

# Deal Pentecostal Church Sermon Outlines 2024

## 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 5<sup>th</sup> 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 C2<sup>nd</sup> 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.*<sup>Jn.16:7</sup> Jesus is now in heaven at the right hand of the Father: *But from now on, the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the mighty God.*<sup>Lk.22:69</sup> 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 in us, not just with us. *If you love me, you will obey what I command. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counsellor to be with you forever—the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you.*<sup>Jn.14:15-18</sup> 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.*<sup>Col.3:1-2</sup>

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."*<sup>Jn.8:31-32</sup> *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.*<sup>Jn.15:7-8</sup> 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: In this world we are like Jesus.*<sup>1Jn.4:16-17</sup> Paul wrote: *Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ.*<sup>1Cor.11:1</sup> 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 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.*<sup>Jn.1:14</sup> *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.*<sup>1Heb.2:8-18</sup>

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.<sup>1Heb.6:1-3</sup> 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.<sup>1Heb.9:14-15</sup> Once we are a Christian, 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.*<sup>2Cor.5:21</sup> 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.*<sup>1Heb.4:16</sup> Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise; give thanks to him and praise his name.<sup>Ps.100:4</sup> 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.*<sup>1Heb.10:14-18</sup> 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.<sup>1Jn.4:14-18</sup> 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.*<sup>1Cor.11:26-34</sup> 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.*<sup>Col.1:22</sup> *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."*<sup>Matt.26:26</sup> 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."*<sup>Matt.26:27-28</sup>

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.*<sup>Mk.7:8</sup>

<sup>9</sup>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.*<sup>Rom.6:17-23</sup> 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.*<sup>Gal.5:6</sup> *No one can please God without faith. Whoever goes to God must believe that God exists and that he rewards those who seek him.*<sup>Heb.11:6</sup>

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.*<sup>Eph.2:8-10</sup> *We belong with those who have faith and are saved.*<sup>Heb.10:39</sup> *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.*<sup>2Tim.3:15</sup> 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.<sup>Heb.10:19-23</sup> 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.<sup>Is.53:4-6</sup>

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.*<sup>Rom.9:33</sup>

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!*<sup>1Cor.11:17-22</sup> 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.*<sup>1Jn.4:19-21</sup> 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.*<sup>1Cor.11:23-34</sup> 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?*<sup>2Cor.2:14-16</sup> 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.* <sup>1Pet.2:4-10</sup>

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.* <sup>Lk.2:28-32</sup> 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.* <sup>Rom.6:20-23</sup> 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.* <sup>Ecc.8:6-8</sup> 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.* <sup>Lk.1:45</sup>

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.* <sup>Lk.2:34</sup> 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.*<sup>Rom.6:2-7</sup>

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.*<sup>Jn.5:24-29</sup> 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 1<sup>st</sup> resurrection (of spiritual new-birth) and the 2<sup>nd</sup> 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.*<sup>Rev.2:11</sup> *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.*<sup>Rev.20:6-15</sup>

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."*<sup>Jn.12:23-26</sup> 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.*<sup>Rev.11:8</sup> *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."*<sup>Rev.17:1;18;21;24</sup>

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.*<sup>1Pet.2:4-6</sup> 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.*<sup>Rom.9:30-33</sup> 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.*<sup>Is.32:1-2</sup> 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.<sup>Gen.49:24</sup> But the LORD has become my fortress, and my God the rock in whom I take refuge.<sup>Ps.94:22</sup> 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.<sup>Is.44:8</sup> 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.<sup>1Cor.10:1-4</sup> 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."<sup>Ex.33:21-23</sup> 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.<sup>Jn.1:14-18</sup>

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 19<sup>th</sup> January Ps.100. Luke 3

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

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.*<sup>Matt.12:36-37</sup> 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.*<sup>Jas.1:26-27</sup> 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!*<sup>Heb.9:14</sup> 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.*<sup>Ps.103:1-2</sup> 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.*<sup>Job.1:3-5</sup> 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.*<sup>Rom.10:1-4</sup>

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.’*<sup>Matt.3:1-3</sup> 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.”*<sup>Jn.1:29-31</sup> 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.”*<sup>Jn.3:3</sup> 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.”*<sup>Jn.3:5-8</sup>

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.<sup>2Pet.1:12-15</sup> 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.*<sup>Lk.3:8</sup> 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.*<sup>1Thess.1:9-10</sup> And, as Isaiah says: *Woe to those who quarrel with their Maker.*<sup>Is.45:9</sup> 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.*<sup>Is.8:20-22</sup>

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.*<sup>2Cor.5:16-21</sup> 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!”*<sup>Is.5:5-8</sup>

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.*<sup>2Cor.7:9-10</sup> 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.<sup>1Sam.15:22-31</sup> 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."<sup>2Sam.12:7-14</sup> 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.<sup>Psa.51:1-13</sup> 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.<sup>1Chron.3:4-6</sup>

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."<sup>Rev.3:1-6</sup> 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.*<sup>Ps.96:7-9</sup> 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.*<sup>Rev.4:11</sup> The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work [serve or worship] and take care of it.<sup>Gen.2:15</sup> 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.*<sup>Jas.1:27</sup> 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.*<sup>Lk.3:18</sup>

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.*<sup>Rom.2:4-11</sup> 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 26<sup>th</sup> 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.”<sup>Matt.22:29</sup> We know that Scripture is always true.<sup>Jn.10:35</sup> But the Scriptures must be fulfilled.<sup>Mk.14:29</sup>* 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.<sup>2Pet.3:15-16</sup>* 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.<sup>2Tim.3:14-17</sup>* 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.<sup>Is.45:9</sup> 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.<sup>Is.8:20-22</sup>*

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.<sup>Ps.19:9-11</sup> 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.]<sup>Heb.4:12</sup>*

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

*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.<sup>Eph.6:17-18</sup> *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.*<sup>Rev.2:12-16</sup> *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.*<sup>2Cor.10:4-5</sup> 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.*<sup>Acts.19:13-16</sup> 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?*<sup>2Jn.5:37-47</sup> 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.*<sup>Ps.119:11</sup>

**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.*<sup>1Thess.5:23</sup> 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.*<sup>Col.2:8</sup> *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.*<sup>1Jn.2:15-17</sup> 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.*<sup>Prov.3:1-8</sup> *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.*<sup>Prov.4:20-23</sup>

**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.*<sup>Ps.31:5-6</sup> *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.”<sup>Dent.32:15-21</sup>

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.<sup>Rom.10:9-10</sup>

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.<sup>Eph.4:4-6</sup> 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.<sup>1Cor.8:4-6</sup>

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.<sup>Zech.14:8-9</sup>

**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.*<sup>Heb.5:13-6:1</sup>

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.*<sup>Psa.119:124-125</sup>

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?”*<sup>Matt.16:8-10</sup>

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.*<sup>Phil.2:5-6</sup>

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 perform 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.<sup>Is.55:11</sup> 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.*<sup>1Thess.2:13</sup>

## 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 2<sup>nd</sup> 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.*<sup>Jn.1:12-13</sup> **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.*<sup>Acts.17:2-4</sup> 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.*<sup>1Thess.1:4-10</sup> 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***<sup>2Jn.2:1-2</sup> 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.*<sup>Acts.8:12</sup> *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.*<sup>Dent.30:19-20</sup> 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.*<sup>Jn.5:37-40</sup> 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.*<sup>Heb.4:12-13</sup> 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.*<sup>Prov.4:20-23</sup> *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!*<sup>Psa.119:102-103</sup> *Gracious words are a honeycomb, sweet to the soul and healing to the bones.*<sup>Prov.16:24</sup> 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.*<sup>Matt.4:4</sup> 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.”<sup>Jn.6:32-58</sup> 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.”<sup>Matt.22:29</sup> 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.*<sup>Lk.1:45</sup> 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.*<sup>1Pet.1:23</sup> *But our citizenship is in heaven.*<sup>Phil.3:20</sup> *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.*<sup>Eph.2:19-20</sup> 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.*<sup>Matt.7:24-25</sup> *Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.*<sup>Jas.1:22</sup> *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.*<sup>Phil.4:9</sup> 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.* <sup>Acts.8:30-34</sup>

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.* <sup>Ps.122:1-4</sup>

## 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 9<sup>th</sup> 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.* <sup>Lk.6:44-45</sup>

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.* <sup>Gen.2:9</sup> 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."* <sup>Gen.2:15-17</sup> 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!”* <sup>Mk.11:12-21</sup> 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!* <sup>Heb.9:8-14</sup> 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.* <sup>Gen.3:21</sup> 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.”* <sup>Jn.1:29-34</sup> But returning to today’s story of *A tree is identified by its fruit.* <sup>Lk.6:45</sup> 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!”* <sup>Ps.92:12-15</sup> 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.<sup>Gal.5:22-25</sup> 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 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.”<sup>Rom.1:16-17</sup> 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.<sup>Rom.6:16-18</sup> 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.<sup>2Cor.5:21</sup> 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. <sup>Jas.1:19-25</sup> 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.<sup>Phil.3:20</sup> Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household.<sup>Eph.2:19</sup> 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.<sup>1Cor.15:47-49</sup> 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.<sup>1Jn.3:18-23</sup> 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.*<sup>Col.1:25-27</sup> 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.*<sup>Rom.5:8</sup> 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.”*<sup>Jn.3:3-8</sup>

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.*<sup>Lk.6:44-45</sup> 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!”*<sup>Ps.92:12-15</sup> 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.*<sup>Is.11:1-4</sup> 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.*<sup>1Cor.1:30</sup> 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.*<sup>Lk.21:13-15</sup> 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.*<sup>Col.1:9-10</sup> 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."*<sup>Ex.31:1-5</sup>

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 16<sup>th</sup> February Ps.104:1-15. Luke 7

**Healthy, Wealthy and Wise!** *But wisdom is proved right by all her children.*<sup>Lk.7:35</sup>

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.*<sup>2Cor.1:20</sup> 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 nyse. 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.*<sup>Ex.15:26</sup> *He sent out his word and healed them; he rescued them from the grave.*<sup>Ps.107:20</sup> Jesus went around healing the sick. *Jesus went preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people.*<sup>Matt.4:23</sup> *Jesus went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him.*<sup>Acts 10:38</sup> *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.*<sup>1Pet.2:24</sup> And Jesus hasn't changed *Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.*<sup>Heb.13:8</sup> 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?*<sup>Rom.8:32</sup> 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.*<sup>Ecd.8:12</sup> 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.*<sup>1Thess.5:23</sup> 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.*<sup>3Jn.2</sup> 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.*<sup>1Cor.6:17</sup> 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.*<sup>Ps.42:10-11</sup> 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.*<sup>1Pet.1:23</sup> 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.*<sup>Is.61:1-3</sup>



**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."*<sup>Lk.12:15-21</sup> 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.*<sup>Rom.4:7-8</sup> *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.*<sup>Prov.28:13-14</sup> We are now citizens of heaven: *But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ.*<sup>Phil.3:20</sup> 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.*<sup>Is.55:1-2</sup> 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."*<sup>Acts.8:18-23</sup> 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!*<sup>2Cor.9:6-15</sup> 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.*<sup>Phil.4:10-15</sup> 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.” <sup>Lk.21:1-4</sup> 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.* <sup>Lk.16:8-13</sup>

**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.* <sup>Lk.7:35</sup> 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. <sup>Prov.3:13-18</sup> *The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life, and the one who is wise saves lives.* <sup>Prov.11:30</sup> *Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a longing fulfilled is a tree of life.* <sup>Prov.11:30</sup> 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.* <sup>1Cor.1:30</sup> The 1<sup>st</sup> 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.* <sup>Rev.2:7</sup> *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.* <sup>Rev.22:1-5</sup> *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.* <sup>Rev.22:14</sup> 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.* <sup>Jas.1:21-25</sup> 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.<sup>Phil.4:8-9</sup> 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.<sup>Josh.1:8</sup> “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.”<sup>Is.59:20-60:1</sup> 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.<sup>2Tim.2:7</sup> 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.<sup>Phile.6</sup> 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.<sup>Is.8:20-21</sup> 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.<sup>Heb.5:12-14</sup>

## 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 23<sup>rd</sup> 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 C16<sup>th</sup>. 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 1<sup>st</sup> 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.’”*<sup>Lk.8:9-10</sup> 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.*<sup>1Cor.15:22-26</sup> 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 of 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.’”*<sup>Matt.6:9-13</sup> 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.*”<sup>Lk.17:20-21</sup> 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.”*<sup>Jn.18:36</sup>

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.*<sup>Lk.8:5-8</sup>

**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 every word that comes from the mouth of God.*<sup>Matt.4:4</sup> 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, 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.*<sup>Jas.1:21-</sup>

<sup>25</sup> 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.*<sup>Lk.24:25-27</sup> 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.*<sup>2Cor.5:17-19</sup> 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.*<sup>1Jn.3:19-24</sup> 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.*<sup>Josh.1:8-9</sup>

**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.*<sup>1Cor.3:16</sup> *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.*<sup>1Cor.6:17-20</sup> 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...*<sup>Ps.103:1-2</sup> *Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise; give thanks to him and praise his name.*<sup>Ps.100:4</sup> 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.*<sup>1Thes.5:16-19</sup> (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.<sup>Lk.8:11-15</sup>

**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.*<sup>Ecd.11:4-6</sup> 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.*<sup>2Cor.9:10-11</sup> 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.<sup>Heb.12:10-15</sup> 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.<sup>Jas.3:13-18</sup> 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.<sup>Rom.4:2;23-25</sup> 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.*<sup>Rom.10:17</sup> 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.*<sup>Heb.4:2</sup> 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.’<sup>Matt.13:11-15</sup> 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.”*<sup>Jn.8:31-32</sup> 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.*<sup>Ps.126:5-6</sup> Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.<sup>Jas.3:18</sup> 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.*<sup>Gal.6:7-10</sup>

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.*<sup>Lk.8:12-15</sup> *But the seed falling on good soil refers to someone who hears the word and understands it. This is the one who produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.*<sup>Matt.13:23</sup>

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. All by itself the soil produces grain—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.*<sup>Mk.4:26-29</sup>

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 2<sup>nd</sup> 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.*<sup>Mk.16:16</sup> *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."<sup>Jn.6:27-29</sup> 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.*<sup>Matt.10:38-39</sup> 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.*<sup>Matt.4:18-21</sup> 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."<sup>Jn.21:19-22</sup> 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.*<sup>Jn.3:16-18</sup> 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].*<sup>Rev.19:10</sup>

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.<sup>Acts.23:8</sup>) 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.*<sup>Acts.2:42-47</sup> 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.<sup>Acts.9:1-2</sup> 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.<sup>Acts.18:24-26</sup> 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.”<sup>Acts.22:3-5</sup> 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.<sup>Acts.24:14-16</sup> 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.<sup>Acts.11:19-26</sup> 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?”<sup>Acts.26:28</sup>

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.”<sup>Matt.3:16-17</sup> This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him.<sup>Lk.9:36</sup> 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.*<sup>Rom.12:1-</sup>

<sup>2</sup> *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.*<sup>Eph.5:25-27</sup> *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.*<sup>Jn.15:3-4</sup>

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.”<sup>Matt.5:1-12</sup>

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.”<sup>Lk.11:28</sup> “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.”<sup>Prov.8:32-36</sup>

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.*<sup>1Pet.3:21-22</sup>

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.*<sup>1Cor.1:30</sup> 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.*<sup>Prov.3:13-18</sup> *The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life, and the one who is wise saves lives.*<sup>Prov.11:30</sup> Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a longing fulfilled is a tree of life.<sup>Prov.11:30</sup>

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.*<sup>Rev.2:7</sup> *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.*<sup>Rev.22:1-5</sup>

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 9<sup>th</sup> 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 Christian 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."*<sup>1Pet.1:15</sup> 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.*<sup>Rom.4:1-5:2</sup> 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.<sup>Acts.24:24-25</sup> 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.*<sup>Heb.5:11-6:3</sup> 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.*<sup>Matt.25:23</sup> 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.*<sup>1Cor.13:13-14:1</sup> *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.*<sup>1Pet.4:8-11</sup> Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found faithful.<sup>1Cor.4:2</sup> 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.*<sup>Deut.8:17-18</sup> *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.*<sup>1Cor.3:5-15</sup> 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.<sup>2Pet.1:3-11</sup> 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."<sup>Lk.7:41-47</sup> And so, we who have been forgiven everything, should love God with all 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.<sup>Mk.12:28-31</sup> 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?"<sup>Heb.13:5-6</sup> 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.<sup>Phil.1:4-6</sup> 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.<sup>1Jn.2:1-2</sup>

A successful Christian is a mature Christian but maturity is more than just knowing the theology of our faith—maturity is living 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.<sup>Heb.7:22</sup> 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.<sup>Heb.8:6</sup> The commands of the Old Covenant were absolute—they all had to be kept completely: If you fully obey the LORD your God and carefully follow all his commands I give you today, the LORD your God will set you high above all the nations on earth. All these blessings will come on you and accompany you if you obey the LORD your God: You will be blessed... 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. 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.<sup>Dent.28:1-19-7</sup> 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.*"<sup>Lk.7:24-28</sup>

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.*<sup>Matt.11:28-30</sup>

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."*<sup>Mk.10:42-45</sup>

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."*<sup>Lk.22:25-30</sup>

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.*<sup>Jn.13:15-17</sup>

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.<sup>Phil.2:1-11</sup>

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.<sup>1Pet.1:16-17</sup>

**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."*<sup>Jn.6:28-29</sup>

To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.<sup>1Pet.2:21</sup>

Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it.<sup>Lk.11:28</sup> 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.*<sup>Rev.1:1-3</sup>

## 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 16<sup>th</sup> March Ps.107 Luke 10

**What is the greatest success we can ever achieve?** *Then Jesus said, "Yes, now go and do the same."*<sup>Lk.10:37</sup>

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 Christian; 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.*<sup>Rom.10:9-10</sup>

Then last week we asked: "*What is a successful Christian?*" and concluded that a successful Christian 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.*<sup>Lk.16:15</sup> 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."*<sup>Mk.10:42-45</sup> 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.*<sup>Phil.2:1-11</sup> 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.*<sup>1Pet.4:8-11</sup> 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."<sup>Lk.22:25-30</sup>

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?*<sup>Lk.9:25</sup> 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.<sup>Ecd.3:9-14</sup> 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.<sup>Ecd.12:6-7</sup> 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.<sup>Rom.14:11-12</sup> 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?*<sup>Ecd.3:17-20</sup> 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.*<sup>1Cor.15:19-23</sup> *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.*<sup>Phil.1:21-23</sup> *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.*<sup>Jn.12:25-26</sup>

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?”*<sup>Lk.10:25-26</sup> 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.’”*<sup>Lk.16:27-31</sup> 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.*<sup>Is.8:21-22</sup> 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.”*<sup>Lk.10:27-28</sup> 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.*<sup>Jn.3:16-18</sup> 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.*<sup>Eph.6:23-24</sup> **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.*<sup>Lk.19:10</sup> 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.*<sup>Gen.12:8</sup> The Tabernacle was pitched with the entrance on the east (so people faced west when they 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.*<sup>Ezek.10:18-19</sup> *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.*<sup>Ezek.43:1-2</sup>

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.*<sup>Jn.14:1-4</sup>

**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.*<sup>Lk.10:37</sup> 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 23<sup>rd</sup> 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.*<sup>D.Bonhoeffer</sup>

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,*<sup>Is.59:15-17</sup> 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.*<sup>Heb.2:11-18</sup> 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.*<sup>Prov.15:8;29</sup> *If anyone turns a deaf ear to my instruction, even their prayers are detestable.*<sup>Prov.28:9</sup> 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."*<sup>Jn.3:3</sup> 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.*<sup>Col.1:12-14</sup> 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.<sup>Jn.1:12-13</sup> 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."*<sup>Jn.14:6</sup> *Christ Jesus our Lord. In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence.*<sup>Eph.3:12</sup> *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.*<sup>Heb.4:14-16</sup> *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.*<sup>Heb.10:19-22</sup> And so, now have open access to God, our prayers are powerful and effective. *The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.*<sup>Jas.5:16</sup> 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."*<sup>Jn.11:21</sup> *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.*<sup>Heb.5:7-8</sup> 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.*<sup>1Jn.5:13-14</sup> 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.*<sup>Is.53:12-54:10</sup>

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.*<sup>Ps.119:165-166</sup> *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.*<sup>Is.26:3-12</sup> *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.*<sup>Is.32:17-20</sup> 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.*<sup>Matt.6:7-13</sup>

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.*<sup>Matt.6:31-34</sup> *"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!"*<sup>Matt.7:9-11</sup> 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."*<sup>Is.57:15</sup> 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 title 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."*<sup>Ex.3:13-15</sup> 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."<sup>John.18:33-37</sup> 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."<sup>Lk.17:20-21</sup> 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.<sup>Matt.13:18-19</sup> 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."<sup>Matt.3:1-2</sup> 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."<sup>Matt.4:17</sup> 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.<sup>Matt.11:12-15</sup> 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."<sup>Mk.9:1</sup>

When we become a Christian 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.<sup>Phil.4:18-21</sup> 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.<sup>Eph.2:17-20</sup> 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.<sup>Gal.5:19-23</sup> For the kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power.<sup>1Cor.4:20</sup> For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.<sup>Rom.14:17</sup>

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.<sup>1Pet.1:8-9</sup> 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 30<sup>th</sup> 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."*<sup>Is.57:15</sup> 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."*<sup>Rom.10:11-13</sup>

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.*<sup>Matt.6:6</sup> *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..."*<sup>Acts.4:24-25</sup> *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.*<sup>1Tim.2:1-4</sup> *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.*<sup>Phil.4:4-7</sup> 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.*<sup>Jas.5:16</sup> *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.*<sup>1Jn.5:13-14</sup>

**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.*<sup>Is.26:3-12</sup> 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.*<sup>Lk.9:16</sup> *When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them.*<sup>Lk.24:30</sup> 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.*<sup>Acts.27:35</sup> 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.'*"<sup>Matt.4:2-4</sup> 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.*<sup>Joh.23:12</sup> 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."<sup>Jn.4:31-35</sup> 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."*<sup>Jn.6:26-29</sup>

**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.*<sup>Acts.5:30-32</sup> *If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.*<sup>1Jn.1:9</sup> 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.*<sup>Ps.49:7-9</sup> *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.*<sup>Is.53:4-5</sup> 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!"<sup>Mk.2:5-12</sup> 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.<sup>Lk.23:24</sup> 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.<sup>1Pet.2:23-25</sup> 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.<sup>Matt.6:14-15</sup>

**And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.** The NIV translates thus: *Keep us from falling into sin when we are tempted. Save us from the evil one.*<sup>Matt.6:13</sup> 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.*<sup>1Cor.2:6-8</sup> 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.’*<sup>Matt.4:2-4</sup> 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.*<sup>Ps.119:11</sup> 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.*<sup>Job.22:21-22</sup> 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.*<sup>Rev.1:12-16</sup> 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.*<sup>2Cor.10:3-5</sup> 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.*<sup>Heb.8:10</sup> 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.*<sup>Tit.1:13-16</sup> 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.*<sup>1Pet.1:13</sup> *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.*<sup>1Tim.6:2-6</sup> *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.*<sup>Eph.5:25-27</sup> *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.*<sup>Rom.12:1-2</sup>

**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.*<sup>Ps.77:14</sup> 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.*<sup>Eph.3:21-22</sup> 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 6<sup>th</sup> 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. *This is why “it was credited to him as righteousness.” The words “it was credited to him” were written not for him alone, but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness—for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead.* 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 <sup>2Kg.14:23-28</sup> 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. <sup>2Kg.13:3</sup> But because of the Lord's great compassion, <sup>2Kg.13:4,23</sup> Israel was spared destruction and delivered from this oppression. <sup>2Kg.13:5</sup> This deliverance came through a “saviour” or deliverer, <sup>2Kg.13:5</sup> 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. <sup>2Kg.13:25</sup> Though Jeroboam *did what was evil in the sight of the LORD*, <sup>2Kg.14:24</sup> he nevertheless expanded Israel even farther than his father did, matching the boundaries in the days of David and Solomon; <sup>2Kg.14:25</sup>, this was “according 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.” <sup>2Kg.14:25</sup> 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 <sup>Gen.10:11</sup> 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 <sup>Ez.4:10</sup> (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.”* <sup>Jon.1:4-6</sup> *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!”* <sup>Mk.4:37-41</sup> 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.* <sup>1Tim.4:1-6</sup> 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.” <sup>2Tim.2:19</sup> 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. <sup>Phil.1:6</sup> 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.* <sup>Jon.1:9</sup> 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."*<sup>Job.36:1-5</sup> Job later declared the same—that God will fulfil His purpose: Then 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."*<sup>Job.42:1-6</sup> 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.*<sup>Ps.33:10-11</sup> *I cry out to God Most High, to God, who fulfils [his purpose] for me.*<sup>Ps.57:2</sup> 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.*<sup>Jon.1:17</sup>

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 3<sup>rd</sup> 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.*<sup>Heb.8:10</sup> *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.*<sup>2Cor.3:3-</sup>

<sup>6</sup>*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.*<sup>Ps.51:8</sup> 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.*<sup>Ps.32:8-9</sup>

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,*<sup>Is.1:19</sup> 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."*<sup>Lk.11:29-32</sup>

In the story of Lazarus, 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.'

<sup>1</sup><sup>Lk.16:29-31</sup> However, the cross of Christ is more powerful than 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.*<sup>1Cor.1:20-25</sup> *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.”*<sup>Rom.1:16-17</sup>

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.*<sup>Matt.16:4</sup> 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.*<sup>Rom.4:25</sup>

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 13<sup>th</sup> 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.*<sup>Heb.3:1</sup> *Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith.*<sup>Heb.12:2</sup> But what do we mean when we say "Jesus 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.*<sup>Jn.1:14</sup> 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.*<sup>Jn.4:23-24</sup> 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."*<sup>Jn.14:6</sup> 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 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."*<sup>Acts.24:24-25</sup>

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." *Wherefore, holy brethren, partakers of a heavenly calling, consider the Apostle and High Priest of our confession, even Jesus.*<sup>Heb.3:1</sup> "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.*<sup>Rom.10:8-10</sup> 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.*<sup>2Cor.3-18</sup> 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.*<sup>Col.1:27-28</sup> 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.*<sup>1Cor.15:47-49</sup> 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.*<sup>1Jn.3:18-23</sup> 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.*<sup>2Cor.5:21</sup> *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.*<sup>1Cor.1:30</sup> 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 suppresses 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.*<sup>2Tim.2:15</sup> *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.*<sup>1Tim.4:15-16</sup>

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 divisions 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 C13<sup>th</sup> and the verses were added C16<sup>th</sup>—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!<sup>Acts17:11</sup>). 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.*<sup>Col.3:15-17</sup>

## 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 20<sup>th</sup> 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.*<sup>Lk.24:17-19</sup>

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.*<sup>Rom.4:24-25</sup> Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel.<sup>2Tim.2:8</sup> 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.<sup>1Cor.15:1-4</sup> 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.<sup>Rom.10:9</sup>

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.*<sup>Jn.1:11</sup> 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.*<sup>Lk.2:25-26</sup> 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.*<sup>Acts.5:17</sup> *The Sadducees say that people will not rise from the dead. They don't believe there are angels or spirits either.*<sup>Acts.23:8</sup> Jesus was warning them against what the Pharisees and Sadducees taught.<sup>Matt.16:12</sup> 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.<sup>Matt.21:33-46</sup> 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."*<sup>Lk.22:66-70</sup> *"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!"*<sup>Mk.15:9-13</sup> 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."*<sup>Mk.8:31-33</sup> 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?"*<sup>Acts.1:8</sup> 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.*<sup>Jn.18:36</sup> *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.*<sup>Lk.17:20-21</sup> *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.*<sup>Matt.26:29</sup> 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.*<sup>Rom.14:17</sup> 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.*<sup>Phil.2:7-11</sup> 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."*<sup>Is.53:9-11</sup> *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.*<sup>Ps.16:9-10</sup> *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!*<sup>Job.19:25-27</sup> *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.*<sup>Matt.12:39-40</sup> "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."<sup>Gen.22:2-5</sup> 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."*<sup>Lk.24:44-49</sup>

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,<sup>1Cor.15:6</sup> 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.*<sup>1Cor.15:12-20</sup> 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?"*<sup>1Cor.15:45-55</sup>

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.<sup>Lk.24:17-19</sup> 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?*<sup>Lk.24:32</sup> *My heart grew hot within me, and as I meditated, the fire burned.*<sup>Ps.39:3</sup> **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 27<sup>th</sup> April Ps.112 Jn.21:1-19**

**Jesus said: Do you truly love me?**<sup>Jn.21:16</sup>

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.*<sup>’Matt.22:36-40</sup> 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.*<sup>Dent.6:4-9</sup> 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.*<sup>1Jn.4:13-19</sup>

**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.]*<sup>Ps.34:9</sup> True love for God does not make us afraid of Him and although God is “our 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.*<sup>Eph.5:25-32</sup> 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.*<sup>Rom.13:8-10</sup> 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.*<sup>Col.1:7-8</sup> 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."*<sup>Jn.21:15-17</sup> 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.*<sup>2Cor.1:3-7</sup>

**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.*<sup>1Jn.4:18-19</sup> 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.*<sup>Rom.5:5-9</sup> 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.*<sup>1Jn.4:20-21</sup> 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.*<sup>Matt.6:14-15</sup>

**To love God means that we will follow Jesus.** *Then Jesus told him, "Follow me."*<sup>Jn.21:19</sup> 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.<sup>Matt.4:18-20</sup> 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."*<sup>Matt.16:24-25</sup>

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.*<sup>Ps.51:10</sup>

### 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 5<sup>th</sup> May Ps.113. Jn.20:24-31

**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.*<sup>Jn.20:31</sup>

The quote “Ignorance is bliss, 'tis folly to be wise!” is often used to excuse lack of knowledge or failure to learn—maybe 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, 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—and there are eternal consequences if we get it wrong! There is no excuse for spiritual ignorance, because, as the Bible says: *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.*<sup>Rom.1:19-20</sup> 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.*<sup>1Thes.4:13-14</sup> 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.*<sup>Is.8:18-9:7</sup>



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.*<sup>2Pet.3:16</sup> 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.*<sup>Rom.15:4</sup> *When my heart was grieved and my spirit embittered, I was senseless and ignorant,*<sup>Psa.73:21-22</sup> *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.*<sup>Pron.30:2-3</sup> 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.*<sup>Jn.20:30-31;21:24</sup> 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.*<sup>Acts.17:29-31</sup>

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.*<sup>Psa.119.161</sup> The Printers Bible 1702

*Blessed are the place-makers (peace-makers).*<sup>Matt.5.9</sup> The Place-Makers Bible 1562:

*Thou shalt not be afraid for the bugges (terror) by night.*<sup>Psa.91.5</sup> The Bug Bible 1551

*Is there no treacle (balm) in Gilead?*<sup>Jer.7.22</sup> The Treacle Bible 1568

*Know ye not that the unrighteous shall inherit (not inherit) the kingdom or God.*<sup>1Cor.6.9</sup> The Unrighteous Bible

*They sewed fig leaves together and made themselves breeches (aprons).*<sup>Gen.3.7</sup> The Breeches Bible

*There are murderers (murmurers).*<sup>Jude.16</sup> The Murderers Bible 1801

*He that hath ears to ears, (hear) let him hear.*<sup>Matt.11.15</sup> The Ears to Ears Bible 1810

*The parable of the vinegar (vineyard)*<sup>Lk.20</sup>—headline. The Vinegar Bible 1717

*If any man come to me, and hate not ... his own wife (life).*<sup>Lk.14.26</sup> The Wife-hater Bible 1810

*Do (do not) commit adultery.*<sup>Ex.20.14</sup> 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.*<sup>Matt.22:29</sup>

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.*<sup>Gen.3:1-4</sup> Isaiah warned against quarrelling with God: *Woe to those who quarrel with their Maker.*<sup>Is.45:9</sup>

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.”*<sup>Gen.2:16-17</sup>

**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.*<sup>2Kgs.2:11</sup>

**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.*<sup>Is.11:6;65:25</sup>

**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.*<sup>Lk.2:2-7</sup>

**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 1<sup>st</sup> 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.*<sup>Gen.3:15</sup>]

**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...<sup>Gen.1:1;Jn.1:1</sup> 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.*<sup>Rom.10:17</sup> 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.*<sup>Jn.20:31</sup> 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.



## 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; it is pondering what His Word says about our ideas and conforming our concepts to His. Never contemplate that sacred season with demons on your mind 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:**

## 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:** 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*

## 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*

## 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:** 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, The Cost Of Discipleship*

## 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

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**August:**

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**Thought for the Month:**

**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:** 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*

**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*

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## Bible Time Chart

### Time Chart of OT

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

### Time Chart of NT

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

A.D.63-65	Paul's release & further ministry
A.D.63	<b>1 Timothy &amp; Titus</b>
A.D.63-64	<b>Hebrews</b> (possibly Barnabas)
<i>A.D.64</i>	<i>Herod's Temple finished</i>
<A.D.65	<b>Matthew, Mark, Luke, Acts</b>
<A.D.65	<b>Revelation****</b>
A.D.64	<b>1 &amp; 2 Peter</b> from Rome
A.D.65	Peter's death in Rome
A.D.65	Paul's 2 <sup>nd</sup> imprisonment at Rome
A.D.65	<b>2 Timothy</b> from Rome
A.D.65	Paul's death at Rome
<A.D.65	<b>Gospel John, 1, 2, &amp; 3 John</b>
A.D.65/66	<b>Jude</b>
<i>A.D.68</i>	<i>Death of Nero</i>
<i>A.D.68-69</i>	<i>Reign of Galba</i>
<i>A.D.69</i>	<i>Reign of Otho</i>
<i>A.D.69</i>	<i>Reign of Vitellius</i>
<i>A.D.69-79</i>	<i>Reign of Vespasian</i>
<i>A.D.70</i>	<i>Destruction of Jerusalem by Titus</i>
<i>A.D.79-81</i>	<i>Reign of Titus</i>
A.D.98/100	Death of John
<i>A.D.81-96</i>	<i>Reign of Domitian</i>

**\*\*** Besides the dating from Tiberius, Daniel had stated that it would be 69 “weeks” before Messiah would appear from the decree to rebuild Jerusalem (Daniel 9:26). Accepting that a “week” represents seven years and the decree to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem was given around 455B.C. (during the time of Ezra and Nehemiah), a specific period of 483 years (69 x 7) was to elapse before the Messiah would appear, dating Jesus’ Baptism at A.D.29 (*there is no date of 0B.C. or A.D.0*). Also: *They replied, “It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?”* Jn.2:20

**\*\*\*** Gildas (A.D.516-570) a British Historian, states, *Meanwhile, these islands ... received the beams of light that is, the Holy precepts of Christ, the true Sun at the latter part, as we know, of the reign of Tiberius Caesar* <sup>Roman Emperor A.D. 14-37</sup>

### **\*\*\*\* 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 C1<sup>st</sup> author who wrote *The Pseudo-Apocalypse*. He died well before John, *i.e.* well before A.D.95, but his Pseudo-Apocalypse contains many references to John's Apocalypse (the Book of Revelation).

### Internal evidence:

**42 months** = the period between A.D.64 and A.D.66 when Nero embarked on the most violent campaign against Christians martyring multitudes.

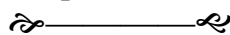
**666** = six hundred and sixty-six, not six, six, six. It is the numerical value of “*Caesar Nero*”

The “*temple*” in the “*holy city*” is still standing as John writes, though it is being threatened with devastation (Rev.11:1-2). We know as a matter of historical fact that the Jewish temple was destroyed in A.D.70, and has never been rebuilt. The sixth “*king*” is presently ruling from the “*seven mountains*” and will do so until a king comes who will reign a “*short time*” (Rev.17:9-10). The preterist takes this to be a clear enough allusion to Nero Caesar. According to the enumeration found in Josephus' *Antiquities* (18:2:2,6, 10) and Suetonius' *Lives of the Twelve Caesars*, Nero is Rome's sixth emperor, following Julius Caesar, Augustus, Tiberius, Gaius, and Claudius. “...the cryptic number 666 (Rev.13:18) designates Nero. The number involves the use of *gemetria* (assigning numerical values to letters of the alphabet and thus determining the numerical value of words). Nero Caesar written in Hebrew letters has the numerical value of 666. That explanation becomes all the more probable when you realize that in Hebrew, *Nero* can also be spelled *Neron*. With the second “*n*” the numerical value is 666. Without it, 616 (a well-attested reading in some New Testament manuscripts).” J. Stewart Russell, *The Parousia*

“It is with great satisfaction that he finds himself in substantial agreement with the distinguished ecclesiastical historian and theologian, Dr. Dollinger, of Munich, in his interpretation of St. Paul's prediction in 2 Thessalonians. (1) Dr. Dollinger distinctly identifies the “*Man of Sin*” with Nero, a conclusion now so generally accepted by the highest authorities, that it may be regarded as a settled point. (2) He clearly distinguishes between the “*Man of Sin*” and “*the Apostasy*,” so frequently confounded by the mass of interpreters. Dollinger shows that the former is a person, the latter a heresy. (3) He recognizes “*the Beast*” of the Apocalypse as the Emperor, and therefore identical with the “*Man of Sin*.” (4) The miracles wrought by the “*Second Beast*” (the Beast from the earth) he regards as a representation derived from our Lord's prophecy on the Mount of Olives.” (*The Parousia, Afterword*.)

The seven seals are shown to have taken place during the reign of the Emperors Augustus to Vespasian. The seven trumpets during the time when Rome placed 4 battalions at the Euphrates River (Rev.9:14). The seven bowls, when Nero was Emperor (Rev.17:10). But Revelation 20 makes the point that there is a long-time gap between Jerusalem being judged and the events described in verse 9 by its use of the term “*thousand years*”. *A. Corbett: Revelation*.

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



### Covenant

A “*covenant*” is an agreement between two parties—either individuals or an individual and group, or a monarch and their subjects. The “*Abrahamic Covenant*” was established by Yahweh (YHWH, that is, God) with Abram and involved a covenantal exchange of their names. Thus, Abram's name became Abr'*ab*'am, and God became known as the God of Abraham. Abraham's wife Sarai became known as Sar'*ab*

## Christian Guidelines

Make the Master proud of you by being good citizens. Respect the authorities, whatever their level; they are God's emissaries for keeping order. It is God's will that by doing good, you might cure the ignorance of the fools who think you're a danger to society. Exercise your freedom by serving God, not by breaking the rules. Treat everyone you meet with dignity. Love your spiritual family. Revere God. Respect the government. <sup>1Pet.2:13-17[TM]</sup>

## 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.* <sup>Jn.6:37</sup>

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.* <sup>Rom.8:38-39</sup>



### 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)

