everyday events: *Jesus also used this illustration: "The Kingdom of Heaven is like the yeast a woman used in making bread. Even though she put only a little yeast in three measures of flour, it permeated every part of the dough." Jesus always used stories and illustrations like these when speaking to the crowds. In fact, he never spoke to them without using such parables.*[Matt.13:33-34] *The disciples came up and asked, "Why do you tell stories?" He replied, "You've been given insight into God's kingdom. You know how it works. Not everybody has this gift, this insight; it hasn't been given to them. Whenever someone has a ready heart for this, the insights and understandings flow freely. But if there is no readiness, any trace of receptivity soon disappears. That's why I tell stories: to create readiness, to nudge the people toward receptive insight.*[Matt.13:10-13] Jesus also demonstrated the kingdom of heaven by helping people: *Jesus travelled throughout the region of Galilee, teaching in the synagogues and announcing the Good News about the Kingdom. And he healed every kind of disease and illness.*[Matt.4:23] *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… 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] Because God is Spirit, His kingdom is a spiritual kingdom, not physical or political, and so His dwelling place (heaven) is a spiritual place. *"The rule of Christ in our heart"* is probably the best definition of God's kingdom. *"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] So God's heavenly kingdom is already here on earth: *The world has now become the Kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign forever and ever.*[Rev.11:15] But not everyone is in submission to Jesus—yet! However, when Jesus returns, everything and everyone will submit to His authority and death itself will finally be destroyed: *Christ is the first of those who rise from the dead. When he comes back, those who belong to him will be raised. Then the end will come. Christ will destroy all rule, authority and power. He will hand over the kingdom to God the Father. Christ must rule until he has put all his enemies under his control. The last enemy that will be destroyed is death.*[1Cor.15:23-26] Until that last enemy is destroyed, we should continue to pray that God's will is done here on earth as it is in heaven: *Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.*[Matt.6:9-10]

Some people imagine that God has shut heaven up and so their prayers don't reach Him—and they usually (mis)quote: *And thy heaven that is over thy head shall be brass, and the earth that is under*

thee shall be iron. Jehovah will make the rain of thy land powder and dust: from heaven shall it come down upon thee, until thou be destroyed.[Deut.28:23-24] But even a cursory look at this verse shows that this "*heaven*" is the sky not the place where God dwells: *The sky over your head will be bronze.* And the context is rebellion and disobedience! *However, if you **do not** obey the LORD your God and **do not** carefully follow all his commands and decrees I am giving you today, all these curses will come on you and overtake you: You will be cursed in the city and cursed in the country.*[Deut.28:15-16] Rebellion and disobedience are not marks of a Believer! A Believer's testimony is: *But we are citizens of heaven, where the Lord Jesus Christ lives. And we are eagerly waiting for him to return as our Saviour.*[Phil.3:20] Jesus explained that He was the Door (*I am the door; whoever enters through me will be saved.*[Jn:10:9]) and that heaven is now open for Disciples: *Then he said to the disciples, "What I'm about to tell you is true. You will see heaven open. You will see the angels of God going up and coming down on the Son of Man."*[Jn.1:51] This was reminiscent of Jacob's vision, hundreds of years previously: *In a dream he saw a stairway standing on the earth. Its top reached to heaven. The angels of God were going up and coming down on it. The LORD stood above the stairway. He said, "I am the LORD."*[Gen.28:12-13] We have an open access to God because Jesus has returned to heaven: *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]

Yes, heaven is where God dwells, but Jesus has brought heaven down to us—so we don't have to wait until we die to experience God's presence and neither do have to go on a pilgrimage to find God: *But faith's way of getting right with God says, "Don't say in your heart, 'Who will go up to heaven?' (to bring Christ down to earth). And don't say, 'Who will go down to the place of the dead?' (to bring Christ back to life again)." In fact, it says, "The message is very close at hand; it is on your lips and in your heart." And that message is the very message about faith that we preach: If you openly declare that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is by believing in your heart that you are made right with God, and it is by openly declaring your faith that you are saved.*[Rom.10:6-10] Paul had an incredible experience of God's heaven that gave him a personal insight into the spiritual realities: *I know a believer in Christ who was taken up to the third heaven 14 years ago. I don't know if his body was taken up or not. Only God knows. I don't know if that man was in his body or out of it. Only God knows. But I do know that he was taken up to paradise. He heard things that couldn't be put into words. They were things that people aren't allowed to talk about.*[2Cor.12:2-4]

John also had an insight into God's heaven: *Then as I looked, I saw a door standing open in heaven, and the same voice I had heard before spoke to me like a trumpet blast. The voice said, 'Come up here, and I will show you what must happen after this.' And instantly I was in the Spirit.*[Rev.4:1-2] We too can experience the spiritual realities of heaven when, like John, we are "*in the Spirit*", that is, as we saw last week, when we are *full of faith and the Holy Spirt.*[Acts.6:5] Then, like Stephen, we too will be able to see God's heavenly glory: *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."*[Acts.7:55-56] Let's make Isaiah's prophecy our own personal testimony: *Arise! Shine! Your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has dawned. Darkness now covers the earth, and thick darkness covers the nations. But the LORD dawns, and his glory appears over you.*[Is.60:1-2]

Questions

What is "heaven"?

Who is in God's heaven?

Why did Jesus use natural stories (parables) to explain spiritual matters?

Can we understand heavenly matters?

Can there be heaven on earth?

Puritan Prayer: Lord of Heaven, Your goodness is ineffably sublime—in the works of Creation, You are Almighty; in the dispensations of Providence, You are all-wise; in the gospel of Grace, You are all love. In Your Son, You have provided for our deliverance from the effects of sin, the justification of our person, the sanctification of our nature and the perseverance of our soul. In the path of life, we have a refuge from the storm, a fountain for sin and a fullness that is accessible to all. Grant us always to know that to walk with Jesus makes all other interests a shadow and a dream. Keep us from intermittent attention to eternal things. Save us from the delusion of those who fail to go far in religion—who are concerned but not converted, who have another thought but not a new one, who have light, zeal and confidence, but not Christ. Let us judge our Christianity, not only by our dependence upon Jesus, but by our love to Him, our conformity to Him and our knowledge of Him. Give us a religion that is both real and progressive, that lives and works in the Spirit and that profits by Your correction.

Sunday 10th August Ps.119:49-56 Acts 8

The Spirit told Philip… *Acts.8:29*

Last week we saw that heaven is now open—just as Jesus said: *Then he said to the disciples, "What I'm about to tell you is true. You will see heaven open. You will see the angels of God going up and coming down on the Son of Man."* *Jn.1:51* Heaven is now open because Jesus has returned to heaven and He is there interceding for us: *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* *Christ Jesus who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.* *Rom.8:34*

God hears our prayers and He answers our prayers—our prayers reach God because there is now no blockage between us and heaven. This heaven is not the sky, nor the earth's atmosphere, nor even outer space—it is the dwelling place of God. God's heaven is not a geographical place but a spiritual place and so you can't see it from earth or space—heaven is where God dwells: *As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."* *Matt.3:16-17* *Suddenly a large group of angels from heaven also appeared. They were praising God. They said, "May glory be given to God in the highest heaven! And may peace be given to those he is pleased with on earth!" The angels left and went into heaven.* *Lk.2:13-15*

God is Spirit and He communicates with us spiritually—Spirit to spirit, His Spirit with our spirit: *God is spirit. His worshipers must worship him in spirit and in truth.* *Jn.4:24* Every human being is spiritually dead (separated from God) when they are born into this world—and until they are spiritually re-born they are not able to fellowship or commune with God. Unbelievers and not-yet-believers can praise God (say good words about Him as the Roman soldier did: *Jesus called out with a loud voice, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." When he had said this, he breathed his last. The centurion, seeing what had happened, praised God and said, "Surely this was a righteous man."* *Lk.23:46-47* (Doxology literally means "glory-words" and benediction means "good-words!) Unbelievers and not-yet-believers can ask God for help and forgiveness (or else no one could be 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.10:11-13* Unbelievers and not-yet-believers don't have any relationship with God. *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… But God loves us deeply. He is full of mercy. So he gave us new life because of what Christ has done. He gave us life even when we were dead in sin. God's grace has saved you. God raised us*

up with Christ. He has seated us with him in his heavenly kingdom because we belong to Christ Jesus.[Eph.2:1-6] And so unbelievers and not-yet-believers cannot worship God because worship is a spiritual response to God. W*ho may ascend the hill of the LORD? Who may stand in his holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to an idol or swear by what is false.*[Ps.24:3-4] *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.*[1Chron.16:29] That is why the New-Birth is essential: *Jesus replied, "What I'm about to tell you is true. No one can see God's kingdom without being born again."*[Jn.3:3] No religion, liturgy, church, or person can ever make anyone into a Christian—but true religion, biblical liturgy, Bible-believing church and devout people all play a part in bringing us to the place where we hear the Holy Spirit speak to us and where we can receive the Gospel—the good news that Jesus has opened the way for us to access heaven. The Holy Spirit is sovereign, so He can work however He chooses to, and whilst He normally uses people to explain the gospel (that's why Jesus commissioned us to "*go and make disciples"!*), the Holy Spirit ***always*** convinces (convicts) people of sin and reveals Jesus as Saviour. *When he comes, he'll expose the error of the godless world's view of sin, righteousness, and judgment: He'll show them that their refusal to believe in me is their basic sin; that righteousness comes from above, where I am with the Father, out of their sight and control; that judgment takes place as the ruler of this godless world is brought to trial and convicted. I still have many things to tell you, but you can't handle them now. But when the Friend comes, the Spirit of the Truth, he will take you by the hand and guide you into all the truth there is. He won't draw attention to himself, but will make sense out of what is about to happen and, indeed, out of all that I have done and said. He will honour me; he will take from me and deliver it to you.*[Jn.16:8-14] God does not coerce us from without but convinces us from within. When we are born again, the Holy Spirit takes up residence within us and becomes joined to our own spirit. *But anyone who is joined to the Lord becomes one with him in spirit… your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is in you. You have received him from God.*[1Cor.6:17-19] *You, however, are not in the realm of the flesh but are in the realm of the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, they do not belong to Christ. But if Christ is in you, then even though your body is subject to death because of sin, the Spirit gives life because of righteousness. And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies because of his Spirit who lives in you.*[Rom.8:9-11]

With the Holy Spirit residing within us, communicating with us, teaching us and guiding us, we are able to know God and even hear God's voice: *We have received the Spirit who is from God. The Spirit helps us understand what God has freely given us. That is what we speak about. We don't use words taught to us by people. We use words taught to us by the Holy Spirit. We use the words of the Spirit to teach the truths of the Spirit. Some people don't have the Holy Spirit. They don't accept the things that come from the Spirit of God. Things like that are foolish to them. They can't understand them. In fact, such things can't be understood without the Spirit's help… But we have the mind of Christ.*[1Cor.2:12-16] However, we still have to **choose to obey** God—but even obedience becomes easy because God gives us the **desire to obey** Him by writing His laws on our hearts: *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]

When someone becomes a Christian, their priority is to know Jesus personally and intimately, so that they can obediently follow Him and experience all the blessings God that has for Believers: *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.1:17-19] In any relationship, the most important factor is time. When we spend time with someone, we get to know their likes, their

dislikes, their passions, their joys, their hurts, their family—we get to know them as a person. After a while, we get to recognise their voice and their mannerisms—and time spent together develops into trust. So it is with God! When we spend time with Him, we get to recognise God's likes, His dislikes, His passions, His joys, His family—we get to know Him a Person. We spend time with God by reading the Bible, praying, and worshipping God **personally** and **collectively**. When we study (read, reflect and recall) the Bible, God speaks to us and when we pray, praise and worship, we speak to God.

We learn to speak to God because God has spoken to us and speaks to us. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote: *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.* We will spend eternity in fellowship with God and other redeemed Believers: *Now when He had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each having a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. And they sang a new song, saying: "You are worthy to take the scroll, and to open its seals; For You were slain, and have redeemed us to God by Your blood out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation, And have made us kings and priests to our God; And we shall reign on the earth." Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels around the throne, the living creatures, and the elders; and the number of them was ten thousand times ten thousand, and thousands of thousands, saying with a loud voice: "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom, and strength and honour and glory and blessing!"*[Rev.5:8-12] So we should start praising, worshipping, praying and studying with other Believers now—and especially within the security of Church, where there is accountability and credibility. It is when we worship collectively that we can safely recognise God's voice for our self: *He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognise a stranger's voice.*[Jn.10:3-5]

With so many different opinions and ideas being promoted, it is essential for us to recognise God's voice, especially when it comes to doctrine and morality. Sadly, not all who think they hear God's voice, actually do hear from Him—most are simply naïve and mistake their imagination for God's leading, but there are some who are obviously deceived: *First, you must understand this: In the last days people who follow their own desires will appear. These disrespectful people will ridicule God's promise.*[2Pet.3:3] *Dear friends, remember what the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ told you to expect: "In the last times people who ridicule God will appear. They will follow their own ungodly desires." These are the people who cause divisions. They are concerned about physical things, not spiritual things [They follow their natural instincts because they do not have God's Spirit in them].*[Jude.17-19] In order for us to stay true to God and His values, we must filter everything (including what we believe God is saying to us) through the basic principles of the New Covenant and general teaching of Scripture: *In the past, God spoke to our people through the prophets. He spoke at many times. He spoke in different ways. But in these last days, he has spoken to us through his Son.*[Heb.1:1-2]

For instance, how many times have you heard Christians pontificate about natural disasters being judgement of God upon our society? But God said that He so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son. Isaiah records that God is not angry anymore—He was angry for a brief moment when He laid on Jesus the iniquity of us all, but now Jesus has paid the price for sin: *"For a brief moment I abandoned you, but with deep compassion I will bring you back. In a surge of anger I hid my face from you for a moment, but with everlasting kindness I will have compassion on you," says the LORD your Redeemer. "To me this is like the days of Noah, when I swore that the waters of Noah would never again cover the earth. So now I have sworn not to be angry with you, never to rebuke you again. Though the mountains be shaken and the hills be removed, yet my unfailing love for you will not be shaken nor my covenant of peace be removed," says the LORD, who has compassion on you.*[Is.54:7-10] But when we stay

in fellowship with God, His Word and His people we will never wander too far off the *tracks of righteousness.*[Ps.23:3] **Fellowship** means participating, partnering and sharing together and our fellowship includes **Fellowship with God**: *This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. If we claim to have fellowship with him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live out the truth.*[1Jn.1:5-6] **Fellowship with God's Word** (the Living Word—Jesus **and** the written Word—the Scriptures): *Tell them, "No, we're going to study the Scriptures." People who try the other ways get nowhere—they are completely in the dark!*[Is.8:20] and **Fellowship with God's people** (especially with those who don't quite see eye-to-eye with us): *Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed.*[Prov.15:22] *A man who isolates himself seeks his own desire; He rages against all wise judgment defies all sound judgment).*[Prov.18:1] *But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.*[1Jn.1:7]

The Holy Spirit is our Teacher and He is the best Teacher—He will never lead us into error but only into truth, so we can trust Him: *Those who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. You didn't receive a spirit that makes you a slave to fear once again. Instead you received the Holy Spirit, who makes you God's child. By the Spirit's power we call God "Abba." Abba means Father. The Spirit himself joins with our spirits. Together they give witness that we are God's children. As his children, we will receive all that he has for us. We will share what Christ receives. But we must share in his sufferings if we want to share in his glory.*[Rom.8:14-17] When the Holy Spirit spoke to Philip, he immediately obeyed and another soul was saved: *The Holy Spirit told Philip, "Go to that chariot. Stay near it." So Philip ran up to the chariot.*[Acts.8:29-30] As we learn to recognise God's leading and promptly obey Him, we will see God use us in wonderful ways to spread the Good News of the Kingdom of Heaven.

Questions

Why do we need to be born again before we can see the kingdom of God?
What do you think is the most basic sin?
What is the role (ministry) of the Holy Spirit?
Why can true Believers be deceived?
How can we ensure that we are not deceived?
How should we respond if we think that the Holy Spirit is prompting us?

Puritan Prayer: God of all Sovereignty, Your greatness is unsearchable, Your Name is most excellent and Your glory is magnificent. Ten thousand minister to You, ten thousand times ten thousand stand before You. We come boldly to Your throne because we will find grace to help us when we need it most—and we will receive Your mercy. Let us see Your hand in the instruments of our grief, rejoicing in Your over-ruling providence. Let not our weeping hinder sowing, nor our sorrow hinder duty. While living in a world of change let us seek the abiding City—the New Jerusalem. You are with us to our journey's end and we will glorify You in death as we do in life. We bless You for Your preservation, Your supplies and Your mercies. To You, the keeper of souls, we commit all we are and all we have. May no evil befall us, no sickness come nigh us and no horror disturb us! May our conscience be clear, our hearts pure and our sleep sweet! Now, with the innumerable company who neither slumber nor sleep, we join in ascribing blessing, honour, glory and power to the Lamb upon the throne, for ever and ever. Amen.

Sunday 17th August Ps.119:57-64 Acts 9

What is your Growth Forecast?

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

Growth forecasts are integral to all businesses and few investors will put money into a business if it is unable to provide a set of clear forecasts. But forecasts are just that—forecasts, a projection of expectations. There is no certainty that the forecast will be realised, and some turn out to be just wishful thinking—as we are seeing with this government's forecast of a possible £20 billion black hole in the country's economy, turning into a definite £40 billion (some say £50 billion) black hole! However, when it comes to Church, people try to make *growth forecasts* using the same criteria as businesses—but Church is not a business that produces "*Christians*" like widgets on a conveyer-belt. Church is primarily a spiritual organisation whose purpose is to spread the news about God's kingdom and then enable people to live as good citizens in God's kingdom. *He also gave apostles, prophets, missionaries, as well as pastors and teachers as gifts to his church. Their purpose is to prepare God's people to serve and to build up the body of Christ. This is to continue until all of us are united in our faith and in our knowledge about God's Son, until we become mature, until we measure up to Christ, who is the standard.*[Eph.4:11-13] Spiritual maturity is basically taking responsibility for your own faith and living as a good citizen in God's kingdom.

But for our growth forecast to become a reality, we must follow the God-given rules and stay on course regardless of what happens all around us—and as we know, the currency of God's kingdom is not £ sterling or any other form of finance but faith. The starting point for growth in the Church may be **no faith**—where conversion is needed—or **some faith**—where instruction is needed—or even **much faith** But we **all** need the exhortation and encouragement of preaching and biblical pastoral care to enable us to progress in our faith until we measure up to Christ who is the standard. Although faith is initially given to us, our faith-growth is determined mainly by these 2 factors: **1) our difficulties** and **2) our determination**! The more hardships we encounter, the more opportunities we will have to grow spiritually. *My brothers and sisters, be very happy when you are tested in different ways. You know that such testing of your faith produces endurance. Endure until your testing is over. Then you will be mature and complete, and you won't need anything.*[Jas.1:2-4] God really is in control of our lives and He *gives the Holy Spirit without limit!*[Jn.3:34] so we should never let fatigue distract or debilitate us: *Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. Whoever sows to please their flesh, from the flesh will reap destruction; whoever sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life. Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time* ***we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.*** *Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.*[Gal.5:7-10]

When it comes to the "g*rowth forecast*" for our Church congregation, our projection can often be greater than reality because although we want to grow numerically, we can't make people become Christians and neither can we make Christians come to our Church—these are factors outside of our control. The early Church grew in numbers because *the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved*[Acts.2:47] but which congregation a person attends is that person's own choice—and a person's **own spiritual growth** is also their own personal choice. Here at Deal Pentecostal Church, we deliberately plan our Church Services and activities to provide a balanced spiritual diet that will enable each member of our congregation to grow spiritually. This spiritual growth happens when *Believers are empowered and encouraged by the Holy Spirit*; and as Believers are empowered and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, *they worship God in wonder and awe and walk in the fear of the Lord.* Although worship is a spirit response, praise is a soul choice—we choose to say good things about God (benediction) and say "glory words" (doxology) to God: *My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.*[Lk1:46-47] *I delight greatly in the LORD; my soul rejoices in my God.*[Is.61:10]

If we don't grow spiritually we will stagnate and, like the Ephesians, may even lose our first love for God: *Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love. Remember the height from which*

you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place. But you have this in your favour: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.[Rev.2:4-7] The word *Nicolaitan* means "*to rule over*" and this was a legacy of the Old Covenant where the priests were the "*professional*" clergy who "*ruled over*" the people—the High Priest was the equivalent of our Prime Minister! In the New Covenant every Believer is a priest and there should not be any dominion by leaders over others. *Don't imagine us leaders to be something we aren't. We are servants of Christ, not his masters. We are guides into God's most sublime secrets, not security guards posted to protect them. The requirements for a good guide are reliability and accurate knowledge.*[1Cor.4:1-2] *Not that we lord it [have dominion] over your faith, but we work with you for your joy, because it is by faith you stand firm.*[2Cor.1:24] *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] The word *Nicolaitans* (*to rule over*) in Aramaic can be translated as "*the performing of rituals*" which would render the verse "*you despise the performing of rituals which I also despise.*" see: *not laying again the foundation of repentance from acts that lead to death.*[Heb.6:1] The Ephesian Church had been blessed with the ministry of so many spiritual giants—Priscilla and Aquila and Apollos (Acts.18). Paul (Acts 19), Timothy (1Tim.1:3), Trophimus (Acts.21:29), Tychicus (Eph.6:21), Onesiphorus (2Tim.1:16)—and John lived there too! But still the Ephesians lost their passion and commitment! However, Jesus did not write them off but encouraged them to get back on course—to repent and return to their first love. Repentance (change of mind) and a return to our first love, leads to restored fellowship (*eat from the tree of life*). Our first love is love for God and His kingdom: *'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment.*[Matt.22:37-38] *But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.*[Matt.6:33] And the way we keep our first love alive and animated, is to *worship God in wonder and awe and walk in the fear of the Lord.*

The well-known early C20th Evangelist, R.A. Torrey, said: *Triumphant prayer is almost impossible where there is neglect of the study of the Word of God. Prayer that is born of meditation upon the Word of God is the prayer that soars upward most easily to God's listening ears.* As we become more Bible literate, we will become more confident in our understanding of what Christ accomplished in His vicarious death, which will then enable us to become more confident in our praying—we are absolutely assured that we are accepted by God because we know that we have been forgiven, justified, sanctified, cleansed and made righteous! As we become more confident in praying, our relationship with God becomes more attractive and less arduous—and we will automatically *worship God in wonder and awe and walk in the fear of the Lord.* Christianity is simple but not simplistic; it is profound but not complicated. *I tell you the truth, unless you turn from your sins and become like little children, you will never get into the Kingdom of Heaven.*[Matt.18:23] Jesus never intended Christianity to be wearisome or onerous. *Jesus said, "Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you. Let me teach you, because I am humble and gentle at heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy to bear, and the burden I give you is light."*[Matt.11:28-30] And neither did Jesus intend prayer to become wearisome or onerous. *I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this is what you were pleased to do.*[Matt.11:25-26] Theology is what we understand about God and is the vehicle that takes us beyond the "veil" into God's presence. To avoid unnecessary detours, we need clarity in our lives True theology is understanding the Word of God, it is the thought process that gives us full access to all of

heaven's fulness which God has prepared for us. Poor theology makes Christianity hard work and wearies the soul but good theology makes Christianity enjoyable and refreshes the soul! Poor theology is another name for ritualist religion and is based on perceived inadequacies—it tries to smooth things over instead of dealing with man's greatest need, which is to be righteous in God's sight. Ritualist religion is a reminder of sin but true Christianity accepts that Jesus is enough—and what is enough, doesn't need to be repeated because it can be relied upon! When we are righteous, we can stand before God in a state of perfection, not by performance but as a gift. We have freedom in God's presence and what we do shows convinced we are that we have been made righteous. Righteousness is not a process but an event—we are either righteous or we aren't righteous! We are as righteous as Jesus because He has become our righteousness.[1Cor.1:20]

Prayer is one of the greatest privileges of God's grace and is the means by which we commune with Him in pouring out our hearts, presenting our requests, and stilling our spirits to hear His voice. Worship is about adoring God with no thought of the worshiper benefiting in any way! Any miracle, any work of the Spirit, is the result of God's grace and sovereignty—we can never coerce God into action on our behalf. Mme Guyon, a C17th French Christian, wrote a book called *A Short and Very Easy Method of Prayer* in which she encourages every Christian to take prayer seriously, yet keep it simple: *All are capable of prayer, and it is a dreadful misfortune that almost all the world have conceived the idea that they are not called to prayer. We are all called to prayer, as we are all called to salvation. Let all pray: you should live by prayer, as you should live by love. 'I counsel you to buy of me gold tried in the fire, that ye may be rich.'*[Rev.3:18] *This is very easily obtained, much more easily than you can conceive. All who are desirous of prayer, may easily pray, enabled by those ordinary graces and gifts of the Holy Spirit which are common to all men. You must, then, learn a species of prayer which may be exercised at all times; which does not obstruct outward employments; which may be equally practised by princes, kings, prelates, priests and magistrates, soldiers and children, tradesmen, laborers, women, and sick persons; it is not the prayer of the head, but* ***of the heart****. Nothing is so easily obtained as the possession and enjoyment of God. He is more present to us than we are to ourselves. He is more desirous of giving Himself to us than we are to possess Him; we only need to know how to seek Him, and the way is easier and more natural to us than breathing. I would warmly recommend to all, never to finish prayer without remaining some little time afterward in a respectful silence.*

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

So let's make the *growth forecast* for us as individuals and also for our church, to reach spiritual maturity as we are enlarged, empowered and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, just as it was for

the early church: *The congregations grew larger and larger with the Believers being empowered and encouraged by the Holy Spirit. They worshipped God in wonder and awe and walked in the fear of the Lord.*[Acts9:31]

Questions

What is the purpose of Church?
What is Church growth?
What is a realistic "growth forecast" for our Church?
How can we implement that forecast?
What is the "*first love*" that the Ephesian Church lost?
How would you describe your first encounter with Jesus?

Puritan Prayer: O God my exceeding joy, singing Your praises uplifts my heart for You are a fountain of delight and You bless the soul that joys in You. You are in Jesus, the object of inexpressible joy. I take exceeding pleasure in the thought of You and I will at all times rest myself in Your excellences, Your goodness and Your loving-kindness. Give me the sweet results of faith in my secret character and in my public life. Cast cords of love around my thoughts for You hold me and will never let me go. May the Saviour's wounds sway me more than the sceptre of princes. Let me love You with a love that covers and swallows up all, that I may not violate my chaste union with the Beloved.

Psalm 119:57-64 You are my portion, LORD; I have promised to obey your words. I have sought your face with all my heart; be gracious to me according to your promise. I have considered my ways and have turned my steps to your statutes. I will hasten and not delay to obey your commands. Though the wicked bind me with ropes, I will not forget your law. At midnight I rise to give you thanks for your righteous laws. I am a friend to all who fear you, to all who follow your precepts. The earth is filled with your love, LORD; teach me your decrees.

Sunday 24th August Ps.119:65-72 Acts 10

Are you good enough for God? *Do not call something unclean if God has made it clean.*[Acts.10:15]

Religion is "*the belief in, and worship of, a personal God*", but without Jesus, religion will only keep people away from God not connect them to God! Religion is man's attempt to connect with God and, as Adam discovered, any attempt to cover our shame from God, results in fear: *Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves. Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the LORD God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the LORD God among the trees of the garden. But the LORD God called to the man, "Where are you?" He answered, "I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid."*[Gen.3:7-10] Religion is man's attempt to get to God but Christianity is God coming to people in Jesus. Religion keeps people away from God—but Christianity unites people with God through Jesus. Religion spiritualizes God—but Jesus humanises God. Religion is a ritual, a dogma, a ceremony—but Christianity is a relationship with God through Jesus Christ. Religion is following a set of rules—but Christianity is following Jesus Christ. Without Jesus, religious litanies, liturgies, rituals, language and clothes become barriers that separate people from God rather than bridges to unite them with God. And even with true religion, people remain alienated from God if they are only spectators instead of participators—and the Jewish religion was no exception! Jesus told the people who studied the Scriptures, that they had no spiritual life because the Word was only in their head and not in their heart: *The Father who sent me has himself given witness about me. You have never heard his voice. You have never seen what he really looks like. And his word does not live in you. This is because you do not believe the One he sent. You study the Scriptures carefully. You study them because you think they will give you eternal life. The Scriptures you study give witness about me. But you refuse to come to me and receive life.*[Jn.5:37-40] Although Judaism's

ritualistic religion was ordained by God, it left worshippers feeling guilty because their sins were only "*atoned*" by the animal sacrifices (*atoned* means *covered up*). The Old Covenant (*Judaism*) never dealt with people's conscience and was only intended to be temporary until the New Covenant came. When Jesus introduced the New Covenant, He called it the ***New*** Covenant because it replaced the Old Covenant and made it obsolete. The New Covenant actually deals with sin by completely removing sin's stain and guilt—and so it will never be replaced with another Covenant in the future! *But in fact the ministry Jesus has received is as superior to theirs as the covenant of which he is mediator is superior to the old one, since the new covenant is established on better promises. For if there had been nothing wrong with that first covenant, no place would have been sought for another… But this is the new covenant I will make with the people of Israel on that day, says the LORD: I will put my laws in their minds, and I will write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people… And I will forgive their wickedness, and I will never again remember their sins." When God speaks of a "new" covenant, it means he has made the first one obsolete. It is now out of date and will soon disappear*[Heb.8:6-13]

God is holy and He expects us to be holy too: *Never allow yourselves to become unclean… Here is the reason: I am the LORD your God. You must live holy lives. Be holy because I am holy. Never become unclean.*[Lev.11:43-44] But no one is truly holy: *No one is right with God, no one at all.*[Rom.3:10] *There isn't anyone on earth who does only what is right and never sins.*[Eccl.7:20] *Because all people have sinned, they have fallen short of God's glory.*[Rom.3:23] And so we need a mediator—someone who is holy and will speak to God on our behalf. *Yet if there is an angel on his side as a mediator, one out of a thousand, to tell a man what is right for him, to be gracious to him and say, 'Spare him from going down to the pit; I have found a ransom for him'—then his flesh is renewed like a child's; it is restored as in the days of his youth. He prays to God and finds favour with him, he sees God's face and shouts for joy; he is restored by God to his righteous state. Then he comes to men and says, 'I sinned, and perverted what was right, but I did not get what I deserved. He redeemed my soul from going down to the pit, and I will live to enjoy the light.'*[Job.33:23-28] Under the Old Covenant, God ordained human priests to mediate. *Tell Aaron and his sons, 'This is how you are to bless the Israelites. Say to them: "The LORD bless you and keep you; The LORD make His face shine upon you, And be gracious to you; The LORD lift up His countenance upon you, And give you peace." So they shall put My name on the children of Israel, and I will bless them.'*[Nu.6:24-27] Jesus is the only person who was born holy: *the baby to be born will be holy, and he will be called the Son of God.*[Lk.1:35] So only Jesus can truly mediate between us and God and bridge the great divide between *holy* and *unholy ("clean" and "unclean"*): *There is one God. There is also one mediator between God and humans—a human, Christ Jesus. He sacrificed himself for all people to free them from their sins. This message is valid for every era.*[1Tim.2:5-6] *Both the one who makes men holy and those who are made holy are of the same family… Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil.*[Heb.2:11-14] *But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace… His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility.*[Eph.2:13-16]

Last week we mentioned the Nicolaitans: *But you have this in your favour: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.*[Rev.2:6-7] We saw that the word *Nicolaitans* in Greek means "*to rule over*" and that the Nicolaitans were the start of the professional clergy who "*ruled over*" the churches instead of treating every Believer as a priest of the New Covenant. *But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.*[1Pet.2:9] The word *Nicolaitans* in Aramaic can be translated as "*the performing of rituals*" which would render the verse "*you despise the performing of rituals which I also despise.*" The Nicolaitans started to turn Christianity

into a ritualistic religion—just like Judaism. But the New Covenant is different from the Old Covenant. Religion, including the Old Covenant, can never clear the conscience of the worshipper because rituals are "*useless*" and lead to death: *not laying again the foundation of repentance from useless rituals [acts that lead to death].*[Heb.6:1] *How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death [useless rituals], so that we may serve the living God! 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.9:13-15]

Unfortunately, ritualistic religion has continued to influence Christianity and alienate worshippers from God by using status, rituals, language and even clothes, so that people remain just spectators instead of becoming participators. The main leaders of the Reformation in Europe during the C16th were Luther, Zwingli and Calvin and their views on Church liturgy were distinctly different—Luther believed that in worship, God's people should sing hymns, Zwingli thought they should not sing at all and Calvin took the middle ground and thought they should only sing directly from God's Word. Lawrence Roff wrote: *"Picture in your mind a huge kettle filled to the brim with Roman doctrine and worship practice. Luther reached in to remove whatever was unbiblical and kept the rest; Calvin dumped out the contents and started over again, placing in the pot only what the Scripture warranted. This was the beginning of the regulative principle of worship."* Luther saw music as a gift from God intended to carry theological truths into our hearts and said: *anyone who does not regard music as a marvellous creation of God, must be a clodhopper indeed and does not deserve to be called a human being!* Until 1534 when Henry VIII separated the English Church from Rome, Church services were conducted in Latin, (a language the congregation did not understand), and the congregation only ate the Lord's Supper (the *mass*) once a year—at Easter (only the priests drank the wine). In 1544, Thomas Cranmer (who was the Archbishop of Canterbury), published the first officially authorised service in English called *the Exhortation and Litany*. Under Edward VI, in 1549, Cranmer published a full English prayer book but 7 years later, during Mary's 5 year reign, he was burnt at the stake for his work (under Mary, a total of 284 Protestants were executed and another 34 died in prison). However, even though Church services were held in English, the services remained a liturgical ritual that had to be rigidly adhered to. The *Act of Uniformity 1549* enforced the use of the Prayer Book and if any Minister deviated from it, the punishment was 6 months imprisonment for the 1st offence, 12 months for 2nd offence and life imprisonment for the 3rd offence! There was much opposition to the introduction of a liturgy in English and in the West Country, over 5,500 people died in what became known as the "*Prayer Book Rebellion*". The Prayer Book was also rejected by the Scots and at a mass in St Giles' Cathedral, the Bishop of Brechin was forced to protect himself by pointing loaded pistols at the congregation while he read from the Prayer Book! In 1645, during the Protectorate period, Cranmer's Prayer Book was outlawed by Parliament and replaced by the *Directory of Public Worship*—which was a set of instructions rather than a prayer book. But when the monarchy was restored, an updated version of Cranmer's Prayer Book known as the "*1662 Book of Common Prayer*" was introduced (and is still used today in some CofE Churches). The Presbyterians had wanted an alternative service book, saying that "*it was improper for lay people to take any vocal part in prayer (as in the Litany or Lord's Prayer), other than to say 'amen'*" and that "*no set prayer should exclude the option of an extempore alternative from the minister*". However, the bishops rejected extempore prayer as apt to be filled with "*idle, impertinent, ridiculous, sometimes seditious, impious and blasphemous expressions.*" Even the Baptists were against congregational participation. At their first Assembly after the *Glorious Revolution* (1688), the General Baptists considered the question of psalm-singing and decided that this was "*so strangely foreign to the evangelical worship that*

it was not conceived anyways safe for the churches to admit to such carnal formalities." It reiterated the rule laid down by Thomas Grantham that the singing of psalms in public worship should be by a single voice only. "*As the prayer of one in the church is the prayer of the whole church so the singing of one [person] in the church is the singing of the whole church.*" How different from the early Church! *All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.*[Acts.2:4] *they raised their voices together in prayer to God.*[Acts.4:24] *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.4:31] *When you come together, each of you has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. Everything must be done so that the church may be built up.*[1Cor.14:26] *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.5:19-20]

Yes, religion will alienate people from God and we are foolish to make Christianity complicated when it is simple, settled and spiritual. As Mme. Guyon wrote: *All are capable of prayer. All who are desirous of prayer, may easily pray, enabled by those ordinary graces and gifts of the Holy Spirit which are common to all men. You must, then, learn a species of prayer which may be exercised at all times; which does not obstruct outward employments; which may be equally practised by princes, kings, prelates, priests and magistrates, soldiers and children, tradesmen, labourers, women, and sick persons; it is not the prayer of the head, but* ***of the heart****.* Although we are using some of the old Puritan prayers, they are not a liturgy to be read as a ritual but a platform to prompt our own prayers—a launch-pad to stimulate our faith as we pray. Jesus said: *And when you come before God… Find a quiet, secluded place so you won't be tempted to role-play before God. Just be there as simply and honestly as you can manage. The focus will shift from you to God, and you will begin to sense his grace. The world is full of so-called prayer warriors who are prayer-ignorant. They're full of formulas and programs and advice, peddling techniques for getting what you want from God. Don't fall for that nonsense. This is your Father you are dealing with, and he knows better than you what you need. With a God like this loving you, you can pray very simply. Like this: Our Father in heaven, Reveal who you are…*[Matt.6:5-9]

Let's remember the lesson that Peter had to learn: *Do not call something unclean if God has made it clean.*[Acts.10:15] God has declared every person of special worth and dignity and the entire world (four corners of the sheet) needs to hear the good news—and they need to be able to understand the message for themselves so they can come to God with boldness and confidence. *So let us come boldly to the throne of our gracious God. There we will receive his mercy, and we will find grace to help us when we need it most.*[Heb.4:16] Jesus has made us clean by His Word: *"You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain joined to me, and I will remain joined to you.*[Jn.15:3-4] So we don't need a human priest to intercede for us, because we have Jesus as our High Priest who has united us with God: *But because Jesus lives forever, his priesthood lasts forever. Therefore he is able, once and forever, to save those who come to God through him. He lives forever to intercede with God on their behalf.*[Heb.7:24-25] And neither do we need a ritual in order to relate to God, because we have a relationship with Jesus: *the sheep recognize [the shepherd's] voice and come to him. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. After he has gathered his own flock, he walks ahead of them, and they follow him because they know his voice… I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me.*[Jn.10:3-4;14] All we need is Jesus Himself—and because we have received Him, let's live in fellowship (harmony, unity and peace) with Him!

Questions

What is "*holiness*"?

What did God mean when He said "*Be holy because I am holy*"?

How can we live up to God's standard?

Why is religion such a powerful influence?

What do you think are the "*useless rituals that lead to death*" *(Heb.6:1;9:14)*?
Are religious rituals and liturgies right or wrong?
Why is the Covenant that Jesus introduced called "*new*"?
Puritan Prayer—Future Blessing: O Lord God, there is no blessing we implore but that You are able to give, have promised to give and have already given, to countless multitudes like ourselves. May we be willing to receive the supply of our need from Your bounty—to this end convince us of sin and soften our hard hearts so we may look with wonder, submission and delight to the provision You have made in the salvation of sinners, for the glory of Your Name. You give us a hope that makes us not ashamed, a love that excites to holy obedience, a joy in You that is our strength and a faith in Your Son who loved us and died for us. May we persevere in duty (even when we are not fully conscious of You), wait upon You and keep Your ways, living continually as on the brink of eternity. We are at Your disposal for the duties and events of life, submitting our preferences to Your wisdom and will. May we know the blessedness of people whose strength is in You and in whose hearts are the highways to heaven.
Ps.119:65-72 Do good to your servant according to your word, LORD. Teach me knowledge and good judgment, for I trust your commands. Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I obey your word. You are good, and what you do is good; teach me your decrees. Though the arrogant have smeared me with lies, I keep your precepts with all my heart. Their hearts are callous and unfeeling, but I delight in your law. It was good for me to be afflicted so that I might learn your decrees. The law from your mouth is more precious to me than thousands of pieces of silver and gold.

Sunday 31st August Ps.119:73-80 Acts 11

Remain true to the Lord with all your heart! *When he arrived and saw the evidence of the grace of God, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts.*[Acts.11:23]
King David was a true worshipper who was intimate with God. Nothing could stop David from worshiping God—and even when he sinned atrociously, it didn't prevent him from reaching out to God: *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… wash me, and I will be whiter than snow. Let me hear joy and gladness… Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me. Then I will teach transgressors your ways, so that sinners will turn back to you. Deliver me from the guilt of bloodshed, O God, you who are God my Saviour, and my tongue will sing of your righteousness. Open my lips, Lord, and my mouth will declare your praise… My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise.*[Ps.51:1-17] David didn't need a quiet, tranquil environment in order to worship God because he worshipped God from his heart and David's heart was a quiet, tranquil place because God had given him rest. David even had rest in the midst of his enemies! *the LORD had given him rest from all his enemies around him.*[2Sam.7:1] This "*rest*" that God gave David was also promised to his son: *But you will have a son who will be a man of peace and rest, and I will give him rest from all his enemies on every side. His name will be Solomon, and I will grant Israel peace and quiet during his reign. He is the one who will build a house for my Name. He will be my son, and I will be his father. And I will establish the throne of his kingdom over Israel forever.*[1Chron.22:9-10] This promise was a prophecy about Jesus: *In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, 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. 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"?[Heb.1:1-5] And regardless of what is going on around us, we too can have rest because God has brought us into His Kingdom and qualified us to share in the inheritance of His holy people: *giving joyful thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of his holy people in the kingdom of light. For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.*[Col.1:12-14] But like David, we can and we must ensure that our soul (*i.e.* our personality with all of its emotions) has put its hope in God—and especially if we feel downcast: *Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God.*[Ps.43:5] We must make our lips do their duty by only saying what God says about us and our situation. *We capture our rebellious thoughts and teach them to obey Christ.*[2Cor.10:6] This quiet assurance and spiritual rest is our inheritance and we should make every effort to enter that rest: *Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification.*[Rom.14:19] *Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will perish by following their example of disobedience. 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.*[Heb.4:11-12] This rest from God will keep us safe—and it will especially keep us safe from worry and anxiety (worry and anxiety will easily lead us into unbelief, which is the quickest way to oppose God). *The person who rests in the shadow of the Most High God will be kept safe by the Mighty One. I will say about the LORD, "He is my place of safety. He is like a fort to me. He is my God. I trust in him." He will certainly save you from hidden traps and from deadly sickness. He will cover you with his wings. Under the feathers of his wings you will find safety. He is faithful. He will keep you safe like a shield or a tower. You won't have to be afraid of the terrors that come during the night. You won't have to fear the arrows that come at you during the day. You won't have to be afraid of the sickness that attacks in the darkness. You won't have to fear the plague that destroys at noon.*[Ps.91:1-6] This is peace and rest is not reserved for a few specially favoured Christians but is the inheritance of all Christians—actually, God doesn't have any favourites but He does have intimates! Intimacy means close, private and familiar—and if we are going to develop a close, private and familiar relationship with God, we have to fellowship with God. But if we are going to speak to God, we must listen to Him first. Bonhoffer said: *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.* That is why we always start our meetings with reading the Scriptures out aloud (and it is also Biblical: *devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching.*[1Tim.4:13]

Good theology helps us live consistent, faithful and effective lives that honour God. The word "*theology*" comes from Greek "*theos*" (meaning "*God*") and "*logos"* (meaning "*word*" or "*study*") and so "*theology*" is what we understand about God. If we have a Biblically sound understanding of God—of who He is, what He has done and what He has said—it is easy to trust God (which is what "*faith*" means). Good theology keeps Christianity easy and enjoyable but poor theology makes Christianity hard work! Too many Christians spend their time and energy trying to do what Jesus has already done for us. They are not "*rightly dividing*" the Word of God and have in a sort of "*christianised*" form of Old Covenant religion by observing "*holy*" days, eating certain food, or not eating certain food—either fasting (*i.e.* abstaining from food), or being faddy (*i.e.* not eating "*un-holy"* food), visiting "*holy*" places (pilgrimages), wanting a priest to mediate with God on their behalf. *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] *But God gave you new life together with Christ. He forgave us all of our sins. He wiped out the written Law with its rules. The Law was against us. It opposed us. He took it away and nailed it to the cross. He took away the weapons of the powers*

and authorities. He made a public show of them. He won the battle over them by dying on the cross. So don't let anyone judge you because of what you eat or drink. Don't let anyone judge you about holy days. I'm talking about special feasts and New Moons and Sabbath days. They are only a shadow of the things that were going to come. But what is real is found in Christ.[Col.2:13-17] This is why we should be ensure that our hymns, songs and prayers reflect the truth about God and especially reflect the finished work of Jesus and not promote sentimental emotional that will lead to deception. Good theology is not the result of academic study but understanding the implications of the New Covenant and then putting God's words into practice. *Why do you call me, 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I say? I will show you what he is like who comes to me and hears my words and puts them into practice. He is like a man building a house, who dug down deep and laid the foundation on rock. When a flood came, the torrent struck that house but could not shake it, because it was well built. But the one who hears my words and does not put them into practice is like a man who built a house on the ground without a foundation. The moment the torrent struck that house, it collapsed and its destruction was complete.*[Lk.6:46:49] God is good, His Word is true and it works in my life—and when we act on God's Word, our "*house*" will stand regardless of what life may throw at us, no matter what difficulties, stresses and struggles we face. But if we don't put God's words into practice we will surely fall. "*Putting God's words into practice*" does not mean just going through the motions of looking like a Christian or sounding like a Christian, but actually living out our beliefs. *As for you, son of man, your countrymen are talking together about you by the walls and at the doors of the houses, saying to each other, 'Come and hear the message that has come from the LORD.' My people come to you, as they usually do, and sit before you to listen to your words, but they do not put them into practice. With their mouths they express devotion, but their hearts are greedy for unjust gain. Indeed, to them you are nothing more than one who sings love songs with a beautiful voice and plays an instrument well, for they hear your words but do not put them into practice.*[Ez.33:30-32] And when we do put God's Word into practice, we will be able to say with Habakkuk: *Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD,I will be joyful in God my Saviour. The Sovereign LORD is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, he enables me to tread on the heights.*[Hab.3:17-19] This rejoicing in the Lord, regardless of our circumstances, comes through knowing the Scriptures and knowing that we are righteous in God's sight: *You will keep in perfect peace those whose minds are steadfast, because they trust in you.*[Is.26:3] *Great peace have those who love your law, and nothing can make them stumble.*[Ps.119:165] *The fruit of that righteousness will be peace; its effect will be quietness and confidence forever. My people will live in peaceful dwelling places, in secure homes, in undisturbed places of rest. Though hail flattens the forest and the city is levelled completely, how blessed you will be, sowing your seed by every stream, and letting your cattle and donkeys range free.*[Is.32:17-20]

Formal liturgy can become a ritual that leads to death if it is merely going through the motions of worshipping God—but when mixed with faith, the Holy Spirit can make those same liturgies of prayers and responses into something living and joyful! Many of Wesley's hymns were originally written as "*holy poems*" to assist with personal devotions, and they can still inspire our worship when we read them with the eye of faith. The "*Puritan Prayers*" that we use each week, were written hundreds of years ago, but they still inspire and encourage when mixed with faith. Faith is our own personal trust in God and unbelief is our own personal distrust of God *If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all.*[Is.7:9] *Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy, because it is by faith you stand firm.*[2Cor.1:24] To trust God means to love and obey Him: *To love God means that we obey his commandments. Obeying his commandments isn't difficult because everyone who has been born from God has won the victory over the world. Our faith is what wins the victory over the world. Who wins the victory over the world? Isn't it the person who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?*[1Jn.5:3-5] *For though I am absent from you in body, I am present with you in spirit and delight to see how orderly you*

are and how firm your faith in Christ is.[Col.2:5] The opposite of **faith** is **fear**. *Phobia* is the medical term for fear and the list of phobias is nearly endless. There were over 500 phobias recorded in one list that I saw, including: Phobophobia—fear of phobias; Aibohphobia—fear of palindromes (which it actually is!); Bibliophobia—fear of books! But the antidote to all **fear** is **faith**—that simple trust in God that is based on His behaviour (what He has already done) and His Word (what He has already said). *When I worried about many things, your assuring words soothed my soul.*[Ps.94:19] God's Name and His Word is the real answer: *I will praise your name for your love and your faithfulness, for you have exalted above all things your name and your word. When I called, you answered me; you made me bold and stouthearted.*[Ps.138:2-3] Faith does not replace fear; faith puts fear in its proper place! No one goes through life without experiencing fear, but people who fear God (*i.e.* reverence and worship God), handle the threats and challenges of life differently than those crippled by fear or filled with false confidence. *I know that it will go better with those who fear God, who are reverent before him. Yet because the wicked do not fear God, it will not go well with them, and their days will not lengthen like a shadow.*[Ecc.8:12-13] Someone once said: *Fear knocked at the door but when Faith answered it there was no one there!* Two other quotes on fear: *Are you afraid? Remember the "fear nots" of the Bible.*[Elisabeth Elliot] *The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom, and they that lack the beginning have neither middle nor end.*[John Bunyan] **Fear** and its children, **worry** and **anxiety**, will weaken and then ultimately destroy our faith if we don't deal with them: *So then, banish anxiety from your heart and cast off the troubles of your body, for youth and vigour are meaningless. Remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come.*[Eccl.11:10-12:1] *Be strong and courageous, because you will lead these people to inherit the land I swore to their forefathers to give them. 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. Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful. Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go.*[Josh.1:6-9] *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. Be self-controlled and alert. Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings.*[1Pet.5:6-9] **Faith**, **hope** and **love** are "*identical triplets*" and will always be found together! *And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.*[1Cor.13:13] *Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith; be men of courage; be strong. Do everything in love.*[1Cor.16:13-14]

Let's determine to be intimate with God by putting His word into practice and enjoy His rest regardless of our natural circumstances: *Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. 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. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.*[Col.3:12-17] And then we will remain true to the Lord with all your heart: *Those of us who have taken refuge in him hold on to the confidence we have been given. We have this confidence as a sure and strong anchor for our lives.*[Heb.6:18-19]

Questions
What is peace?
How can we be at peace in times of trouble?
What is the difference between faith and fear?
Is fear a sin?
What should we do when we feel afraid?
What does it mean to "*build your house on the rock*"?

Puritan Prayer: God's Good Pleasure
Sovereign Lord, Your will is supreme in heaven and earth, and all beings are creatures of Your power. You are the Father of our spirits—Your inspiration gives us understanding and Your providence governs our lives. But, Lord, we were sinners in Your sight; You judged us so, and if we deny it, we make You a liar—yet in Christ, we are reconciled to You. Give us the ear of faith to hear You, the eye of faith to see You, the hand of faith to receive You, the appetite of faith to feed upon You; that we might find in You light, riches, honour and eternal life. You are the inviting One—may we hearken to You. You are the Almighty Instructor—teach us to live for You. Possess our minds with the grandeur of Your perfections. Your love to us in Jesus is firm and changeless. Nothing can separate us from Your love, and in the enjoyment of Your love nothing can make us miserable. Preserve us from all hypocrisy and formality in religion. Enable us to remember what You are and what we are; to recall Your holiness and our unworthiness; to approach You boldly, yet clothed with humility. Let us never forget Your patience, wisdom, power, faithfulness and care—and let us never cease to respond to Your invitations

Ps.119:73-80
Your hands made me and formed me; give me understanding to learn your commands. May those who fear you rejoice when they see me, for I have put my hope in your word. I know, LORD, that your laws are righteous, and that in faithfulness you have afflicted me. May your unfailing love be my comfort, according to your promise to your servant. Let your compassion come to me that I may live, for your law is my delight. May the arrogant be put to shame for wronging me without cause; but I will meditate on your precepts. May those who fear you turn to me, those who understand your statutes. May I wholeheartedly follow your decrees, that I may not be put to shame.

September:

Remember. *Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. Heb.13:7-8*

Thought for the Month:

God's Name, God's Kingdom and God's will must be the primary object of Christian prayer. Of course it is not as if God needed our prayers, but they are the means by which the disciples become partakers in the heavenly treasure for which they pray. *Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "The Cost Of Discipleship"*

Sunday 7th September Ps.119:81-88 Acts 12

The difference between talking and praying to God. *The church was earnestly praying to God…*[Acts.12:5]

Wee Willie Winkie climbs the stairs; Wee Willie Winkie kneels to say his prayers:
Hands together, eyes closed, a bowing of his head
Mumbles words his mother taught him—tumbles into bed.
Wee Willie Winkie never fails to pray; Wee Willie Winkie knows just what to pray.
Wee Willie wonders what good the words have done
For he has never prayed a prayer with words that are his own! *Gordon Baily*

Anyone can talk to God but only Believers can truly pray to God. Although Abimelech talked to God, it was Abraham's prayers that God answered—the person who God called righteous: *But God came to Abimelech in a dream one night and said to him, "You are as good as dead because of the woman you have taken; she is a married woman… Now return the man's wife, for he is a prophet, and he will pray for you and you will live.*[Gen.20:3-7] It was Job's prayer that God accepted: *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.42:8-9] God is Spirit and those who are spiritually dead cannot fellowship with God. Unbelievers can talk to God but that is quite different from relating to God and having an open line of communication with Him. Even Believers who are double minded have no assurance that God will answer their prayers: *If you need wisdom, ask our generous God, and he will give it to you. He will not rebuke you for asking. But when you ask him, be sure that your faith is in God alone. Do not waver, for a person with divided loyalty is as unsettled as a wave of the sea that is blown and tossed by the wind. Such people should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. Their loyalty is divided between God and the world, and they are unstable in everything they do.*[Jas.1:5-8] God is not impressed with the religious "*prayers*" of unbelievers and says they are detestable: *The LORD is far from the wicked, but he hears the prayer of the righteous.*[Prov.15:29] *The LORD detests the sacrifice of the wicked, but the prayer of the upright pleases him.*[Prov.15:8] Obviously, God always hears and responds to anyone who calls out to Him for forgiveness: *Scripture says, "The one who trusts in him will never be put to shame." There is no difference between those who are Jews and those who are not. The same Lord is Lord of all. He richly blesses everyone who calls on him. Scripture says, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." How can they call on him unless they believe in him? How can they believe in him unless they hear about him? How can they hear about him unless someone preaches to them? And how can anyone preach without being sent? It is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!"*[Rom.10:11-15] However, the fact that they called on Jesus' Name in faith changes them from an unbeliever to a Believer! But before we became a Christian our talking to God could not really be called "*prayer*" because: *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 our first real prayer was ask God to save us: *Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.*[Acts.2:21]

After we become a Believer, we are in fellowship with God and prayer is a way of life for us because it is our line of communication with God: *Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.*[1Thess.5:16-18] *Therefore I want the men everywhere to pray, lifting up holy hands without anger or disputing.*[1Tim.2:8] However, to pray effectively we need to keep the faith and stay away from sin: *If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened; but God has surely listened and heard my voice in prayer. Praise be to God, who has not rejected my prayer or withheld his love from me!*[Ps.66:18-20] *But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.*[Matt.6:15] Some thirty years ago, I was challenged to stop praying "*silly*" prayers—to stop praying prayers that God can't answer, won't answer or has already answered. Jesus said that we would have to give an account for every empty word (literally *word that does not work*): *But I tell you that everyone will have to give account on the day of judgment for every empty word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned.*[Matt.12:36-37] So we need to be careful how we pray and make sure our prayers are effective and "*work*".

An **effective prayer** has to prayed by **a righteous person** (note that James writes "*person*" not large number of people!): *The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective. Elijah was as human as we are, and yet when he prayed earnestly that no rain would fall, none fell for three and a half years! Then, when he prayed again, the sky sent down rain and the earth began to yield its crops.*[Jas.5:16-18] A righteous person is not someone who does something good or even someone who says "*prayers*" but someone who believes God: *What does Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness."*[Rom.4:3] And God is attentive to the prayers of the righteous: *Whoever would love life and see good days must keep their tongue from evil and their lips from deceitful speech. They must turn from evil and do good; they must seek peace and pursue it. For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their prayer, but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.*[1Pet.3:10-12] When we pray we are often unsure how to pray or what to pray for, but the Holy Spirit is there to help us. *In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God.*[Rom.8:26-27] **Effective prayers aren't extended prayers:** *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…"*[Matt.6:5-9] **Although God answers prayer, it is faith that God responds to!** When we are "*in faith*" (*i.e. trusting God*), we can be sure that God hears us when we pray: *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.*[1Jn.5:13-14] *Yes, I prayed to my God for help. He heard me from his sanctuary; my cry to him reached his ears.*[Ps.18:6] To "*trust*" God means that we are at rest in His presence and no longer feeling guilty or anxious because we have complete assurance of God's acceptance and forgiveness. *Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful.*[Heb.10:19-23] But as Greg Koukl points out, faith in and of itself accomplishes nothing.

The notion that faith saves is a common misconception among Protestants, but it's easily rectified with an illustration. Imagine venturing out on a frozen lake with full faith and confidence that the surface will bear your weight. Will that profound belief alone keep you safe? No. If you've stepped out on thin ice, you're heading for a cold soaking no matter how unshakable your conviction is. The world is filled with people overflowing with unwavering religious belief. Yet their confidence will be useless if that which they've trusted in has no ability to save them. They've strayed onto thin ice. Faith by itself, no matter how strong, cannot rectify false hope. It benefits nothing. As I have written elsewhere, "If we are reaching out with the hand of faith to grasp a fantasy, then there will be no one there to rescue us, no matter how strong or sincere our faith is." Though *sola fide*—"faith alone"—is part of the bedrock of our Christian confession, its point is to distinguish trust in Christ from personal merit. Works don't rescue us; Jesus does. "Sola fide" reminds us that faith is the lone means of connecting to the redeemer who gathers us to himself and saves us. When we rely on Jesus rather than our own efforts, we find safety. He does for us what we could never do for ourselves. Jesus is thick ice. To be most precise, then, we should say that Jesus saves us, not our faith, but he saves us through our faith. Our salvation is not grounded on our faith. It is grounded on the capable rescuer in whom we place our trust. (*Rapid Fire – Part 1 STR.org)*

Maturity is committing our way to the Lord and trusting Him with the outcome. *Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will direct your paths.*[Prov.3:5-6] Faith is never disappointed because our trust is in God not what He does. *Teach me knowledge and good judgment, for I believe in your commands. Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I obey your word. You are good, and what you do is good; teach me your decrees.*[Ps.119:66-68] Although faith and fate may appear similar, they are the exact opposite of one another. **Fate says: what will be, will be done;** whereas **Faith says: God's will, will be done!** When we pray, we must **believe God**, which means that we **trust Him.** This is not the same as "*believing*" for a specific outcome to our prayers because we cannot dictate to God how He answers our prayers. But we can ask God to help us, to intervene and even change our situation. As we saw last week, **fear** and its children, **worry** and **anxiety**, will weaken and then ultimately destroy our faith if we don't deal with them: *So then, banish anxiety from your heart and cast off the troubles of your body, for youth and vigour are meaningless. Remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come.*[Eccl.11:10-12:1] Anxiety and fear are banished when we have total confidence in God as our Heavenly Father: *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.1:6-8] Cain's unbelief showed on his face: *The LORD looked with favour on Abel and his offering, but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favour. So Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast. Then the LORD said to Cain, "Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast [dejected, disappointed]? If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must rule over it."*[Gen.4:4-5] The reason Cain was angry and his face was downcast was because of his unbelief—Abel believed God (*by faith*) but Cain was living in unbelief: *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] How different from the blessing of God which also shows on our face: *"The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; the LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace."*[Nu.6:24-26]

Praying is a partnership in the Gospel: *I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.*[Phil.1:3-5] *I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers, because I hear about your love for all*

his holy people and your faith in the Lord Jesus. I pray that your partnership with us in the faith may be effective in deepening your understanding of every good thing we share for the sake of Christ.[Phile.4-6] The word "*partnership*" is also translated as *communion*, *fellowship* and *participation*, which implies assurance, confidence, joy and thanksgiving—which is how we should with one another and for one another: *For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you. We continually ask God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives, so that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, and giving joyful thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of his holy people in the kingdom of light.*[Col.1:9-12] *We always thank God for all of you and continually mention you in our prayers.*[1Thess.1:2] We should also pray for those beyond our circle of friends and associates with the same assurance, confidence, joy and thanksgiving: *I urge, then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people—for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. This is good, and pleases God our Saviour, who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.*[1Tim.2:1-4] *But to you who are listening I say: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.*[Matt.6:27-28] *Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse.*[Rom.12:14]

Our prayers are not just words uttered as a religious activity but they are a memorial offering before God: *Cornelius stared at him in fear. "What is it, Lord?" he asked. The angel answered, "Your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God.*[Acts.10:4] Prayer under the Old Covenant was a priestly ministry offered with incense to symbolise the ascent of the prayers to God *May my prayer be set before you like incense; may the lifting up of my hands be like the evening sacrifice.*[Ps.141:2] Under the New Covenant, prayer is also a priestly ministry, but instead of priests being an hereditary elite group of Jews, now **EVERY BELIEVER IS A PRIEST**: *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.*[1Pet.2:5] And prayer is a joy! *And will fill them with joy in my house of prayer.*[Is.56:7] John saw that there was a supernatural connection of priestly prayers with heaven: *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 the saints, on the golden altar before the throne. The smoke of the incense, together with the prayers of the saints, went up before God from the angel's hand.*[Rev.8:3-4] **So let us take the priestly ministry of prayer seriously but joyfully as we live in the Kingdom of God.**

Questions

What is the difference between talking to God and praying to God?
How does the Bible describe the prayer of a Believer?
How does the Bible describe the prayer of un unbeliever?
Why was Cain's face downcast?
What does the Bible say we should do if we feel downcast?
In what way is prayer a "partnership"?
Why was incense used in Old Covenant worship?

Puritan Prayer: Earth and Heaven. O Lord, we live here as fish in a vessel of water with only enough to keep us alive—but in heaven we shall swim in the ocean. Here we have a little air in us to keep us breathing—but in heaven we shall have sweet and fresh gales; Here we have a beam of sun to lighten our darkness, a warm ray to keep us from freezing—but in heaven we shall live in light and warmth for ever. Our natural desires are corrupt and misguided and it is Your mercy to destroy them. Our spiritual longings are of Your planting and You will water

and increase them—quicken our hunger and thirst after the realm above. Here we can have the world—but in heaven we shall have You in Christ. Here is a life of longing and prayer—but in heaven there is assurance without suspicion, asking without refusal. Here are gross comforts, more burden than benefit—but in heaven there is joy without sorrow, comfort without suffering, love without inconstancy, rest without weariness. Give me to know that heaven is all love, where the continual viewing of Your beauty keeps the soul in continual transports of delight. Give me to know that heaven is all peace, where error, pride, rebellion and passion raise no head. Give me to know that heaven is all joy, the end of believing, fasting, praying, mourning, humbling, watching, fearing, repining—and lead me to it soon!

Ps.119:81-88: My soul faints with longing for your salvation, but I have put my hope in your word. My eyes fail, looking for your promise; I say, "When will you comfort me?" Though I am like a wineskin in the smoke, I do not forget your decrees. How long must your servant wait? When will you punish my persecutors? The arrogant dig pits to trap me, contrary to your law. All your commands are trustworthy; help me, for I am being persecuted without cause. They almost wiped me from the earth, but I have not forsaken your precepts. In your unfailing love preserve my life, that I may obey the statutes of your mouth.

Sunday 14th September Ps.119:89-96 Acts 13

God's Purpose for my life.

Now when David had served God's purpose in his own generation, he fell asleep.[Acts.13:36]

The basic entry level of Christianity is to be blessed because all Christians have been blessed with more blessings than they can count or need: *Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with <u>every</u> spiritual blessing in Christ.*[2Pet.1:4-5] *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 when God blesses us, no one can curse us: *Like a fluttering sparrow or a darting swallow, an undeserved curse does not come to rest.*[Prov.26:2] Not even Balaam could curse the Israelites, even though they were full of unbelief: *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? I have received a command to bless; he has blessed, and I cannot change it… There is no divination against Jacob, no evil omens against Israel.*[Nu.23:19-23] However, if we do not honour God, our blessings become a curse: *"And now, you priests, this warning is for you. If you do not listen, and if you do not resolve to honour my name," says the LORD Almighty, "I will send a curse on you, and I will curse your blessings. Yes, I have already cursed them, because you have not resolved to honour me."*[Mal.2:1-2] This curse is not a deposit of evil bestowed on us but rather the good receding away much like the waters receded after the flood: *Then Noah knew that the water had <u>receded</u> from the earth.*[Gen.8:11] This word "*receded*" is also translated "*cursed*"—it is the forfeiting of the grace that could be ours: *Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs. But I, with a song of thanksgiving, will sacrifice to you. What I have vowed I will make good. Salvation comes from the LORD.*[Jon.2:8-9] But the highest level of Christianity is to be a blessing: *In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'*[Acts.20:35] *I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing.*[Gen.12:2] To be a blessing to others, we must pass on what we have received from God. *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] Worship is our evaluation of God—what we think He is worth—and an expression of our love (that is, our commitment) and appreciation of God: *"Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" Jesus replied: " 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all*

your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment.[Matt.22:36-38] God created us to worship Him and to care for His creation so we can eat and be fruitful in every area of our lives: *Now the LORD God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man he had formed. The LORD God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground—trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food… God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.*[Gen.2:8-15] The word translated "*work*" is also translated "*worship*" in Exodus: *Worship the LORD your God, and his blessing will be on your food and water.*[Ex.23:25] Adam worshipped God as he worked the garden because he was in fellowship with God and they walked together. Although Adam lost this intimate fellowship with God, we are promised a restoration of this fellowship in the New Covenant: *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." Therefore, "Come out from them and be separate, says the Lord. Touch no unclean thing, and I will receive you." And, "I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty." Therefore, since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God.*[2Cor.6:16-7:1] And in the New Covenant there is no secular/sacred divide—everything we have and do is holy: *On that day HOLY TO THE LORD will be carved on the bells of the horses. The cooking pots in the LORD's temple will be just like the sacred bowls in front of the altar for burnt offerings. Every pot in Jerusalem and Judah will be set apart to the LORD. All those who come to offer sacrifices will get some of the pots and cook in them. At that time there won't be any Canaanites in the LORD's temple. He is the LORD who rules over all.*[Zech.14:20-21] *And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.*[Col.3:17] We cannot worship God with an untruth, a lie or a falsehood: *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] If we are not true worshippers of God, everything we do will be on shaky foundations, which means that we will not withstand the storms of life. *So why do you keep calling me 'Lord, Lord!' when you don't do what I say? I will show you what it's like when someone comes to me, listens to my teaching, and then follows it. It is like a person building a house who digs deep and lays the foundation on solid rock. When the floodwaters rise and break against that house, it stands firm because it is well built. But anyone who hears and doesn't obey is like a person who builds a house without a foundation. When the floods sweep down against that house, it will collapse into a heap of ruins.*[Lk.6:46-49]

Although it was the devil who deceived them, Adam and Eve could not escape the consequences of their actions—their deception led to rebellion which resulted in their work becoming a toilsome effort instead of a joyful experience. *To Adam, God said, "Because you listened to your wife and ate fruit from the tree about which I commanded you, 'You must not eat from it,' "Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat food from it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return."*[Gen.3:17-19] But God did not leave them to perish in their own self-made predicament—He pronounced the devil's demise and man's emancipation: *I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.*[Gen.3:15] This promise is called the "*protoevangelium*" meaning the "*first mention of the Gospel*". The devil is a deceiver, a devourer and a destroyer: *From the beginning, the devil was a murderer. He has never obeyed the truth. There is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his natural language. He does this because he is a liar. He is the father of lies.*[Jn.8:44] *For the accuser of our brothers, who accuses them before our God day and night, has been hurled down.*[Rev.12:10] *A thief comes to steal, kill, and destroy. But I came so that my sheep will have life and so that they will have everything they need.*[Jn.10:10] *Then he showed me Joshua the high priest standing before the angel of the LORD, and Satan standing at his right side to accuse him. The LORD said to Satan, "The*

LORD rebuke you, Satan![Zech.3:1-2] *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] Eve's Seed was the Word of God who became human: *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 as the Son of Man, Jesus' heel was "*bruised*" when He died at Calvary—but by His death, Jesus conquered the devil and destroyed his work by "*bruising*" satan's head: *The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work.*[1Jn.3:8] *Then God made you alive with Christ, for he forgave all our sins. He cancelled the record of the charges against us and took it away by nailing it to the cross. In this way, he disarmed the spiritual rulers and authorities. He shamed them publicly by his victory over them on the cross.*[Col.2:13-15]

War, famine and disaster do not increase death because death is total in every generation—everyone has to face death: *Just as people are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.*[Heb.9:27-28] However, many people live in the fear of death because death is often accompanied by pain but it is also final. Although Paul wanted to get to heaven, understandably he did not want to die! *We know that if the life we live here on earth is ever taken down like a tent, we still have a building from God. It is an eternal house in heaven that isn't made by human hands. In our present tent-like existence we sigh, since we long to put on the house we will have in heaven. After we have put it on, we won't be naked. While we are in this tent, we sigh. We feel distressed because we don't want to take off the tent, but we do want to put on the eternal house. Then eternal life will put an end to our mortal existence. God has prepared us for this and has given us his Spirit to guarantee it.*[2Cor.5:1-5] When Jesus came to free us from our sin, He crushed satan's head[Gen.3:15] which disarmed him[Col.2:15] and also destroyed his work.[1Jn.3:8] **So now those who are slaves to sin can be emancipated:** *I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave of sin.*[Jn.8:34] *Now you are free from your slavery to sin, and you have become slaves to righteousness… But now you are free from the power of sin and have become slaves of God. Now you do those things that lead to holiness and result in eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord.*[Rom.6:18-23] **And those who are slaves to the fear of dying can be emancipated too:** *Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.*[Heb.2:14-15]

Jesus completed the work His Father gave Him to do before returned to heaven and we too must complete the work the Father has given us to do before we go to heaven. *I have come to do what you want. Your law is in my heart. I have told the whole community of those who worship you that what you do is right.*[Ps.40:7-9] Jesus was strengthened and energised by doing what God had called Him to do, and our inner strength and energy will also come from doing what God has called us to do: *My food, is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work. Don't you have a saying, 'It's still four months until harvest'? I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest. Even now the one who reaps draws a wage and harvests a crop for eternal life, so that the sower and the reaper may be glad together. Thus the saying 'One sows and another reaps' is true. I sent you to reap what you have not worked for. Others have done the hard work, and you have reaped the benefits of their labour.*[Jn.4:34-38] **The work God has prepared for us to do, is to obey Him, believe on Jesus and to be His witness—which is true worship:** *And this is love: that we walk in obedience to his commands.*[2Jn.6] *Jesus told them, "This is the only work God wants from you: Believe in the one he has sent."*[Jn.6:29] *But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you. Then you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem. You will be my witnesses in all Judea and Samaria. And you will be my witnesses from one end of the earth to the other.*[Acts.1:8] So let's stay active in sharing our faith by acknowledging the good things we have from God: *I thank my God, making mention of you always in my prayers, hearing of your love and faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints, that the sharing of your faith may become effective by the acknowledgment of*

every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus. For we have great joy and consolation in your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed by you, brother.[Phile.4-7]

Whilst we believe, preach, practice and experience true prosperity (the blessings of God), God's purpose for us is not always an abundance of "*stuff*" or even a large salary followed by a large pension. **God's purpose is for us to have a rich relationship with Him:** *But God said to him, 'You fool! You will die this very night. Then who will get everything you worked for?' Yes, a person is a fool to store up earthly wealth but not have a rich relationship with God.*[Lk.12:15-21] The Christian message is the message about Christ, not the message about us and how to be more comfortable and sadly this message sometimes loses its impact because of a bad testimony or even just plain ugly sin. If an important letter is delivered in a dirty envelope, it is unlikely to be taken seriously—or even read! If our lives don't match our message, people will not take our message seriously. We are called to live a holy life and to focus on what is good and pure: : *Finally, my brothers and sisters, always think about what is true. Think about what is noble, right and pure. Think about what is lovely and worthy of respect. If anything is excellent or worthy of praise, think about those kinds of things. Do what you have learned or received or heard from me. Follow my example. The God who gives peace will be with you.*[Phil.4:8-9] However, regardless of our weaknesses and failings, ultimately God will ensure that His message goes forth effectively: *so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.*[Is.55:11] We know that God will work everything out for His glory and our good: *In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God. 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.8:26-28] God will fulfil His purpose for us! *The LORD will fulfil his purpose for me.*[Ps.138:8] *I cry out to God Most High, to God, who fulfils his purpose for me.*[Ps.57:2] That's why when we pray, we can have the confidence to trust God with the outcome. We can and should pray that God's will is done[Matt.6:10] but we must also play our part as well as pray our part! *Many are the plans in a man's heart, but it is the LORD's purpose that prevails.*[Prov.19:21] *No wisdom, wise saying or plan can succeed against the LORD. You can prepare a horse for the day of battle. But the power to win comes from the LORD.*[Prov.21:30-31]

So let's continue to play our part and pray our part, believing (trusting) God to fulfil His purposes for our lives. *With this in mind, we constantly pray for you, that our God may count you worthy of his calling, and that by his power he may fulfil every good purpose of yours and every act prompted by your faith.*[2Thes.1:11] Then like Paul, when we have fought the good fight of our faith and run our race to completion, we will claim our crown of righteousness: *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] And like David, we too will have fulfil God's purpose in our own generation

Questions

What does it mean to be blessed?

What is the greatest blessing?

What does it mean to do "*all in the name of the Lord Jesus" [Col.3:17]?*

Why do we no longer have to live in fear of death?

What is God's purpose for us (what does God want us to do)?

How can know that we are living in God's will?

Puritan Prayer. Faith: My God, I bless You that You have given me the eye of faith, to see You as Father, to know You as a Covenant God, to experience Your love planted in me. For faith is the grace of union by which I spell out my entitlement to You. Faith casts my anchor

upwards where I trust in You and engage You to be my Lord. You live and move within me, breathing in my prayers, inhabiting my praises, speaking in my words, moving in my actions, living in my life, causing me to grow in grace—Your bounteous goodness has helped me believe. Lord, fan this divine spark into glowing flame. Lord, awaken faith to put forth its strength until all heaven fills my soul and all impurity is cast out.

Psalm 119:89-96. Your word, LORD, is eternal; it stands firm in the heavens. Your faithfulness continues through all generations; you established the earth, and it endures. Your laws endure to this day, for all things serve you. If your law had not been my delight, I would have perished in my affliction. I will never forget your precepts, for by them you have preserved my life. Save me, for I am yours; I have sought out your precepts. The wicked are waiting to destroy me, but I will ponder your statutes. To all perfection I see a limit, but your commands are boundless.

Sunday 21st September Ps.119:97-104 Acts 14

What's your "usual"? *At Iconium Paul and Barnabas went as usual into the Jewish synagogue. There they spoke so effectively that a great number of Jews and Greeks believed.*[Acts.14:1]

Our childhood experiences become imprinted within our subconscious and when stress and distress come along, we often revert to them for comfort and security. After Peter denied knowing Jesus, he did what he grew up with—he went fishing. *Simon Peter said, "I'm going fishing." "We'll come, too," they all said. So they went out in the boat, but they caught nothing all night.*[Jn.21:3] When David was in the middle of battle, he longed for some water from his childhood home of Bethlehem: *At that time David was in the stronghold, and the Philistine garrison was at Bethlehem. David longed for water and said, "Oh, that someone would get me a drink of water from the well near the gate of Bethlehem!".*[2Sam.23:13-17] The Exiles in Babylon longed for Zion: *By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion.*[Ps.137] There is something very comforting about our childhood memories and revisiting them makes us feel secure. But not every childhood experience is necessarily good and not all our early values will edify, exhort or encourage us when we dwell on them. However, we can change our conscious and subconscious norm by thinking about godly values, talking about them and putting them into practice: *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. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.*[Phil.4:8-9] We now belong to God, we have been made clean—and so we should lead a clean life that reflects God's values: *I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. "I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.*[Jn.15:1-5] However, we need to stay clean: *He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" Jesus replied, "You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand." "No," said Peter, "you shall never wash my feet." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no part with me." "Then, Lord," Simon Peter replied, "not just my feet but my hands and my head as well!" Jesus answered, "Those who have had a bath need only to wash their feet; their whole body is clean. And you are clean, though not every one of you." For he knew who was going to betray him, and that was why he said not everyone was clean.*[Jn.13:6-11] Thinking and pondering God's Word will wash our minds and keep us clean: H*usbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word.*[Eph.5:25-26] Being physically clean gives us a good feeling and being spiritually clean also gives us a good feeling. But knowing that we are spiritually clean also enables us to appreciate and

appropriate God's will and values—and then when stress and distress comes we will continue to stay in faith and trust God instead of filling our minds with destructive doubt and unbelief. *Who may ascend the mountain of the LORD? Who may stand in his holy place? The one who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not trust in an idol or swear by a false god. They will receive blessing from the LORD and vindication from God their Savior.*[Ps.24:3-5]

A habit is something we do without having to think about it and if we make a habit of thinking like God and seeing life as God sees life, we will find it easy keep the faith, even in times of trouble. Paul made a habit of meeting with other Believers (which is what Church is). *At Iconium Paul and Barnabas went as usual into the Jewish synagogue. There they spoke so effectively that a great number of Jews and Greeks believed.* [Acts.14:1] At that time, the local synagogue was the place where god-fearing people met as there were no churches established then. Church should be a place where God displays His Wisdom: *His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose that he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord. In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence.*[Eph.3:10-12] Wisdom is the application of knowledge—it is acting on the information we have. That's why we need to see life from God's perspective. True wisdom comes from respect for God—and there is a vast difference between what God calls wisdom and what the world calls wisdom. *The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; all who follow his precepts have good understanding. To him belongs eternal praise.*[Ps.111:10] Jesus only did what His Father wanted: *Therefore, when Christ came into the world, he said: "Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me; with burnt offerings and sin offerings you were not pleased. Then I said, 'Here I am—it is written about me in the scroll—I have come to do your will, my God.'*[Heb.10:5-7] *He withdrew about a stone's throw beyond them, knelt down and prayed, "Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done."*[Lk.22:41-41] *For I did not speak on my own, but the Father who sent me commanded me to say all that I have spoken. I know that his command leads to eternal life. So whatever I say is just what the Father has told me to say.*[Jn.12:49] *I will not say much more to you, for the prince of this world is coming. He has no hold over me, but he comes so that the world may learn that I love the Father and do exactly what my Father has commanded me.*[Jn.14:30] And Jesus is the personification of wisdom: *It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption.*[1Cor.1:30] Sometimes the world (that is, the people who reject God) acknowledge that there is more to life than the physical, but they still refuse to acknowledge God as their Creator and Saviour and so reject the source of true wisdom—even though God clearly shows His existence through His creation. *The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. 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.1:18-20] *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] *The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.*[Col.1:15-17] *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 just a cursory look at Creation shows the wisdom of God—how everything inter-relates and is inter-dependant. But this same God who created the universe also has a plan and a purpose for us—and He is working His purposes out in order that we can be saved and be in fellowship with Him: *In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the*

purpose of his will, in order that we, who were the first to put our hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory.[Eph.1:11-12] God's plan for us is to be Church

Church should be the place where God displays His wisdom: *His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose that he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord.*[Eph.3:10-11] And Church should be a place where the preaching is carefully and prayerfully prepared and presented. *Work hard so you can present yourself to God and receive his approval. Be a good worker, one who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly explains the word of truth.*[2Tim.2:15] *They read from the Book of the Law of God and clearly explained the meaning of what was being read, helping the people understand each passage.*[Neh.8:8] Church should be a place where we show our commitment to one another—by promoting sound doctrine and encouraging faith and also by meeting practical and social needs. *They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.*[Acts.2:42-47] Church should be a joyful place where we are spiritually secure but also physically and emotionally secure. *I was glad when they said to me, "Let us go into the house of the LORD." Our feet have been standing within your gates, O Jerusalem! Jerusalem is built as a city that is compact together, where the tribes go up, the tribes of the LORD, to the Testimony of Israel, to give thanks to the name of the LORD.*[Ps.122:1-4] *Great is the LORD, and most worthy of praise, in the city of our God, his holy mountain. Beautiful in its loftiness, the joy of the whole earth, like the heights of Zaphon is Mount Zion, the city of the Great King. God is in her citadels; he has shown himself to be her fortress.*[Ps.48:1-3] The Church described as Jerusalem, or Mount Zion: *These two women serve as an illustration of God's two covenants. The first woman, Hagar, represents Mount Sinai where people received the law that enslaved them. And now Jerusalem is just like Mount Sinai in Arabia, because she and her children live in slavery to the law. But the other woman, Sarah, represents the heavenly Jerusalem. She is the free woman, and she is our mother… And you, dear brothers and sisters, are children of the promise, just like Isaac. But you are now being persecuted by those who want you to keep the law, just as Ishmael, the child born by human effort, persecuted Isaac, the child born by the power of the Spirit. But what do the Scriptures say about that? "Get rid of the slave and her son, for the son of the slave woman will not share the inheritance with the free woman's son." So, dear brothers and sisters, we are not children of the slave woman; we are children of the free woman.*[Gal.4:24-31] *I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. 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." 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."*[Rev.21:2-5] Church should be a place where meet by habit—not to perform formal rituals but as a forum to encourage one another: *And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.*[Heb.10:24-25] And so, if we haven't encouraged someone today, we haven't been Church! And when we meet we should always bring something to give: *So here's what I want you to do. When you gather for worship, each one of you be prepared with something that will be useful for all: Sing a hymn, teach a lesson, tell a story, lead a prayer, provide an insight.*[1Cor.14:23]

When the Letter to Hebrews was written, persecution from the Jews was beginning to get nasty again. *In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.*[Heb.12:4] Although James and Stephen had been executed soon after the Church had started, generally the persecution at this time was verbal or an inconvenience rather than fatal. *Claudius had ordered all Jews to leave Rome.*[Acts.18:2] *"This man is not doing anything that deserves death or imprisonment." Agrippa said to Festus, "This man could have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar."*[Acts.26:31-32] Because of the freedom to travel and the initial openness of the Roman Empire, Christianity had spread all over the Roman Empire. Paul said the Gospel had been preached over the whole world (i.e. the Roman Empire). *In the same way, the gospel is bearing fruit and growing throughout the whole world. This is the gospel that you heard and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, have become a servant.*[Col.1:6;23] 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* (A.D. 14-37), so Christianity had spread to Britain before A.D. 34! Not long after this though, persecution became much harsher from the Jews and the Romans and to declare one's faith in Jesus Christ meant loss of life as well as loss of comfort. Today, the only persecution of Christians in this country is inconvenience and discomfort but other countries are imprisoning, torturing and executing Christians because of their faith. "Open Doors" estimate that over 380 million Christians face high levels of persecution and discrimination—that's one in seven believers worldwide. Last year, 4,476 believers worldwide were killed for their faith (3,100 were from Nigeria) and at least 209,771 Christians were forced from their homes to go into hiding or exile because of the faith (almost half of whom are from Nigeria—and that's despite around half of all Nigerians being Christian). But whatever difficulties we experience in life—whether it is persecution, distress, disease or discouragement or even disappointment, God's antidote to all of life's difficulties is Church—the place where we meet together for physical, social, mental, emotional support but especially spiritual support: *For his Spirit joins with our spirit to affirm that we are God's children. And since we are his children, we are his heirs. In fact, together with Christ we are heirs of God's glory. But if we are to share his glory, we must also share his suffering. Yet what we suffer now is nothing compared to the glory he will reveal to us later. Can anything ever separate us from Christ's love? Does it mean he no longer loves us if we have trouble or calamity, or are persecuted, or hungry, or destitute, or in danger, or threatened with death? …No, despite all these things, overwhelming victory is ours through Christ, who loved us… No power in the sky above or in the earth below—indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord.*[Rom.8:16-39]

Old habits die hard and so when life gets difficult we will revert to our old habits. We want our old habits to be good old habits! So let's make our Church the place where we give and receive support to one another by cultivating the habit of truly being Church—and then make it our "usual". Then when times of stress and distress come, we are safe and secure because we have taken comfort in God's provision—the Church!

Questions

Why is God's Word so important to the Christian?
How can we embed God's Word into our life?
How important is Church to Christianity?
What should Church be like?
Why is there so much opposition to God's kingdom?
Is there anything that we can do to make Church more Biblical?

Puritan Prayer. Happiness: O Lord, help me not to expect happiness from the world, but only in You. Let me not think that I shall be more happy by living to myself, for I can only be truly happy if employed for You and if I desire to live in this world only to do and suffer what You allot me. Teach me that if I do not live a life that satisfies You, I shall not live a life that will satisfy myself. Help me to desire the spirit and attitude of angels who willingly come down to this lower world to perform Your will, though their desires are heavenly and not set in the least upon earthly things—then I shall have the attitude that I ought to have. Help me not to think of living to You in my own strength, but always to look to You and rely on You for assistance. Teach me that there is no greater truth than this: that I can do nothing of myself. Lord, this is the life that no unconverted man can live—yet it is an end that every godly soul presses after. Let it be my concern to devote myself and my all to You, bearing fruit in every season of my life. How precious is time, and how painful to see it fly with little done to good purpose—I need Your help! O may my soul sensibly depend upon You for all sanctification and every accomplishment of Your purposes for me, for the world, and for Your kingdom.
Ps.119:97-104: Oh, how I love your law! I meditate on it all day long. Your commands are always with me and make me wiser than my enemies. I have more insight than all my teachers, for I meditate on your statutes. I have more understanding than the elders, for I obey your precepts. I have kept my feet from every evil path so that I might obey your word. I have not departed from your laws, for you yourself have taught me. How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth! I gain understanding from your precepts; therefore I hate every wrong path.

Sunday 28th September Ps.119:105-112 Acts 15

Different but not divided; bruised but not broken; best because we are blessed! *Then Judas and Silas, both being prophets, spoke at length to the believers, encouraging and strengthening their faith. They stayed for a while, and then the believers sent them back to the church in Jerusalem with a blessing of peace.*[Acts.15:32-33]
At the Last Supper, Jesus said that the broken bread represented His broken body: *And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me."*[Lk.22:19] The Body of Christ was broken once upon the cross—that was where God's anger against sin was shown. *He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.*[Rom.4:25] *Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.*[Heb.9:28] Jesus was punished for our iniquities: *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] God made a Covenant of Peace on our behalf: *My servant David will be king over them, and they will all have one shepherd. They will follow my laws and be careful to keep my decrees. They will live in the land I gave to my servant Jacob, the land where your ancestors lived. They and their children and their children's children will live there forever, and David my servant will be their prince forever. I will make a covenant of peace with them; it will be an everlasting covenant. I will establish them and increase their numbers, and I will put my sanctuary among them forever. My dwelling place will be with them; I will be their God, and they will be my people.*[Ezek.37:24-27] This promise was not fulfilled in David's immediate son who built the physical temple in Jerusalem as God's dwelling place but in David's greater Son, Jesus Christ, who built the spiritual temple in Believers' hearts as God's dwelling place: *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] God's "*Covenant of Peace*" was established though the death and resurrection of the Prince of Peace: *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] *The God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep.*[Heb.13:20] *His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.*[Eph.2:15-18] Because of His Covenant of Peace, God has promised that He will never be angry with us again: *"For a brief moment I abandoned you, but with deep compassion I will bring you back. In a surge of anger I hid my face from you for a moment, but with everlasting kindness I will have compassion on you," says the LORD your Redeemer. "To me this is like the days of Noah, when I swore that the waters of Noah would never again cover the earth. So now I have sworn not to be angry with you, never to rebuke you again. Though the mountains be shaken and the hills be removed, yet my unfailing love for you will not be shaken nor my covenant of peace be removed," says the LORD, who has compassion on you.*[Is.54:7-10] We should remember that Isaiah wrote this when God's people were in complete rebellion with Manasseh as king, who was probably the worst they had ever had—he burnt his children in pagan sacrifices and had Isaiah sawn in half whilst still alive (*c.f. Heb.11:37)*!

However, God has always had a remnant of faithful believers. But differences and disunity have still beset God's people—even among the true Believers. Before the Church began there were differences and disunity among the Disciples—they rebuked those who brought children to Jesus: *Then people brought little children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them and pray for them. But the disciples rebuked them.*[Matt.19:13] They tried to stop others from ministering: *"Master," said John, "we saw someone driving out demons in your name and we tried to stop him, because he is not one of us."*[Lk.9:49] Judas was a thief: *Judas did not say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it.*[Jn.12:6] And after the Church began, differences and divisions continued. There were sharp disputes: *In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Hellenistic Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food.*[Acts.6:1] *Certain people came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the believers: "Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved." This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question.* [Acts..15:1-2] *They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company. Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus, but Paul chose Silas and left, commended by the believers to the grace of the Lord.*[Acts.15:39] There were criticisms: *So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him and said, "You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them."*[Acts.11:2-3] There were lawsuits: *But instead, one brother goes to law against another—and this in front of unbelievers! The very fact that you have lawsuits among you means you have been completely defeated already.*[1Cor.6:5-7] There were cliques and factions: *But then some of the believers who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees stood up and insisted, "The Gentile converts must be circumcised and required to follow the law of Moses."*[Acts.15:5] *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.3:3-4] And sadly the Church has continued to have differences, disputes and divisions. The Nicene Creed was formulated in C4th to counteract Arianism (which taught that Jesus is not the Eternal Word but was a created being) and unitarianism (the belief that God is a single Person but reveals Himself as Father in the OT, Jesus in the Gospels and the Holy Spirit today). The Protestant Reformation of the

C16th was a re-action against the heresies of the established Church. Marin Luther was so incensed by the blatant abuse of religion that he started to study the Bible with a genuine desire to see God and discovered that justification came by faith! One of the major abuses of the Church was the sale of indulgences (which was supposed to reduce the amount of punishment one had to undergo for forgiven sins and in particular, shorten the time spent in purgatory). Albert of Brandenburg bought the office of Archbishop of Mainz from the pope and paid for it by selling indulgences through Johann Tetzel who was the Grand Commissioner for indulgences in Germany. This couplet was attributed to Tetzel: "*As soon as the gold in the casket rings The rescued soul to heaven springs"* (The pope used the money to build St Peter's Basilica in Rome!) But at the same time as the Reformation, the Anabaptist movement started and they were called the Church of Radical Bible Readers because of their passion for reading the Bible! They said that Scripture is easy to understand but costly to obey and insisted that Church is only for Believers because Christianity is a way of life not a status. But the Lutherans killed as many Anabaptists as the Catholics did—the only difference was the Lutherans drowned them (as a further "*baptism*") and the Catholics burnt them at the stake! The Pentecostal Doctrine of the early C20th was originally ostracised by the main-stream Churches and although they brought a new dimension of spirituality, within a few years the Pentecostals were so divided that they were split into 2 camps over the "*Finished Work*" teaching of William Durham. Pentecostals had their roots in the Holiness Movement who taught that the experience of "*sanctification*" after conversion was needed in order to be saved. Durham emphasized that Jesus' cry of "*It is finished*" declared that the work of salvation was complete and that there is no further experience needed for salvation after conversion. There have many more differences and divisions within the Church—and there still are—but the Church will triumph because Jesus is building His Church. *And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.*[Matt.16:18]

In the mid-1800s, John William Colenso (who was the first Bishop of Natal) was deposed for his liberal views of Scripture and Christianity and so he appealed to the higher ecclesiastical authorities in England. Samuel Stone became involved in the debate, which inspired him to write a set of hymns titled *Lyra Fidelium*; Twelve Hymns on the Twelve Articles of the Apostles' Creed. His hymn based on the ninth article in the Creed (The holy Catholic Church; The Communion of Saints) is "*The Church's One Foundation*" where he alludes to the controversy: "*Though with a scornful wonder men see her sore oppressed, by schisms rent asunder, by heresies distressed.*" (The hymn also served as inspiration for Rudyard Kipling's 1896 poem, *Hymn Before Action*.) The hymn not only expresses concern over divisions but also declares that the Church will never perish because her dear Lord is with her to defend, guide, sustain and cherish! After Jesus died, His broken body was laid in the grave, but on the third day, Jesus rose from the dead with an un-broken body. He was alive, not resuscitated but resurrected. Jesus had been metamorphosed with His mortal body exchanged for an immortal body.[1Cor.15] Jesus was no longer broken but whole! The Church is called the Body of Christ: *Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it. And God has placed in the church first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, of helping, of guidance, and of different kinds of tongues.*[1Cor.12:27:28] The Church is certainly battered, but she is holy and whole—bruised but not broken! *Christ loved the church. He gave himself up for her. He did it to make her holy. He made her clean by washing her with water and the word. He did it to bring her to himself as a brightly shining church. He wants a church that has no stain or wrinkle or any other flaw. He wants a church that is holy and without blame.*[Eph.5:25-27] *There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.*[Eph.4:4-6] So it behoves us to live as holy and whole people, thinking,

speaking and acting as holy and whole people not broken people. Our wholeness is a spiritual wholeness and we should make every effort to maintain that spiritual unity: *Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace… So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.*[Eph.4:2-3;11-16]

We can be bruised without being broken: *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. We are pressed on every side by troubles, but we are not crushed. We are perplexed, but not driven to despair. We are hunted down, but never abandoned by God. We get knocked down, but we are not destroyed. Through suffering, our bodies continue to share in the death of Jesus so that the life of Jesus may also be seen in our bodies.*[2Cor.4:7-10] And we can be different without being divisive: *I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought.*[1Cor.1:10] *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] *There should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other.*[1Cor.12:25]

There has always been heresy and apostasy in the Church so we need to be on our guard to protect ourselves from those who would deceive us and 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?*[Gal.3:1-5] John gave some clear instructions about deception and divisions: *Dear children, we are living in the last days. You have heard that the great enemy of Christ is coming. But even now many enemies of Christ have already come… Make sure that you don't forget what you have heard from the beginning. Then you will remain joined to the Son and to the Father. That's what God has promised us. We have eternal life. I'm writing these things to warn you about those who are trying to lead you down the wrong path. But you have received the Holy Spirit from God. He continues to live in you. So you don't need anyone to teach you. God's Spirit teaches you about everything. What he says is true. He doesn't lie. Remain joined to Christ, just as you have been taught by the Spirit.*[1Jn.2:18-27]

Although the Holy Spirit will keep us from error, we still need to be Bible-literate and show ourselves approved by God as we correctly handle the Word of God: *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… Nevertheless, God's solid foundation stands firm, sealed with this inscription: "The Lord knows those who are his," and, "Everyone who confesses the name of the Lord must turn away from wickedness."*[2Tim.2:14-19]

The Gospel is simple and settled yet spiritual, but to keep on course and prevent ourselves from being deceived, we must keep **Christ central**: *Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel*[2Tim.2:8] and we must never lose sight 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]
We can be different but let us never be divided! We may be bruised but let us never be broken! We can be the best because we are blessed! So let us **encourage** and **strengthen** one another in our faith and leave each other with a **blessing of peace**.[Acts.15:32-33]

Questions

Why is sound doctrine important?
Why is the Church *"sore oppressed, by schisms rent asunder, by heresies distressed"*?
What does it mean to "*contend for the faith*" (Jude 3)?
How can we disagree without being disagreeable?
How can *correctly handle the word of truth (2Tim.2:15)?*

Puritan Prayer. Rest in God: My dear Lord, I depend wholly upon You—wean me from all other dependences. You are my all, You overrule all and You are my delight. You are the foundation of goodness—how can I distrust You? How can I be anxious about what happens to me? In the light of Your preciousness, the world and all its enjoyments are infinitely poor—I value the favour of men no more than pebbles. Amid the blessings I receive from You, may I never lose the thought of being a stranger here on earth. May I love You, my Benefactor, in all my benefits, not forgetting that my greatest danger arises from my advantages. Produce in me a self-despair that will make Jesus precious to me, delightful in all His offices, pleasurable in all His ways. And may I love His commands as well as His promises.

Ps.119:105-112 Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path. I have taken an oath and confirmed it, that I will follow your righteous laws. I have suffered much; preserve my life, LORD, according to your word. Accept, LORD, the willing praise of my mouth, and teach me your laws. Though I constantly take my life in my hands, I will not forget your law. The wicked have set a snare for me, but I have not strayed from your precepts. Your statutes are my heritage forever; they are the joy of my heart. My heart is set on keeping your decrees to the very end.

The Church's one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord,
She is His new creation by water and the Word.
From heaven He came and sought her to be His holy bride;
With His own blood He bought her and for her life He died.

Elect from every nation, yet one o'er all the earth;
Her charter of salvation, one Lord, one faith, one birth;
One holy Name she blesses, partakes one holy food,
And to one hope she presses, with every grace endued.

The Church shall never perish! Her dear Lord to defend,
To guide, sustain, and cherish, is with her to the end;
Though there be those who hate her, and false sons in her pale,
Against or foe or traitor she ever shall prevail.

Though with a scornful wonder men see her sore oppressed,
By schisms rent asunder, by heresies distressed;
Yet saints their watch are keeping, their cry goes up, "How long?"
And soon the night of weeping shall be the morn of song!

'Mid toil and tribulation, And tumult of her war,
She waits the consummation Of peace forevermore;
Till, with the vision glorious, her longing eyes are blest,
And the great Church victorious shall be the Church at rest.

Yet she on earth has union with God the Three in One,
And mystic sweet communion with those whose rest is won;
O happy ones and holy! Lord, give us grace that we, like them,
The meek and lowly, on high may dwell with Thee.

October:

Remember. *Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. 2Cor.9:6*

Thought for the Month: For the Christian, there is no such thing as a low self-esteem, only a low esteem of the finished work of Jesus! *Mike Petzer*

Sunday 5th October Ps.119:113-120 Acts 16

How do you pray? *About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them.*[Acts.16:25]

Prayer is communicating with God and although we can pray at any time and at any place, we only have access to God through Jesus Christ: *Jesus answered, I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.*[Jn.14:6] *For there is only one God and one Mediator who can reconcile God and humanity—the man Christ Jesus. He gave his life to purchase freedom for everyone. This is the message God gave to the world at just the right time.*[1Tim.2:5-6] If we try to come another way we are either deceiving ourselves or we are thieves and robbers: *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… Very truly I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who have come before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep have not listened to them. I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. They 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.10:1-10] But the Righteous who have an open line of communication with God. *The LORD is far from the wicked, but he hears the prayer of the righteous.*[Prov.15:29] *The LORD detests the sacrifice of the wicked, but the prayer of the upright pleases him.*[Prov.15:8] The Righteous are not those who have done some altruistic deed or who have lived an upright life but those who God calls Righteous because He has made them right through His unconditional love and their faith. *God's grace has saved you because of your faith in Christ. Your salvation doesn't come from anything you do. It is God's gift. It is not based on anything you have done. No one can boast about earning it.*[Eph.2:8-9] *We are made right with God by putting our faith in Jesus Christ. That happens to all who believe.*[Rom.3:22] People may "*pray*" to God and even revere a "*Jesus*", but if that Jesus is not God's eternal Son who was with God in the beginning,[Jn.1:1-3] then they are not communicating with God. Their "*prayers*" aren't even prayers at all because they are separated from God and still in their sins. *We know that God does not listen to sinners. He listens to the godly person who does his will.*[Jn.9:31] *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] Access to God is now available to all: *In the past, God spoke to our people through the prophets. He spoke at many times. He spoke in different ways. But in these last days, he has spoken to us through his Son.*[Heb.1:1-2] And even those who have never been to Church have enough evidence of a loving Creator from creation: *The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they reveal knowledge. They have no speech, they use no words; no sound is heard from them. Yet their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world.*[Ps.19:1-4] *Ever since the world was created it has been possible to see the qualities of God that are not seen. I'm talking about his eternal power and about the fact that he is God. Those things can be seen in what he has made. So people have no excuse for what they do. They knew God. But they didn't honour him as God. They didn't thank him. Their thinking became worthless. Their foolish hearts became dark… They chose a lie instead of God's truth… They didn't think it was important to know God. So God let them go… They know that God's commands are right. They know that those who do evil things should die. But they continue to do those very things. They also approve of others who do them.*[Rom.1:20-32] *God overlooked the times when people didn't know any better. But now he commands everyone everywhere to turn to him and change*

the way they think and act. He has set a day when he is going to judge the world with justice, and he will use a man he has appointed to do this. God has given proof to everyone that he will do this by bringing that man back to life.[Acts.17:30-31] However, we need more than just creation to have a clear and accurate understanding of God—we need to take God's Word and study it: *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.* The phrase "*godless chatter"* in Greek is "*babbler*" (*σπερμολόγος spemologos)* and refers to a bird that picks up seeds (*sperma*, "a seed," *lego*, "to collect"). Metaphorically it is used of someone who picks up scraps of information and retails them second-hand, a plagiarist, a person who makes a show, in unscientific style, of knowledge obtained from misunderstanding lectures. If we don't handle God's Word correctly it is like picking up bits of information and retailing them second-hand. The sons of Sceva tried that! *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] How many people who listen to sermons ever check out that the preacher was actually using the Bible correctly? If we don't align our beliefs and values with God, we will live in darkness and despair: *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]

We saw last week that the Creeds, such as the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed, were statements agreed by the early Church to counteract heresies that had begun to emerge—false beliefs such as Gnosticism (the belief that we need extra secret knowledge that is not contained in the Scriptures); Arianism (the belief that Jesus is not the eternal Son of God); Unitarianism (the belief that God is a singular person not a unified God consisting of Father, Son and Holy Spirit). These Creeds have stood the test of time and are the standard by which we can judge people's orthodoxy. Good theology makes Christianity easy to understand and enjoyable but poor theology makes Christianity hard work and tiresome. When Adam disobeyed God's instructions, he was told that life would be hard and wearisome till the day he died: *Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat food from it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return.*[Gen.3:17-19] And all of Adam's descendants inherited that curse of "*blood, sweat and toil*". This is especially true of religion—no matter how hard we try to become right with God by our good behaviour or by an altruistic act, we will always fail because we are "*cursed*" to live a life outside of Eden. By "*curse*", we mean that God's blessings recede away and we are left helpless and hopeless—but Jesus broke that curse by becoming a curse for us: *All who depend on obeying the law are under a curse. It is written, "May everyone who doesn't continue to do everything that is written in the Book of the Law be under God's curse." We know that no one is made right with God by keeping the law. Scripture says, "Those who are right with God will live by faith." The law is not based on faith. In fact, it is just the opposite. It teaches that "the one who does those things will live by them." Christ set us free from the curse of the law. He did it by becoming a curse for us. It is written, "Everyone who is hung on a pole is under God's curse." Christ Jesus set us free so that the blessing given to Abraham would come to non-Jews through Christ. He did it so that we might*

receive the promise of the Holy Spirit by believing in Christ.[Gal.3:10-14] What Adam lost, Jesus has restored—and restored with interest! We can now eat of that Tree of Life: *He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.*[Rev.2:7] Isaac Watts puts it like this: *In Him the tribes of Adam boast more blessings than their father lost.*

And so Christians—followers of Christ, who have consciously placed their trust in Him—are blessed beyond measure: *He has blessed us with every spiritual blessing.*[Eph.1:3] *God's power has given us everything we need to lead a godly life.*[2Pet.1:3] So now, when life is hard and we feel weary, we can find rest for our souls: *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] Following Jesus is costly: *Then Jesus said to them all: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it. What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit their very self? Whoever is ashamed of me and my words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his glory and in the glory of the Father and of the holy angels.*[Lk.9:23-26] But serving Jesus will always result in blessings and never leave us spiritually hungry or the weary. *But he said to them, "I have food to eat that you know nothing about… My food is to do what my Father sent me to do. My food is to finish his work.*[Jn.4:32-35] *God's work is to believe in the One he has sent.*[Jn.6:29]

So, how should we pray? The Bible gives us some clear instructions of dos and don'ts.

Do pray privately to God but don't be hypocritical (like an actor who knows his lines word-perfect but is role-playing for the sake of the crowds). *And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.*[Matt.6:5-6]

Do pray to God as our Father, giving Him the glory and honour **but don't pray long prayers**. *And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. This, then, is how you should pray: Our Father in heaven…*[Matt.6:7-9]

Do pray with an attitude of forgiveness but don't hold grudges. *In prayer, there is a connection between what God does and what you do. You can't get forgiveness from God, for instance, without also forgiving others. If you refuse to do your part, you cut yourself off from God's part.*[Matt.6:14-15] *If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened; but God has surely listened and heard my voice in prayer. Praise be to God, who has not rejected my prayer or withheld his love from me!*[Ps.66:18-20] Although it sounds easy to forgive others, it is not easy when we are hurt or angry. But we can ask God to help us forgive others as He has forgiven us—remember, we have a duty to forgive others. *His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature, having escaped the corruption in the world caused by evil desires. For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness… For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. But whoever does not have them is near-sighted and blind,* ***forgetting that they have been cleansed from their past sins.***[2Pet.1:3-9] *Therefore I want the men everywhere to pray, lifting up holy hands without anger or disputing.*[1Tim.2:8]

Do pray in public as well as in private. *When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God. Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? …They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen. Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. Stretch out your hand to heal and perform signs and wonders through the name of your holy*

servant Jesus." 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]

Do pray all sorts of prayers for all sorts of people. *I urge, then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people—for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. This is good, and pleases God our Saviour, who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all people.*[1Tim.2:1-6]

Do pray with your spirit as well as your 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.*[1Cor.14:14-15]

Do pray so others can hear (and understand) *About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them.*[Acts.16:25] *For if you praise God only in the spirit, how can those who don't understand you praise God along with you? How can they join you in giving thanks when they don't understand what you are saying? You will be giving thanks very well, but it won't strengthen the people who hear you.*[1Cor.14:16-17]

Do pray in the Holy Spirit. *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.1:20-21]

Do pray with thanksgiving. *For he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors. Sing, barren woman, you who never bore a child; burst into song, shout for joy, you who were never in labour.*[Is.53:12-54:1] *Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.*[1Thes.5:16-] *Mattaniah the director who led in thanksgiving and prayer.*[Neh.11:17] *Three times a day he got down on his knees and prayed, giving thanks to his God, just as he had done before.*[Dan.6:10] *I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers.*[Eph.1:16] *I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy.*[Phil.1:3-4] *We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you.*[Col.1:3] *Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful. And pray for us, too.*[Col.4:2-3] *I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers.*[Phile.1:2]

So how do you pray? If we follow these Scriptural principles, our praying will be a joy not a chore and become the regular pattern of life for us instead of a ritual performance.

Questions

Why is it important to be righteous?
What is prayer?
Does God always hear our prayers?
What should we do when we don't get the answer to our prayers?
What is the New Covenant?
Why is the New Covenant so important?
Why do so many people prefer the rituals of the Old Covenant?

Puritan Prayer. Rest in God: Amid the blessings I receive from You, may I never lose the thought of being a stranger here on earth. May I love You, my Benefactor, in all my benefits, not forgetting that my greatest danger arises from my advantages. Produce in me a self-despair that will make Jesus precious to me, delightful in all His offices, pleasurable in all His ways. And may I love His commands as well as His promises. Help me to discern between true and false love—the one consisting of supreme love to You, the other not; the former uniting Your glory and man's happiness that they may become one common interest, the latter disjointing and separating them both. Teach me that genuine love is different in kind from that wrought by rational arguments or the motive of self-interest. Grant me grace to distinguish between the genuine and the false and to rest in You who are all love.

Ps.119:113-120: I have done what is righteous and just; do not leave me to my oppressors. Ensure your servant's well-being; do not let the arrogant oppress me. My eyes fail, looking for your salvation, looking for your righteous promise. Deal with your servant according to your love and teach me your decrees. I am your servant; give me discernment that I may understand your statutes. It is time for you to act, LORD; your law is being broken. Because I love your commands more than gold, more than pure gold, and because I consider all your precepts right, I hate every wrong path.

Jesus shall reign where'er the sun doth his successive journeys run;
His Kingdom stretch from shore to shore, till moons shall wax and wane no more.

To Him shall endless prayer be made. And princes throng to crown His head,
His name like sweet perfume shall rise with every morning sacrifice.

People and realms of every tongue dwell on His love with sweetest song;
And infant voices shall proclaim their early blessings on His name.

Blessings abound where'er He reigns: the prisoner leaps to lose his chains,
The weary find eternal rest, and all the sons of want are blest.

Where He displays His healing power death and the curse are known no more;
In Him the tribes of Adam boast more blessings than their father lost.

Let every creature rise and bring peculiar honours to our King;
Angels descend with songs again, and earth repeat the loud Amen. *Isaac Watts*

Sunday 12th October Ps.119:121-128

As Dave Smethurst is with us, I have used Andrew Corbett's article on the need for Conversion

Manasseh—a Great Conversion

In 2006 a Australian Federal Parliamentarian declared he and his Party should be regarded as truly representing the Christian vote of Australians. He then went on to more or less state that his understanding of Christianity was not the same as that of Evangelicals—who regard *conversion* as an essential—instead, his idea of Christianity was one of improving social conditions and promoting wealth-equity throughout society. He seemed to be criticising Evangelicals for preaching a Gospel of "*conversion*". He wanted to champion a Christianity after the fashion of the great Deitrich Bonhoeffer. Is conversion necessary or not to be an authentic Christian?

In John Bunyan's unequalled classic, *Pilgrim's Progress*, he tells of a man named Pilgrim who starts a life journey after innocently praying. As a result of praying he becomes aware of a burden on his back which he then realised had always been there. It seems to Pilgrim as if the burden becomes increasingly heavier. No matter how hard he tries he cannot free himself from this burden. He embarks on a journey to find relief. He meets Evangelist who points him to a hill called Golgotha. It is there that he meets a Saviour and realises that this Saviour's blood still flows.

As Pilgrim gazes into the face of the Saviour he is struck by the epiphany that this Saviour is dying for him. "*For me He dies! For me He dies!*" he cries. And as the blood of the Saviour flows toward him the burden of sin, guilt and shame snaps off his back and rolls down the hill. At

that point Pilgrim is converted!

So passionately did John Bunyan believe that Christianity could only be entered into via conversion that he was prepared to be jailed for that belief! It was in that prison cell that he wrote Pilgrim's Progress which champions the Biblical doctrine that salvation was by God's gifts of grace and faith resulting in *regeneration* (conversion). Those who disagree with Bunyan about the need for conversion and yet still regard themselves as Christians are often happy to wear the label *universalist*. They regard that since one man, Adam, brought the world involuntarily into sin, likewise the whole world has been *universally* saved by one man: Jesus Christ.

And what a difference between our sin and God's generous gift of forgiveness. For this one man, Adam, brought death to many through his sin. But this other man, Jesus Christ, brought forgiveness to many through God's bountiful gift.[Rom.5:15]

In resolving this dispute we must acknowledge that the stakes are potentially infinitely high! Eternal destinies are perhaps at risk by our opinions about this crucial matter. Our objective frame of reference and source of primary information to determine the truth of how we are saved is the Bible. Therefore, does the Bible really promote the concept of conversion unto salvation, or does the Bible present a universal salvation which makes conversion unnecessary? This debate is further confused by the experiences of some genuine Christians who either had a very dramatic conversion experience which they can identify occurring at a specific moment, and those Christians who have no idea when or if they ever had a conversion experience and could never identify a single moment when a conversion may have happened. So what do we mean when we say "*converted*"? It was perhaps Ezekiel who described it best when he prophesied about the salvation wrought by Christ—*I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.*[Ezek.36:26]

The New Testament develop the Bible's description of this '*newness'* with such contrasting metaphors as:

Darkness to light: *He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son.*[Col.1:13]

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.[1Pet.2:9]

Death to life: *The sin of this one man, Adam, caused death to rule over us, but all who receive God's wonderful, gracious gift of righteousness will live in triumph over sin and death through this one man, Jesus Christ.*[Rom.5:17]

We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers. Whoever does not love abides in death.[1Jn.3:14]

The universalist argues that this is everyone's standing before God due to the Cross. The Evangelical argues that this is only the experience of the elect (that is, *those who have accepted Christ and been spiritually regenerated by the Holy Spirit*). The problem that the universalist faces in sustaining their case from Scripture is *Scripture*. Scripture seems to present Christianity as commencing with a translation (*from* something *to* something else) experience. The metaphors that the Bible uses to describe this include, *from* death *to* life (*Rom.6:13*), *from* darkness *to* light, *from* the domain of Satan *to* the Kingdom of God (*Col.1:13*), *from* sin *to* holiness (*Rom.6:22*).

The Bible presents every person, despite their social standing, in need of salvation. In fact, all too often it is those who think that by virtue of their social standing they are more valuable to God—and therefore *deserving* of His salvation. Paul laments that–*For you see your calling, brethren, that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called.*[1Cor.1:26] Yet God can save anyone—even a King! In the Old Testament we have the account of the most wicked

King eventually turning to God in repentance. His story is wonderful example of the greatest conversions in the Bible.

The story of King Manasseh is one of the saddest episodes of Judah's history. He was the most wicked of kings, he continually rejected God and he justified his evil with religion—but God knew what it would take to bring him to repentance and God knew how to convert him. Manasseh was born during his father Hezekiah's, final years, which were deplorably squandered by Hezekiah leaving Manasseh with little more than contempt for God. He demonstrated this contempt by committing some of the grossest acts of indecency and human rights violations imaginable. Perhaps the most vile of these included his assassination of Isaiah the prophet.

This is the Talmudic account *(which is legendary rather than mythical c.f.Heb.11:37)* of that murderous rampage: *Manasseh killed Isaiah. Manasseh said to Isaiah, "Moses, thy master, said, 'There shall no man see God and live' [Ex.23:20]; but thou hast said, 'I saw the Lord seated upon his throne'" (Isa.6:1); and went on to point out other contradictions—as between Deut.4:7 and Isa.55:6; between Ex.23:26 and 2Kings 20:6. Isaiah thought: "I know that he will not accept my explanations; why should I increase his guilt?" He then uttered the Unpronounceable Name, a cedar-tree opened, and Isaiah disappeared within it. Then Manasseh ordered the cedar to be sawn asunder, and when the saw reached his mouth Isaiah died; thus was he punished for having said, "I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips" (Yeb. 49b).* The Jewish Encyclopaedia

Manasseh sacrificed his children in pagan rituals, established and promoted lewd sexual activity in the "*the high places*" all in the name religious practice He brought pagan objects of worship into the Temple precinct which may have seemed to bring some degree of legitimacy to His wickedness. *Manasseh was twelve years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem fifty-five years. He did evil in the eyes of the LORD, following the detestable practices of the nations the LORD had driven out before the Israelites. He rebuilt the high places his father Hezekiah had demolished; he also erected altars to the Baals and made Asherah poles. He bowed down to all the starry hosts and worshiped them. He built altars in the temple of the LORD, of which the LORD had said, "My Name will remain in Jerusalem forever." In both courts of the temple of the LORD, he built altars to all the starry hosts. He sacrificed his children in the fire in the Valley of Ben Hinnom, practiced divination and witchcraft, sought omens, and consulted mediums and spiritists. He did much evil in the eyes of the LORD, arousing his anger.*[2Chron.33:1-6]

Many people today are justifying their sexual proclivities, '*religiousizing*' their worldview, and excusing themselves from the ordinary standards of decency—especially when it comes to the weakest and most vulnerable in our society: children.

And that is exactly what Manasseh did—but God knew what it would take to bring Manasseh to repentance! You may be praying for a strayed loved one to turn to Christ and think they are beyond redemption. But God thinks otherwise! he knows how to bring them home.

Firstly, we notice that God *spoke* to Manasseh and Judah. *The LORD spoke to Manasseh and to his people, but they paid no attention.*[2Chron.33:10] This was most probably, and at least, through Isaiah the prophet. But Manasseh and Judah and would not listen to God. We then observe that God gave them over to their enemies. In this sense, God "*sent*" their enemies to attack them: *Therefore the LORD brought upon them the commanders of the army of the king of Assyria, who captured Manasseh with hooks and bound him with chains of bronze and brought him to Babylon.*[2Chron.33:11]

This is reminiscent of what Paul wrote in Romans where it says that certain people who rebelled against God's will and continually refused to repent were "*given up*" by God to fully indulge their sin: *Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonouring of their bodies among themselves.*[Rom.1:24]

When the Assyrians came and attacked Manasseh and took him captive, this was a great tragedy. We don't often associate tragedy with God's gracious dealings. But God knew that this is what it would take to bring Manasseh to repentance. It's often amazing how things sometimes seem to

turn for the worse when we pray for someone to turn to God. I have read this passage perhaps hundreds of times. When I ponder this episode, I wonder what Isaiah did prior to his execution. I wonder whether he prayed for Manasseh. I wonder he prayed for Manasseh to repent. If so, the events that transpired almost immediately after his death were an unforeseeable answer to prayer. God used tragedy to humble Manasseh and bring him to repentance.

It appears in Scripture that God generally uses three broad approaches to lead people to repentance. Firstly, God uses ***kindness*** to lead people to repentance. *Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?*[Rom.2:4]

Secondly, it appears that God uses ***miracles*** to bring people to repentance. Christ expresses His disappointment that many of the cities in which He performed miracles did not repent: *Then Jesus began to denounce the cities where he had done most of his miracles, because they hadn't turned from their sins and turned to God.*[Matt.11:20]

Thirdly, God uses ***tragedy*** to bring people to repentance. We see this in the life of Manasseh and also in the events that transpired in Jerusalem leading up to 70AD. During the 42 month bombardment and attack by the Romans, Israel experienced its great tribulation as spoken of by Christ in Matthew 24. The Book of Revelation put it this way: *Everyone was burned by this blast of heat, and they cursed the name of God, who sent all of these plagues. They did not repent and give him glory.*[Rev.16:9]

It could be argued that God used at least two of these three means, and possibly all three, to bring Manasseh to repentance. What Jeremiah doesn't record in Second Kings, Ezra draws the attention of the reader to in Second Chronicles. Manasseh humbled himself, prayed to God, repented, and confessed his need for God. *And when he was in distress, he entreated the favour of the LORD his God and humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers. He prayed to him, and God was moved by his entreaty and heard his plea and brought him again to Jerusalem into his kingdom. Then Manasseh knew that the LORD was God.*[2Chron.33:12-13]

Manasseh's conversion resulted in him reforming religious activity in Judah. He rebuilt the Temple altars and made repairs to the House of the Lord. His conversion was so dramatic that it should be regarded as one of the greatest conversions of the Bible. His conversion should encourage the modern believer to keep praying for those who do not know God. It should similarly encourage those who have doubts about God to experiment with prayer. Secondly, Manasseh's conversion should give us reason to have hope for a better future for ourselves and our communities because it shows us the extraordinary lengths that God will go to, to rescue people from seemingly hopeless situations.

God is in the business of conversion. He loves to convert people. He loves to rescue those who cry out to Him in humility. To those people, including Parliamentarians, who ridicule us Evangelicals for promoting Christianity as a matter of conversion, Manasseh presents a problem. But not only Manasseh, several others as well, which we explore in further instalments. It might also be worth noting that Deitrich Bonhoeffer would sound a loud "*Amen*!" He made this extremely clear in his book "*Life Together*" where he stressed the need for conversion and pointed out that the Christian community should only be considered as being constituted of those who have been converted. It is my prayer that we will see many thousands of people authentically converted to Christ all around the world. *Amen!*

N.B. *Manasseh was 12 years old when he became king and so he was born after God extended Hezekiah's life for 15 years by healing him of a mortal illness. Even though Manasseh was born as a direct result of a miracle, he turned out to be the worst of all kings—and yet God still turned evil to good and saved a soul from hell! C.f. Isaiah 38; 2Kings 20-21; 2Chron.26&33*

Questions
Read the account of Hezekiah's miraculous healing (Isaiah 38-39; 2Kings 20; 2Chronicles 32) and Manasseh's evil reign (2Kings 21; 2Chronicles 33:1-9) and then Manasseh's conversion (2Chronicles 33:10-20)
How could such evil *(Manasseh's reign)* **come out of such a miracle** *(Hezeakiah's healing)***?**
What is "conversion"?
Can anyone be converted?
Can people be saved *(i.e. go to heaven)* **without being converted?**
How does God get people's attention?
Can anyone resist God's call on their life?
What difference does being a Christian make?
Puritan Prayer. Blessings: 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.'
Psalm 119:121-128: I have done what is righteous and just; do not leave me to my oppressors. Ensure your servant's well-being; do not let the arrogant oppress me. My eyes fail, looking for your salvation, looking for your righteous promise. Deal with your servant according to your love and teach me your decrees. I am your servant; give me discernment that I may understand your statutes. It is time for you to act, LORD; your law is being broken. Because I love your commands more than gold, more than pure gold, and because I consider all your precepts right, I hate every wrong path.

Sunday 19th October Ps.119:129-136 Acts 17

How "open-minded" are you?
The people of Berea were more open-minded than the people of Thessalonica. They were very willing to receive God's message, and every day they carefully examined the Scriptures to see if what Paul said was true. Acts.17:11
It is often said that no two snowflakes are the same—that everyone is unique! But that is impossible to prove and because snowflakes are just a visual expression of frozen water, it is highly probable that many snowflakes are identical. However, every human being is unique and so there is no one quite like you (or me) because, regardless of how similar our bodies may seem (even within a family), we all have our own individual personalities and it is our personality that makes us unique! Our personality is our soul and it is made up of our mind, our will and our emotions. But unlike the rest of creation, we also have a spirit—that is, a God-likeness that is, like God, eternal and it is with our spirit that we communicate with God, who is Spirit. God created Adam and Eve and said they were very good. *So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground." ... 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.1:27-2:1] But after Adam and Eve disobeyed God, their goodness and innocence ended and they died spiritually (death is separation and they were spiritually separated from God). *But the LORD God warned him, "You may freely eat the fruit of every tree in the garden—except the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. If you eat its fruit, you are sure to die."*[Gen.2:16-17] *"You won't die!" the serpent replied to the woman. "God knows that your eyes will be opened as soon as you eat it, and you will be like God, knowing both good and evil." … The LORD God called to the man and asked him, "Where are you?" He answered, "I heard you in the garden. I was afraid because I was naked, so I hid." "Who told you that you were naked?" the LORD God asked. "Have you eaten from the tree whose fruit I commanded you not to eat?"*[Gen.3:4-11] All of Adam's children have inherited his "*dead*" spirit (sinful nature) and they in turn passed it on to their children for perpetuity. *Sin came into the world through one person, and death came through sin. So death spread to everyone, because everyone sinned.*[Rom.5:12]

This means that **every human being is born spiritually dead and separated from God.** When we were born, we were innocent (because we had done nothing wrong or right) but we were born spiritually dead and naturally opposed to God because we inherited a fallen nature from our father Adam. We call this the **Doctrine of Original Sin:** *As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins.*[Eph.2:1] *I know I've been a sinner ever since I was born. I've been a sinner ever since my mother became pregnant with me.*[Ps.51:5] *Indeed, there is no one on earth who is righteous, no one who does what is right and never sins.*[Eccl.7:20] However, God has a remedy for original sin—**the New Birth**: *You must be born again (born from above).*[Jn.3:3] At conversion (*the New-Birth*), our old *dead* spirit received from Adam was replaced with a new *living* spirit received from Jesus—and this spirit is imperishable as well as incorruptible: *Adam is an image of the one who would come. There is no comparison between God's gift and Adam's failure. If humanity died as the result of one person's failure, it is certainly true that God's kindness and the gift given through the kindness of one person, Jesus Christ, have been showered on humanity.*[Rom.5:14-15] *I will give them an undivided heart and put a new spirit in them; I will remove from them their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh. Then they will follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. They will be my people, and I will be their God.*[Ez.11:19-20] *For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God.*[1Pet.1:23] Christians—people who follow Christ after placing their trust in Him—are no longer separated from God but united with God. *But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace… [and he has reconciled us] to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.*[Eph.2:13-18] We are no longer dead to God because we have been made alive to God through the Cross of Christ: *You were once dead because of your failures and your uncircumcised corrupt nature. But God made you alive with Christ when he forgave all our failures. He did this by erasing the charges that were brought against us by the written laws God had established. He took the charges away by nailing them to the cross.*[Col.2:13-14]

Adam was made in God's image: *So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them;*[Gen.1:27] And every human being is a descendant of Adam: *From one man he has made every nation of humanity to live all over the earth.*[Acts.17:26] But all Adam's descendants are naturally biased against making the right choices because of their sinful nature. Our soul (personality) develops by responding and reacting to our environment—our mind thinks about our environment; our emotions like or dislike our environment; and our will makes choices about our environment. This process started within our mother's womb when we responded to her diet, her stress, her peace and even her love. And the soul continues to develop after birth which is why we try to protect our children from negative influences, especially danger. As we develop from childhood to adulthood, our soul (personality) grows and we mature by training and discipline—which is

why good parenting is so important. However, spiritual parenting is not just the role of natural parents but it is also the responsibility of the local Church. When we have a "*baby dedication*" service, we ask the congregation to take some responsibility for the child: "*Do you, as members of this church, acknowledge and accept the responsibility, together with the parents, of teaching and training this child, so that, being brought up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord, he/she may be led in due time to trust Christ as Saviour, and, confessing him as Lord in baptism, be made a member of his Church? If so, will you signify your acceptance of this responsibility by standing."* But even with good parenting from natural parents and the Church, there is no guarantee that people will make the right choices because we are by nature opposed to God! *Those who are under the control of the corrupt nature can't please God. But if God's Spirit lives in you, you are under the control of your spiritual nature, not your corrupt nature.*[Rom.8:8-9] (Last week we saw that Hezekiah, who was one of Judah's better kings was succeeded by his son Manasseh, who was Judah's worst king!) Obviously, we are not all born with an equal start and some people are born with serious disadvantages such as poverty, abuse, poor expectations, etc. But there comes a point in our life when we are answerable for our own choices—when our soul (our mind, emotions and will) becomes our own responsibility. God has commanded us to turn to Him and choose Him above our own interests: *God commands everyone everywhere to repent of their sins and turn to him. For he has set a day for judging the world with justice by the man he has appointed, and he proved to everyone who this is by raising him from the dead.*[Acts.17:30-31] And even after conversion, we still have the ability to make wrong choices (sin)—we live in a sinful environment, and we still have memories of our old way of life. But like Solomon, we can ask God to help us: *Give me a heart that listens so that I can judge your people and tell the difference between good and evil.*[1Kg.3:9]

The New Birth is a complete package and is much more than just the start to our spiritual life with God—it also includes God's continual presence with us through the indwelling Holy Spirit: *If you love me, keep my commands. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever— the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you.*[Jn.14:15-18] *His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature, having escaped the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.*[2Pet.1:3-4] That doesn't mean that life is easy or that we always make the right choices, but it does mean that we are never left isolated and helpless. And if we do make the wrong choices, there is a way back into fellowship with God: *My dear children, I am writing this to you so that you will not sin [make the wrong choices]. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate who pleads our case before the Father. He is Jesus Christ, the one who is truly righteous. He himself is the sacrifice that atones for our sins–and not only our sins but the sins of all the world.*[1Jn.2:1-2]

Faith—the absolute trust in God and His Word—will enable us to consistently make the right choices and will bring us to maturity—faith will "*save our soul*". *Though you have not seen [Jesus Christ], you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls.*[1Pet.1:8-9] Maturity is about making the right choices and comes from training our minds to honour God and giving Him the respect that He deserves. *We have a lot to explain about this. But since you have become too lazy to pay attention, explaining it to you is hard. By now you should be teachers. Instead, you still need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word. You need milk, not solid food. All those who live on milk lack the experience to talk about what is right. They are still babies. However, solid food is for mature people, whose minds are trained by practice to know the difference between good and evil.*[Heb.5:11-14] Maturity develops through regularly reading the Scriptures and reflecting on them, through

meeting together for fellowship as Believers, and through **being** the "*Re-built Tent of David*": *Simon has described to us how God first intervened to choose a people for his name from the Gentiles. The words of the prophets are in agreement with this, as it is written:" 'After this I will return and rebuild David's fallen tent. Its ruins I will rebuild, and I will restore it, that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord, even all the Gentiles who bear my name, says the Lord, who does these things'—things known from long ago.*[Acts.15:14-18] When King David brought the Ark to Jerusalem, the Tent of Moses (the Tabernacle) was still at Gibeon: *Solomon and the whole assembly went to the high place at Gibeon, for God's tent of meeting was there, which Moses the LORD's servant had made in the wilderness. Now David had brought up the ark of God from Kiriath Jearim to the place he had prepared for it, because he had pitched a tent for it in Jerusalem. But the bronze altar that Bezalel son of Uri, the son of Hur, had made was in Gibeon in front of the tabernacle of the LORD; so Solomon and the assembly inquired of him there.*[2Chron.1:3-4] And so David made tent for the Ark and established it as a place of continual praise and worship. *They brought the ark of God and set it inside the tent that David had pitched for it, and they presented burnt offerings and fellowship offerings before God. After David had finished sacrificing the burnt offerings and fellowship offerings, he blessed the people in the name of the LORD. Then he gave a loaf of bread, a cake of dates and a cake of raisins to each Israelite man and woman… David left Asaph and his associates before the ark of the covenant of the LORD to minister there regularly, according to each day's requirements… With them were Heman and Jeduthun and the rest of those chosen and designated by name to give thanks to the LORD, "for his love endures forever."*[1Chron.16:1-43] The restoration of David's Tent implies that we are to continually praise and worship—that our whole life is to be a living sacrifice of praise: *Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that openly profess his name. And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.*[Heb.13:15-16] *Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.*[Rom.12:1-2] This transformation doesn't happen from one big epic church service or even from a spectacular divine intervention—we **grow into maturity** by **faithfully fellowshipping with God through His Word and by faithfully fellowshipping with other Believers** (normally at our regular church services). We learn the Word, not from **one** Bible Study or from **one** sermon, but from **years** of study and **years** of sermons. The prophet Isaiah reminds us that the Word grows in us, *line after line, a little here, a little there.*[Is.28:10] We may never receive recognition from people for making the right choices, **but we will receive recognition from God for making the right choices**: *Those who had respect for the LORD talked with one another. They cheered each other up. And the LORD heard them. A list of people and what they did was written on a scroll in front of him. It included the names of those who respected the LORD and honoured him. "They will belong to me," says the LORD who rules over all. "They will be my special treasure. I will spare them just as a loving father spares his son who serves him. Then once again you will see the difference between godly people and sinful people. And you will see the difference between those who serve me and those who do not.*[Mal.3:16-18]

The people of Berea were open-minded because they were willing to receive God's message through Paul but also because they carefully examined the Scriptures to see if what he said was true.[Acts.17:11] A few years ago "*Christianity Today*" had a very good article entitled "*Gullibility is not a Spiritual Gift*" which made some very good points including: "A*s followers of Jesus, we are people of the truth." "God has not called us to be easily fooled. Gullibility is not a Christian virtue." "You need to go to trusted sources. Social media news feeds are not a trusted source." "When Christians spread lies, they need to repent of those lies. Sharing fake news makes us look foolish and harms our witness."* Although this was specifically about Covid, the points made are valid for the whole of our life, including finding out about God and sharing our faith. Let's make sure we remain open-minded, as we examine

the Scriptures to check that we are on course and then keep on making the right choices. *Look to God's instructions and teachings! People who contradict his word are completely in the dark. They will go from one place to another, weary and hungry. And because they are hungry, they will rage and curse their king and their God. They will look up to heaven and down at the earth, but wherever they look, there will be trouble and anguish and dark despair. They will be thrown out into the darkness.*[Is.8:20-22] Our goal is to live a stable successful Christian life that honours God and reflects our family name: *Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.*[Eph.4:11-16]

That is how we remain open-minded and reach maturity.

Questions

Why is everyone uniquely individual?
What is meant by "*original sin*"?
What were the main characteristics of David's Tent (*1Chron.16*)?
What is the relevance of David's Tent today?
What is spiritual maturity?
How can we mature spiritually?

Puritan Prayer. Love shed abroad: 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.

Ps.119:129-136: Your statutes are wonderful; therefore I obey them. The unfolding of your words gives light; it gives understanding to the simple. I open my mouth and pant, longing for your commands. Turn to me and have mercy on me, as you always do to those who love your name. Direct my footsteps according to your word; let no sin rule over me. Redeem me from human oppression, that I may obey your precepts. Make your face shine on your servant and teach me your decrees. Streams of tears flow from my eyes, for your law is not obeyed.

Sunday 26th October Ps.119:137-144 Acts 18

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

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

We take it for granted that we can read the Bible in our own language but until the C16th the only Bible that was available in England was in Latin (the Wycliffe translation from the C14th was in Middle English but outlawed). But in the early C16th William Tyndale began his translation into English and he was so committed to helping people learn about God from the Scriptures that he risked his life to do so—and paid the ultimate price! He had said that if God spared his life, he would cause the boy that drives the plough in England to know more of the Scriptures than the pope himself! Tyndale ingeniously coined new English words for his translation including: *atonement, beautiful, broken-hearted, castaway, fisherman, housetop, infidel, Jehovah, mercy seat, Passover, scapegoat. stiff-necked, sorcerer, two-edged sword, ungodly, uproar, viper.* In 1531 Henry VIII decreed that *the translation of the Scripture corrupted by William Tyndale should be utterly expelled, rejected, and put away out of the hands of the people*. Tyndale fled England and went to Europe to continue his work but 4 years later, he was arrested near Antwerp and imprisoned for 18 months. Tyndale was not charged with translating the Bible into English (he was no longer in England) but with heresy. A long list of charges was drawn up, including that he maintained: faith alone justifies; salvation is by faith alone rather than by the sacraments; approved clergy aren't necessary to interpret Scripture; there is no purgatory; neither the Virgin nor the Saints pray for us or should be invoked by us. Eventually Tyndale was condemned to the stake and on 6th October 1536 he was hung, but regained consciousness, and then burned alive. Tyndale's final words "*spoken with a fervent zeal and a loud voice*" were: "*Lord, open the King of England's eyes.*" Within four years of his death, Henry VIII had permitted four different English translations of the Bible and decreed that every Parish Church in the land must have an English translation of the Bible!

Today we have dozens of translations of the Bible available to us and in many different formats, such as print, audio, video, electronic, *etc.*—but most Christians are still Biblically illiterate! Some are able to quote (or more likely, mis-quote) a few verses or recall a few Bible stories, but few are able to "*rightly divide the Word of God*" *i.e.* discern between prose and prophecy; potential and promise; Old Covenant and New Covenant; past, present or future. Although we don't need to be theologians, we do need to understand theology—to have a correct view of God and know what He has spoken to us in Scripture. *Be <u>diligent</u> to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.*[2Tim.2:15] With a basic understanding of the Bible we can understand what it means to be right before God and what God want for us today. We can also understand the difference between the Old Covenant and the New Covenant—how people related to God before Jesus was born and how they relate to Him now. The Cross is the great divide between the Old Covenant and the New Covenant (actually, it is the death, resurrection, ascension of Jesus and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit that divides between Old and New Covenants). The Old Covenant was based on a future fulfilment of the Christ who had yet to come, whereas the New Covenant is based on the finished work of the Christ who has already come. The Old Covenant was based on a physical place (the Tabernacle and then the Temple in Jerusalem where God said He would meet with people), whereas the New Covenant is based on a spiritual place (we are God's Temple and our heart is the place where He meets us). The Old Covenant was conducted with elaborate ceremonies by a priest, whereas the New Covenant has no physical formal ceremonies because Jesus is our High Priest who is now in heaven, having completed His work on the Cross. The Old Covenant was based on repeated animal sacrifices that never actually forgave sin or cleared the people's conscience whereas the New Covenant is based on the single sacrifice of Jesus which removes sin and clears the conscience. Although the Old Covenant required faith in God, it was only temporary until the New Covenant was introduced. *When God speaks of a "new" covenant, it means he has made*

the first one obsolete.[Heb.8:13] *For that old system deals only with food and drink and various cleansing ceremonies–physical regulations that were in effect only until a better system could be established. So Christ has now become the High Priest over all the good things that have come. He has entered that greater, more perfect Tabernacle in heaven, which was not made by human hands and is not part of this created world. With his own blood–not the blood of goats and calves–he entered the Most Holy Place once for all time and secured our redemption forever.*[Heb.9:10-12]

God's promised Messiah (the Christ) **has already come in the Person of Jesus**, God's Son and our Saviour: *I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats this bread will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.*[Jn.6:51] **Jesus has already defeated** the devil at Calvary: *Christ 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.2:14-155] **Jesus is already Lord** (He is reigning now): *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] *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] **Jesus has already established His** (spiritual) **Kingdom**: *And he said to them, "Truly I tell you, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see that the kingdom of God has come with power."*[Mk.9:1] **Jesus has already blessed** us with every spiritual blessing: *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] **Jesus has already given us everything we need** for life and godliness: *His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness.*[2Pet.1:3] If we don't understand these basic truths, we will have a distorted view of Scripture and end up confused, frustrated or even worse, because we will be trying to get God to do what He has already done. Jesus' teaching at the beginning of His ministry was so simple and yet most people are not yet living it: *Don't ever worry and say, 'What are we going to eat?' or 'What are we going to drink?' or 'What are we going to wear?' Everyone is concerned about these things, and your heavenly Father certainly knows you need all of them. But first, be concerned about his kingdom and what has his approval. Then all these things will be provided for you. So don't ever worry about tomorrow. After all, tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.*[Matt.6:31-34] When Jesus came, He established the Kingdom of heaven here on earth **BUT** His Kingdom is a **spiritual** Kingdom and His rule is in people's **hearts**. *Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place."*[Jn.18:36] *People can't observe the coming of the kingdom of God. They can't say, 'Here it is!' or 'There it is!' You see, the kingdom of God is within you.*[Lk.17:20-21] The Bible contains everything we need to know about Jesus and God's Kingdom—how to enter it and how to live in it. *Don't ever think that I came to set aside Moses' Teachings or the Prophets. I didn't come to set them aside but to make them come true.*[Matt.5:17] *Jesus explained to them what was said about himself in all the Scriptures. He began with Moses and all the Prophets.*[Lk.24:27] *From morning till evening he [Paul] explained and declared to them the kingdom of God and tried to convince them about Jesus from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets.*[Acts.28:23] *You have known the Holy Scriptures ever since you were a little child. They are able to teach you how to be saved by believing in Christ Jesus. God has breathed life into all of Scripture. It is useful for teaching us what is true. It is useful for correcting our mistakes. It is useful for making our lives whole again. It is useful for training us to do what is right. By using Scripture, a man of God can be completely prepared to do every good thing.*[2Tim.3:15-17] Although the Bible contains some passages that are hard, it is the ignorant people who distort them. *Some things in [Paul's] letters are hard to understand. Ignorant people and people who aren't sure of what they believe distort what Paul says in his letters the same way they distort the rest of the Scriptures. These people will be destroyed.*[2Pet.3:16] And

because we Believers have the Holy Spirit, **we are able to understand** what God had given us: *We have received the Spirit who is from God. The Spirit helps us understand what God has freely given us. That is what we speak about. We don't use words taught to us by people. We use words taught to us by the Holy Spirit. We use the words of the Spirit to teach the truths of the Spirit. Some people don't have the Holy Spirit. They don't accept the things that come from the Spirit of God. Things like that are foolish to them. They can't understand them. In fact, such things can't be understood without the Spirit's help... But we have the mind of Christ.*[1Cor.2:12-16]

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

God's Kingdom is spiritual Kingdom and so it is an everlasting Kingdom. But unlike the kingdoms of this world, in God's Kingdom the meek, humble and lowly are the most important people: *Jesus called them together and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."*[Matt.20:25-27] *"Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all." He took a little child whom he placed among them. Taking the child in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me."*[Mk.9:35-37] *There will be weeping there, and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, but you yourselves thrown out. People will come from east and west and north and south, and will take their places at the feast in the kingdom of God. Indeed there are those who are last who will be first, and first who will be*

last.[Lk.13:28-30] And God's Kingdom is a place of great blessing: *God blesses those who are poor and realize their need for him, for the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs. God blesses those who mourn, for they will be comforted. God blesses those who are humble, for they will inherit the whole earth. God blesses those who hunger and thirst for justice, for they will be satisfied. God blesses those who are merciful, for they will be shown mercy. God blesses those whose hearts are pure, for they will see God. God blesses those who work for peace, for they will be called the children of God. God blesses those who are persecuted for doing right, for the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs. God blesses you when people mock you and persecute you and lie about you and say all sorts of evil things against you because you are my followers. Be happy about it! Be very glad! For a great reward awaits you in heaven. And remember, the ancient prophets were persecuted in the same way.*[Matt.5:3-12] Let's never stop learning, and especially learning about God and His kingdom and apply that information so our knowledge changes into wisdom—which is epitomised in Jesus. *Because of what God has done, you belong to Christ Jesus. He has become God's wisdom for us. He makes us right with God. He makes us holy and sets us free.*[1Cor.1:30] Then we will live contented, fulfilled and blessed lives: *My father taught me. He said, "Hold on to my words with all your heart. Keep my commands. Then you will live. Get wisdom. Get understanding. Don't forget my words. Don't turn away from them. Stay close to wisdom, and she will keep you safe. Love her, and she will watch over you. Wisdom is best. So get wisdom. No matter what it costs, get understanding. Value wisdom, and she will lift you up. Hold her close, and she will honour you. She will set a beautiful crown on your head. She will give you a glorious crown.*[Prov.4:4-9]

Questions

What does it mean to *rightly divide the word of truth.*[2Tim.2:15]?
How can we understand the Bible correctly?
How can we stay spiritually healthy?
In what way does spiritual health affect mental and physical health?
What is God's Kingdom like?
How is God's Kingdom different from the kingdoms of the world?

Puritan Prayer. Love shed abroad: 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 support me. 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 my faith was tested. 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. **Ps.119:137-144:** You are righteous, LORD, and your laws are right. The statutes you have laid down are righteous; they are fully trustworthy. My zeal wears me out, for my enemies ignore your words. Your promises have been thoroughly tested, and your servant loves them. Though I am lowly and despised, I do not forget your precepts. Your righteousness is everlasting and your law is true. Trouble and distress have come upon me, but your commands give me delight. Your statutes are always righteous; give me understanding that I may live.

November:

Remember. *Remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come.Eccl.12:1*

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 2nd November Ps.119:145-152 Acts 18

How confiden are you that Jesus is the Christ? *Apollos refuted the Jews with powerful arguments in public debate. Using the Scriptures, he explained to them that Jesus was the Christ. Acts.18:28*

We know that God's answer to man's problems is Jesus Christ—but how competent are you in proving that Jesus is the Christ? Christianity is much more than an academic religion—it is a heart religion, which means that it experiential and emotional. We sing that we know Jesus lives because He lives within our heart:

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

Jesus said that He and His Father would live within everyone who loves Him and obeys His teaching: *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. Anyone who does not love me will not obey my teaching. These words you hear are not my own; they belong to the Father who sent me.*[Jn.14:23-24] But experiences and emotions are very subjective and are not something that we should base our beliefs on—we need a better foundation that just feelings. And Apollos is a prime example: *At that time a Jew named Apollos came to Ephesus. He was an educated man from Alexandria. He knew the Scriptures very well. Apollos had been taught the way of the Lord. He spoke with great power. He taught the truth about Jesus.*[Acts.18:24-25] Alexandria is in Egypt and there had been a large Jewish community there since its foundation by Alexander the Great—it was at Alexandria that the Old Testament was translated from Hebrew into Greek in the late C3rd B.C. (we call this translation the Septuagint). Apollos was Bible literate and taught accurately about Jesus—about salvation, about the forgiveness of sins and Believers baptism—but he hadn't experienced the Baptism of the Holy Spirit. When Priscilla and Aquilla met Apollos, they took him to one side and explained Christianity more fully. Everything that Apollos was teaching was true and accurate but there is more than just going to heaven with our sins forgiven—Christianity is about following Christ and being in fellowship with Christ through the Holy Spirit, what some people call the "withness of the Spirit". Fellowship means a sharing together and we have fellowship with God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. *But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.*[Gal.5:24-25] *Dear friends, do not believe everyone who claims to speak by the Spirit. You must test them to see if the spirit they have comes from God. For there are many false prophets in the world. This is how we know if they have the Spirit of God: If a person claiming to be a prophet acknowledges that Jesus Christ came in a real body, that person has the Spirit of God. But if someone claims to be a prophet and does not acknowledge the truth about Jesus, that person is not from God. Such a person has the spirit of the Antichrist, which you heard is coming into the world and indeed is already here.*[1Jn.4:1-3]

The converts that Apollos left in Ephesus were saved and baptised but they didn't know about the Holy Spirit—so Paul baptised them in Jesus' Name, laid his hands on them and they were

filled with the Holy Spirit. *Paul took the road through the interior and arrived at Ephesus. There he found some disciples and asked them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" They answered, "No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit." So Paul asked, "Then what baptism did you receive?" "John's baptism," they replied. Paul said, "John's baptism was a baptism of repentance. He told the people to believe in the one coming after him, that is, in Jesus." On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. When Paul placed his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied. There were about twelve men in all.*[Acts.19:1-7] We see from this, that true Believers can be saved and going to heaven with their sins forgiven and yet never reach God's potential for them by being filled with the Holy Spirit!

A basic study of the Bible shows that every Believer has the Holy Spirit residing with them: *Therefore I want you to know that no one who is speaking by the Spirit of God says, "Jesus be cursed," and no one can say, "Jesus is Lord," except by the Holy Spirit.*[1Cor.12:3] The Holy Spirit is received at conversion: *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] Although we usually call this the infilling of the Holy Spirit, it is actually the outflowing of the Holy Spirit! *"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.7:37-38] God gives His Spirit without measure or limit: *For the one whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for God gives the Spirit without limit.*[Jn.3:34] And so a Christian can never be dry, empty or thirsty for God: *Jesus answered, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life."*[Jn.4:13-14] Although we may feel as if we are dry or empty, we need to declare the truth which is God is not just with us—He is within 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] *Our actions will show that we belong to the truth, so we will be confident when we stand before God. Even if we feel guilty, God is greater than our feelings, and he knows everything.*[1Jn.3:19-20] *The one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world.*[1Jn.4:4]

But however wonderful our feelings are, they are subjective, changeable and so they are unreliable. We cannot rely on our feelings for matters so important as our relationship with God and our eternal destiny—which is why God has given us the Scriptures. It is Scriptures that we turn to for our information about all things spiritual—and especially about Jesus, our relationship with God and our salvation. *Look to God's instructions and teachings! People who contradict his word are completely in the dark. They will go from one place to another, weary and hungry.*[Is.8:2-21] *You have been taught the holy Scriptures from childhood, and they have given you the wisdom to receive the salvation that comes by trusting in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It corrects us when we are wrong and teaches us to do what is right. God uses it to prepare and equip his people to do every good work.*[2Tim.3:15-17] All that we need to know about Jesus and God's plan of salvation through Him, has been recorded in the Bible—from Genesis to Revelation: *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.*[Jn.1:45-46] *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. As they approached the village to which they were going, Jesus*

continued on as if he were going farther. But they urged him strongly, "Stay with us, for it is nearly evening; the day is almost over." So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him, and he disappeared from their sight. They asked each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?"[Lk.24:25-32] Last week we saw how the New Covenant has replaced the Old Covenant because the Old Covenant didn't work and all it did was to remind people of their sin! It was a temporary agreement until Jesus came and took away the sins of the world: *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.2:2] All the intricate details of the rituals of the Old Covenant illustrated what Jesus would achieve for us in the New Covenant: *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] But when people see what Jesus has done and even when they have tasted the "new wine", they still prefer a ritualistic religion where they have to do something to appease their conscience: *And no one pours new wine into old wineskins. Otherwise, the new wine will burst the skins; the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined. No, new wine must be poured into new wineskins. And no one after drinking old wine wants the new, for they say, 'The old is better.'*[Lk.5:37-39] That is why it is so important to understand what Jesus has done—and then apply it to our own life. If we are to enjoy the benefits of God's Kingdom now, we need to know and understand the fundamentals of our faith—we need to believe in our heart and speak with our mouth; we need to pray and praise with our mind and our spirit. *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.*[1Cor.14:15] Jesus opened the Disciples' minds to understand the Scriptures and see Jesus there: *He said to them, "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms." Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, "This is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high."*[Lk.24:44-49] And the Holy Spirit is doing that today: *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 the truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will glorify me because it is from me that he will receive what he will make known to you. All that belongs to the Father is mine. That is why I said the Spirit will receive from me what he will make known to you.*[Jn.16:12-15] Jesus has removed the barrier of sin that was separating us from God, just as the Scriptures foretold: *Brothers and sisters, I'm making known to you the Good News which I already told you, which you received, and on which your faith is based. In addition, you are saved by this Good News if you hold on to the doctrine I taught you, unless you believed it without thinking it over. I passed on to you the most important points of doctrine that I had received: Christ died to take away our sins as the Scriptures predicted. He was placed in a tomb. He was brought back to life on the third day as the Scriptures predicted.*[1Cor.15:1-4]

And so now we can enjoy God—as the Westminster Shorter Catechism reminds us: What is the chief end of man? *Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him for ever.* What rule hath God given to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy him? *The Word of God, which is contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, is the only rule to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy him.* The Westminster Shorter Catechism is a series of 107 Questions and Answers (with Bible references) about the Christian faith. It was completed in 1647 during the Civil War and presented to the Long Parliament who had commissioned the Westminster Assembly of Divines (made up of theologians and members of the English Parliament) to restructure the

Church of England from Episcopalian (ruled by bishops and with its roots in Catholicism) to Presbyterian (led by an elected assemblies of elders who were Puritans). The Westminster Assembly produced a new Form of Church Government, a Confession of Faith (statement of belief), two catechisms or (manuals for religious instruction)—Shorter and Larger—and a liturgical manual (the Directory for Public Worship) for the Churches of England and Scotland. Although Parliament adopted the new system it lacked the power to implement it and during the Restoration of the monarchy in 1660, all of the documents of the Westminster Assembly were repudiated and episcopal church government was reinstated in England. However, the Church of Scotland retained the Presbyterian system of Church government and the Free Church of Scotland still presents a Bible to a child who can answer all of the 107 Catechism questions accurately at one sitting! Charles II brought in four draconian pieces of legislation (known as *The Clarendon Code*). These included *The Corporation Act 1661* which required all municipal officials to take Anglican communion (thus excluding nonconformists from public office); *The Act of Uniformity 1662* which made the Book of Common Prayer compulsory in religious service—more than 2000 clergy refused to comply and were forced to resign their livings (known as *The Great Ejection*); *The Conventicle Act 1664,* which forbade conventicles (a meeting for unauthorized worship) of more than 5 people who were not members of the same household; *The Five Mile Act 1665*, which forbade Nonconformist ministers from coming within five miles of incorporated towns—and they were also forbidden to teach in schools. It was during this time that John Bunyon (author of *Pilgrims' Progress*) was imprisoned for being a Pastor and Samuel Tavenor (who had been Governor of Deal Castle) was imprisoned for his faith in Dover Castle. During the Commonwealth period, Tavenor had been persuaded to attend an open-air meeting of Believers in field next to Deal Castle. He went along through curiosity but was ashamed to be seen in their presence because of his rank, so he hid behind a hedge. Through their preaching Tavenor was converted and was baptised by immersion in the Delf Stream at Sandwich on 13th April 1663. He joined the Baptists, who met at Dover, and became an itinerant preacher.

Although we don't need to be so formal in our response to doctrinal questions as reciting a Catechism, we do need to be confident that Jesus the Christ and, like Apollos, be able to explain from the Scriptures that Jesus is the Christ. So let's continue to talk about Scripture and bring out treasures from the "*store room*": *"Have you understood all these things?" Jesus asked. "Yes," they replied. He said to them, "Therefore every teacher of the law who has become a disciple in the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old."*Matt.13:51-52

Questions

How do we know that we are saved and our sins are forgiven?
Are feelings and emotions important to our faith?
Why can we trust the Bible to be God's Word?
What is the purpose of Scripture?
Does it matter what translations we read?
How does God speak through His Word?
How important is prophesy?

Puritan Prayer. Love shed abroad: 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 support me. 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 my faith was tested. 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.
Ps.119:145-152: I call with all my heart; answer me, LORD, and I will obey your decrees. I call out to you; save me and I will keep your statutes. I rise before dawn and cry for help; I have put my hope in your word. My eyes stay open through the watches of the night, that I may meditate on your promises. Hear my voice in accordance with your love; preserve my life, LORD, according to your laws. Those who devise wicked schemes are near, but they are far from your law. Yet you are near, LORD, and all your commands are true. Long ago I learned from your statutes that you established them to last forever.

Remembrance Sunday 9th November Ps.119:153-160

God remembers!

Wednesday was November 5th when we remember the failed Gunpowder Plot of 1605, which, if it had succeeded would have blown up the Houses of Parliament—and possibly the king and the Government with it. Henry VIII brought the English Church out of the control of Rome, Queen Mary I took the Church back into Roman Catholicism and Queen Elizabeth I restored England to a Protestant country. When Elizabeth died in 1601, James VI of Scotland (who was a Protestant sympathiser) became James I of England but there was a plot to overthrow him in order to make England Catholic again. James had become King of Scotland at the age of 13 months when his mother Mary Queen of Scots was forced to abdicate. Although Scotland was Protestant, Mary was Catholic but James was brought up as a Protestant but it seems that his religion was a head religion not heart religion with little Christianity involved! James' son, Charles I was a secret Catholic, his grandson, Charles II had promised to convert to Catholicism and his other grandson, James II was openly Catholic (he was the last Catholic English monarch)! So much for England having a Protestant heritage! Following the failed Gunpowder Plot, in early 1606, an act was passed designating 5th November as a date of thanksgiving, with bonfires and fireworks to commemorate the occasion. And so Bonfire night has become enshrined in our history through law and verse:

Remember, remember, the 5th of November, gunpowder, treason and plot.
I see no reason why gunpowder treason should ever be forgot.
Guy Fawkes and his companions did the scheme contrive, to blow the King and Parliament all up alive.
Threescore barrels, laid below, to prove old England's overthrow.
But, by God's providence, him they catch, with a dark lantern, lighting a match!
A stick and a stake for King James's sake! If you won't give me one,
I'll take two, the better for me, and the worse for you. A rope, a rope, to hang the Pope,
a penn'orth of cheese to choke him, a pint of beer to wash it down, and a jolly good fire to burn him.
Holloa, boys! holloa, boys! make the bells ring! Holloa, boys! holloa boys!
God save the King! Hip, hip, hooor-r-r-ray!

And Remembrance Sunday is another time of thanksgiving and commemoration. The tradition of Remembrance Day evolved out of Armistice Day and the first Armistice Day celebration was held in the grounds of Buckingham Palace on the morning of 11 November 1919 and included a two-minute silence as a mark of respect for those who died in the war and those left behind. In 1939 Britain, the two-minute silence was moved to the Sunday nearest to 11th November in order not to interfere with wartime production, and this became "*Remembrance Sunday*". Today we remember with thanksgiving those who made the supreme sacrifice of laying down their lives.

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".

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

This year we have been focusing on remembering, with a Scripture each month highlighting things we should remember about our faith, but today we are looking at 3 things that God says He will remember: His Covenant, our sins no more, and us.

God remembers His Covenant. *Yet I will remember the covenant I made with you in the days of your youth, and I will establish an everlasting covenant with you.*[Ezek.16:60] A covenant is an agreement or alliance between 2 parties. God made a covenant with Adam, another one with Noah, another one with Abraham and of course the covenant with Israel given through Moses. Actually, each of these covenants progressively revealed God's redemptive plan—which is to bring people together in unity with Himself. *But now through Christ Jesus you, who were once far away, have been brought near by the blood of Christ. So he is our peace. In his body he has made Jewish and non-Jewish people one by breaking down the wall of hostility that kept them apart. He brought an end to the commandments and demands found in Moses' Teachings so that he could take Jewish and non-Jewish people and create one new humanity in himself. So he made peace. He also brought them back to God in one body by his cross, on which he killed the hostility. He came with the Good News of peace for you who were far away and for those who were near. So Jewish and non-Jewish people can go to the Father in one Spirit. That is why you are no longer foreigners and outsiders but citizens together with God's people and members of God's family. You are built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets. Christ Jesus himself is the cornerstone. In him all the parts of the building fit together and grow into a holy temple in the Lord. Through him you, also, are being built in the Spirit together with others into a place where God lives.*[Eph.2:13-22] Another meaning of a "*covenant*" is a "*will*" or "*testament*" and just as a person's last will and testament does not take effect until that person dies, so God's Covenants were implanted with a death—a sacrifice. And God's final Covenant, that replaced all the previous covenants, was also implemented with a death—Jesus' sacrifice at Calvary: *In the case of a will, it is necessary to prove the death of the one who made it, because a will is in force only when somebody has died; it never takes effect while the one who made it is living. This is why even the first covenant was not put into effect without blood. When Moses had proclaimed every command of the law to all the people, he took the blood of calves, together with water, scarlet wool and branches of hyssop, and sprinkled the scroll and all the people. He said, "This is the blood of the covenant, which God has commanded you to keep." In the same way, he sprinkled with the blood both the tabernacle and everything used in its ceremonies. In fact, the law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness. It was*

necessary, then, for the copies of the heavenly things to be purified with these sacrifices, but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these.[Heb.9:16-23] Jesus introduced God's New Covenant with His death: *And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me." In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you.*[Lk.22:19-20] And this New Covenant brought an end to the commandments and demands found in Moses' Teachings by making that old covenant obsolete. *This is the covenant I will establish with the people of Israel after that time, declares the Lord. I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people… they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest. For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more." By calling this covenant "new," he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and outdated will soon disappear.*[Heb.8:10-13] *In this new covenant we have a God-awareness and know God personally because He writes His laws on our heart and gives us clean conscience. Under the old system, the blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer could cleanse people's bodies from ceremonial impurity. Just think how much more the blood of Christ will purify our consciences from sinful deeds so that we can worship the living God. For by the power of the eternal Spirit, Christ offered himself to God as a perfect sacrifice for our sins.*[Heb.9:13-14] *Yet I will remember the covenant I made with you in the days of your youth, and I will establish an everlasting covenant with you.*[Ezek.16:60] **Yes! God remembers His Covenant!**

God remembers our sins no more: *For I will forgive their wickedness and I will remember their sins no more.*[Heb.8:12] The reason the New Covenant is greater than any of the previous covenants is that this new covenant actually works and our sins are forgiven—our sins are expunged, remised and sent away from us and from God! *Jesus has been given a greater work to do for God. He is the go-between for the new covenant. That covenant is better than the old one. It is based on better promises. Suppose nothing had been wrong with that first covenant. Then no one would have looked for another covenant. But God found fault with the people. He said, "A new day is coming, says the Lord. I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel. I will also make it with the people of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their people of long ago. That was when I took them by the hand. I led them out of Egypt. My new covenant will be different because they didn't remain faithful to my old covenant. So I turned away from them, says the Lord. This is the covenant I will make with Israel after that time, says the Lord. I will put my laws in their minds. I will write them on their hearts. I will be their God. And they will be my people.*[Heb.8:6-10] God doesn't "*forget*" our sins in a lapse of memory, only to remember them again sometime in the future! No! God consciously and deliberately "*remembers them no more*" because they are no more—they are gone. *For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us.*[Ps.103:11-12] *I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions, for my own sake, and remembers your sins no more.*[Is.43:25] *"Come now, let us reason together," says the LORD. "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool."*[Is.1:18] These statements were prophesies written under the Old Covenant, but they are fulfilled in the New Covenant—the covenant that Jesus implemented and the covenant that God remembers. *God has rescued us from the power of darkness and has brought us into the kingdom of his Son, whom he loves. His Son paid the price to free us, which means that our sins are forgiven.*[Col.1:13-14] *All the prophets testify that people who believe in the one named Jesus receive forgiveness for their sins through him.*[Acts.10:43] *I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins.*[Mk.2:10] *For I will forgive their wickedness and I will remember their sins no more.*[Heb.8:12] **Yes! God remembers our sins no more.**

God remembers us. *Give thanks to the One who remembered us when things were going badly for us. His faithful love continues forever.*[Ps.136:23] We are never alone—even when things are going badly for us—because God is with us. God is with us in a very personal and tangible way, because God the Holy Spirit indwells every Believer (last week we called this the *"withness"* of the Spirit). *Those*

who are in the realm of the flesh cannot please God. You, however, are not in the realm of the flesh but are in the realm of the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, they do not belong to Christ. But if Christ is in you, then even though your body is subject to death because of sin, the Spirit gives life because of righteousness. And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies because of his Spirit who lives in you.[Rom.8:8-11] *Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God?*[1Cor.6:19] In a very real yet mystical way, we are united with God (mystical means a mystery because we don't understand how it works). *But anyone who is joined to the Lord becomes one with him in spirit.*[1Cor.1:17] In the carol "*Hark the herald angels sing,*" Wesley puts like this:

Come, Desire of Nations, come, fix in us Thy humble home,
Rise, the woman's Conquering Seed, bruise in us the serpent's head.
Now display Thy saving power, ruined nature now restore,
Now in mystic union join, Thine to ours and ours to Thine.
Adam's Likeness, LORD, efface, stamp Thy image in its place,
Second Adam from above, reinstate us in Thy love.
Let us Thee, though lost, regain, Thee, the life, the inner man:
Oh to all Thyself impart, formed in each believing heart.

The Bible takes the analogy of a mother's compassion for her baby and says that God's compassion is far, far greater than a mother's compassion and God will never forget us: *Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you! See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands;*[Is.49:15-16] God has engraved our names on the palms of His hands very dramatically at Calvary—the nails that the Romans used to pin Jesus to the cross, also engraved our names on His hands! Jesus has our names imprinted on His hand and His heart. God will never forget us or forsake us! *Remember these things, O Jacob, for you are my servant, O Israel. I have made you, you are my servant; O Israel, I will not forget you. I have swept away your offenses like a cloud, your sins like the morning mist. Return to me, for I have redeemed you.*[Is.44:21-22] *God has said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you." So we say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?"*[Heb13:3-6] When the thief asked Jesus to remember him, Jesus gave him the assurance that He would not only remember him but that he would be with Him forever: *Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your Kingdom." And Jesus replied, "I assure you, today you will be with me in paradise."*[Lk.23:42-43] The Bible says that when we think about the honour of His Name, we are recorded in a "*Scroll of Remembrance*"! *Then those who feared the LORD spoke with each other, and the LORD listened to what they said. In his presence, a scroll of remembrance was written to record the names of those who feared him and always thought about the honour of his name.*[Mal.3:16] *Give thanks to the One who remembered us when things were going badly for us. His faithful love continues forever.*[Ps.136:23] **Yes! God remembers us.**

Three important things that God remembers—God remembers His Covenant; God remembers our sins no more; God remembers us. Let's make sure we remember them too!

Questions

Should we remember those who died in wars and conflicts?
Should Christians fight in political wars?
Can a Christian be a pacifist?
What does the Bible say about remembering the past?
What does it mean that God "*remembers our sins no more*"?
In what ways does God remember us?

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

Ps.119:153-160: Look on my suffering and deliver me, for I have not forgotten your law. Defend my cause and redeem me; preserve my life according to your promise. Salvation is far from the wicked, for they do not seek out your decrees. Your compassion, LORD, is great; preserve my life according to your laws. Many are the foes who persecute me, but I have not turned from your statutes. I look on the faithless with loathing, for they do not obey your word. See how I love your precepts ;preserve my life, LORD, in accordance with your love. All your words are true; all your righteous laws are eternal.

Captain's Innings—A Poem for Remembrance Day

The nets are down, the scoreboard blank, Persistent is the rain;
November's fallen leaves Stir memories again

Of keen-fought contests that were played Upon this well-kept green;
But Cecil, Fred and Tom were picked To play a distant team.

In khaki clad, in fields of mud, They played their finest game
And "slogged it out" till "close of play"—Immortal is their name!

But when I think of men who died In frenzied, costly strife,
It never fails to bring to mind The Christ who gave His life

Not for a nation's flag or cause—Mere transitory gains—
But in the rout of satan's hosts Who held us all in chains.

Mons, Passchendaele and Vimy Ridge, Blood-drench'd Gallipoli;
But never was a triumph won Greater than Calvary!

So, Captain of our Salvation, As we in tribute pause,
Inspire in us such bravery, Yet for Your highest cause.

Dr David Allen (2014)—David was a lecturer at Mattersey College and my tutor.

Sunday 16th November Ps.119:161-168 Acts.19

Puritan Prayer. Privileges: 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.
Ps.119:161-168 Rulers persecute me without cause, but my heart trembles at your word. I rejoice in your promise like one who finds great spoil. I hate and detest falsehood but I love your law. Seven times a day I praise you for your righteous laws. Great peace have those who love your law, and nothing can make them stumble. 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.ת

Sunday 16th November Ps.119:161-168 Acts.19
Sunday 16th November Ps.119:161-168 Acts.19
Wednesday 19th November 10.00am Bible Study
Sunday 23rd November 10.30am Ps.119:169-176 Acts.20
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!
Remember. *Remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come.Eccl.12:1*
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*
Paul spoke boldly, arguing persuasively about the kingdom of God. *Acts 19:8*
Paul spent nearly 2 years at Corinth preaching and teaching the Word of God in what was one of the most depraved cities of the Roman Empire. Corinth was renowned for its immorality and the temple of Aphrodite boasted of over 1,000 prostitutes—which obviously influenced the culture of the area! But notwithstanding the immorality of Corinth, when the Gospel was proclaimed, people were converted, and a Church was established. *And so it was with me, brothers and sisters. 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* And it was during his time in Corinth that Paul wrote to the Churches in Galatia and Thessalonica. When Paul returned to his home church in Antioch, he went via Ephesus where he left Priscilla and Aquilla who met an enthusiastic young preacher named Apollos. Apollos was a great evangelical but not yet a Pentecostal—he knew how to arrive heaven when he died but didn't know how to experience heaven before he died; he knew about the forgiveness of sins but not yet about the fellowship of Spirit—so Priscilla and Aquilla explained to him about the baptism of the Holy Spirit! *Apollos was an eloquent speaker and knew how to use the Scriptures in a powerful way. He had been instructed in the Lord's way and spoke enthusiastically. He accurately taught about Jesus but knew only about John's baptism.* *Acts.18:24-25* When Apollos left Ephesus and crossed over the Aegean Sea to Corinth, the Believers in Ephesus had only heard Apollos' earlier preaching, so when Paul returned to Ephesus, he asked: *"Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?" They answered him, "No, we've never even heard of the Holy Spirit." Paul asked them, "What kind of baptism did you have? "They answered, "John's baptism." Paul said, "John's baptism was a baptism of repentance. John told people to believe in Jesus, who was coming later." After they heard this, they*

were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. When Paul placed his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came to them, and they began to talk in other languages and to speak what God had revealed.[Acts.19:2-6] Paul then spent 2 years at Ephesus, establishing the Church, **speaking boldly, arguing persuasively about the kingdom of God**. *Paul entered the synagogue and spoke boldly there for three months, arguing persuasively about the kingdom of God. But some of them became obstinate; they refused to believe and publicly maligned the Way. So Paul left them. He took the disciples with him and had discussions daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus. This went on for two years, so that all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord.*[Acts.19:8-10] And it was from Ephesus that Paul wrote to the Church at Corinth to advise on their difficulties (which had developed into disputes) and to bring some order to this new Church. In this letter, Paul mentions the Kingdom of God in 4 different passages.

To live in God's Kingdom is to live an empowered life: *The kingdom of God is not a matter of talk. It is a matter of power.*[1Cor.4:20] Talk is easy and cheap and if our faith is to be credible, our theology must be more than theory—it must be backed up by reality. When we say that Jesus is our Saviour, we should know that our sins really are forgiven—and be living with the assurance that we really do have peace with God. *But if we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all wickedness.*[1Jn.1:9] When we pray to God, we should know that God hears our prayers—and then pray with assurance and confidence. This does not mean that God does everything we tell Him to do because prayer is NOT giving God instructions. No! Prayer is reporting for duty. Prayer is fellowshipping with God as our heavenly Father and committing ourself and our loved ones to His care. Prayer builds us up in our faith[Jude 20] and enables us to trust God better so that we don't doubt His love or become anxious. *Worry is a vote of no confidence in God.* When we became a Christian, God not only changed us but He made His home with us. Christ is not just **<u>with</u>** us, but He is actually **<u>within</u>** us: *the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.*[Col.1:27] Christ means "*anointed one*" and the "*anointed one*" within us is the Holy Spirit: *And <u>Christ lives within you</u>, 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, <u>lives in you</u>. And just as God raised Christ Jesus from the dead, he will give life to your mortal bodies by this same <u>Spirit living within you</u>.*[Rom.8:10-11] Because God gives the Holy Spirit without limit,[Jn.3:34] we will not become spiritually empty. *Jesus told them, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me <u>will never become hungry</u>, and whoever believes in me will <u>never become thirsty</u>.*[Jn.6:35] Although we cannot have **more of God coming in to us**, we do need **more of God coming out of us**! And we need to keep reminding ourselves of who we really are or else we will start believing that we need more of God or more power, or more anointing, or more forgiveness, or more cleaning. John G. Lake said: *If you are born again, you are a son of God. And for you to tear yourself out of your sonship, your relationship and the righteousness of God and put yourself over in the reality of death and tell God you are dirty, unclean, that His blood has not cleansed you, and His life has not been delivered to you—it is a monstrous thing. It is alright to sing that as an unregenerate, but it is not the experience of the sons and daughters of God.*

To live in God's Kingdom is to live an ennobled life: *Don't you know that evil people will not receive God's kingdom? Don't be fooled. Those who commit sexual sins will not receive the kingdom. Neither will those who worship statues of gods or commit adultery. Neither will men who are prostitutes or who commit homosexual acts. Neither will thieves or those who always want more and more. Neither will those who are often drunk or tell lies or cheat. People who live like that will not receive God's kingdom. Some of you used to do those things. <u>But your sins were washed away. You were made holy. You were made right with God.</u> All of that was done in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.*[1Cor.6:9-11] God has set a high standard for His subjects, but we are more than just citizens of heaven—we are also His family. This means we have an obligation to maintain the honour of God's Name by keeping to His

standards. If we really understand what God has done for us, we will want to live holy, pure, clean and respectable lives that honour Him. Our spiritual past, together with its guilt, has been erased and removed—it's gone: *Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!*[2Cor.5:17] Living in the dirt is the devil's domain! *You will crawl on the ground. You will eat dust all of the days of your life.*[Gen.4:14] We are better than that—and instead of living in the gutter, we should be enjoying heaven now: *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] *God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus.*[Eph.2:6] Another quote from John G. Lake: *There should be a development of God and His nature in you, through the agency of the Holy Spirit. This process of re-making and re-moulding should change your nature and life and dissolve difficulties out of your soul.*

To live in God's Kingdom is to live a submitted life: *Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death.*[1Cor.15:24-25] This world will continue in its opposition to God until Jesus has destroyed all opposition but by definition, Christians are followers of Christ not opposers of Him. When we became a Christian we confessed Jesus as 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.*[Rom.10:9-10] To confess that Jesus is Lord means that we willingly submit to His authority. But it also means that we have access to God's Kingdom—and God is pleased to give us the Kingdom: *Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom.*[Lk.12:32] To submit to Jesus is to yield to Him by saying: "*Yes Lord*". This means that grumbling and complaining should be eradicated from our vocabulary. *And don't grumble as some of them did, and then were destroyed by the angel of death. These things happened to them as examples for us. They were written down to warn us who live at the end of the age. If you think you are standing strong, be careful not to fall. The temptations in your life are no different from what others experience. And God is faithful. He will not allow the temptation to be more than you can stand. When you are tempted, he will show you a way out so that you can endure.*[1Cor.10:10-13] A further quote from Lake: *It is a sad thing when you hear Christians with a groan. The secret of Christianity is the secret of Christ possessing the heart of a person, a person being yielded to Him so that His victory, His consciousness and His power possesses your spirit and mind.* It is the willing and obedient who live in the blessings of God's Kingdom: *If you are willing and obedient, you will eat the good things of the land; but if you resist and rebel, you will be devoured by the sword.*[Is.1:19-20] David's prayer of contrition was under the Old Covenant but under the New Covenant it is the experience of every Christian at conversion. *Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me. Then I will teach transgressors your ways, so that sinners will turn back to you.*[Ps.51:10-13]

To live in God's Kingdom is to live a spiritual life: *I declare to you, brothers and sisters, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable.*[1Cor.15:50] God's Kingdom is a spiritual kingdom, but we are more than a just a spirit who lives in a body—we are a trinity of spirit, soul and body: *May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it.*[1Thess.5:23-24] Paul was being very precise when he wrote this because the order of spirit, soul and body is important. Until our spiritual life dominates our soul life, we are not spiritual (no matter how religious we may seem) and we remain infants in our faith and spiritually immature: *Brothers and sisters, I could not address you as people who live by the Spirit but as people who are still worldly—mere infants in Christ. I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet*

ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready. You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarrelling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere humans? For when one says, "I follow Paul," and another, "I follow Apollos," are you not mere human beings?[1Cor.3:1-4] A spiritually immature person doesn't understand about righteousness, that is, they don't know who they are in Christ. *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. Therefore let us move beyond the elementary teachings about Christ and be taken forward to maturity.*[Heb.5:13-6:1] The Greek word for "*infant*" is literally "*a non-speaker*" so spiritually immature people don't talk about who they are in Christ! And so a spiritually mature person is someone whose re-born spirit dominates their personality and mind (soul) by making their soul (their mind and personality) praise God by saying good things about Him. *Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Saviour and my God.*[Ps.43:5] John G. Lake again: *It is not the words you say that is going to bless them. They need something greater—they need the thing in your soul. When they receive it, then their soul will open and there will be a divine response. Give it to them—it is the love of God.*

We are subjects of Jesus the King of kings, so let's live by the values of His Kingdom and live **empowered lives, ennobled lives, submitted lives and spiritual lives.** *God's kingdom has nothing to do with eating or drinking. It is a matter of being right with God. It brings the peace and joy the Holy Spirit gives.*[Rom.14:17] This quote from John G. Lake about the value of knowing the Lord and what communion with God means summarises the Christian's walk with God—and hopefully, your walk with God too! *Salvation is not just something God gives you that is going to bless you after you die; it is having the presence of the Lord now. God has promised to the Christian the guidance and direction of the Holy Spirit.*

Questions

Does the spiritual climate of our community affect our spiritual life?

What do you understand by an "empowered life"?

What do you understand by an "ennobled life"?

What do you understand by a "submitted life"?

What do you understand by a "spiritual life"?

Puritan Prayer. Privileges: 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.

Ps.119:161-168: Rulers persecute me without cause, but my heart trembles at your word. I rejoice in your promise like one who finds great spoil. I hate and detest falsehood but I love your law. Seven times a day I praise you for your righteous laws. Great peace have those who love your law, and nothing can make them stumble. 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.

In 1995 I ministered in several Apostolic Faith Churches in Zimbabwe Harare and also at their Bible School. Cossam Chiangwa (who later became the President of AFC in Zimbabwe) was the pastor of the church in Glen Norah, Harare where I was based for the week. That church had grown to about 3000 members after a lady who had died was prayed for and returned to life! The AFC in Africa was started by John G Lake, (see November's "*Thought for the Month*") and because I am using several other quotes from him this morning, I will give a little of his background. John Graham Lake was born in Canada in 1870 and was healed of childhood rheumatoid arthritis through John Alexander Dowie's ministry. Lake later moved to Zion City (which is now a suburb of Chicago) which Dowie had founded as place of healing and wholeness. In 1908, Lake went to Africa and together with Thomas Hezmalhalch, founded the Apostolic Faith Mission of South Africa (AFM). Within five years, they had produced 1,250 preachers, 625 congregations, and 100,000 converts. In 1913 Lake returned to the USA and settled in Spokane, Washington, where he founded a church and a Healing Home, which drew thousands from around the world for ministry and saw over 100,000 people healed. Lake died in 1935 at the age of 65.

Sunday 23rd November Ps.119:169-176 Acts.20

I've started so I'll finish!

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

Some of you will remember the BBC's Quiz Show "*Mastermind*", where contestants had 2 minutes to answer questions on their specialized subject and also on general knowledge. However, if the time ran out while the final question was being read, the questioner finished asking the question and allowed the contestant to answer it, which led to the programme's catchphrase, "*I've started so I'll finish!*" Even though Paul the apostle did not actually use the exact phrase "*I've started so I'll finish,*" he talked about his faith in the same way: *I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.*[2Tim.4:7-8] Paul used competition sport (probably the Olympic Games) as an illustration of his determination to live his Christian life within God's rules so he could finish the "*race*" that he had started—without being disqualified: *All athletes are disciplined in their training. They do it to win a prize that will fade away, but we do it for an eternal prize. So I run with purpose in every step. I am not just shadowboxing. I discipline my body like an athlete, training it to do what it should. Otherwise, I fear that after preaching to others I myself might be disqualified.*[1Cor.9:25-27] It was this determination to finish the race that drove Paul to endure hardship, discomfort and discouragement: *Three different times I begged the Lord to take it away. Each time he said, "My grace is all you need. My power works best in weakness." So now I am glad to boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ can work through me. That's why I take pleasure in my weaknesses, and in the insults, hardships, persecutions, and troubles that I suffer for Christ. For when I am weak, then I am strong.*[2Cor.12:8-10] Even though Paul was striving with all his might to gain the "*prize*", he wasn't complacent but acknowledged that he had not achieved perfection and that his "*race*" would continue to the end of his life. *I have not yet received all of those things. I have not yet been made perfect. But I move on to take hold of what Christ Jesus took hold of me for. Brothers and sisters, I don't consider that I have taken hold of it yet. But here is the one thing I do. I forget what is behind me. I push hard toward what is ahead of me. I move on toward the goal to win the prize. God has appointed me to win it. The heavenly prize is Christ Jesus himself.*[Phil.3:12-14] All Christians are in that same "*faith race*" and we are pressing towards our goal—which is the salvation of our souls. *In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have*

come so that the proven genuineness of your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may result in praise, glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed. Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls.[1Pet.1:6-9] But if we don't compete within the rules that God has set out, we may end up becoming disqualified—however like Paul, we will never reach perfection this side of the grave: *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.1:8-2:2] Although God calls us holy and righteous, it is our new spiritual nature that is perfect, not necessarily our lifestyle—although we are getting better! And through our faith (our simple, confident and complete trust in God), we are aligning our lifestyle with our new nature: *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] This world's system is opposed to God and we are continually bombarded with ideas and information that are opposed to God's values. *We know that we are children of God, and that the whole world is under the control of the evil one.*[1Jn.5:19] *Don't you know that to be a friend of the world is to hate God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God.*[Jas.4:4] Ever since Adam and Eve rebelled against God and were evicted from Eden, this world's system has opposed God. The world's rebellion and evil grieved God in Noah's day: *The LORD saw how bad the sins of man had become on the earth. All of the thoughts in his heart were always directed only toward what was evil. The LORD was very sad that he had made man on the earth. His heart was filled with pain.*[Gen.6:5-6] The pagan nations surrounding Israel profaned God' Name by killing their children in the name of Molech: *Do not give any of your children to be sacrificed to Molech, for you must not profane the name of your God. I am the LORD.*[Lev.18:21] And today, nations are still profaning God's Name by killing children through abortion—and God's condemnation is the same! We may change the words we use—instead of lying we call it "*a legal loophole*"; instead of adultery or fornication we call it "*an affair*," "*a paramour*," "*a fling*," or "*a one night stand*"; instead of murder we call it "*euthanasia*"; instead of abortion we call it "*termination*"—but evil still grieves God. It is estimated that in our country, 1 in 3 women will have had an abortion in their lifetime. The Abortion Act came into effect in England, Scotland and Wales on 27 April 1968 and over ten million babies have been slaughtered by abortion since then. The latest figures on the Government website show that in 2022 there were 251,377 abortions for women resident in England and Wales—the highest number since the Abortion Act was introduced. The state of the world's rebellion and evil is still grieving God—however, God is a God of grace and His compassion overflows in Jesus: *God's law was given so that all people could see how sinful they were. But as people sinned more and more, God's wonderful grace became more abundant. So just as sin ruled over all people and brought them to death, now God's wonderful grace rules instead, giving us right standing with God and resulting in eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.*[Rom.5:20-21] With so much spiritual, emotional and even physical opposition to God's values, we need to continually re-set our moral and spiritual compass if we are to stay spiritually healthy. And we re-set our moral and spiritual compass by washing our minds with God's Word: *Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what he wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you.*[Rom.12:2] *Christ loved the church. He gave up his life for her to make her holy and clean,*

washed by the cleansing of God's word. He did this to present her to himself as a glorious church without a spot or wrinkle or any other blemish. Instead, she will be holy and without fault.[Eph.5:25-27] Spiritual health comes from **eating spiritual food**—the Word of God: *Man doesn't live only on bread. He also lives on every word that comes from the mouth of God;*[Matt.4:4] by **exercising spiritually**—prayer: *But you, dear friends, carefully build yourselves up in this most holy faith by praying in the Holy Spirit.*[Jude.20] and by **resting spiritually**—trusting not trying: *God's promise of enjoying his rest still stands. So be careful that none of you fails to receive it… Those who enjoy God's rest also rest from their work. So let us make every effort to enjoy that rest.*[Heb.4:1;10-11]

Spiritual Food: Although the Word of God is our spiritual food, if we are to benefit from it, we must "*digest*" God's Word by pondering on it—and then actually put it into practice: *Keep this Book of the Law always on your lips; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful. Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go.*[Josh.1:8-9] *May these words of my mouth and this meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer.*[Ps.19:14] *Jesus told them, "My food is to do what the one who sent me wants me to do and to finish the work he has given me.*[Jn.4:34] *Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock.*[Matt.7:24] *Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says… But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it—not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it—they will be blessed in what they do.*[Jas.1:22-25]

Spiritual Exercise: And it is the same with prayer. As in any intimate relationship, it is the *connection* that makes it work not just the words spoken—and although sometimes we don't need to use words, we always need the personal connection! Prayer is fellowship with God not following a ritual, and so if we are to benefit from prayer and if prayer is to be effective, we must not only recite the words, we must also relate to God and build ourselves up in the faith through prayer.

Spiritual Rest: Rest has always been integral to God's plan for mankind, which is why He established the Sabbath. The word "*Sabbath*" actually means, to cease from work and the Sabbath Law in the OT was to be a time of rest, for them, their families, their livestock, and their land. At times this meant making sacrifices in business. However, God promised to bless those who did honour the Sabbath with more than they would have if they didn't observe the Sabbath. Israel was told to gather twice as much manna on the day before the Sabbath, so they could rest on the Sabbath from gathering food. Regardless of how much they gathered the day before, they would have exactly what they needed for the Sabbath day. But the people were very reluctant to love God in this way: *On the seventh day some of the people went out to gather food, but they couldn't find any. Then the LORD said to Moses, 'How long will you people refuse to obey my commands and teachings? Look, the LORD has made the Sabbath a day of rest for you. So on the sixth day he will give you enough food for two days, but on the seventh day each of you must stay where you are. Do not go anywhere.' So the people rested on the seventh day.*[Ex.16:27-30] But the Christian Sabbath is position of rest not a day of rest—the physical rest of the Sabbath under the Old Covenant was an illustration of our spiritual rest under the New Covenant. *For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken later about another day. 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.4:8-11] *But now that you know God—or rather are known by God—how is it that you are turning back to those weak and miserable forces? Do you wish to be enslaved by them all over again? You are observing special days and months and seasons and years! I fear for you, that somehow I have wasted my efforts on you.*[Gal.4:9-11] Although we rest from the works of gaining merit with God, there is still much work to do. Our primary work is to believe in Jesus: *"What must we do to do the works God requires?" Jesus answered, "The work of God is this: to believe in the*

one he has sent."[Jn.6:28-29] But we must also work at obeying God (making the right choices): *Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfil his good purpose.*[Phil.2:12-13] Another translation says: *"Work hard to show the results of your salvation, obeying God with deep reverence and fear."* But our spiritual work is not wearisome work and neither is it "*painful toil*" with the "*sweat of your brow*" that came from Adam's sin! Our spiritual work is easy and restful because God's Presence is with us: *The LORD replied, "My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest."*[Ex.33:14] *Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.*[Matt.11:28-30] Jesus has redeemed us from the spiritual effects of the curse of sin: *Christ set us free from the curse of the law. He did it by becoming a curse for us… Christ Jesus set us free so that the blessing given to Abraham would come to non-Jews through Christ. He did it so that we might receive the promise of the Holy Spirit by believing in Christ.*[Gal.3:13-14] Jesus said that the work that God wants us to do is to believe in Him: *Then they asked him, "What must we do to do the works God requires?" Jesus answered, "The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent."*[Jn.6:28-29] But faith is never silent: *We're not keeping this quiet, not on your life. Just like the psalmist who wrote, "I believed it, so I said it," we say what we believe. And what we believe is that the One who raised up the Master Jesus will just as certainly raise us up with you, alive. Every detail works to your advantage and to God's glory: more and more grace, more and more people, more and more praise! So we're not giving up. How could we! Even though on the outside it often looks like things are falling apart on us, on the inside, where God is making new life, not a day goes by without his unfolding grace.*[2Cor.4:13-16] We promote the Gospel by *telling others the Good News about the wonderful grace of God.*[Acts.20:24] And when we do God's work—God's real work of believing and talking about our faith—we are refreshed, revitalised and restored: *Jesus told them, "I have food to eat that you don't know about." The disciples asked each other, "Did someone bring him something to eat?" Jesus told them, "My food is to do what the one who sent me wants me to do and to finish the work he has given me. "Don't you say, 'In four more months the harvest will be here'? I'm telling you to look and see that the fields are ready to be harvested. The person who harvests the crop is already getting paid. He is gathering grain for eternal life. So the person who plants the grain and the person who harvests it are happy together. In this respect the saying is true: 'One person plants, and another person harvests.' I have sent you to harvest a crop you have not worked for. Other people have done the hard work, and you have followed them in their work."*[Jn.4:32-38]

So let's continue to obey the Great Commission of spreading the good news of God's grace—and like Paul, finish our race with honour: *But my life is worth nothing to me unless I use it for finishing the work assigned me by the Lord Jesus–the work of telling others the Good News about the wonderful grace of God.*[Acts.20:24]

Questions

What are God's rules for running our spiritual race?
How are we qualified to receive our heavenly prize?
Can we be disqualified from our heavenly prize?
Why is the world opposed to God and His Kingdom?
How can we ensure that we are not influenced by this world's values?
What is the primary work that God wants us to do?

Puritan Prayers. Reposes: 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.
Psalm 119:169-176: May my cry come before you, LORD; give me understanding according to your word. May my supplication come before you; deliver me according to your promise. May my lips overflow with praise, for you teach me your decrees. May my tongue sing of your word, for all your commands are righteous. May your hand be ready to help me, for I have chosen your precepts. I long for your salvation, LORD, and your law gives me delight. Let me live that I may praise you, and may your laws sustain me. I have strayed like a lost sheep. Seek your servant, for I have not forgotten your commands.

Sunday 30th November Ps.122. Luke 1:1-25

I was glad when they said to me, "Let us go into the house of the LORD."Ps.122:1
The house of the Lord is the centre of worship because, as the description implies, it is where God we can meet God. Under the Old Covenant this God's House was Moses' Tabernacle and then the Temple in Jerusalem and public worship under the Old Covenant involved a lot of organisation because it was essential to keep exactly to the prescribed rituals. The animals used in the daily sacrifices were quarantined for at least 4 days to ensure that they had no disease or blemish, and so they required feeding and cleaning before they were slaughtered and prepared for the holy Offerings—and of course there was also the liturgy of praise and prayers that continued throughout the day. And when you think of the size of the Temple—the Temple precinct could hold up to 250,000 people—it required at least 50 priests plus lay people (Levites) to be on duty each day! Some of these Priests and Levites permanently resided at the Temple in order to keep everything running smoothly but there were also other Priests who lived throughout the country and they came twice a year to the Temple to fulfill their duties. These Priests were divided up into 24 divisions according to their family line and each division was on duty at the Temple for a week at a time. Zachariah was one of these non-resident Priests and he was of the division of Abijah: *In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly.*[Lk.1:5-6] Each morning at 9.00am and each afternoon at 3.00pm, the Temple worship included the burning of incense where the ascending smoke represented prayer ascending to God: *May my prayer be set before you like incense; may the lifting up of my hands be like the evening sacrifice.*[Ps.141:2] *And when he had taken it, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb. Each one had a harp and they were holding golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of God's people. And they sang a new song.*[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] It was a great privilege to be chosen to burn the incense and it usually happened only once in a Priest's lifetime—and Luke records the occasion when Zechariah was chosen to do this: *Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the*

assembled worshipers were praying outside.[Lk.1:8-10] As the devout worshipers were praying outside in the Temple courts, Zechariah was burning the incense inside the Temple in the Holy Place as a visible reminder that God hears the prayers of the righteous: *The LORD is far from the wicked, but he hears the prayer of the righteous.*[Prov.15:29] *The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.*[Jas.5:16] But on this day, not only did the prayers go up to heaven but heaven came down to earth as the Angel joined Zechariah: *And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside. Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. But the angel said to him: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard.*[Lk.1:10-13]

Under the New Covenant, God no longer dwells in a building but a body—the body of Believers (*body* as in the corporate body of Believers and *body* as in the physical body of an individual Believer): *Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in your midst? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person; for God's temple is sacred, and you together are that temple. Do not deceive yourselves.*[1Cor.3:16-18] And because we are God's Temple, we should be together, in both spiritually and physically unity—and this happens when we meet together for worship in one heart and one spirit. *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] *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] *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] That is why our meeting together as Church should be the highlight of the week because Church is the place where we can worship together and share spiritual food—where we can be encouraged and be an encouragement, where we are blessed and where we can be a blessing.

Of course, there are Churches and Churches! Some Churches are little more than a religious club where people come to do their religious duty in the hope that one day it will pay off, and they will eventually get into heaven—if such a place exists—and some churches are a foretaste of heaven where God is experienced. But because Church is a building of saints not of stones, most Churches include a whole variety people who come for a whole variety of reasons. There are "*True-Believers*" who come to Church—and because they are the Church, they are immediately at home; there are "*Just-about-Believers*" who come to Church—and they want their where faith nurtured and matured; and there are "*Not-yet-Believers*" who come to Church for all sorts of reasons. But we welcome everyone who comes because we want everyone to know our God who loves the world, who loves the Church and who loves each of us. And we also welcome everyone because we know that Church (at least our Church) is a place where people can access faith because faith comes from hearing the Word of God. Faith is very personal relationship with God, and it is also a living and growing relationship—but we all have to start somewhere. In the Gospels, Jesus sometimes said that His Disciples had no faith: *A furious squall came up, and the waves broke over the boat, so that it was nearly swamped. Jesus was in the stern, sleeping on a cushion. The disciples woke him and said to him, "Teacher, don't you care if we drown?" He got up, rebuked the wind and said to the waves, "Quiet! Be still!" Then the wind died down and it was completely calm. He said to his disciples, "Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?"*[Mk.4:37-40] And sometimes Jesus said that His Disciples had little faith: *Then Jesus said to his disciples: "Therefore I tell you, do not worry*

about your life, what you will eat; or about your body, what you will wear. For life is more than food, and the body more than clothes. Consider the ravens: They do not sow or reap, they have no storeroom or barn; yet God feeds them. And how much more valuable you are than birds! Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to your life? Since you cannot do this very little thing, why do you worry about the rest? Consider how the wild flowers grow. They do not labour or spin. Yet I tell you, not even Solomon in all his splendour was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today, and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, how much more will he clothe you—you of little faith! And do not set your heart on what you will eat or drink; do not worry about it. For the pagan world runs after all such things, and your Father knows that you need them. But seek his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well. Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom.[Lk.12:22-32] And Jesus also said that some people had great faith (although these weren't His close Disciples!): *When Jesus heard this, he was amazed and said to those following him, "Truly I tell you, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith.*[Matt.8:10] *Then Jesus said to her, "Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted."*[Matt.15:8] And after His Resurrection, Jesus even rebuked His Disciples for their unbelief! *Now when Jesus rose early on the first day of the week, He appeared first to Mary Magdalene, out of whom He had cast seven demons. She went and told those who had been with Him, as they mourned and wept. And when they heard that He was alive and had been seen by her, they did not believe. After that, He appeared in another form to two of them as they walked and went into the country. And they went and told it to the rest, but they did not believe them either. Later He appeared to the eleven as they sat at the table; and He rebuked their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they did not believe those who had seen Him after He had risen.*[Mk.16:9-14] However, it is not the size of our faith that matters but the substance of our faith that counts: *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] We need living faith that will grow. *Then Jesus asked, "What is the kingdom of God like? What shall I compare it to? It is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his garden. It grew and became a tree, and the birds perched in its branches."*[Lk.13:18-19] *Our hope is that, as your faith continues to grow, our sphere of activity among you will greatly expand, so that we can preach the gospel in the regions beyond you. For we do not want to boast about work already done in someone else's territory. But, "Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord." For it is not the one who commends himself who is approved, but the one whom the Lord commends.*[2Cor.10:15-18] That is why Church should be the centre for true worship in the Holy Spirit and a place of encouragement where faith is cultivated and exercised: *For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed—a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith."*[Rom.1:17] *They preached the gospel in that city and won a large number of disciples. Then they returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith.*[Acts.14:21-22] And of course true worship is only by the Holy Spirit and will always focus on Jesus: *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] *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] *For it is we who are the circumcision, we who worship by the Spirit of God, who glory in Christ Jesus.*[Phil.3:3] *Worship only God. For the essence of prophecy is to give a clear witness for Jesus.*[Rev.19:10]

As New Covenant Believers who meet as Church, we are the embodiment of the Holy Spirit—the Holy Spirit dwells within us. But the Holy Spirit also flows out of us and this is seen in our day to day lives as well as our "*ministry*" (that is, how we relate to others). And it is the ministry of the Holy Spirit that strengthens, encourages and comforts us: *But the one who prophesies speaks to people for their strengthening, encouraging and comfort… For you can all prophesy in turn so that everyone may be instructed and encouraged.*[1Cor.14:3;31] After all the Holy Spirit is called the "*Comforter*" or

"*Encourager*"! *But the Advocate [Comforter], the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you.*[Jn.14:26-27] *Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace and was strengthened. Living in the fear of the Lord and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers Then the churches throughout all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and were edified. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, they were multiplied].*[Acts.9:31] And the Holy Spirit does not act out of character but in character—and His character it is the fruit of the Spirit: *But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.*[Gal.5:22-25] Interestingly, in 1909 there was a prophesy from the Azusa Street Mission in Los Angeles that in 100 years there will be: *an overemphasis on power, rather than on righteousness; an overemphasis on praise, to a God they no longer pray to; an overemphasis on spiritual gifts rather than the Lordship of Jesus.*

After Zachariah had burnt the incense, he was supposed to have returned to the waiting worshippers and pronounced the Priestly blessing over them—as we do at the end of each Service—but because of his unbelief, he was unable to speak. *The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make His face shine on you and be gracious to you; the LORD turn His face toward you and give you peace.*[Num.2:24-26]

Let's keep the faith, keep talking about our faith and make every effort to maintain the joy of meeting together as Church as we live in righteousness under the Lordship of Jesus. And as we pray, praise and proclaim God's Word together, not only will our prayers and praises ascend to heaven like incense but, as Zachariah experienced, heaven will also descend to us too!

Questions:

Why was the OT Temple so important?
Why was incense burnt in the Temple worship?
What should Church be like?
How can we facilitate the outflowing of the Holy Spirit in our lives?
How can we facilitate the outflowing of the Holy Spirit in our Church?
How much credence should we give to prophecies?
What does "*the LORD make His face shine on you"* mean?

Puritan Prayers. Reposes: Lord, 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**.**

Psalm 122: I rejoiced with those who said to me, "Let us go to the house of the LORD." Our feet are standing in your gates, Jerusalem. Jerusalem is built like a city that is closely compacted together. That is where the tribes go up—the tribes of the LORD—to praise the name of the LORD according to the statute given to Israel. There stand the thrones for judgment, the thrones of the house of David. Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: "May those who love you be secure. May there be peace within your walls and security within your citadels." For the sake of my family and friends, I will say, "Peace be within you." For the sake of the house of the LORD our God, I will seek your prosperity.

December:

Remember. *Look to the LORD and his strength; seek his face always. Remember the wonders he has done, his miracles, and the judgments he pronounced.Ps.105:4-5*

Thought for the Month: To the eye of faith God's Word is sure, and by it we perceive that our works are prospered even when everything seems to go against us. But it is not outward prosperity that Christians most desire and value—it is soul prosperity they long for. *C.H.Spurgeon*

Sunday 7th December Psalm 122. Luke 1:25-56

My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Saviour.[Lk.1:46-47]

Last week, we focused on being glad to come to God's House[Ps.122:1] and when I read out the verse, I said "*sad*" instead of "*glad*"! Of course I quickly corrected myself, but for some people, meeting together as Church is the last thing they want to do— they really are sad to come to God's House! When they are encouraged to go to Church, there is no sense of joy that they will be in God's presence, with God's people and praising Jesus. They have no concept that they could be a blessing to someone and so they reluctantly go to Church to perform a religious duty—and if they can avoid it, so much the better! But for the born-again Believer, meeting together is a wonderful opportunity to express how they feel about God their Saviour and is a time where they can give and receive, where they can be a blessing and be a blessing because they know that they are the House of God and are offering spiritual sacrifices that God accepts: *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] When Mary met Elizabeth, their babies within them (who were both filled with the Holy Spirit[Lk.1:15;35]), leapt for joy: *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] The *My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Saviour.*[Lk.1:46-47]

*you who are highly favouredyou have found favour with God*t conversion, the Holy Spirit comes to us, overshadows us and resides within us—a*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.*[Lk.1:35] Luke traces Jesus' genealogy through Mary, right back to Adam, who he calls the son of God: *the son of Seth, the son of Adam, the son of God.*[Lk.3:38] This is because God not only created Adam but He breathed His life into him: *Then the LORD God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.*[Gen.1:7] When Adam sinned, his relationship with God was broken and this estranged relationship with God was passed on to all of Adam's descendants—but that family relationship with God is restored when God breathes His Spirit into us again. Luke makes it clear that Joseph was only Jesus' adopted father because Jesus' His true Father was God Himself: *Now Jesus himself was about thirty years old when he began his ministry. He was the son, so it was thought, of Joseph, the son of Heli.*[Lk.1:23] *So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God.*[Lk.1:35] And as the Son of God, Jesus was able to breathe the Holy Spirit into His Disciples. *Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit.*[Jn.20:21-22] When Jesus ascended to heaven, He sent the Holy Spirit to continue His work: *And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counsellor to be with you forever— the Spirit of truth… But the Counsellor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.*[Jn.14:16;26] *But*

to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. This is why it says: "When he ascended on high, he led captives in his train and gave gifts to men." (What does "he ascended" mean except that he also descended to the lower, earthly regions? He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe.)[Eph.4:7-10] And although Jesus doesn't physically breathe His Spirit into us, He still impart His Spirit to us and the Holy Spirit literally enters into us at conversion. When the Holy Spirit comes, He convicts us of the sin of unbelief, convincing us that we are now righteous in God's sight and assures us that the devil has been judged and now stands condemned: *But I tell you the truth: It is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Counsellor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. When he comes, he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment: in regard to sin, because men do not believe in me; in regard to righteousness, because I am going to the Father, where you can see me no longer; and in regard to judgment, because the prince of this world now stands condemned. 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.16:7-13] By convincing us of the sin of unbelief, the Holy Spirit gives us faith to believe that Jesus is God's Son: *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] To believe is to receive Jesus—this means accepting what God has said and done as true and most especially, true for us! This is much more than legal transaction (although that is what it actually is)—this is the miracle of new birth where we become God's children: *He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God— children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.*[Jn.1:10-13] *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] This means that all Christians have the Holy Spirit within them: *Therefore I tell you that no one who is speaking by the Spirit of God says, "Jesus be cursed," and no one can say, "Jesus is Lord," except by the Holy Spirit.*[1Cor.12:3] *If you love me, keep my commands. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever— the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you.*[Jn.14:15-17] In fact we can't understand spiritual matters without the Holy Spirit: *What we have received is not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so 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, explaining spiritual realities with Spirit-taught words. 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. The person with the Spirit makes judgments about all things, but such a person is not subject to merely human judgments, for, "Who has known the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?" But we have the mind of Christ.*[1Cor.2:12-16] And with the Holy Spirit residing within us, we naturally have the supernatural character of the Holy Spirit (also called "*the fruit of the Spirit*"): *But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.*[Gal.5:22-25] This "*fruit*" is the atmosphere of heaven and we need to let that heavenly atmosphere permeate our mind as well as our spirit: *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… put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator… Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience… 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.[Col.3:1-17]

Mary's example of rejoicing in God is the standard for all Believers, not just for those who have a bubbly personality: *My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant. For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for he who is mighty has done great things for me and holy is his name.*[Lk.1:46-49] Rejoicing is also a command from God: *But may all who seek you rejoice and be glad in you; may those who love your salvation say continually, "Great is the LORD!"*[Ps.40:16] *Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near.*[Phil.4:4-5] And regardless of our circumstances or feelings, we are to remember what God has done for us and praise Him: *Bless the LORD, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name! Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits, who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy, who satisfies you with good so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.*[Ps.103:1-5] The angel told Mary that God's Word has intrinsic power and life: *For no word from God will ever fail.* [Lk.1:37] A literal rendering of the text is: *no word from God is void of power.* And Mary's response was: *I am the Lord's servant, may your word to me be fulfilled.*[Lk.1:38] And God's Word accomplishes what He wants: *As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it. You will go out in joy and be led forth in peace; the mountains and hills will burst into song before you, and all the trees of the field will clap their hands.*[Is.55:9-12] But even though God's Word will accomplish what He wants, we still need to obey God's Word and put it into practice: *Jesus replied, "My mother and brothers are those who hear God's word and put it into practice."*[Lk.8:21] *He replied, "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it."*[Lk.11:28]

God's Word is spiritual, living and life giving: *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." For Jesus had known from the beginning which of them did not believe and who would betray him. He went on to say, "This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless the Father has enabled them." [The Spirit can make life. Sheer muscle and willpower don't make anything happen. Every word I've spoken to you is a Spirit-word, and so it is life-making. But some of you are resisting, refusing to have any part in this." (Jesus knew from the start that some weren't going to risk themselves with him. He knew also who would betray him.) He went on to say, "This is why I told you earlier that no one is capable of coming to me on his own. You get to me only as a gift from the Father."]*[Jn.6:63-65] That is why we put so much emphasis on God's Word—we read it together publicly, we hide it in our heart, we ponder it, we share it, we sing it and we pray it! *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. [God means what he says. What he says goes. His powerful Word is sharp as a surgeon's scalpel, cutting through everything, whether doubt or defence, laying us open to listen and obey. Nothing and no one is impervious to God's Word. We can't get away from it—no matter what.]*[Heb.4:12-13]

As we approach this festive season, let's keep focused on the true meaning of Advent, which is Emmanuel—God is with us. As we celebrate the birth of our Lord, we should also remembering that there is another Advent coming soon because Jesus will come again. But until He does return, let's follow Mary's example by doing what she did: *My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Saviour.*[Lk.1:46-47]

Questions

Why was Mary highly favoured and blessed among women? (Lk.1:28)
What does it mean to "*rejoice in God my Saviour*"?
How does God impart His life to us?
What was the significance of Jesus breathing on His Disciples? (*Jn.20:21-22*)
What is the main ministry of the Holy Spirit?
Why is God's Word described as "*alive and active*"?(*Heb.4:12*)

Puritan Prayer. The Prayer of Love: Gracious Lord, Your Name is love—and in love You receive my prayer. My sins are more than the wide sea's sand—but where sin abounds, there is grace more abundant. You look to the cross of Your beloved Son and You view the preciousness of His atoning blood. You listen to His never-failing intercession and You whisper to my thought, '*Your sins are forgiven, be of good cheer, lie down in peace.*' Your grace flows for ever as it cataracts from heaven, and Your mercy never wearies in bestowing benefits. Grant me more and more, to prize the privilege of prayer—of coming to You in simple faith as Your child and conversing with You.

Psalm 121: I lift up my eyes to the mountains—where does my help come from? My help comes from the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth. He will not let your foot slip—he who watches over you will not slumber; indeed, he who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. The LORD watches over you—the LORD is your shade at your right hand; the sun will not harm you by day, nor the moon by night. The LORD will keep you from all harm—he will watch over your life; the LORD will watch over your coming and going both now and forevermore.

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

Psalm 123: I lift up my eyes to you, to you who sit enthroned in heaven. As the eyes of slaves look to the hand of their master, as the eyes of a female slave look to the hand of her mistress, so our eyes look to the LORD our God, till he shows us his mercy. Have mercy on us, LORD, have mercy on us, for we have endured no end of contempt. We have endured no end of ridicule from the arrogant, of contempt from the proud.

Sunday 14th December Ps.123. Luke 2:1-21

Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests. Lk.2:14

Christian fellowship is not just an "*old boys club*" where people of the same mind gel together around a common interest. Christian fellowship is fellowship of the spirit and of the Spirit—the Holy Spirit—it is a common union (communion) with the Holy Spirit. And the Holy Spirit brings freedom, joy and peace as He envelops us into God's presence—which is called "glory":

For the Lord is the Spirit, and wherever the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. So all of us who have had that veil removed can see and reflect the glory of the Lord. And the Lord–who is the Spirit–makes us more and more like him as we are changed into his glorious image.[2Cor.3:17-18] Following the Christmas story over the last 2 weeks we have seen the joy of fellowshipping with other Believers when Mary and Elizabeth had a very happy reunion: *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!" And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Saviour".*[Lk.1:41-75] Because we have the same Holy Spirit within us, we too should be filled with joy: *The believers were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.*[Acts.13:52] *I pray that God, the source of hope, will fill you completely with joy and peace because you trust in him. Then you will overflow with confident hope through the power of the Holy Spirit.*[Rom.15:13] And when we come together as the Body of Christ, we have that joy because we are worshipping God together just as He intended: *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] *Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience… 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.*[Col.3:1-12-17] *I was glad when they said to me, "Let us go to the house of the LORD!"*[Ps.122:1]

The message that the angels brought to the Shepherds was: *Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests.*[Lk.2:14] When God's glory is manifested, only those who have God's favour resting on them have peace—everyone else is afraid because they are in conflict with God. Christianity is the only religion that unites God with humanity—most of the other religions attempt to connect with a "*deity*" but they fail because Jesus is the only way to God the Father: *I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him.*[Jn.14:6-7] Isaiah experienced God's glory and was petrified—until he knew that his sins were forgiven: *It was in the year King Uzziah died that I saw the Lord. He was sitting on a lofty throne, and the train of his robe filled the Temple. Attending him were mighty seraphim, each having six wings. With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. They were calling out to each other, "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of Heaven's Armies! The whole earth is filled with his glory!" Their voices shook the Temple to its foundations, and the entire building was filled with smoke. Then I said, "It's all over! I am doomed, for I am a sinful man. I have filthy lips, and I live among a people with filthy lips. Yet I have seen the King, the LORD of Heaven's Armies." Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a burning coal he had taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. He touched my lips with it and said, "See, this coal has touched your lips. Now your guilt is removed, and your sins are forgiven."*[Is.6:1-7] But once Isaiah's sins were forgiven, he had peace with God and his fear was gone. Instead of being afraid to be in God's presence, Isaiah was quick to volunteer to speak for God: *Then I heard the Lord asking, "Whom should I send as a messenger to this people? Who will go for us?" I said, "Here I am. Send me." And he said, "Yes, go, and say to this people…* [Is.6:8-9] Throughout the Bible we see the same response to God's presence—people's first response is fear but they are told to not to be afraid. *Then the angel spoke to the women. "Don't be afraid!" he said. "I know you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He isn't here! He is risen from the dead, just as he said would happen. Come, see where his body was lying. And now, go quickly and tell*

his disciples that he has risen from the dead, and he is going ahead of you to Galilee. You will see him there. Remember what I have told you." The women ran quickly from the tomb. They were very frightened but also filled with great joy, and they rushed to give the disciples the angel's message. And as they went, Jesus met them and greeted them. And they ran to him, grasped his feet, and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, "Don't be afraid! Go tell my brothers to leave for Galilee, and they will see me there." Matt.28:5-10 It is natural to be afraid of God's holiness and purity which why in the OT people had to always go through a cleaning ritual before they could approach God—but when Jesus initiated the New Covenant, our spiritual cleansing was completed and we are now right in God's sight. But we are much more than just right with God—we are God's family: See how very much our Father loves us, for he calls us his children, and that is what we are! But the people who belong to this world don't recognize that we are God's children because they don't know him. *Dear friends, we are already God's children, but he has not yet shown us what we will be like when Christ appears. But we do know that we will be like him, for we will see him as he really is. And all who have this eager expectation will keep themselves pure, just as he is pure* 1Jn.3:1-3 We are now "*insiders*" not "*outsiders*" and because of Jesus' death on the cross we have peace with God: *Now because of Christ—dying that death, shedding that blood—you who were once out of it altogether are in on everything… Christ brought us together through his death on the Cross. The Cross got us to embrace, and that was the end of the hostility. Christ came and preached peace to you outsiders and peace to us insiders. He treated us as equals, and so made us equals. Through him we both share the same Spirit and have equal access to the Father… This kingdom of faith is now your home country. You're no longer strangers or outsiders. You belong here, with as much right to the name Christian as anyone. God is building a home. He's using us all—irrespective of how we got here—in what he is building. He used the apostles and prophets for the foundation. Now he's using you, fitting you in brick by brick, stone by stone, with Christ Jesus as the cornerstone that holds all the parts together. We see it taking shape day after day—a holy temple built by God, all of us built into it, a temple in which God is quite at home.* Eph.2:13-22 This is the very essence of the Christian message and also of the Christmas message too—which is good news that will cause great joy for all people!

Christianity is *universal* in the sense that it is for all people and for all time, but it is not *universal* in the sense that everyone benefits from it. God's offer of forgiveness and peace is a limited to those who want it. *The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world. The Word was in the world that was made through him. But the world did not recognize him. He came to what was his own. But his own people did not accept him. Some people did accept him. They believed in his name. He gave them the right to become children of God. To be a child of God has nothing to do with human parents. Children of God are not born because of human choice or because a husband wants them to be born. They are born because of what God does. The Word became a human being. He made his home with us. We have seen his glory. It is the glory of the one and only Son. He came from the Father. And he was full of grace and truth.* Jn.1:9-14 And there comes a time when God's offer of forgiveness and peace is ended and it is too late to change your mind, but until then God's offer still stands—the trouble is, no one knows when the cut-off time is. That's why Solomon warns us: *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" … Remember him—before the silver cord is severed, or the golden bowl is broken; before the pitcher is shattered at the spring, or 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.* Eccl.12:1;6-7 Montgomery in his carol "*Angels from the realm of glory*" eloquently describes the Christian message of peace with God through repentance: *Sinners wrung with true repentance, Doomed for guilt to endless pains, Justice now revokes the sentence, Mercy calls you; break your chains.* Wesley's carol "*Hark the Herald angels*" also expresses the Christian message of peace with God through the new birth: *Hail the heaven-born Prince of Peace! Hail the Sun of Righteousness! Light & 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. Hark! the herald angels sing. Glory to the new-born King. But at the moment there is still time to have peace with God and His rest: *Therefore since it still remains for some to enter that rest, and since those who formerly had the good news proclaimed to them did not go in because of their disobedience, God again set a certain day, calling it "Today."*[Heb.4:6] But when we breathe our final breath, it is too late to repent—there is no such place as purgatory where people can have another chance by paying for their sins through torment, or have someone buy them out of hell with indulgencies. Even before Jesus' sacrifice on the cross, those in torment could not escape their suffering in hell: *The time came when the beggar died. The angels carried him to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried. In hell, the rich man was suffering terribly. He looked up and saw Abraham far away. Lazarus was by his side. So the rich man called out, 'Father Abraham! Have pity on me! Send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water. Then he can cool my tongue with it. I am in terrible pain in this fire.' But Abraham replied, 'Son, remember what happened in your lifetime. You received your good things. Lazarus received bad things. Now he is comforted here, and you are in terrible pain. Besides, a wide space has been placed between us and you. So those who want to go from here to you can't go. And no one can cross over from there to us.' The rich man answered, 'Then I beg you, father. Send Lazarus to my family. I have five brothers. Let Lazarus warn them. Then they will not come to this place of terrible suffering.' Abraham replied, 'They have the teachings of Moses and the Prophets. Let your brothers listen to them.' 'No, father Abraham,' he said. 'But if someone from the dead goes to them, they will turn away from their sins.' Abraham said to him, 'They do not listen to Moses and the Prophets. So they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.'* [Lk.16:22-31] That is why the Christmas message is the Christian message: *Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests.*[Lk.2:14]

And as the angels declared to the Shepherds, this message is for now—*peace <u>on earth</u>*—not just when we die! We don't see any political peace hear on earth and many people don't have any mental or even physical peace right now but God's offer of spiritual peace is as real and relevant today as it was when the Angels told the Shepherds. And when we have peace in our spirit, our mind and body will fall in line with our spirit. The hymns that we sing are chosen to reinforce the plain, simple Gospel truths which are the foundation of our faith. Hymns like: *"It is well with my soul," We have an Anchor that keeps the soul steadfast sure while the billows blow," Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine, O what a foretaste of glory divine."* The Shepherds' response to the Angels' message was: *Let's go and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.* [Lk 2:15] And of course it was just as they had been told: *They hurried to the village and found Mary and Joseph. And there was the baby, lying in the manger. After seeing him, the shepherds told everyone what had happened and what the angel had said to them about this child. All who heard the shepherds' story were astonished, but Mary kept all these things in her heart and thought about them often. The shepherds went back to their flocks, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen. It was just as the angel had told them.*[Lk.2:16-20] And it will always be as God has said because God always keeps His Word—so let's keep smiling and carry on!

Questions

Why is joy integral to the Christian message?
What did the Angels mean when they said "peace on earth"?
What does "Glory to God" mean?
Is it ever too late to get right with God?
Does God ever change His mind?
Is it important for our hymns to be doctrinally accurate? What about carols?

Puritan Prayer. The Prayer of Love: Heavenly Father, may I know You as the path in which my feet tread; as the latch upon the door of my lips; as the light that shines through my eyes; as the music of my ears; as the marrow of my understanding; as the strength of my will; as the power

of my affection; and as the sweetness of my memory. May the matter of my prayer be always wise, humble, submissive, obedient, scriptural and Christ-like. Give me unwavering faith so that my supplications are never in vain—and if I seem not to obtain my petitions, that I shall have larger and richer answers which surpass all that I ask or think. Thank You that You have given me the greatest Gift of all—the Person of Your Son—for it is in Him, You will give me all I need.

Psalm 124:1-8 If the LORD had not been on our side—let Israel say—if the LORD had not been on our side when people attacked us, they would have swallowed us alive when their anger flared against us; the flood would have engulfed us, the torrent would have swept over us, the raging waters would have swept us away. Praise be to the LORD, who has not let us be torn by their teeth. We have escaped like a bird from the fowler's snare the snare has been broken, and we have escaped. Our help is in the name of the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth.

Carol Service Sunday 21st December

Christmas traditions change but the Christmas message is changeless and that timeless message is found in Matthew's account of the Nativity: *But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. 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

This morning we are using a PowerPoint presentation to project the words, pictures and videos onto the wall in such clear and crisp way but who remembers the Overhead Projectors (OHP) of just 25 years ago? We started to use them in the 1980s and we thought they were so wonderful because liberated us from the hymnbooks and enabled us to illustrate the sermon (or possibly provide a distract from the sermons!) by using coloured illustrations and photos! But in reality the OHP slides were often hand written and illegible—and those operating the OHP never seemed to be able find the right slide in time! Mind you, many Churches to day use the media projector in the same way and never seem to synchronise the words with the musicians! (Worship is not singing songs but the expression of what God is worth to us. Whilst we can express this in song, if our heart is not in agreement with our hymns, it is not worship!) How technology has changed! But go back 70 years to this clip of Billy Graham's first Christmas broadcast in 1952. The quality of the sound and colour was excellent when it was produced but today our phones can take better quality recordings than the top-of-the-range technology of the 1950s! And compare that to the video clips of his son Franklin and grandson Will.

Not only has technology changed but traditions have changed too. The early Santa Claus' outfits were often green but when Coca Cola used Father Christmas in their adverts Santa Clause became the jovial old gentleman in red that is so recognisable today !

And look at the Christmas tree—practically every home has a Christmas Tree decorated with lights and baubles but this only started in the 1800's. Before then England had the tradition of decorating churches and homes with evergreens at Christmas, but decorating a fir tree as a Christmas tree was introduced from Germany in the early 1800s by Queen Charlotte, George III's German-born wife. In 1832 the 13 year old Princess Victoria wrote in her journal on Christmas Eve: *After dinner... we then went into the drawing-room near the dining-room... There were two large round tables on which were placed two trees hung with lights and sugar ornaments. All the presents being placed round the trees.* The large Christmas tree on display in Trafalgar Square, London each December is donated by the city of Oslo as a token of their appreciation for our support of the Norwegian resistance during the Second World War. The first fir tree that was actually called a Christmas Tree was in 1510 in Riga, Latvia, however, it was Martin Luther who is credited with

the Christmas Tree as we know it today. Walking home one winter evening, Luther was awed by the brilliance of stars twinkling amidst evergreens. To recapture the scene for his family, he cut a tree, brought it indoors and wired its branches with lighted candles. Luther taught his friends and family that the tree represented the everlasting love of God, the evergreen's colour did not fade, just as the Lord's love would not fade no matter what the circumstance or trial and the candles represented the light that Jesus brings to the world through his birth, death and resurrection. Now the fir tree is the most well-known symbol of the Christian Christmas.

But although Christmas is intrinsically Christian, four hundred years ago Christmas was cancelled by Christians because of its associations with drunkenness and debauchery! When Charles I became king, he was immediately at odds with Parliament over his belief in the divine right of kings. A few months after ascending to the throne, he was married by proxy to the 15-year-old French princess Henrietta Maria in front of the doors of Notre Dame de Paris! Many members of the Parliament opposed the king's marriage to a Catholic, fearing that he would undermine the protestant Church of England. Although the king told Parliament that he would not relax religious restrictions, in a secret marriage treaty with his new brother-in-law Louis XIII of France, he promised to do exactly that! When Charles was crowned on 2 February 1626 at Westminster Abbey, his wife she refused to participate in a Protestant religious ceremony! Charles' duplicitous behaviour prompted a Civil War that resulted in his execution! The religious dissent during the Civil War became even more polarised with the Church of England's Episcopalian structure of Bishops being disbanded. (The plan was to make the Church of England like the Presbyterian Church of Scotland, with elected Elders and a less formal Prayer Book but the monarchy was restored before it was completed.) However, in 1647, Parliament officially outlawed Christmas due to the drunkenness, gluttony, gambling, *etc.* that accompanied the Christmas festivities, making a supposedly "*holy*" day an extremely "*unholy*" day! Whilst Town Criers shouted: "*No Christmas! No Christmas!*", Canterbury passed a resolution that if they could not have Christmas Day, they would have the King back on his throne again. On Wednesday 22nd December 1647, Canterbury Town Crier proclaimed that: *Christmas day, and all other Superstitious festivals should be put down, and that a Market should be kept upon Christmas day.* Three days later on Christmas Day, only a few shops were open, but a crowd of over 10,000 people forced them shut and then started the "*Plum Pudding Riots*". The crowd demanded a church service, permission to decorate doorways with holly bushes and for the shops to stay shut. Under the slogan "*For God, King Charles, and Kent*", they then descended into violence and riot, with the Mayor's house attacked and a soldier being assaulted. Canterbury stayed under the rioters' control until they were forced to surrender in early January.

Although technology has changed and traditions—even Christmas traditions—have changed, the true Christmas message has not changed. The Christmas message and the Christian message is the same. It is what the Angel brought to Mary, to Joseph and to the Shepherds—that a Saviour has come who will save His people from their sins. *But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. 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

God is Omnipotent and there is nothing that is impossible for Him. Just look at Creation to see the omnipotence of God—He created everything without any help! God made the world by His Word and He sustains the world by His Word: *The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.* Col.1:15-17 When Adam rebelled against God, He could

have destroyed Adam and all the world with him. But God had made the world for mankind and He wants mankind to enjoy His creation so He made a way to redeem us. *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.1:3] This is the essence of the Christmas message: *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."*[Matt.1:21] But however good a message is, it is only effective when someone applies it—and this is true of the Christmas message—the good news is for all people, but it only applies to *those on whom his favour rests.*[Lk.2:14] To please God we must have faith (believe): *And it is impossible to please God without faith. Anyone who wants to come to him must believe that God exists and that he rewards those who sincerely seek him.*[Heb.11:6] Faith is what makes us right with God: *For I am not ashamed of this Good News about Christ. It is the power of God at work, saving everyone who believes–the Jew first and also the Gentile. This Good News tells us how God makes us right in his sight. This is accomplished from start to finish by faith. As the Scriptures say, "It is through faith that a righteous person has life."*[Rom.1:16-17] The blessing comes from believing what God says: *Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!*[Lk.1:45] The Word of God works in our life when we believe it: *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] That's why we are so passionate about understanding what God has said.

The Christmas and Chrisitan message is good news for all people and especially for us Christians, so as we celebrate Christmas again this year, let's enjoy the festivities—even those without much Biblical basis—but make a distinction between faith and fantasy. And remember, the greatest attribute of God is Love—which is displayed in Jesus, born as a baby, killed as a criminal but raised to life as Lord.

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 and 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 28th December Ps.124

What could you say about Jesus? *Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.*[Lk.2:38]

The King, the leaders of our political parties and leaders of Christian denominations all use the Christmas season to make inspiring speeches to the nation—but if you had the opportunity to speak to the nation, what would you say? You would certainly want to be careful to present your message in such a way that people would want to listen and take notice of what you said! Christians are Christ's Ambassadors: *We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God.*[2Cor.5:20] Wand we should be able to say with conviction "*I am an Ambassador for Jesus Christ. I can explain what that means, and I can clearly defend my conviction in the truth of Christianity in an attractive manner that commends the message.*" And whether we are speaking to our nation or to our neighbour, we should be careful to make our

conversation befit our status. We should also aim to encourage and inspire others by speaking the truth, which is not that hard to do when we cultivate a sensible faith—a faith that is real, relevant and credible. *LORD, who may dwell in your sacred tent? Who may live on your holy mountain? The one whose walk is blameless, who does what is righteous, who speaks the truth from their heart.*[Ps.15:1-2] *Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ.*[Eph.4:15] *When you gather for worship, each one of you be prepared with something that will be useful for all: bring a hymn or a teaching or a word from God. All of those things must be done to make the church strong.*[1Cor.14:26] And we should ensure that what we say is in harmony with sound doctrine. Sound doctrine makes stress-free Christianity because we are believing the same as God believes—and He is always right! Although we don't need to be theologians, we should be able to rightly understand the Word of God: *Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who doesn't need to be ashamed, correctly teaching the word of truth. But avoid irreverent, empty speech, for this will produce an even greater measure of godlessness.*[2Tim.2:15-16] Sound doctrine will keep us balanced, sensible and sensitive as well as helping us enjoy life as we walk in harmony with the Holy Spirit. *You must teach what is in accord with sound doctrine. Teach the older men to be temperate, worthy of respect, self-controlled, and sound in faith, in love and in endurance.*[Titus.2:1-2] And that is why Church is so important—because the Church is a storehouse where we share our gifts. *Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this," says the LORD Almighty, "and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that there will not be room enough to store it. I will prevent pests from devouring your crops, and the vines in your fields will not drop their fruit before it is ripe," says the LORD Almighty. "Then all the nations will call you blessed, for yours will be a delightful land," says the LORD Almighty.*[Mal.3:10-12]

Under the Old Covenant people were expected to bring one tenth of their income into the storehouse as an act of worship—the storehouse was the Temple. But even though we are under the New Covenant, the principle of bringing our gifts to God is still important. However, our gifts are much more than money—we should present whole ourself to God, not just a portion! And the blessings that God has promised are spiritual and so can never be measured in monetary terms. In any case, religion should never be used for financial profit: *They have wicked minds and have missed out on the truth. These people think religion is supposed to make you rich. And religion does make your life rich, by making you content with what you have. We didn't bring anything into this world, and we won't take anything with us when we leave. So we should be satisfied just to have food and clothes. People who want to be rich fall into all sorts of temptations and traps. They are caught by foolish and harmful desires that drag them down and destroy them. The love of money causes all kinds of trouble. Some people want money so much they have given up their faith and caused themselves a lot of pain.*[1Tim.6:5-10] Those who use religion as a means of trying to get rich are described a "*followers of Balaam*": *They have wandered off the main road and have gone astray, because they are prophets who love profit—the wages they earn by wrongdoing. They are following the example of Balaam, son of Beor, who was rebuked for evil by a donkey incapable of speech yet that spoke with a human voice and restrained the prophet's madness.*[2Pet.2:15-16] You cannot legislate for the things of the Spirit and so New Covenant Believers are not bound by rules but we are governed by principles. We are spiritual people and so we need to ensure that our soul (our will, emotions and personality) is dominated by our spirit—legalism is helpless in bringing this about and only gets in the way: *So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. 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. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other.[Gal.5:16-26]

The New Testament principle of giving is clearly expounded by Paul in his letter to the Corinthians. The Church at Corinth was birthed in power ministry: *I always thank my God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus. For in him you have been enriched in every way—with all kinds of speech and with all knowledge— God thus confirming our testimony about Christ among you. Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed.*[1Cor.1:4-7] *And so it was with me, brothers and sisters. 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] And although Corinth was probably the most charismatic of the New Testament Churches, they certainly could not be described as spiritual! *Brothers, I could not address you as spiritual but as worldly—mere infants in Christ. I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready. You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarrelling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere men? For when one says, "I follow Paul," and another, "I follow Apollos," are you not mere men?*[1Cor.3:1-4] Charisma is not spirituality—spirituality is being in harmony with God. And so Paul needed to instruct this Church on giving: *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.*[2Cor.9:6-8] But giving is not restricted to money and as Paul explains, we should first of all give ourselves 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]

Church is the Storehouse where we bring our spiritual offerings of praise: *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] *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] In the OT, the priests were God's representatives—they were the people who were the intermediates between God and people. And like all of the OT activities, the priesthood was a type (an illustration) of Jesus. Jesus introduced the New Covenant and made the way for us to come to God, and so all Believers are now priests and represent God to the people of the world. It is Believers who offer spiritual sacrifices and Believers who are fed with spiritual food from the spiritual Storehouse. We Believers are to take the spiritual food and bless others with that spiritual food.

And so to go back to how I began: If we had the opportunity to speak to the nation we would have to be careful to present our message in such a way that people who have no relationship with God would want to listen and take notice to what we say! Whether we are speaking to the nation or to the neighbour, let's be careful to make our conversation befits our status of Ambassador for Christ. Let's speak the truth by talking about things from God's perspective—

and the Bible gives us insight into God's mind. We are not responsible for what other people believe or don't believe but we are responsible for what we believe—and for what we say: *Your mouths say everything that is in your hearts. A good man says good things. These come from the good that is put away inside him. An evil man says evil things. These come from the evil that is put away inside him. But here is what I tell you. On judgment day, people will have to account for every careless word they have spoken. By your words you will be found guilty or not guilty.*[Matt.12:34-37] Let's be clear about God. God is holy and He has both spiritual and moral standards which He expects us to keep. *But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: "Be holy, because I am holy."*[1Pet.1:15-16] And let's be clear about Jesus. Jesus is much more than a good man or even a prophet—He is the Eternal Son of God: *You are the Christ. You are the Son of the living God.*[Matt.16:16]

But our relationship with God does not come from the way we live or even by following Jesus' example. Our relationship with God comes from Jesus Himself—from believing in Him and then following Him by putting His words into practice. *Do not work for food that spoils. Work for food that lasts forever. That is the food the Son of Man will give you. God the Father has put his seal of approval on him." Then they asked him, "What does God want from us? What works does he want us to do?" Jesus answered, "God's work is to believe in the One he has sent."*[Jn.6:27-29] *Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven. Only those who do what my Father in heaven wants will enter… So then, everyone who hears my words and puts them into practice is like a wise man. He builds his house on the rock... But everyone who hears my words and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man. He builds his house on sand.*[Matt.7:21-26] *An angry person doesn't do what God approves of. So get rid of all immoral behaviour and all the wicked things you do. Humbly accept the word that God has placed in you. This word can save you. Do what God's word says. Don't merely listen to it, or you will fool yourselves… However, the person who continues to study God's perfect teachings that make people free and who remains committed to them will be blessed. People like that don't merely listen and forget; they actually do what God's teachings say.*[Jas.1:20-25]

But however accurate we are in our doctrine, if we don't bear the fruit of the Spirit (the character of the Holy Spirit), our testimony will be ignored. We should be gentle and reverent, not quarrelsome, but kind, patiently correcting those in error. *But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behaviour in Christ may be ashamed of their slander.*[1Pet.3:15-16] *And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Opponents must be gently instructed, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth.*[2Tim.2:24-25]

So, let's make every effort to maintain both our trust and our testimony and try to make our message clear and memorable. Then we will be Ambassadors in name and action.

Questions

What does being an Ambassador for Christ mean?
What does the NT teach about tithing?
Why is sound doctrine important?
What is the difference between character and charisma?
What does it mean to be spiritual?

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

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

Psalm 125:1-5: 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. The sceptre of the wicked will not remain over the land allotted to the righteous, for then the righteous might use their hands to do evil. LORD, do good to those who are good, to those who are upright in heart. But those who turn to crooked ways the LORD will banish with the evildoers. Peace be on Israel.

I saw three ships come sailing in on Christmas Day in the morning!

Lots of popular Christmas Carols (like the this one) have little or no connection with the Christian message of: "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy. It is for all the people. Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you. He is Christ the Lord. Here is how you will know I am telling you the truth. You will find a baby wrapped in strips of cloth and lying in a manger."Lk.2:10-12 This is because our modern Western Christmas culture is the creation of American Unitarians, Episcopalians and other liberal Protestants who had little interest in several key tenets of the evangelical understanding of the gospel. The Evangelical Puritans who first populated America had banned Christmas altogether—predominately because Christmas reminded them of Catholic superstitions and also because of secular celebrations excesses (especially the drunkenness and immorality). The Baptist, Methodist and especially Presbyterian churches of the early 19th century shunned the idea of Christmas services and it was left to the Episcopalians or Unitarians to celebrate Christmas—which they proudly did, seeing the holiday as an antidote to the allegedly dour Congregationalism. The blessings of Christmas, they thought, must be universal, just as they believed God's offer of salvation was. And Christmas must be a time of joy, not a moment to reflect on the sinful condition of humanity.

Some American promoters of Christmas were influenced by the popular British author Charles Dickens, whose story A Christmas Carol portrayed the holiday as a time when the cantankerous, miserly Ebenezer Scrooge discovered the joy of generosity. Dickens, who was raised a nominal Anglican but joined a Unitarian chapel as an adult, believed in the humanitarian teachings of Jesus. He used his fiction to promote the idea of Christmas as a day for all people to follow their better impulses, become a little less selfish and adopt a charitable disposition toward all. Unitarians were optimists about the possibility of moral reform through human effort. They envisioned Christmas as a day that would unite Christians across the theological spectrum and encourage loving attitudes that would improve society. In Dickens's A Christmas Carol, Scrooge experiences what amounts to a Unitarian Christmas conversion: He becomes a better man. If Jesus is necessary for such a conversion, he's needed only as an inspiring moral example of human possibility, not as an atoning saviour. Unitarians, after all, didn't accept the idea of substitutionary atonement, and they likewise rejected the idea of Jesus' divinity and all aspects of Trinitarian theology. Yet many became passionate advocates of Christmas in the mid-19th

century because they saw in the holiday a story of God's love for the world and the optimistic hope of universal human brotherhood.

The best-known 19th century Christmas hymns penned by Unitarians have become beloved classics because they appeal to our longing for a world of love, beauty, peace, and justice. "O Holy Night," translated from the French into English by the liberal Massachusetts Unitarian and antislavery advocate John Sullivan Dwight in 1855, honours Jesus as a great teacher of social ethics and emancipation—a popular theme among New England abolitionists in the years leading up to the Civil War. Likewise, another 19th century New England Unitarian Christmas hymn, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's "I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day," expresses optimism in the midst of the Civil War that God's peace and righteousness will eventually prevail. Christmas hymns penned by 19th century Episcopalians gave much greater recognition to Jesus' divinity and saving power than Unitarian carols did. But rather than highlight Jesus's saving work on the cross (as evangelicals wanted), they presented a more peaceful, quiet image of the sleeping Jesus who could be encountered through tranquil contemplation. This was the message of "O Little Town of Bethlehem," written by Boston Episcopal rector Phillips Brooks in 1868, and "Silent Night," which was translated into English by a New York Episcopal minister in 1859. By contrast, the evangelical Protestant hymnals had focused far more attention on the atoning death of Jesus than on his birth. And the few hymns that did touch on his birth—such as Charles Wesley's "Hark the Herald Angels Sing"—gave extensive treatment to Christ's saving mission, his kingship, and the "second birth" that he would bring to humanity. Yet in the late 19th century, many evangelicals who had not celebrated Christmas in their churches began singing the Episcopal Christmas hymns as eagerly as anyone else.

Without realizing it, then, many evangelicals absorbed much of the theology of the 19th century Unitarians and Episcopalians because it pervaded most of the traditional hymns and Christmas readings they had come to adore. Yet over the course of the 20th century, the "Christmas spirit" became increasingly separated from the historical Jesus in American public life. In the mid-19th century, even the Unitarians affirmed the teachings of the historical Jesus and believed they would lead to a happier, more emancipated society. But by the mid-20th century, some public figures who welcomed the chance to talk about the "Christmas spirit" shied away from any specific invocation of Jesus. In the numerous Christmas messages that echo the phrase "peace on earth and good will to men" very few ever mention Jesus Christ and public expressions of "Merry Christmas" are grounded in nothing more substantive than a vaguely Unitarian wish for a universal "Christmas spirit" of peace and goodwill.

We need a recovery of wonder at the incarnate God coming to earth in the form of a baby in order to save humanity. The 19th century Unitarians who wanted Christmas because they longed for better social relations were right to earnestly desire this aspect of the kingdom of God. But as evangelicals know, for this to work, people need a Jesus who was just as divine as He was human—and they need His atoning death. The Victorian Episcopalians who became sentimental in their reflection on the sleeping Christ child were right to bow their knee to the baby in the manger. But maybe the night when he entered a world of pain and sin was a lot less silent than they imagined. And the 20th century liberal Protestants who tried to appeal to a universal "Christmas spirit" were right about the invisible power at work on that day. But maybe it could be better identified as the Holy Spirit rather than as some universal human beneficence that could save the world apart from Jesus. Those of us who are evangelical in our faith can still have a merry Christmas. But if we want to do so in a way that foregrounds the gospel, we may have to discover a new approach to the holiday that does more than simply preserve the old. This Christmas, believers in the gospel will gather together. They'll marvel at the incarnate Son

of God, whose entry into the world made possible the "Christmas spirit" that numerous people across the theological spectrum have longed for. But Christ's birth marks more than a humanitarian project or a sentimental story. It's about the ultimate divine gift to a sinful world—a world that in the 19th century, as in the 1st and the 21st centuries, comprehended it not! (Adapted from an article in Christianity Today)

Theme for the year: Remember

January

Remember: *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." Jude 17-18*

Thought for the Month: 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

February:

Remember: *Remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of their way will save them from death and cover over a multitude of sins.Jas.5:20*

Thought for the Month: 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. *K.D.Johnson*

March:

Remember: *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.8:18*

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 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 come alive today. *R. Cantalamessa*

April:

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

Thought for the Month: When we pray "*in Jesus' name*," we acknowledge that our prayers depend on Jesus Christ. 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. Jesus Christ himself is the foundation, the Word of God, who always lives to intercede for us. *K.D.Johnson*

May:

Remember: *I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers, because I hear about your love for all his holy people and your faith in the Lord Jesus. Phile.4-5*

Thought for the Month: When we pray, we must hold fast and believe that God has heard our prayer. It was for this reason that the ancients defined prayer as an *Ascensus mentis ad Deum*—the ascent of the mind to God! *Martin Luther*

June:

Remember: *We always thank God for all of you and continually mention you in our prayers. We remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labour prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. 1Thess.1:2-3*

Thought for the Month: Remorse before Calvary is of God; remorse after you have been to Calvary is of the devil. Repent of your sin, yes; but do not make your sin a subject for long and melancholy meditation. Why should I cheat God by spending my time and energy on remorse? I am greater than my sins. *Martin Luther*

July:

Remember: *Remember Lot's wife! Whoever tries to keep their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life will preserve it. Lk.17:32-33*

Thought for the Month: Prayer is communion with the Father; prayer is pondering what God's Word says about our ideas—and then conforming our concepts to His. Never contemplate that sacred season with demons on your mind 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*

August:

Remember: *I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now.Phil.1:3-4*

Thought for the Month: 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.*M. Petzer*

September:

Remember: *Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. Heb.13:7-8*

Thought for the Month: God's Name, God's Kingdom, God's will must be the primary object of Christian prayer. Of course it is not as if God needed our prayers, but they are the means by which the disciples become partakers in the heavenly treasure for which they pray.*Dietrich Bonhoeffer*

October:

Remember: *Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. 2Cor.9:6*

Thought for the Month: There is no such thing in the Body of Christ as low self-esteem, only a low esteem of Jesus Christ! If we esteemed His finished work properly, there would be no sense of inferiority or inadequacy because we are a miracle—not only fearfully and wonderfully made but also fearfully and wonderfully re-made—we are re-created in the image of Jesus! *M.Petzer*

November:

Remember: *Remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come.Eccl.12:1*

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*

December:

Remember: *Look to the LORD and his strength; seek his face always. Remember the wonders he has done, his miracles, and the judgments he pronounced.Ps.105:4-5*

Thought for the Month: To the eye of faith God's Word is sure, and by it we perceive that our works are prospered even when everything seems to go against us. But it is not outward prosperity that Christians most desire and value—it is soul prosperity they long for. *C.H.Spurgeon*

Bible Time Chart

Time Chart of OT

1479B.C.	Exodus under Thutmose II

(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])

1270B.C.	*Another possible date for the Exodus (under Ramesses 2 also called Ramesses the Great)*
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*) 1st Exile 2Kings 24:10-17
586B.C.	Judah's (*Southern Kingdom*) 2nd Exile 2Kings 25:1-21
537B.C.	Judah's (*Southern Kingdom*) Return from Exile

Time Chart of NT

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

A.D.63-65	Paul's release & further ministry
A.D.63	**1Timothy & Titus**
A.D.63-64	**Hebrews** (possibly Barnabas)
A.D.64	*Herod's Temple finished*
<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 2nd 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**
A.D.68	*Death of Nero*
A.D.68-69	*Reign of Galba*
A.D.69	*Reign of Otho*
A.D.69	*Reign of Vitellius*
A.D.69-79	*Reign of Vespasian*
A.D.70	*Destruction of Jerusalem by Titus*
A.D.79-81	*Reign of Titus*
A.D.98/100	Death of John
A.D.81-96	*Reign of Domitian*

** 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'*ah*'am, and God became known as the God of Abraham. Abraham's wife Sarai became known as Sar'*ah*

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)*

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A Local Church with a World Vision

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