Deal Pentecostal Church Sermon Outlines 2026

The church isn't just part of our lives, it's where we're reminded of the One who gives us life. Because Christ is our life, we are called to abide in Him, to sit under His Word, to worship Him, and to grow together as His people. The gathering of the church is not merely a weekly routine but a gift where God strengthens our faith and draws us nearer to Himself. Join us this Sunday as we gather!

I thank my God through Jesus the Anointed for all of you because we are joined by faith as family… I know that when we come together something beautiful will happen as we are encouraged by each other's faith. [Romans 1:9-12 The Voice]

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*]

Let Your Spirit produce in me wise desires by which I may ask right things, and then I shall know You hear me. May I never be importunate for temporal blessings but always refer them to Your Fatherly goodness—for You know what I need before I ask. May I seek first Your kingdom and its righteousness.. May I never think I prosper unless my soul prospers; or that I am rich, unless rich toward You; or that I am wise, unless wise unto salvation. May I seek my happiness in Your favour, image, presence and service. May my spiritual welfare be my chief consideration and value everything in relation to eternity.

Prayer for Ukraine

Heavenly Father, destroy the works of the enemies, divide their tongues, frustrate their efforts, and bring their counsels to naught; cause the enemy to fight within their own ranks, weaken their cause, force them to abandon the war and return home in shame, never to return! But may all who seek You rejoice and be glad in You—may those who love Your salvation always say, "Let God be exalted!" In Jesus' Name, Amen!

January 3

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January

God's Glory. *Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD rises upon you. See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples, but the LORD rises upon you and his glory appears over you. Isaiah 60:1-2*

Thought for the Month: To hear is to be informed—to believe is to be transformed. *Mike Petzer*

Sunday 4th January Ps.126

What would you like to achieve this year? Many people say that they have made a new year resolution, but their good intentions don't usually last a week, let alone a month and certainly not a year—sometimes because their circumstances changed, but mostly because they were unrealistic. However, regardless of any new year resolutions, what do you want to achieve this year in your spiritual life? The glib answer would be: *I want to be more like Jesus!* But what does it mean *to be more like Jesus*? And what should you do to work towards that goal? Your answers will depend your theology—and as we said last week, "*good theology makes stress-free Christianity!*" For many people, the goal of becoming *more like Jesus* would entail more Church services, more prayer, more Bible Study, more giving, more charity work , more… (*you can add your own list*). All these activities are good—and some are important—but whilst they have their place, they will not make you more like Jesus. The only activity that will make you more like Jesus is conversion—the New Birth. The moment we are born-again we are spiritually complete, we are whole and holy. *Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time.*[1Pet.1:3-5] *For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God.*[1Pet.1:23] *For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and in Christ you have been brought to fullness. He is the head over every power and authority. [For in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form, and in Him you have been made complete, and He is the head over all rule and authority.]*[Col.2:9-10] *Both the one who makes people holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters.* [Heb.2:11] The hymn puts it like this: *I'm accepted, I'm forgiven, I am fathered by the true and living God. I'm accepted, no condemnation, I am loved by the true and living God. There's no guilt or fear as I draw near to the Saviour and Creator of the world. There is joy and peace, as I release my worship to You, O Lord.*

If want to be like Jesus and don't believe that we are already spiritually complete, whole and holy, we will spend all our time and energy trying to become more complete, more whole and more holy. We will tire ourselves out by trying to be good enough, trying to be holy enough, trying to pray enough, trying to be spiritual enough, instead of living as the spiritually whole and holy person that God says we are. Adam was created whole and holy but when he sinned, his relationship with God was broken and he was expelled from Paradise, resulting in Adam' work became wearisome and tiring: *To Adam he said: Because you listened to your wife and ate fruit from the tree about which I commanded you, 'You must not eat from it,' Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat food from it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return.*[Gen.3:17-19] And Adam passed this "*curse*" on to all his descendants, but Jesus redeemed us from that curse: *For all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse, as it is written: "Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law." Clearly no one who relies on the law is justified before God, because "the righteous will live by faith." The law is not based on faith; on the contrary, it says, "The person who does these things will live by them." Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who is hung on a pole." He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might*

come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit.[Gal.3:10-14] When we are redeemed, we are united with God—and we cannot be more spiritual than having God dwelling within us! *But whoever is united with the Lord is one with him in spirit.*[1Cor.6:17] And if we become weary and burdened, Jesus has promised us rest for our souls: *All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.*[Matt.11:27-30] Some years ago, I saw a poster with a squirrel eating nuts and the caption: *God wants spiritual fruit not religious nuts!"* Some people are so "*heavenly*" minded that they are no earthly use! God doesn't want us to be "*religiously*" spiritual but He does want us to be *naturally* spiritual or as the Living Bible puts it: *I am your servant; therefore give me common sense to apply your rules to everything I do.*[Ps.119:125] There is a heresy that began to infiltrate Christianity from almost the beginning of the Church. This false teaching says: "*Spirit is good, flesh is evil; God is spirit, we are flesh and if we are to be more like God, we have to deny our flesh*". Deceptions work because they have some credibility and the devil will often flood your mind with truth in order to float one little lie! But just as a little dirt makes the cleanest clothes dirty, so a little error will make the whole teaching wrong—a little yeast permeates the whole loaf: *Your boasting is not good. Don't you know that a little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough? Get rid of the old yeast, so that you may be a new unleavened batch—as you really are. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed.*[1Cor.5:6-7]

If we don't believe that we are right (holy) in God's sight (unbelief is the greatest sin of all), we will <u>try to make ourselves right</u> (holy) in God's sight and of course we will never achieve this (which is the very essence of the Gospel) but we will also miss out on the life that God has for us. But the Christian life is a life of fellowship with God not a life of fellowship with the devil and we need to believe what God say about us. Of course we should live a holy, pure, and wholesome life that is compatible with the values of God's Kingdom, but we live by faith, by trusting not trying; in communion not conflict. Nevertheless, we all readily admit that we are not yet perfect. Even John and Paul recognized this: *This is the message we heard from Jesus and now declare to you: God is light, and there is no darkness in him at all. So we are lying if we say we have fellowship with God but go on living in spiritual darkness; we are not practicing the truth. But if we are living in the light, as God is in the light, then we have fellowship with each other, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, cleanses us from all sin. If we claim we have no sin, we are only fooling ourselves and not living in the truth. But if we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all wickedness. If we claim we have not sinned, we are calling God a liar and showing that his word has no place in our hearts.*[1Jn.1:5-10] *Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.*[Phil.3:12-14] So how do we change from where we are to where we are going? How do we become more like Jesus, not just in our nature but in our daily lives as well?

Jesus is full of glory: *The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.*[Jn.1:14] *The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.*[Heb.1:3] *Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent. I have brought you glory on earth by finishing the work you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began.*[Jn.17:3-5] Paul defines sin as falling short of God's glory: *for all have sinned*

and fall short of the glory of God,[Rom.3:23] But when we meditate or contemplate God's glory, we are transformed into Jesus likeness: *And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.*[2Cor.3:18] This word "*transformed*" is also used about Jesus' transfiguration: *There he was <u>transfigured</u> before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light. Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus.*[Matt.17:2-3] The same word is used about the renewing of our mind as we worship: *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 <u>transformed</u> by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.*[Rom.12:2]

So to make our new holy and righteous nature a reality in our daily lives, we need to display the Lord's glory—and that will change us to become more like him so that we have more and more glory. *The Government of Death, its constitution chiselled on stone tablets, had a dazzling inaugural. Moses' face as he delivered the tablets was so bright that day (even though it would fade soon enough) that the people of Israel could no more look right at him than stare into the sun. How much more dazzling, then, the Government of Living Spirit? If the Government of Condemnation was impressive, how about this Government of Affirmation? Bright as that old government was, it would look downright dull alongside this new one. If that makeshift arrangement impressed us, how much more this brightly shining government installed for eternity? With that kind of hope to excite us, nothing holds us back. Unlike Moses, we have nothing to hide. Everything is out in the open with us. He wore a veil so the children of Israel wouldn't notice that the glory was fading away— and they didn't notice. They didn't notice it then and they don't notice it now, don't notice that there's nothing left behind that veil. Even today when the proclamations of that old, bankrupt government are read out, they can't see through it. Only Christ can get rid of the veil so they can see for themselves that there's nothing there. Whenever, though, they turn to face God as Moses did, God removes the veil and there they are—face to face! They suddenly recognize that God is a living, personal presence, not a piece of chiselled stone. And when God is personally present, a living Spirit, that old, constricting legislation is recognized as obsolete. We're free of it! All of us! Nothing between us and God, our faces shining with the brightness of his face. And so we are transfigured much like the Messiah, our lives gradually becoming brighter and more beautiful as God enters our lives and we become like him.*[2Cor.3:7-18]

Displaying God's glory is a wonderful honour as well as being a wonderful experience, but we should not fall into the error of thinking that only "super-spiritual" people can attain this. Our Verse for the month is from Isaiah's prophecy about Jesus' glory rising upon us: *Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD rises upon you. See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples, but the LORD rises upon you and his glory appears over you.*[Is.60:1-2] Isaiah saw and experienced Jesus' glory before He was born in Bethlehem: *Isaiah said this because he saw Jesus' glory and spoke about him.*[Jn.12:41] But Isaiah prophesied that when we see that glory, we will no longer live in gloom or darkness: *Consult God's instruction and the testimony of warning. If anyone does not speak according to this word, they have no light of dawn. Distressed and hungry, they will roam through the land; when they are famished, they will become enraged and, looking upward, will curse their king and their God. Then they will look toward the earth and see only distress and darkness and fearful gloom, and they will be thrust into utter darkness. Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress. In the past he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the future he will honour Galilee of the nations, by the Way of the Sea, beyond the Jordan—The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned… For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end. He will*

reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this.[Is.8:20-9:7]
Let's live in the fulfilment of this prophecy and instead of seeing darkness and gloom, see the light of God's glory—not just in heaven but on earth, on us and in us. And let's make 2026 the best year of our life—because with God's glory risen upon us we can. If God be for us, who can be against us?

Questions

What is God's glory like?
What is sin?
What does "*the glory of the LORD rises upon you"* mean?
Can we become more like Jesus?
How can we display more of Jesus?
Should we change anything in our services to facilitate God's glory?

Puritan Prayer. Worship and Fellowship: O Lord, we commune with You every day but sometimes secular concerns reduce heavenly impressions. We bless You therefore, that today is sacred to our souls and we can wait upon You and be refreshed. We thank You for the institutions of religion, by use of which, we draw near to You and You to us. We rejoice that today, without distractions or even with distractions, we can attend upon You. Let our fellowship be devout, our conversation edifying, our reading pious and our hearing profitable. We are the House of Prayer—pour upon us the Spirit of Grace and Supplication. We are the House of Praise—awaken in us every grateful and cheerful emotion so that our souls are quickened and elevated. As we receive instruction, give testimony to the Word preached and glorify it in the hearts of all who hear. May Your Word enlighten the ignorant, awaken the careless, reclaim the wandering, establish the weak, comfort the feeble-minded and make ready a people for their Lord. Be a Sanctuary to all who cannot come and forget not those who never come. Bestow upon us benevolence towards our dependants, forgiveness towards our enemies, peaceableness towards our neighbours and openness towards our fellow-Christians.

Psalm 126: When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dreamed. Our mouths were filled with laughter, our tongues with songs of joy. Then it was said among the nations, "The LORD has done great things for them." The LORD has done great things for us, and we are filled with joy. Restore our fortunes, LORD, like streams in the Negev. 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.

Sunday 4th January Ps.126

A day in the life of a saint. *To the church of God at Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called as saints, with all those in every place who call on the name of Jesus Christ our Lord — both their Lord and ours.*[1Cor.1:2]

In 2011 there was a TV documentary series called "*A Day in the Life*" that followed individuals for 24 hours, showcasing their daily routines and unique lifestyles. What would you think a day in the life of a saint would be like? First of all, we need to define a "*saint*". Many people have the idea that a saint is a very religious person who has an exceptional degree of holiness or closeness to God but is out of touch with real everyday life. The word "*saint*" comes from the Latin *sanctus*, meaning "*holy*" or "*consecrated*." Sometimes the word "*hallow*" is used (from O.E. "*hālig*" meaning "*holy*,") and is used in "*All Hallows' Eve*" (Halloween) and "*All Hallows' Day"* (November 1). In Roman Catholic Church theology, the term '*saint'* is reserved for those individuals who have led a holy and exemplary life and have entered Heaven. The process of

becoming a "*saint*" is called canonization and the first known canonization was of Ulric of Augsburg in 973. A special department called *The Congregation for the Causes of Saints,* investigates the life of the individual, checking for orthodox belief and any miracles claimed as a result of their intercession. The Pope then declares the person to be beatified (blessed) and if another miracle occurs, they are declared a "*saint*"!

However, if we are to be true worshippers, we must remain true to God and His Word because God is only worshipped in truth: *Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth.*[Jn.4:23-24] God's Word is Truth: *Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth.*[Jn.17:17] Our confidence, our hope, our freedom and our delight is in God's Word—which is the Word of Truth: *May your unfailing love come to me, LORD, your salvation, according to your promise; then I can answer anyone who taunts me, for I trust in your word. Never take your word of truth from my mouth, for I have put my hope in your laws. I will always obey your law, for ever and ever. I will walk about in freedom, for I have sought out your precepts. I will speak of your statutes before kings and will not be put to shame, for I delight in your commands because I love them. I reach out for your commands, which I love, that I may meditate on your decrees.*[Ps.119:41-48] Believers believe what God says and neither add or take anything from His statements in the Scripture: *I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this scroll: If anyone adds anything to them, God will add to that person the plagues described in this scroll. And if anyone takes words away from this scroll of prophecy, God will take away from that person any share in the tree of life and in the Holy City, which are described in this scroll.*[Rev.22:18-19] Those who don't take God's Word seriously only see darkness and gloom around them, but those who do take God's Word seriously have seen the Light—who is Jesus Christ: *Consult God's instruction and the testimony of warning. If anyone does not speak according to this word, they have no light of dawn. Distressed and hungry, they will roam through the land; when they are famished, they will become enraged and, looking upward, will curse their king and their God. Then they will look toward the earth and see only distress and darkness and fearful gloom, and they will be thrust into utter darkness. Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress. In the past he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the future he will honour Galilee of the nations, by the Way of the Sea, beyond the Jordan—The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned… For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this.*[Is.8:20-9:7] God's glory has risen upon us: *Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD rises upon you. See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples, but the LORD rises upon you and his glory appears over you.*[Is.60:1-2] Our salvation is a salvation of light and glory *Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all nations: a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel.*[Lk.2:29-32]

So what does the Bible say about "*saints*"—about "*holy*" people? At the end of December we looked at the Church in Corinth and said that it was probably the most charismatic of all the early Churches. The Church was birthed in great power and with signs and wonders being the norm: *I always thank my God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus. For in him you have been enriched in every way—with all kinds of speech and with all knowledge— God thus confirming our testimony about Christ among you. Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed.*[1Cor.1:4-7] *And so it was with me, brothers and sisters. When I came to you, I did not come with eloquence or human wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing*

while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. I came to you in weakness with great fear and trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on human wisdom, but on God's power.[1Cor.2:1-5] Although the Church members at Corinth spoke in tongues and prophesied, they were not spiritual! *Brothers, I could not address you as spiritual but as worldly—mere infants in Christ. I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready. You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarrelling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere men? For when one says, "I follow Paul," and another, "I follow Apollos," are you not mere men?*[1Cor.3:1-4] Spirituality is being in harmony with God, not being charismatic! Nevertheless, although Paul refused to call them spiritual, he did address them as "saints": *To the church of God at Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called as saints, with all those in every place who call on the name of Jesus Christ our Lord — both their Lord and ours.*[1Cor.1:2]

Sainthood is not an attainment—it is the status of all of who have been born again. When God spoke light into our hearts, He dispelled darkness: *For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ.*[2Cor.4:6] We are now holy because we belong to God: *But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.*[1Pet.2:9-10] Under the Old Covenant, anything that touched the altar became holy: *For seven days make atonement for the altar and consecrate it. Then the altar will be most holy, and whatever touches it will be holy.*[Ex.29:37] The altar is the place of cleansing and worship within the Temple and under the New Covenant, we have another altar—the place where we are cleansed—the cross on which Jesus died to make us right with God: *Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. Do not be carried away by all kinds of strange teachings. It is good for our hearts to be strengthened by grace, not by eating ceremonial foods, which is of no benefit to those who do so. We have an altar from which those who minister at the tabernacle have no right to eat. The high priest carries the blood of animals into the Most Holy Place as a sin offering, but the bodies are burned outside the camp. And so Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood. Let us, then, go to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore. For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come. Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that openly profess his name. And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.*[Heb.13:8-16]

Our relationship with God is based Jesus' death—and because His death was effective, Jesus will never again die for our sins: *Just as people are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.*[Heb.9:27-28] By Jesus' death we have been made holy and righteous. *And so Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood.*[Heb.13:12] *God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith. He did this to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished— he did it to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.*[Rom.3:25-26] We are justified—we can say: "*it's just as if I had never sinned*". *But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! For if, while we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! Not only is this so, but we also boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.*[Rom.5:8-11] We are a holy nation and a holy temple: *Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple? God's Spirit lives in you. If anyone*

destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. God's temple is holy. And you are that temple.[1Cor.3:16-17] *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.*[1Pet.2:9] But we still need to match our nurture with our nature, living holy lives that are consistent with our calling: *He has saved us and called us to a holy life—not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.* [2Tit.1:9-10] *As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: "Be holy, because I am holy."*[1Pet.1:14-16]

So what would a day in the life of a saint look like? Well, if you are a Believer, it would look like any day of your life, because Believers are saints! However, we need to constantly work at living holy lives, lives that are dedicated to God and honour Him. And that is where our faith comes in because the goal of our faith is the salvation of our souls: *Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls.*[1Pet.1:8-9] We live by faith: *For we live by faith, not by sight.*[2Cor.5:7] Living by faith means that our trust in God is the dominant factor in our life—and trust results in harmony, peace and contentment. But this trust requires a continual re-setting of our spiritual compass. Our natural, physical, social and political environment is important but transient and temporary and so we need to focus on the eternal spiritual dimension that is unseen with our natural eyes. *So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.*[2Cor.4:18] But we must ensure that we form our opinions and views about spiritual matters from God's ideas, not from human ideas, from the Bible, not from philosophy. Of course, not all human ideas and philosophy is wrong but they don't take God into account. But we must also be careful that we don't take every "Christian" or Church teaching as being the same a God's teaching—that is why God gave us the Scriptures and the Holy Spirit so we can each read what God has really said. And God has also given us the Church, (Storehouse) where can bring our gifts, encouragements, praise, prayers and our questions and receive from God through the Holy Spirit led Church family. *What then shall we say, brothers and sisters? When you come together, each of you has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. Everything must be done so that the church may be built up.*[1Cor.14:26] When we come together in Jesus' Name, some beautiful happens: *I know that when we come together something beautiful will happen as we are encouraged by each other's faith.*[Rom.1:12] And God's wisdom is then displayed in our midst: *His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose that he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord. In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence.*[Eph.3:10-12]

Remember who we are: *We are His church, we are all God's own people, we all proclaim that He is King, He is King. Look and see the glory of the King, sense the presence of the Lord amongst His people. Feel Him fill the temple of our lives as He sits upon the throne of our praise.* Yes, all Believers are saints because God has made us holy —even the unspiritual Believers like those charismatic Christians in Corinth! So just keep living like the saint you are!

Questions

What is a "*saint*"?

Why does the Bible address unspiritual Believers (*like those in Corinth*) as "saints"?

What does it mean "*to live by faith*"? (*2Cor.5:7*)

Does academic study (*such as psychology, science, etc.*) have any value for Christians?

What should we expect to happen when we meet as Church?

Puritan Prayer. Bounty: You are the great and only Potentate; You have made summer and winter, day and night—each of these revolutions serves our welfare and is full of Your care and kindness. Your bounty is seen in the relations that train us, the laws that defend us, the homes that shelter us, the food that builds us, the raiment that comforts us, and the continuance of our health, senses, understanding, memory, affection and will. But as stars fade before the rising sun, You have eclipsed all these benefits in the wisdom and grace that purposed redemption by Jesus Your Son. Blessed be Your mercy through that One who is mighty, willing and able to save to the uttermost. Make us deeply sensible of our need of His saving grace, of His blood that cleanses and of the rest He has promised—that He imputes to us His righteousness which justifies the guilty, giving us a title to eternal life and possession of the Spirit.
Psalm 127 Unless the LORD builds the house, the builders labour in vain. Unless the LORD watches over the city, the guards stand watch in vain. In vain you rise early and stay up late, toiling for food to eat—for he grants sleep to those he loves. Children are a heritage from the LORD, offspring a reward from him. Like arrows in the hands of a warrior are children born in one's youth. Blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them. They will not be put to shame when they contend with their opponents in court.

Sunday 18th January Ps.48

The glory of the New Covenant Temple.

Son of man, describe to the people of Israel the Temple I have shown you, so they will be ashamed of all their sins. Let them study its plan, and they will be ashamed of what they have done. Describe to them all the specifications of the Temple–including its entrances and exits–and everything else about it. Tell them about its decrees and laws. Write down all these specifications and decrees as they watch so they will be sure to remember and follow them. And this is the basic law of the Temple: absolute holiness! The entire top of the mountain where the Temple is built is holy. Yes, this is the basic law of the Temple.[Ezek.43:10-12]
Our theme for 2026 is God's Glory and during January we are looking at the implications of God's "*glory shining all around*" (as the Shepherds experienced at Jesus' nativity). Moses was able to see God's glory when he was hidden in the cleft of a rock. *And the LORD said, "I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the LORD, in your presence. I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. But," he said, "you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live." Then the LORD said, "There is a place near me where you may stand on a rock. When my glory passes by, I will put you in a cleft in the rock and cover you with my hand until I have passed by. Then I will remove my hand and you will see my back; but my face must not be seen."*[Ex.33:19-23] As with all the history in the OT, this event was written down for us to learn more about our Salvation through our Saviour. The Rock represents Jesus: *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. Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them; their bodies were scattered in the wilderness. Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did.*[1Cor.10:1-6] When Moses hit the rock, water flowed out: *I will stand there before you by the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it for the people to drink." So Moses did this in the sight of the elders of Israel.*[Ex.17:6] When Jesus was "*hit*" (*i.e.* died), a different water was released—the Holy Spirit: *On the last and greatest day of the festival, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them." By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive. Up to that time the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified.*[Jn.7:37-39] *But I tell you I am going to do what*

is best for you. This is why I am going away. The Holy Spirit [Friend, Encourager, Advocate, Counsellor] cannot come to help you until I leave. But after I am gone, I will send the Spirit to you. The Spirit will come and show the people of this world the truth about sin and God's justice and the judgment.[Jn 16:7-8] We can only experience God's glory when we are hiding in the security of Jesus and the result of His substitutionary death on the cross: *My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.*[1Jn.2:1-2]

The OT Tabernacle, and later the Temple, was where God met with His people. It was a holy place and there were strict regulations on how to approach God because God's glory (presence) was there. Moses' face shone with God's glory: *When Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the two tablets of the covenant law in his hands, he was not aware that his face was radiant because he had spoken with the LORD. When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, his face was radiant, and they were afraid to come near him... When Moses finished speaking to them, he put a veil over his face. But whenever he entered the LORD's presence to speak with him, he removed the veil until he came out. And when he came out and told the Israelites what he had been commanded, they saw that his face was radiant. Then Moses would put the veil back over his face until he went in to speak with the LORD.*[Ex.34:29-35] When Soloman dedicated the 1st Temple, God's glory filled the building: *When Solomon finished praying, fire came down from heaven and consumed the burnt offering and the sacrifices, and the glory of the LORD filled the temple. The priests could not enter the temple of the LORD because the glory of the LORD filled it. When all the Israelites saw the fire coming down and the glory of the LORD above the temple, they knelt on the pavement with their faces to the ground, and they worshiped and gave thanks to the LORD, saying, "He is good; his love endures forever."*[2Chron.7:1-3] Although Israel was God's Chosen People and a Holy Nation, they constantly rebelled against God and as a result were oppressed by enemies, with many being taken into captivity to Babylon. Ezekiel was one of these in Exile and was in Babylon when God spoke to him through a prophetic vision about God's Glory (that is the presence and persona of God). Because of the great idolatry of those people remaining in Israel and especially the priests who were at the Temple, God's glory departed from the Temple. *He said to me, "Son of man, have you seen what the elders of Israel are doing in the darkness, each at the shrine of his own idol? They say, 'The LORD does not see us; the LORD has forsaken the land.' " Again, he said, "You will see them doing things that are even more detestable."*[Ezek.8:12-13] *Then the glory of the LORD departed from over the threshold of the temple and stopped above the cherubim. While I watched, the cherubim spread their wings and rose from the ground, and as they went, the wheels went with them. They stopped at the entrance of the east gate of the LORD's house, and the glory of the God of Israel was above them.*[Ezek.10:18-19] But later God showed Ezekiel that His glory would return to the Temple: *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. The vision I saw was like the vision I had seen when he came to destroy the city and like the visions I had seen by the Kebar River, and I fell facedown. The glory of the LORD entered the temple through the gate facing east. Then the Spirit lifted me up and brought me into the inner court, and the glory of the LORD filled the temple* [Ezek.43:1-5] God said that when His Glory returned to the Temple, His people would never again defile His holy Name: *While the man was standing beside me, I heard someone speaking to me from inside the temple. He said: "Son of man, this is the place of my throne and the place for the soles of my feet. This is where I will live among the Israelites forever. The people of Israel will never again defile my holy name—neither they nor their kings—by their prostitution and the funeral offerings for their kings at their death.*[Ezek.43:6-7] But the natural Israel did continue to defile God's Name—and eventually crucified Jesus Christ, God's Son. No wonder God called Jerusalem "*Sodom and Egypt*": *Now when they have finished their testimony, the beast that comes up from the Abyss will attack them, and overpower and kill them. Their bodies will lie in the public square of the great city—which is figuratively called Sodom and Egypt—where*

also their Lord was crucified.[Rev.11:7-8] And also "*Babylon*" and "*Prostitute*": *A second angel followed and said, " 'Fallen! Fallen is Babylon the Great,' which made all the nations drink the maddening wine of her adulteries."*[Rev.14:8] *Then the angel carried me away in the Spirit into a wilderness. There I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast that was covered with blasphemous names and had seven heads and ten horns. The woman was dressed in purple and scarlet, and was glittering with gold, precious stones and pearls. She held a golden cup in her hand, filled with abominable things and the filth of her adulteries. The name written on her forehead was a mystery: BABYLON THE GREAT THE MOTHER OF PROSTITUTES AND OF THE ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH. I saw that the woman was drunk with the blood of God's holy people, the blood of those who bore testimony to Jesus. When I saw her, I was greatly astonished.*[Rev.17:3-6] And so Ezekiel's vision was not of God's glory returning the physical Temple in Jerusalem but of God's glory returning to the spiritual Temple in the heavenly Jerusalem—the real Temple made up of Believers: *But you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the Judge of all, to the spirits of the righteous made perfect.*[Heb.12:22-23] *For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the slave woman and the other by the free woman. His son by the slave woman was born according to the flesh, but his son by the free woman was born as the result of a divine promise. These things are being taken figuratively: The women represent two covenants. One covenant is from Mount Sinai and bears children who are to be slaves: This is Hagar. Now Hagar stands for Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present city of Jerusalem, because she is in slavery with her children. But the Jerusalem that is above is free, and she is our mother.*[Gal.4:22-26] *One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues came and said to me, "Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb." And he carried me away in the Spirit to a mountain great and high, and showed me the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. It shone with the glory of God, and its brilliance was like that of a very precious jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal.*[Rev.21:9-11] God's glory has returned to His Temple: *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. The vision I saw was like the vision I had seen when he came to destroy the city and like the visions I had seen by the Kebar River, and I fell facedown. The glory of the LORD entered the temple through the gate facing east. Then the Spirit lifted me up and brought me into the inner court, and the glory of the LORD filled the temple.*[Ezek.43:1-5] This also what Isaiah prophesied: *Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD rises upon you. See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples, but the LORD rises upon you and his glory appears over you.*[Is.60:1-2] God's Temple is now the Church (that is you and me) and it was to this Temple that God's glory returned. This happened when Jesus sent the Holy Spirit from heaven at Pentecost and so we experience God's glory now here on earth, not just in heaven sometime in the future: *Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.*[Eph.3:20-21] In his vision, Ezekiel was told to describe the re-purposed Temple to the people of Israel so they would be ashamed of their sins. The Psalmist had a similar desire: *Within your temple, O God, we meditate on your unfailing love. Like your name, O God, your praise reaches to the ends of the earth; your right hand is filled with righteousness. Mount Zion rejoices, the villages of Judah are glad because of your judgments. Walk about Zion, go around her, count her towers, consider well her ramparts, view her citadels, that you may tell of them to the next generation. For this God is our God for ever and ever; he will be our guide even to the end.*[Ps.48:9-14]

The Temple was never meant to be an historical memorial or even a visitor centre but the place people can meet God—a worship centre where everyone participates in a personal relationship with God. We participate in the functions of the Temple, not by becoming a Jew and following Judaism (which is obsolete), or even by following a Church ritual, but by worshiping God in

Spirit and in truth—which is true worship. That's why we resist any Episcopalian rituals, including religious festivals and religious dress—they were types and shadows of the Old Covenant and we are worshippers under the New Covenant who have the fulfilment of those Old Covenant rituals in Jesus. *Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ. Do not let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you. Such a person also goes into great detail about what they have seen; they are puffed up with idle notions by their unspiritual mind. They have lost connection with the head, from whom the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow.*[Col.2:16-19] The foundation of our Temple is Jesus Christ and the teachings of the Apostles as recorded in the Scriptures (not teaching from Church tradition): *Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.*[Eph.2:19-22] And we are to build our lives on the only foundation that is safe and secure—Jesus Christ: *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. Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in your midst? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person; for God's temple is sacred, and you together are that temple.*[1Cor.3:9-17] Building our lives on the foundation of Jesus Christ requires listening to what God has said—and then doing what God has said: *Why do you call me, 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I say? As for everyone who comes to me and hears my words and puts them into practice, I will show you what they are like. They are like a man building a house, who dug down deep and laid the foundation on rock. When a flood came, the torrent struck that house but could not shake it, because it was well built. But the one who hears my words and does not put them into practice is like a man who built a house on the ground without a foundation. The moment the torrent struck that house, it collapsed and its destruction was complete.*[Lk.6:46-49] We have a sound Foundation to our Temple and we are constructing a sound building on that Foundation, so now let's switch the lights on and pull the curtains back! Let the glory shine out! Then we will truly see God's "*glory shining all around*". Jesus said: *"No one lights a lamp and hides it in a clay jar or puts it under a bed. Instead, they put it on a stand, so that those who come in can see the light. For there is nothing hidden that will not be disclosed, and nothing concealed that will not be known or brought out into the open. Therefore consider carefully how you listen. Whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what they think they have will be taken from them." Now Jesus' mother and brothers came to see him, but they were not able to get near him because of the crowd. Someone told him, "Your mother and brothers are standing outside, wanting to see you." He replied, "My mother and brothers are those who hear God's word and put it into practice."*[Lk.8:16-21]

Questions

In Ezekiels' vision, why did God's glory depart from the Temple?
Why was Ezekiel told to describe the specifications of the Temple?
Which Temple did God's glory return to? (*Explain your answer*)
What is the significance of the River that flowed out of that Temple? (*Ezekiel 47*)
How do we build God's Temple today?

Should Christians follow any religious rituals?
What role does God's glory have in our life?
Puritan Prayer. Bounty: Blessed be Your mercy through that One who is mighty, willing and able to save to the uttermost. Make us deeply sensible of our need of His saving grace, of His blood that cleanses and of the rest He has promised—that He imputes to us His righteousness which justifies the guilty, giving us a title to eternal life and possession of the Spirit. May we love the freeness of salvation and joy in its holiness. Give us faith to grasp Your promises that are our hope, that provide for every exigency and that prevent every evil. Keep our hearts from straying after forbidden pleasures and may Your will bind all our wishes. Let us live out of the world as to its spirit, maxim and manners, but live in it as the sphere of our action and usefulness. May we be alive to every call of duty, accepting without question Your determination of our circumstances and our service.
Psalm 48: Great is the LORD, and most worthy of praise, in the city of our God, his holy mountain. Beautiful in its loftiness, the joy of the whole earth, like the heights of Zaphon is Mount Zion, the city of the Great King. God is in her citadels; he has shown himself to be her fortress. When the kings joined forces, when they advanced together, they saw her and were astounded; they fled in terror. Trembling seized them there, pain like that of a woman in labour. You destroyed them like ships of Tarshish shattered by an east wind. As we have heard, so we have seen in the city of the LORD Almighty, in the city of our God: God makes her secure forever. Within your temple, O God, we meditate on your unfailing love. Like your name, O God, your praise reaches to the ends of the earth; your right hand is filled with righteousness. Mount Zion rejoices, the villages of Judah are glad because of your judgments. Walk about Zion, go around her, count her towers, consider well her ramparts, view her citadels, that you may tell of them to the next generation. For this God is our God for ever and ever; he will be our guide even to the end.

Sunday 25th January Ps.128

And this is the basic law of the Temple: absolute holiness… Yes, this is the basic law of the Temple.[Ezek.43:12]
All of God's promises—and especially our salvation promise—are fulfilled in Jesus Christ but they are also only available to us in Jesus Christ: *Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and he is the one whom Timothy, Silas, and I have preached to you—and he has never been both a "yes" and a "no." He has always been and always will be for us a resounding "YES!" For all of God's promises find their "yes" of fulfilment in him. And as his "yes" and our "amen" ascend to God, we bring him glory!*[2Cor.1:19-20] If we don't understand this then much of the Bible becomes irrelevant to us because we think that it is talking about someone else! **God's positive promises are to us Believers**. God has made other promises (such as judgement with eternal consequences) that are for the unbeliever, but all of God's "*yes*" promises are ours in Christ: *For no matter how many promises God has made, they are "Yes" in Christ.*
Last week we looked at God's glory returning to the Temple and said that Isaiah's prophecy of God's glory rising upon us has been fulfilled in us Believers—the Church: *Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD rises upon you. See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples, but the LORD rises upon you and his glory appears over you.*[Is.60:1-2] *to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.*[Eph.3:21] Although God's glory left the physical Temple in Jerusalem, it returned to the New Covenant Temple of Believers. We are God's Temple made with living stones because the old Temple made with physical stones is now obsolete and has been demolished. There will never be a physical Temple again because at its best, it was only a copy of the spiritual Temple, and at its worst (according to Jesus) was a "*den of robbers*".[Matt.21:13] The Temple of the New Covenant is people and so there is

no need for a physical place: *I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendour into it. On no day will its gates ever be shut, for there will be no night there. The glory and honour of the nations will be brought into it. Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life.*[Rev.21:22-27] Of course all the time we have a physical body we need a physical place where we can meet together, but it is not our meeting place that is the Temple of God—it is Believers. We are the Temple of God!

When Ezekiel saw the Glory of God return to the Temple, there were specific instructions and rules for that Temple—and the overriding rule was holiness: *And this is the basic law of the Temple: absolute holiness… Yes, this is the basic law of the Temple.*[Ezek.43:12] Christian holiness or "*righteousness*" is the state of being right with God through being born-again into God's family. *But to all who believed him and accepted him, he gave the right to become children of God. They are reborn–not with a physical birth resulting from human passion or plan, but a birth that comes from God.*[Jn.1:12-13] We are not "*holy"* or right with God because we live a perfect life but because our nature is "*righteous*" and that means we are holy by nature. Zechariah foresaw this when he prophesied that a time was coming when everything would be dedicated to God and called holy: *On that day HOLY TO THE LORD will be inscribed on the bells of the horses, and the cooking pots in the LORD's house will be like the sacred bowls in front of the altar. Every pot in Jerusalem and Judah will be holy to the LORD Almighty, and all who come to sacrifice will take some of the pots and cook in them. And on that day there will no longer be a Canaanite in the house of the LORD Almighty.*[Zech.14:20-21] Nevertheless, even though we have a holy nature, we have a responsibility to live a "*holy*" life: *But now you must be holy in everything you do, just as God who chose you is holy. For the Scriptures say, "You must be holy because I am holy."*[1Pet.1:15-16] *Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one falls short of the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many.*[Heb.12:14-15] In other words, God expects us to live our lives in a way that honours Him, not only by doing the right things but, more importantly by having the same mindset as God. Because Jesus is the exact representation of God the Father, we should have the same mindset as Jesus: *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.*[Phil.2:1-6]

Holiness is not found in the absence of enjoyment but in the expression of joy: *Nehemiah said, "Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength." The Levites calmed all the people, saying, "Be still, for this is a holy day. Do not grieve." Then all the people went away to eat and drink, to send portions of food and to celebrate with great joy, because they now understood the words that had been made known to them.*[Neh.8:10-12] *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. Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.*[Phil.4:4-9] The fruit of the Spirit is the character of the Holy Spirit and so these qualities are also the character of God the Father and

of Jesus—and these qualities should also be our character too: *But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other.*[Gal.5:22-26] *Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.*[Matt.11:28-30] These personality qualities are basic to the Kingdom of God: *God's kingdom has nothing to do with eating or drinking. It is a matter of being right with God. It brings the peace and joy the Holy Spirit gives. Those who serve Christ in this way are pleasing to God. They are pleasing to people too. So let us do all we can to live in peace. And let us work hard to build each other up.*[Rom.14:17-19]

God's holiness is majestic, awesome and full of splendour: *Who among the gods is like you, LORD? After consulting the people, Jehoshaphat appointed men to sing to the LORD and to praise him for the splendour of his holiness as they went out at the head of the army, saying: "Give thanks to the LORD, for his love endures forever." As they began to sing and praise, the LORD set ambushes against the men of Ammon and Moab and Mount Seir who were invading Judah, and they were defeated.*[2Chron.20:21-22] *Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name; bring an offering and come before him. Worship the LORD in the splendour of his holiness.*[1Chron.16:29] And so, when we live holy lives, we are raised into the heavenly atmosphere—we are elevated us above the dirt, despondency and depression of the world's values, even though we are physically still here on earth! *God said, "Let light shine out of darkness." He made his light shine in our hearts. It shows us the light of God's glory in the face of Christ. Treasure is kept in clay jars. In the same way, we have the treasure of the good news in these earthly bodies of ours. That shows that the mighty power of the good news comes from God. It doesn't come from us. We are pushed hard from all sides. But we are not beaten down. We are bewildered. But that doesn't make us lose hope. Others make us suffer. But God does not desert us. We are knocked down. But we are not knocked out. We always carry around the death of Jesus in our bodies. In that way, the life of Jesus can be shown in our bodies.*[2Cor.4:6-10] *The people of the world believe certain basic things. You died with Christ as far as things like that are concerned. So why do you act as if you still belong to the world? Here are the rules you follow. "Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!" Rules like that are all going to die out as time goes by. They are only based on human rules and teachings. It is true that those rules seem wise. Because of them, people give themselves over to their own kind of worship. They pretend they aren't proud. They treat their bodies very badly. But rules like that don't help. They don't stop people from chasing after sinful pleasures. You have been raised up with Christ. So think about things that are in heaven. That is where Christ is. He is sitting at God's right hand. Think about things that are in heaven. Don't think about things that are on earth.*[Col.2:20-3:2]

The devil was relegated to the dust: *So the LORD God said to the serpent, "Because you have done this, "Cursed are you above all livestock and all wild animals! You will crawl on your belly and you will eat dust all the days of your life.*[Gen.3:14] We are not cursed to live in the dirt of this world but in the heavenly realms with Christ:. *All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath. But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.*[Eph.2:3-7] *Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, love for the Father is not in them. For everything in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but whoever does the will of God lives forever.*[1Jn 2:15-17] Some people live an animal life instead of a holy life: *These individuals are nothing but brute beasts—irrational creatures, born in the wild to be caught and destroyed—and they will perish like beasts. They are professional insulters, who slander whatever they don't*

understand, and in their destruction they will be destroyed. For all the evil they have done will come crashing down on them. They consider it their great pleasure to carouse in broad daylight. When they come to your love feasts they are but stains and blemishes, revelling in their deceptions as they feast with you. They are addicted to adultery, with eyes that are insatiable, with sins that never end. They seduce the vulnerable and are experts in their greed—they are but children of a curse![2Pet.2:12-14] But we are better than the basic animal life of natural creation because we now belong to God and are of the new creation. *Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation.*[2Cor.5:17-19] There are people, even Christians, who only see the darkness of this world's kingdom instead of living in the light of God's kingdom—but we are different: *"The people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned." From that time on Jesus began to preach, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."*[Matt.4:16-17] *You, LORD, keep my lamp burning; my God turns my darkness into light.*[Ps.18:28] *Then Jesus told them, "You are going to have the light just a little while longer. Walk while you have the light, before darkness overtakes you. Whoever walks in the dark does not know where they are going. Believe in the light while you have the light, so that you may become children of light".*[Jn.12:35-36] *For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) and find out what pleases the Lord. Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them. It is shameful even to mention what the disobedient do in secret. But everything exposed by the light becomes visible—and everything that is illuminated becomes a light. This is why it is said: "Wake up, sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you." Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is. Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.*[Eph.5:8-20] *No one lights a lamp and puts it in a place where it will be hidden, or under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, so that those who come in may see the light. Your eye is the lamp of your body. When your eyes are healthy, your whole body also is full of light. But when they are unhealthy, your body also is full of darkness. See to it, then, that the light within you is not darkness. Therefore, if your whole body is full of light, and no part of it dark, it will be just as full of light as when a lamp shines its light on you.*[Lk.11:33-36]

So let's live our life to the full, in the beauty of holiness because that is the only way to really live the Christian life—and it is the only way to live a truly happy, contented and joyful life too! *This day is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.*[Neh.8:10]

Questions

Why are we called the "Temple of God"?
Why is holiness the basic rule for God's Temple?
Why is it important for us to live clean and disciplined lives?
Is it possible to be a dirty or undisciplined Christian?
Why should we pay close attention to doctrine? (Doctrine is what we believe about God)

Puritan Prayer—The Giver: Creator, Upholder and Proprietor of all things, we cannot escape from Your presence and control, nor do we desire to do so. Our privilege is to be under the agency of Your Omnipotence, Righteousness, Wisdom, Patience, Mercy and Grace, for You are Love with more than parental affection. We admire Your Goodness and we stand in awe of Your Power and Your Purity. It is the discovery of Your Goodness alone that can banish our fear and allure us into Your Presence. We review our past guilt and are conscious of unworthiness. We bless You that Your steadfast Love and Attributes are essential to our happiness and hope. You have witnessed to us Your Grace and Mercy in the bounties of nature, in the fullness of Your Providence, in the revelations of Scripture, in the gift of Your Son, in the proclamation of the Gospel. Help us not only to receive Jesus but to walk in Him, to depend upon Him, to commune with Him and to follow Him as dear children—not yet perfect, but still pressing forward; not complaining of labour, but valuing rest; not murmuring under trials, but thankful for our state. And by so doing, let us silence the ignorance of foolish people.
Psalm 128: Blessed are all who fear the LORD, who walk in obedience to him. You will eat the fruit of your labour; blessings and prosperity will be yours. Your wife will be like a fruitful vine within your house; your children will be like olive shoots around your table. Yes, this will be the blessing for the man who fears the LORD. May the LORD bless you from Zion; may you see the prosperity of Jerusalem all the days of your life. May you live to see your children's children—peace be on Israel.

February:

God's Glory. *For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what they have done. Matthew 16:27*

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

Sunday 1st February Ps.129

Contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to God's holy people. Jude 3

Jude's Letter is one of the shortest books of the NT with only 624 words in the NIV (*619 words in 1984 NIV; 608 in KJV*)—only 3John, 2John and Philemon are shorter—nevertheless, the letter covers some very relevant and important issues. The theme of Jude's letter is a call to persevere in the historical faith and not to be distracted by false teachings—even when they look religious and have the appearance of being spiritual. Jude was a brother of Jesus and although some Churches teach that Mary was a perpetual virgin, the Bible refers to the brothers and sisters of Jesus and even names some of them: *Joseph… took Mary home as his wife. But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.*[Matt.1:24-25] *Coming to his hometown, [Jesus] began teaching the people in their synagogue, and they were amazed. "Where did this man get this wisdom and these miraculous powers?" they asked. "Isn't this the carpenter's son? Isn't his mother's name Mary, and aren't his brothers James, Joseph, Simon and Judas? Aren't all his sisters with us? Where then did this man get all these things?" And they took offense at him.*[Matt.13:53-57] Jude would have witnessed Jesus' 1st miracle at Cana: *On the third day a wedding took place at Cana in Galilee. Jesus' mother was there, and Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. When the wine was gone, Jesus' mother said to him, "They have no more wine." …What Jesus did here in Cana of Galilee was the first of the signs through which he revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him. After this he went down to Capernaum with his mother and brothers and his disciples. There they stayed for a few days.*[Jn.2:1-12] However, Jude, along with his brothers, didn't initially believe that Jesus was the Christ: *After this, Jesus went around in Galilee. He did not want to go about in Judea because the Jewish leaders there were looking for a way to kill him. But when the Jewish Festival of Tabernacles was near, Jesus' brothers said to him, "Leave Galilee and go to Judea, so that your disciples there may see the works you do. No one who wants to become a public figure acts in secret. Since you are doing these things, show yourself to the world." For even his own brothers did not believe in him.*[Jn.7:1-5] But after His resurrection, Jesus showed Himself to His brother James: *For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.*[1Cor.15:3-8] And it was this James who later became the leader of the Church in Jerusalem: *Then after three years, I went up to Jerusalem to get acquainted with Cephas and stayed with him fifteen days. I saw none of the other apostles—only James, the Lord's brother. I assure you before God that what I am writing you is no lie.*[Gal.1:18-20] (James, the brother of John was the second martyr mentioned in Acts: *It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them. He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword.*[Acts.12:1-2]) Two of Jesus' brothers, James and Jude contributed to our Scripture. *James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.*[Jas.1:1] *Jude, a servant of Jesus Christ and a brother of James, To those who have been called, who are loved in God the Father and kept for Jesus Christ.*[Jude:1]

Jude wrote his letter to encourage his readers to keep the faith and not get distracted with counterfeit religion that looked "*spiritual*" but denied Jesus' deity and authority. *Dear friends,*

although I was very eager to write to you about the salvation we share, I felt compelled to write and urge you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to God's holy people. For certain individuals whose condemnation was written about long ago have secretly slipped in among you. They are ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into a license for immorality and deny Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord.[Jude 3-4] Jude references his plea to stay true to the historical faith with examples from Scripture. *Though you already know all this, I want to remind you that the Lord at one time delivered his people out of Egypt, but later destroyed those who did not believe. And the angels who did not keep their positions of authority but abandoned their proper dwelling—these he has kept in darkness, bound with everlasting chains for judgment on the great Day. In a similar way, Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding towns gave themselves up to sexual immorality and perversion. They serve as an example of those who suffer the punishment of eternal fire.*[Jude 5-7] The early Disciples received their teaching directly from Jesus and so their doctrine was not distorted by superstition or tradition—it was *once for all entrusted to God's holy people.* Although Paul was converted after Jesus ascended to heaven, Jesus personally spoke to Paul: *Last of all, as to one untimely born, [Jesus] appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.*[1Cor.15:8-9] *For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread.*[1Cor.11:23] *But when God, who set me apart from my mother's womb and called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles, my immediate response was not to consult any human being. I did not go up to Jerusalem to see those who were apostles before I was, but I went into Arabia. Later I returned to Damascus.*[Gal.1:15-17] The Scriptures are a true and accurate record of God's revelation to us—Luke starts his Gospel by saying that he carefully researched his information: *Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.*[Lk.1:1-4] But we still need to study the Scriptures and be careful to base our faith, doctrine and theology only on Scripture. *Look to God's instructions and teachings! People who contradict his word are completely in the dark.*[Is.8:20] *Jesus replied, "You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God.*[Matt.22:29] God's Word is trustworthy: *May your unfailing love come to me, LORD, your salvation, according to your promise; then I can answer anyone who taunts me, for I trust in your word. Never take your word of truth from my mouth, for I have put my hope in your laws.*[Ps.119:41-43] *Sovereign LORD, you are God! Your covenant is trustworthy, and you have promised these good things to your servant.*[2Sam.7:28] Jesus affirmed that Scripture is God's Word and is true: *Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth.*[Jn.17:17] *We know that Scripture is always true.*[Jn.10:35] And it is because God's Word is trustworthy, that Jesus is also called "*the Word*": *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.*[Jn.1:1-5] Paul preached the Word of God: *So Paul stayed in Corinth for a year and a half, teaching them the word of God.*[Acts.18:11] And it is the Word of God that we preach too because the Word of God is all about Jesus. It is not surprising that there so many different sects and cults masquerading as "*Christian*" today when it was already happening in Jude's lifetime. Which is why Jude reminds that we should stay with the historical faith in Jesus God's Son and our Saviour, who is Sovereign and Lord. Judaism brought people to God through the Law but failed to change their hearts. The Law of Moses was good to convict people of sin—that is why it was given—but it was only temporary until Jesus came: *Why, then, was the law given? It was given alongside the promise to show people their sins. But the law was designed to last only until the coming of the child who was promised. God gave his law through angels to Moses, who was the*

mediator between God and the people. Now a mediator is helpful if more than one party must reach an agreement. But God, who is one, did not use a mediator when he gave his promise to Abraham. Is there a conflict, then, between God's law and God's promises? Absolutely not! If the law could give us new life, we could be made right with God by obeying it. But the Scriptures declare that we are all prisoners of sin, so we receive God's promise of freedom only by believing in Jesus Christ. Before the way of faith in Christ was available to us, we were placed under guard by the law. We were kept in protective custody, so to speak, until the way of faith was revealed. Let me put it another way. The law was our guardian until Christ came; it protected us until we could be made right with God through faith. And now that the way of faith has come, we no longer need the law as our guardian. For you are all children of God through faith in Christ Jesus. And all who have been united with Christ in baptism have put on Christ, like putting on new clothes.[Gal.3:19-27]
Until Jesus came, the Law was the best religion available but it could never cleanse people's conscience: *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.*[Heb.9:9-10] It is only by faith that we can please God: *And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.*[Heb.11:6] And faith in Jesus does cleanse our conscience: *How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!*[Heb.9:14]
Jude is emphatic that we must never lose sight of this historical faith in Jesus Christ because there are severe consequences to turning our backs on God's revealed religion. The Christian faith is not just about believing that Jesus is Lord—it is also about yielding to Jesus' Lordship by submitting to His authority and living by His rules. The people who were bringing deceptive teachings, received their "*revelations*" from dreams and visions and although they said they were from God, they were doing what the Bible said they shouldn't! *In the very same way, on the strength of their dreams these ungodly people pollute their own bodies, reject authority and heap abuse on celestial beings. But even the archangel Michael, when he was disputing with the devil about the body of Moses, did not himself dare to condemn him for slander but said, "The Lord rebuke you!" Yet these people slander whatever they do not understand, and the very things they do understand by instinct—as irrational animals do—will destroy them.*[Jude 8-10] This is why we need to be Bible-literate and actually <u>know</u> what God has really said, rather than knowing what someone else thinks God has said! With 2000 years of study and wisdom to draw on (including translations, concordances, dictionaries, *etc.*), it should be easy to find out what God has said—but academic study is not enough to understand spiritual matters. Of course we need to inform our mind but we also need to inform our spirit. Spiritual matters are understood by our spirit and unless we have the Holy Spirit within us, the spiritual truths cannot be understood: *God's Spirit has shown you everything. His Spirit finds out everything, even what is deep in the mind of God. You are the only one who knows what is in your own mind, and God's Spirit is the only one who knows what is in God's mind. But God has given us his Spirit. This is why we don't think the same way that the people of this world think. This is also why we can recognize the blessings God has given us. Every word we speak was taught to us by God's Spirit, not by human wisdom. And this same Spirit helps us teach spiritual things to spiritual people. This is why only someone who has God's Spirit can understand spiritual blessings. Anyone who doesn't have God's Spirit thinks these blessings are foolish. People who are guided by the Spirit can make all kinds of judgments, but they cannot be judged by others. The Scriptures ask, "Has anyone ever known the thoughts of the Lord or given him advice?" But we understand what Christ is thinking.*[1Cor.2:10-16]
Jude continues to explain that Jesus' first Disciples warned that scoffers and mockers would follow their own natural instincts (under the guise of religion) and try to divide and separate us:

But, dear friends, remember what the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ foretold. They said to you, "In the last times there will be scoffers who will follow their own ungodly desires." These are the people who divide you, who follow mere natural instincts and do not have the Spirit.[Jude 17-19] Be very careful of any teaching that brings doubt, division, or distress, especially if the person bringing it does not display the fruit of the Spirit. Remember the Church at Corinth—even though they were called very charismatic and were called "saints", Paul could not address them as spiritual! Spirituality is <u>being like Jesus</u> not saying that you are like Jesus! God's antidote to doubt, division, deception and even distress is to build ourselves up in the faith: *But you, dear friends, by building yourselves up in your most holy faith and praying in the Holy Spirit, keep yourselves in God's love as you wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to bring you to eternal life.* [Jude20-21] Being strong in our faith will cause us to be compassionate, gracious and merciful not arrogant or proud. Because we want others to enjoy the life and liberty that we have in Christ, we will try our hardest to help others escape from the mire of unbelief: *Be merciful to those who doubt; save others by snatching them from the fire; to others show mercy, mixed with fear—hating even the clothing stained by corrupted flesh.* [Jude22] But whoever and whatever we face, we need never despair or feel overwhelmed because God has the power and authority to keep us: *To him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy— to the only God our Saviour be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen.*[Jude 24-25] God will continue what He has started: *I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.*[Phil.1:3-6] And remember our verse from last month! *Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD rises upon you. See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples, but the LORD rises upon you and his glory appears over you.*[Is.60:1-2]

Questions

Why should we pay attention to the examples of Scripture?
When was God's final revelation given to us?
Does God still speak directly to us today?
What role does prophecy have in the Church?
Does God speak through dreams and visions today?
How can we know who has God's Spirit?
Why can we be confident that God will keep us?

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

Psalm 129: "They have greatly oppressed me from my youth," let Israel say: "they have greatly oppressed me from my youth, but they have not gained the victory over me. Ploughmen have ploughed my back and made their furrows long. But the LORD is righteous; he has cut me free from the cords of the wicked." May all who hate Zion be turned back in shame. May they be like grass on the roof, which withers before it can grow; a reaper cannot fill his hands with it, nor one who gathers fill his arms. May those who pass by not say to them, "The blessing of the LORD be on you; we bless you in the name of the LORD."

Sunday 8th February Ps.130

Contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to God's holy people. Jude 3

How much faith do you need for your miracle?

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

Faith is the core value of Christianity because without faith we cannot please God[Heb.11:6] and all that is not of faith is sin.[Rom.14:23] But what exactly is faith? **FAITH** is sometimes explained as **F**orsaking **A**ll **I** **T**rust **H**im and while that sounds simplistic, it does define the essence of faith—which is **Trust**. Trust, confidence, certainty, conviction, belief—these are synonyms of faith and help us understand what we mean by faith. But Christian faith is more than merely believing that God exists, or being confident that there is a God—Christian faith is a personal trust in Jesus Christ as Lord and what He has accomplished to redeem us. We must not only believe in God but also have an assurance that God will honour our faith—in other words, faith is an absolute confidence that God has made us righteous: *And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.*[Heb.11:6] *What does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness." …The words "it was credited to him" were written not for him alone, but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness—for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.*[Rom.4:3;23-25]

The first Christians were all Jews who worshipped God under the Old Covenant—which was God's prescribed religion. And so the early Christians thought that a person had become a Jew before they could become a Christian. It was when Cornelius invited Peter to talk about faith that he realised that someone could believe in Jesus without becoming a Jew.: *Talking with [Cornelius], Peter went inside and found a large gathering of people. He said to them: "You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with a Gentile or visit him. But God has shown me that I should not call any man impure or unclean… Then Peter began to speak: "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favouritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right. You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, telling the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all… [Jesus] commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."* [Acts.10:27-43] But Peter still struggled to relinquish the Old Covenant mindset and Paul publicly confronted him about this: *When Peter came to Antioch, I told him face to face that he was wrong. He used to eat with Gentile followers of the Lord, until James sent some Jewish followers. Peter was afraid of the Jews and soon stopped eating with Gentiles. He and the others hid their true feelings so well that even Barnabas was fooled. But when I saw they were not really obeying the truth that is in the good news, I corrected Peter in front of everyone and said: Peter, you are a Jew, but you live like a Gentile. So how can you force Gentiles to live like Jews? We are Jews by birth and are not sinners like Gentiles. But we know that God accepts only those who have faith in Jesus Christ. No one can please God by simply obeying the Law. So we put our faith in Christ Jesus, and God accepted us because of our faith.*[Gal.2:11-16]

Faith has always been essential to relate to God: *By faith Abel offered God a better sacrifice than Cain did. By faith he was commended as a righteous man, when God spoke well of his offerings. And by faith he still speaks, even though he is dead… By faith Enoch… By faith Noah… By faith Abraham…By faith Moses…*

And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets.[Heb.11] Although the Old Covenant involved performing certain rituals in a prescribed way, it was essentially a religion of faith—faith in the coming Messiah. But that Old Covenant is now obsolete because it has been replaced by the New Covenant, which is also a religion of faith—not faith is the coming Messiah, but faith in the Messiah who has already come! *But the ministry Jesus has received is as superior to theirs as the covenant of which he is mediator is superior to the old one, and it is founded on better promises. For if there had been nothing wrong with that first covenant, no place would have been sought for another. But God found fault with the people and said: "The time is coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they did not remain faithful to my covenant, and I turned away from them, declares the Lord. This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time, declares the Lord. I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will a man teach his neighbour, or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest. For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more." By calling this covenant "new," he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and aging will soon disappear.*[Heb.8:6-13] Jesus is that Messiah and He completely fulfilled the requirements of that Old Covenant so that we can enter into God's Kingdom—which is righteous, peace and joy: *For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.*[Rom.14:17]

The Chrisitan life is a life of **faith <u>in</u> Jesus**: *I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!*[Gal.2:20-21] Nowhere in the Bible are we ever told to have faith <u>*for*</u> things—whether healing, homes, money, or possessions (although there was a man at Lystra that had faith to be healed[Acts.14:9]). Instead we are told to have **faith <u>in</u> God**: *"Have <u>faith in God</u>," Jesus answered. "I tell you the truth, if anyone says to this mountain, 'Go, throw yourself into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart but believes that what he says will happen, it will be done for him.*[Mk.11:22-23] *The Lord's message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia—your <u>faith in God</u> has become known everywhere. Therefore we do not need to say anything about it.*[1Thess.1:8] Faith in God is one of the elementary teachings of Christianity: *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, and of <u>faith in God</u>, instruction about baptisms, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. And God permitting, we will do so.*[Heb.6:1-3] The word for "*leave*" is literally "*to send away*" as in divorce and emphasises that we should have so settled these basic teaching in our heart that we never have to question them again. Spiritual maturity is having a trust, confidence, certainty, conviction, and belief in God and in Jesus Christ. Christianity as the word suggests, is about trusting Jesus Christ, the Son of God: *Simon Peter answered, "<u>You are the Christ, the Son of the living God</u>." Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.*[Matt.16:16-18] *He then brought them out and asked, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" They replied, "<u>Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved</u>—you and your household." Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his household were baptized. The jailer brought them into his house and set a meal before them; he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God—he and his whole household.*[Acts.16:30-34] *Jesus answered, "The work of God is this: <u>to believe in the one he has sent</u>."*[Jn.6:29] *Then Jesus cried out, "<u>Whoever believes in me does not believe in me only, but in the one who sent me</u>. The one who looks at me is seeing the one who sent me.* [Jn.12:44-45]

"My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for <u>those who will believe in me</u> through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so <u>that the world may believe that you have sent me</u>.[Jn.17:20-21]

It is by faith that we are counted righteous by God: *When a man works, his pay is not considered a gift. It is owed to him. But things are different with God. He makes evil people right with himself. If people trust in him, their faith is accepted even though they do not work. Their faith makes them right with God. King David says the same thing. He tells us how blessed some people are. God makes those people right with himself. But they don't have to do anything in return. David says, "Blessed are those whose lawless acts are forgiven. Blessed are those whose sins are taken away. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord never counts against him."*[Rom.4:4-8] And it is a righteous person's prayer that is effective: *The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.*[Jas.5:16] *The LORD is far from the wicked, but he hears the prayer of the righteous.*[Prov.15:29] The Christian's prayer is not a battle, where we fight to overcome the devil's opposition or even wrestling with God in order to influence Him or get Him to change His mind. The Christian's prayer is communion with the Father; it is harmonizing our plans with His; it is pondering what His Word says about our ideas and conforming our concepts to His; it is harmonizing our spirits and emotions with His Holy Spirit and His Word; it is aligning our spirituality, our meditations, our concepts with the facts of Christ's redemption—with what and who He has made us to be and with what He has sent us to do as His representatives; it is absorbing His love so that we may witness of Christ more effectively in a despairing and confused world; it is worshipping Him for all that He is and for all that He has provided for humanity. When we petition God we petition Him as our Heavenly Father: *When you pray, don't be like the hypocrites who love to pray publicly on street corners and in the synagogues where everyone can see them. I tell you the truth, that is all the reward they will ever get. But when you pray, go away by yourself, shut the door behind you, and pray to your Father in private. Then your Father, who sees everything, will reward you. When you pray, don't babble on and on as people of other religions do. They think their prayers are answered merely by repeating their words again and again. Don't be like them, for your Father knows exactly what you need even before you ask him! Pray like this: Our Father in heaven, may your name be kept holy…* [Matt. 6:5-9] *You parents–if your children ask for a loaf of bread, do you give them a stone instead? Or if they ask for a fish, do you give them a snake? Of course not! So if you sinful people know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give good gifts to those who ask him.*[Matt.7:9-11]

Of course we need faith, but we need faith in God Himself not faith for God to do something for us. Although Jesus had used a real tree in His example of trusting in God, He obviously didn't expect His Disciples to move physical mountains by prayer: *"<u>Have faith in God</u>," Jesus answered. "Truly I tell you, if anyone says to this mountain, 'Go, throw yourself into the sea,' and does not doubt in their heart but believes that what they say will happen, it will be done for them. Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive them, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins."*[Mk.11:22-25] When it comes to living the Christian life, obtaining faith is not something we have to work at because God gives us faith. *And to another, the same Spirit gives the gift of faith.*[1Cor.12:9] Faith is not positive thinking or mind-over-matter but a gift from God. *For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you.*[Rom.12:3] Although we cannot make faith, we can place ourselves in a position to receive faith by hearing God's Word: *Consequently <u>faith comes from what is heard</u>, and what is heard comes through the preached <u>word of Christ</u>.*[Rom.10:17] There are degrees of faith for Believers—no faith;[Mk.4:40] little faith,[Matt.16:8] great faith.[Matt.8:10] And we can add to our faith. *For this very reason, make <u>every effort to add to your faith</u> 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 Savior Jesus Christ.[2Pet.1:5-11] And we are to build ourselves up in the faith through prayer: *Dear friends, build yourselves up in your most holy faith. Let the Holy Spirit guide and help you when you pray.*[Jude 20] If we don't keep the faith we will lose it—*i.e.* if we don't act upon God's Word, we will find it difficult to trust God: *Therefore consider carefully how you listen. Whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what they think they have will be taken from them. Now Jesus' mother and brothers came to see him, but they were not able to get near him because of the crowd. Someone told him, "Your mother and brothers are standing outside, wanting to see you." He replied, "My mother and brothers are those who hear God's word and put it into practice."*[Lk 8:18-21] *He replied, 'I tell you that to everyone who has, more will be given, but as for the one who has nothing, even what they have will be taken away. But those enemies of mine who did not want me to be king over them—bring them here and kill them in front of me.'*[Lk.19:26-27] When we keep the faith, *i.e.* we trust God, He keeps us in perfect peace: *Now open the gates to welcome the righteous, so that those who keep faith may enter in. You will keep the peace, a perfect peace, for all who trust in You, for those who dedicate their hearts and minds to You.*[Is.26:2-3] *Great peace have those who love your law, and nothing can make them stumble. I wait for your salvation, LORD, and I follow your commands.*[Ps.119:165-166] *So keep up your courage, men, for I have faith in God that it will happen just as he told me. Nevertheless, we must run aground on some island.*[Acts.27:25-26] But we don't need lots of faith—only living faith (which is why Jesus used seed as an illustration not sand!): *The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!" He replied, "If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it will obey you.*[Lk.17:5-6]

In one of his "*I was just thinking*" articles (available on our Church website), George Canty wrote: *It doesn't matter to God what we think about Him. You either believe or you don't. One time when God is put to the test is in healing meetings and in prayer. When people lose faith because God didn't do for them what seemed reasonable, they were testing God. In healing meetings, many come to try it out. If it doesn't happen, they either profess disappointment or are happy to 'prove' it doesn't work. The allegation is that the evangelist built up their hopes and then failed them. I don't believe this ever really happens. They had been testing God and God had not obliged. True faith is never disappointed, healing or no healing.* So let's keep trusting in God and let Him work His purposes out in our lives! *I cry out to God Most High, to God, who fulfils [his purpose] for me.*[Ps.57:2]

Questions

Define faith using biblical phrases
Define faith without using biblical phrases
What are the ingredients of faith?
How do we receive faith?
How can we grow our faith?
Can you have faith and still be anxious?

Puritan Prayer—Worship: Glorious God, It is the flame of my life to worship You, the crown and glory of my soul to adore You, my heavenly pleasure to approach You. Give me power by Your Spirit to help me worship now, that I may forget the world, be brought into fullness of life, be refreshed, comforted and blessed. Give me knowledge of Your goodness that I might not be over-awed by Your greatness. Give me Jesus, Son of Man, Son of God, that I might not be terrified but be drawn near with filial love and holy boldness. He is my Mediator, Brother, Interpreter, Branch, Daysman, Lamb—Him I glorify and in Him I am set on high. Crowns to give, I have none—but what You have given, I return, content to feel that everything is mine

when it is Yours, and the more fully mine when I have yielded it to You. Let me live wholly to my Saviour, free from distractions, from carking [*distressing*] care and from hindrances to the pursuit of the narrow way. I am pardoned through the blood of Jesus—give me a new sense of it and continue to pardon me by it. May I come every day to the fountain and every day be washed anew, that I may worship You always in spirit and truth.

Psalm 130:1-8: Out of the depths I cry to you, LORD; Lord, hear my voice. Let your ears be attentive to my cry for mercy. If you, LORD, kept a record of sins, Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness, so that we can, with reverence, serve you. I wait for the LORD, my whole being waits, and in his word I put my hope. I wait for the Lord more than watchmen wait for the morning, more than watchmen wait for the morning. Israel, put your hope in the LORD, for with the LORD is unfailing love and with him is full redemption. He himself will redeem Israel from all their sins.

Sunday 15th February Ps.131

I believe in miracles, for I believe in God! *You are the God who performs miracles; You display your power among the peoples. Ps.77:14*

Kathryn Khulman, who died 50 years ago this week (20th February 1976) was an American healing evangelist and it is purported that over 2 million people were healed under her ministry. The theme song for her Crusades and TV programmes was: *I believe in miracles, for I believe in God!*

Creation shows the power of God, there's glory all around,
And those who see must stand in awe, for miracles abound.
I believe in miracles, I've seen a soul set free,
Miraculous the change in one redeemed through Calvary;
I've seen the lily push its way up through the stubborn clod;
I believe in miracles, for I believe in God!

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

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

So what is a miracle?

A miracle is a direct intervention of God—something that God does that we can't do ourselves. Of course, not everything that happens without a natural explanation is necessarily a miracle from God! Some unexplained events are the result of coincidences or chance: *I have seen something else under the sun: The race is not to the swift or the battle to the strong, nor does food come to the wise or wealth to the brilliant or favour to the learned; but time and chance happen to them all [It is all decided by chance, by being in the right place at the right time; or God controls the timing of every event. He also controls how things turn out]. Moreover, no man knows when his hour will come.*[Eccl.9:11-12] Miracles are nearly impossible to prove scientifically because miracles are the direct intervention of God who is unseen and not restricted to the physical laws He installed into His creation. We need faith to understand God and faith is a spirit, which means it is activated in our spirit not our soul (mind): *It is written: "I believed; therefore I have spoken." Since we have that same spirit of faith, we also believe and therefore speak, because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you to himself.*[2Cor.4:13-14] But of all the miracles that God performs (other than the new birth) it is often the timing that is supernatural and most amazing. God is never "*just in time*" because His timing is always perfect. Some years ago I was given the book *"The Miracles Of Exodus"* by Colin Humphries, which researched the Exodus and concluded that although most of the

miraculous events were natural, it was God's timing that made them supernatural. Nevertheless, God does perform creative miracles—and although they are rare, they do still occur.

There are some Christians who believe that God no longer directly intervenes today and when the apostles died and scripture was completed, the miraculous gifts of the Holy Spirit ceased (they are called 'Cessationists'). But one of the basic beliefs of Christianity is that God is Eternal and does not change like shadows: *Every good and perfect gift is from God. It comes down from the Father. He created the heavenly lights. He does not change like shadows that move.*[Jas.1:17] God revealed Himself to Moses as the "*I Am*". This means that God is—He is the God of the now. *God replied 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 this to the Israelites: The LORD, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you. This is my name forever; this is how I am to be remembered in every generation.*[Ex.3:14-15] Time was created by God but like eternity, God is outside of the limits of time. *Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was, and who is to come.*[Rev 1:4] *And the twenty-four elders, who were seated on their thrones before God, fell on their faces and worshiped God, saying: "We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty, the One who is and who was, because you have taken your great power and have begun to reign.*[Rev.11:16-17] Everything has to have a beginning but logically there has to be something to start the beginning or there is still nothing! The Bible explains that God is that Beginning: *In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.*[Gen.1:1] *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.*[Jn.1:1-5] God is also the end as well as the Beginning: *He said to me: "It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To the thirsty I will give water without cost from the spring of the water of life.*[Rev.21:6] Because God is outside of time, He doesn't change: *God, who is enthroned from of old, who does not change—he will hear them and humble them, because they have no fear of God.*[Ps.55:19] *I the LORD do not change. So you, the descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed.*[Mal.3:6] *And it was not without an oath! Others became priests without any oath, but he became a priest with an oath when God said to him: "The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind: 'You are a priest forever.' " Because of this oath, Jesus has become the guarantor of a better covenant.*[Heb.7:20-22] *Don't be deceived, my dear brothers and sisters. Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created.*[Jas.1:16-18] And God's purposes don't change either—and God's purpose is to save mankind: *But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.*[2Pet.3:8-9] This salvation requires the greatest miracle of all—which is the rebirth our spirit. This is conversion, which being born-again and it is a spiritual new creation—something that no human can ever do. *Jesus replied: Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again… 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.*[Jn.3:3-6] *Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation.*[2Cor.5:17-18] Yes, conversion is the greatest miracle and requires God's power: *You are the God who performs miracles; You display your power among the peoples.*[Ps.77:14]

When the Roman Catholic Church assesses possible miracles, they always seek natural explanations first and only when no adequate natural cause can be found will they declare something miraculous. They state that "*miracles don't 'prove' faith—but they support it, encouraging believers to trust God more deeply.*" They also say that we need miracles *to renew faith when it grows cold.*

To encourage devotion to the sacraments and saints. To call attention to holiness in the modern world. To inspire conversion, especially among sceptics.

PERFECT TIMING

Thirteen years ago I had rheumatism in my ankle, knee and shoulder. I couldn't walk — only hop around and sometimes couldn't dress myself due to the inflammation in my shoulder. I was under treatment from the Rheumatologist, who said that I had to live with it as it wasn't clearing up. Our minister layed hands on me and prayed for healing, but 'nothing happened' We moved to Devon and on the day I had to walk into my new job, which was ten months after being prayed for, the rheumatism went! God's timing is so perfect.

Last year I developed a hernia, which became so painful I couldn't bend down. My doctor suggested I went into hospital the next day to receive surgical treatment. I talked to Jesus about it, and the hernia was healed. Within two days I was again lifting 2 cwt. logs and big heavy sheep without any pain.

Paul Fermor

Plymouth Christian Centre Church Magazine 1989

Augustine wrote: "*Miracles are not contrary to nature, but only contrary to what we know about nature.*" Ruth Heflin says: "*miraculous manifestations make people excited about going to Church, excited about sharing their faith, and excited about growing in faith so that they can do more for the Lord who obviously loves them so much*!" The thesis for my Master's degree, was "*The Effects of Signs, Wonders and Miracles on Faith throughout the History of the Christian Church*" (available on our Church website). My conclusion was that *miracles are not a sign of maturity nor of perfection—they simply display God's glory and love. You don't have to be a perfect person before God will shower you with Tokens of His Love. Miracles should make one 'feel good' about oneself and also 'feel good' about God too. The assurance that God is personally interested in you and loves you, will build faith and increase one's self-value. Miracles are thus a major contribution to developing faith in believers and to their sharing that faith with others.* The miracles, signs and wonders that we have seen are very difficult to prove to be a direct intervention of God but they can and should become a talking point from which we can share something about our faith. And when we share what we believe, we have a better understanding of God and all that He has for us: *I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith, so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ.* Phile.6 We have seen many miracles, signs and wonders in our previous Church in Somerset, in this Church here in Deal and in other countries too. People have had extraordinary experiences with God, including provision, protection, physical healing, emotional healing, oil appearing on hands and feet, uncontrollable laughing, falling into trances for long periods of time, unable to walk for hours—and I even had a tooth turn gold! But our focus in all of this, is to worship Jesus: *At this I fell at [the angel's] feet to worship him. But he said to me, "Don't do that! I am a fellow servant with you and with your brothers and sisters who hold to the testimony of Jesus. Worship God! For it is the Spirit of prophecy who bears testimony to Jesus."* Rev.19:10

Although we can and should expect miracles, we must never lose sight of their purpose, which is to turn our attention on the Miracle worker—Jesus Christ. And if we really appreciate God's display of love to us, we will always want to give Him the glory—which will be evidenced in the way we express our gratitude and appreciation to God and the way we talk to others about what God has done. *On his way to Jerusalem Jesus passed through the border region between Samaria and Galilee. As he entered one village, ten men approached him, but they kept their distance, for they were lepers. They shouted to him, "Mighty Lord, our wonderful Master! Won't you have mercy on us and heal us?" When Jesus stopped to look at them, he spoke these words: "Go to be examined by the Jewish priests." They set off,*

and they were healed while walking along the way. One of them, a Samaritan, when he discovered that he was completely healed, turned back to find Jesus, shouting out joyous praises and glorifying God. When he found Jesus, he fell down at his feet and thanked him over and over, saying to him, "You are the Messiah." "So where are the other nine?" Jesus asked. "Weren't there ten who were healed? They all refused to return to give thanks and give glory to God except you, a foreigner from Samaria?" Then Jesus said to the healed man lying at his feet, "Arise and go. It was your faith that brought you salvation and made you whole."Lk.17:11-19

Questions

Are miracles important today?
Does it matter where our help comes from?
How important is it to check out what people believe?
Should we allow just anyone to pray for us?
What role does the Church have in our spiritual security?
Can we do anything to help miracles happen?
Can we do anything to hinder miracles from happening?

Puritan Prayer—A Disciple's Renewal: O my Saviour, help me. I am too often slow to learn, too prone to forget, and too often in the foothills when I should be on the heights. It is my chief joy to study You, to meditate on You and to gaze on You; to sit at Your feet like Mary; to lean against You like John; to appeal to Your love like Peter; to count all things as loss like Paul. Give me increase and progress in grace, so that there may be more decision in my character, more vigour in my purposes, more elevation in my life, more fervour in my devotion and more constancy in my zeal. When I have position in the world, keep me from making the world my position. May I never seek in the creature what can be found only in the Creator. Let not faith cease from seeking You until it vanishes into sight. Ride forth in me, O King of kings and Lord of lords, that I may live victoriously—and in victory, attain my end.

Psalm 131:1-3: My heart is not proud, LORD, my eyes are not haughty; I do not concern myself with great matters or things too wonderful for me. But I have calmed and quieted myself, I am like a weaned child with its mother; like a weaned child I am content. Israel, put your hope in the LORD both now and forevermore.

Sunday 22nd February Ps.132

Are you are Deist or a Theist?

The words "*deist*" and "*theist*" both have the same literal meaning, which is someone who believes in a "*god*"—deist comes from the Latin *deus* meaning "*god*" and theist comes from the Greek *theos* meaning "*god*". But these terms have come to describe people who have very different beliefs about God. Deists believe in a creator God who established the universe but does not intervene in human affairs or the natural order—and so of course, they reject miracles and prophecies, whereas theists believe in a personal God who created the universe and actively participates in human affairs, often through miracles or supernatural revelation. There also 2 other types of belief about "*god*": *agnostics* who aren't sure if there is a "*god*" and *atheists* who deny that there is any "*god*" at all! Deism became prominent in the 17th and 18th centuries, particularly in Europe where it was closely associated with thinkers of the Enlightenment who challenged orthodox religious authority—people such as Voltaire, Thomas Paine, John Locke and Sir Isaac Newton. In the United States, many Founding Fathers, including Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin, were influenced by Deist ideas, advocating for a vision of God compatible with reason and liberty. And the term "*deist*" would describe many traditional churchgoers today—they like the idea of a deity who is sort of in charge, but they resist any attempt to make themselves accountable to their "*god*" so they can live as they please with impunity!

But Christianity is much more than believing in a "*god*"—Christianity is a personal belief in Jesus Christ as the Son of God, who made peace between mankind and God through His substitutionary death on the cross: *[Jesus'] purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.*[Eph.2:15-18] *If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved. As Scripture says, "Anyone who believes in him will never be put to shame."*[Rom.10:9-11] The validity of Jesus' deity (and also of our salvation) is His 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… And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead... if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. 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.*[1Cor.15:3-22]

Heresies and errors always contain some truth or else they could never attract any support—who in their right mind would intentionally believe a lie? The deists are correct in believing that God established this universe to function without any visible intervention. At creation, God set in motion laws and principles that sustains the *status quo*. Gravity keeps the planets in place and provides regular seasons, ocean tides, days and nights, *etc. As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night will never cease.*[Gen.8:22] God has also set in motion the laws of reproduction which ensures that the world and its Eco structure continues. *Then God said, "Let the land produce vegetation: seed-bearing plants and trees on the land that bear fruit with seed in it, according to their various kinds." And it was so. The land produced vegetation: plants bearing seed according to their kinds and trees bearing fruit with seed in it according to their kinds. And God saw that it was good.*[Gen.1:11-12] But God didn't just create the world and leave it to its own devices—this world is sustained by God's Word, Jesus Christ. *The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.*[Heb.1:3] *The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy.*[Col.1:15-18] *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind.*[Jn.1:1-4] Even though God sustains this world, He has delegated the day-to-day care of this world to mankind: *So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.*[Gen.1:27-28] Work is a God-ordained activity and intrinsically linked with worship. Before sin entered the world, Adam was told to work the Garden: *The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.*[Gen.2:15] But that same word used for work is also translated "*worship*": *And God said, "I will be with you. And this will be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: When you have brought the people out*

of Egypt, you will worship God on this mountain."[Ex.3:12] Christians are people follow Christ and have dedicated their whole life to serving Him—and so, whether we are working in secular employment or simply doing our daily chores, we are serving God and we should see our work as an act of worship: *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… Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything; and do it, not only when their eye is on you and to curry their favour, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord. Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving.*[Col.3:17-24] *So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.*[1Cor.10:31] *Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms. If anyone speaks, they should do so as one who speaks the very words of God. If anyone serves, they should do so with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen.*[1Pet.4:10-11]

Last week we looked at God working miracles and said that even when God uses natural events, it is His perfect timing that makes His intervention miraculous. People who don't believe God directly intervenes today have relegated God to history instead of honouring Him as the "I AM" God who never changes: *I AM WHO I AM… This is my name forever; this is how I am to be remembered in every generation.*[Ex.3:14-15] And the cessationist Christians who reject the miraculous gifts of the Holy Spirit have divided God's Kingdom into time dispensations instead of an everlasting Kingdom: *In the time of those kings, the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed, nor will it be left to another people. It will crush all those kingdoms and bring them to an end, but it will itself endure forever. This is the meaning of the vision of the rock cut out of a mountain, but not by human hands—a rock that broke the iron, the bronze, the clay, the silver and the gold to pieces. The great God has shown the king what will take place in the future. The dream is true and its interpretation is trustworthy.*[Dan.2:44-45] Of course there is the general grace of God's provision and protection that is common to all mankind—that is what keeps the world functioning and without God's intervention, we would die: *When you hide your face, they are terrified; when you take away their breath, they die and return to the dust. When you send your Spirit, they are created, and you renew the face of the ground. May the glory of the LORD endure forever; may the LORD rejoice in his works.*[Ps.104:29-31] But there is also the specific provision and protection for people that comes from their personal relationship with their heavenly Father: *The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God— children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.*[Jn.1:9-13] *When you pray, don't babble on and on as people of other religions do. They think their prayers are answered merely by repeating their words again and again. Don't be like them, for your Father knows exactly what you need even before you ask him! Pray like this: Our Father in heaven, may your name be kept holy. May your Kingdom come soon. May your will be done on earth, as it is in heaven.*[Matt.6:7-10] We don't need to go aimlessly through life without any purpose or direction—God has delivered us from that kind of existence! *Since you call on a Father who judges each person's work impartially, live out your time as foreigners here in reverent fear. For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your ancestors, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect.*[1Pet.1:17-19] We can expect God to directly intervene in our life, both out of His sovereign love and also in response to our faith. God does answer the prayers of Believers. *I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life. This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us—whatever we ask—we know that we have*

what we asked of him.[1Jn.5:13-15] Of course, we are not so naïve as to think that God will gives us anything and everything we ask for but those words are inspired by the Holy Spirit and contain His Life, so we must take them seriously! We can live our lives in the assurance that God has given us His general grace where we can rely on the natural laws of gravity, of seedtime and harvest, of summer and winter, of day and night. Because of these laws or principles, we know that good seed 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.*[Mk.4:26-29] And there are also spiritual applications to these natural laws—when we sow God's Word, when we sow in prayer or when sow in support to others, there will be a harvest: *Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work. As it is written: "They have freely scattered their gifts to the poor; their righteousness endures forever." Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness. You will be enriched in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God. This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of the Lord's people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God.*[2Cor.9:6-12] We can expect more in life than the basic existence of eating and drinking: *If I fought wild beasts in Ephesus with no more than human hopes, what have I gained? If the dead are not raised, "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die." Do not be misled: "Bad company corrupts good character." Come back to your senses as you ought, and stop sinning; for there are some who are ignorant of God—I say this to your shame.*[1Cor.15:32-34] We have been elevated into God's family—we are now family! *See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.*[1Jn.3:1-2] God sustains us, both generally and specifically: *I lie down and sleep; I wake again, because the LORD sustains me.*[Ps.3:5] *Listen to me, you descendants of Jacob, all the remnant of the people of Israel, you whom I have upheld since your birth, and have carried since you were born. Even to your old age and grey hairs I am he, I am he who will sustain you. I have made you and I will carry you; I will sustain you and I will rescue you.*[Is.46:3-4]

Are you a Theist or a Deist? We know from Scripture and from experience that God not only cares for us in a general way but that He cares for us in specific ways too: *What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?*[Rom.8:31-32] So let's get rid of anxiety and undue worry by committing ourselves to God: *Cast your cares on the LORD and he will sustain you; he will never let the righteous be shaken.*[Ps.55:22] We are more blessed than we can ever imagine: *Praise the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! Through Christ, God has blessed us with every spiritual blessing that heaven has to offer. Before the creation of the world, he chose us through Christ to be holy and perfect in his presence. Because of his love he had already decided to adopt us through Jesus Christ. He freely chose to do this so that the kindness he had given us in his dear Son would be praised and given glory.*[Eph.1:3-6]

Questions
How can we be sure that our knowledge of God is accurate and credible?
How does God maintain His creation?
Why is work important for Christians?
What difference does it make that we are children of God?
Why do some Christians not believe in God's direct intervention?
What evidence do you have that God intervenes in your life?
Puritan Prayer—A Cry For Deliverance: Heavenly Father save me entirely from sin. I know that I am righteous through the righteousness of Another—but I pant and pine for likeness to Yourself. I am Your child and should bear Your image. Enable me to recognize my death unto sin and when it tempts me, may I be deaf unto its voice. Deliver me from the invasion of sin as well as the dominion of sin. Grant me to walk as Christ walked and to live in the newness of His life—the life of love, the life of faith and the life of holiness. When Your blessings come—children, friends, wealth, honour—if I should idolize them, then cleanse this spiritual adultery; give me spiritual chastity and close my spiritual affection to all but You. Sin is my greatest curse—let Your victory be apparent to my consciousness and be displayed in my life. Help me to be always devoted, confident, obedient, resigned and childlike in my trust of You; to love You with my soul, body, mind and strength; to love my fellow-man as I love myself; to be saved from unregenerate temper, hard thoughts, slanderous words, meanness and unkind manners; to master my tongue and keep the door of my lips. Fill me with grace daily, that my life may be a fountain of sweet water.
Psalm 132: LORD, remember David and all his self-denial. He swore an oath to the LORD, he made a vow to the Mighty One of Jacob: "I will not enter my house or go to my bed, I will allow no sleep to my eyes or slumber to my eyelids, till I find a place for the LORD, a dwelling for the Mighty One of Jacob." We heard it in Ephrathah, we came upon it in the fields of Jaar: "Let us go to his dwelling place, let us worship at his footstool, saying, 'Arise, LORD, and come to your resting place, you and the ark of your might. May your priests be clothed with your righteousness; may your faithful people sing for joy.' " For the sake of your servant David, do not reject your anointed one. The LORD swore an oath to David, a sure oath he will not revoke: "One of your own descendants I will place on your throne. If your sons keep my covenant and the statutes I teach them, then their sons will sit on your throne for ever and ever." For the LORD has chosen Zion, he has desired it for his dwelling, saying, "This is my resting place for ever and ever; here I will sit enthroned, for I have desired it. I will bless her with abundant provisions; her poor I will satisfy with food. I will clothe her priests with salvation, and her faithful people will ever sing for joy. "Here I will make a horn grow for David and set up a lamp for my anointed one. I will clothe his enemies with shame, but his head will be adorned with a radiant crown."

March:

God's Glory. *The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. John 1:14*

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

Sunday 1st March Psalm 133

How bright is your light ? *No one lights a lamp and hides it in a clay jar or puts it under a bed. Instead, they put it on a stand, so that those who come in can see the light.*[Lk.8:16]

Our statement of faith says that *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.* And yet when we read the Bible, there are many apparently contradictory statements, or paradoxes, such as: *For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it.*[Mk.8:35] (On a practical note, when we read the Bible, we should always start from the premise that God does not lie, He does not change His mind, He is always right and so is His Word: *Woe to those who quarrel with their Maker, those who are nothing but potsherds among the potsherds on the ground. Does the clay say to the potter, 'What are you making?' Does your work say, 'The potter has no hands'?*[Is.45:9] *Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth.*[Jn.17:17] *Jesus answered them: Didn't God say in your Law, 'I have said you are gods'? We know that Scripture is always true. God spoke to some people and called them 'gods.'*[Jn.10:34-35] *Jesus replied, "You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God.*[Matt.22:29]) And here is another paradox—we should let our light shine but our life is hidden! *You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.*[Matt.5:14-16] *For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God.*[Col 3:3] We used to sing: "*This little light of mine, I'm going to let it shine*" but then we heard a Church singing "*This mighty light of mine, I'm going to let it shine*" and it changed our mindset. Never belittle what God has done for us. No Christian is insignificant or unimportant because we are of great value in God's sight: *Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?*[Matt.6:25-27] Eleanor Roosavelt once said: "*No-one can make you feel inferior without your permission.*" God loved us so much that He gave His One and Only Son for us: *For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.*[Jn.3:16] God purchased us with His Son's life, so He clearly has placed a high value on us: *And they sang a new song: "You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth."*[Rev.5:9-10] *But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace.*[Eph.2:13-14] *For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross. Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behaviour. But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation— if you continue in your faith, established and firm, and do not move from the hope held out in the gospel. This is the gospel that you heard and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, have become a servant.*[Col.1:19-23] Now we

belong to God, we have been taken out of the mire of sin and folly and elevated to the status of sons and family. We have a new song of praise in our heart and in our mouth—praise is audible, not just nice thoughts! *He lifted me out of the slimy pit, out of the mud and mire; he set my feet on a rock and gave me a firm place to stand. He put a new song in my mouth, a hymn of praise to our God. Many will see and fear the LORD and put their trust in him.*[Ps.40:2-3] We should be enthusiastic and proud to share our new status. We should be enthusiastic and proud to share our new status. Even though some Believers have to meet in secret, God never intended us to be secret Christians—which is why we are instructed to pray for our national leaders. We should pray that we can live peaceful lives and share our faith in effectively:

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. For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all people. This has now been witnessed to at the proper time.[1Tim.2:1-6] Jesus said we would have trouble but we should stand firm and cheerful: *I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.*[Jn.16:33] The Church has always been harassed and persecuted: *We sent Timothy, who is our brother and co-worker in God's service in spreading the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you in your faith, so that no one would be unsettled by these trials. For you know quite well that we are destined for them. In fact, when we were with you, we kept telling you that we would be persecuted. And it turned out that way, as you well know. For this reason, when I could stand it no longer, I sent to find out about your faith. I was afraid that in some way the tempter had tempted you and that our labours might have been in vain.*[1Thess.3:2-5] And even today in some countries it is against the law to become a Christian and the punishment for talking about your faith is very severe. In those countries, Christians have to worship in secret and if they are discovered sharing their faith, it will cost them their liberty and maybe their life. Open Doors estimate that more than 388 million Christians face persecution and discrimination because they follow Jesus. But in this country, we can meet together to worship Jesus Christ without any interference from the Government—at the moment! There are many people who are attacking our Christian heritage by promoting anything and everything that opposes God but usually our Church activities are free from interference. The *Ecclesiastical Courts Jurisdiction Act 1860* is still in force and states that anyone who *molests, disturbs, vexes, or troubles, or by any other unlawful means disquiets or misuses any preacher duly authorized to preach any places of religious worship, shall on conviction by a magistrates' court, be liable to a fine or imprisonment for a term not exceeding two months*. This past week the Reform UK Party's Home Affairs spokesman Zia Yusuf (who is a Muslim), said that Britain's Christian values are at risk and his Party has pledged to restore Britain's Christian heritage if elected into government. When we were in Latvia, we heard first-hand from people who, when they were in the old Soviet Union, had to hide from their government when they met for worship—one man we met had been in prison for 20 years for being a Christian!

We are to let our light shine. Jesus said: *"Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned…" Then the disciples went out and preached everywhere, and the Lord worked with them and confirmed his word by the signs that accompanied it.*[Mk.16:15-20] When the Holy Spirit converts us, we become living testimonies to what God has done: *But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.*[Acts.1:8] We are saved by confessing and declaring audibly that Jesus as Lord: *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. As the Scripture*

says, "Anyone who trusts in him will never be put to shame." For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile—the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, for, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."[Rom.10:9-13] When we baptise Believers we say: "*upon the confession of your faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour and upon your own request, we baptize you in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.*" We encourage everyone to share their faith with others—both their conversion story and what they believe about God—in general conversation and in public meetings. *I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers, because I hear about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints. I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith, so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ. Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the saints.*[Phile.4-7] One of the strengths of the FGBFI was that they expected their members to share their testimony at a moment's notice—like the Scouts motto: Be prepared! Jesus made it clear that we cannot be a true Believer and be ashamed of our belief: *Whoever is ashamed of me and my words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his glory and in the glory of the Father and of the holy angels.*[Lk.9:26] *I tell you, whoever publicly acknowledges me before others, the Son of Man will also acknowledge before the angels of God. But whoever disowns me before others will be disowned before the angels of God.*[Lk 12:8-9]

Stuart Hamblin (whose testimony we watched this morning) wrote this hymn;

The chimes of time ring out the news, another day is through
Someone slipped and fell, was that someone you?
You may have longed for added strength, your courage to renew
But do not be disheartened I have news for you.
It is no secret what God can do, what he has done for others He'll do for you.
With arms wide open, He'll pardon you; It is no secret what God can do.
There is no night, for in His light You'll never walk alone.
You'll always feel at home wherever you may roam,
There is no power can conquer you, while God is on your side.
Take Him at His promise, don't run away and hide.

And yet the paradox of our Faith is that if we are to let our light shine, our lives must be hidden in God: *For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God.*[Col 3:3] *You are my hiding place; you will protect me from trouble and surround me with songs of deliverance. I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you with my loving eye on you.*[Ps.32:7-8] If we are going to be secure we must dwell in a secret place with God: *He who dwells in the secret place of the Most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the LORD, "He is my refuge and my fortress; my God, in Him I will trust."*[Ps.91:1-2] To be built up we have to be rooted down. *So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.*[Col 2:6-7] Without being rooted in the hidden place with God we will never be able to withstand life's storms and like a tree with poor roots, we will fall in times of stress. But with our roots firmly established in that hidden place with God and watered by the water of the Holy Spirit, we will stay verdant—fresh and green bearing fruit in season: *Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers, but whose delight is in the law of the LORD, and who meditates on his law day and night. That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither—whatever they do prospers.*[Ps.1:1-3]

Too many Christians worry about circumstances and about how desperate they think their situation is—but the darker the night the brighter the light! When we have seen great Light, we will focus God's glory instead of distress and darkness: *They will look toward the earth and see only distress and darkness and fearful gloom, and they will be thrust into utter darkness. Nevertheless, there will be*

no more gloom for those who were in distress. In the past he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the future he will honour Galilee of the nations, by the Way of the Sea, beyond the Jordan—he people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned.[Is.8:22-9:2] And that Light is Jesus Christ: *When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."*[Jn.8:12] Where sin abounds, grace is more abundant! *But where sin increased, grace increased all the more.*[Rom.5:20] Now we are God's children, made right with God, our light should be getting brighter: *The path of the righteous is like the morning sun, shining ever brighter till the full light of day.*[Prov.4:18] And by letting our light shine we will lead others to righteousness: *Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever.*[Dan.12:3] There are at least 10 people watching us and wanting to know about our God: *This is what the LORD Almighty says: "In those days ten people from all languages and nations will take firm hold of one Jew by the hem of his robe and say, 'Let us go with you, because we have heard that God is with you.' "*[Zech.8:23] What are you going to say to them? Let's be prepared with an answer for our faith: *But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behaviour in Christ may be ashamed of their slander.*[1Pet.3:15-16]

Questions

In what way are we the light of the world?
Why does it matter how we think about ourself?
How important is our testimony?
What does it mean to *dwell in the secret place of the Most High*? (Psalm 91)
How can we change our perspective of life from gloom to glory?

Puritan Prayer: A Christian's Prayer—Blessed God, defend me—ten thousand snares are mine without and within. When sloth and indolence seize me, give me views of heaven. When sinners entice me, give me disrelish of their ways. When sensual pleasures tempt me, purify and refine me. When I desire worldly possessions, help me to be rich toward You. When the vanities of this world ensnare me, let me not plunge into new guilt and ruin. May I remember the dignity of my spiritual release and never be too busy to attend to my soul or be so engrossed with time that I neglect the things of eternity—and thus may I not only live for You, but also grow towards You. Form my mind to the right notions of religion, that I may not measure my spiritual advances by the efforts of my natural being. May I seek after an increase of divine love to You; an unreserved resignation to Your will; an extensive benevolence to my fellow creatures; a patience and fortitude of soul; a heavenly disposition; a concern to please You in public and in private. As You draw the contours of Christ on my soul, take delight in every trace and feature, for I am Your workmanship, created in Christ Jesus; I am Your letter written with the Holy Spirit's pen; I am Your tilled soil ready for the sowing and the harvest.

Psalm 133: How good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity! It is like precious oil poured on the head, running down on the beard, running down on Aaron's beard, down on the collar of his robe. It is as if the dew of Hermon were falling on Mount Zion. For there the LORD bestows his blessing, even life forevermore.

Sunday 8th March Ps.134

Last week we asked how bright was our light—and reflected on the paradox that if we are to shine our light, our lives must be hidden with Christ in God: *let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.*[Matt.5:16] *For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God.*[Col 3:3] Our private life with God must be sound and settled if our public life

with God is going to be real and relevant—and to have sound shoots, we must have good roots: *So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.*[Col.2:6-7] *Those on the rocky ground are the ones who receive the word with joy when they hear it, but they have no root. They believe for a while, but in the time of testing they fall away. The seed that fell among thorns stands for those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by life's worries, riches and pleasures, and they do not mature. But the seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop.*[Lk.8:13-15] For our faith to be real, our personal relationship with God—that hidden relationship with God that no-one else sees—must be settled: *When you pray, go into a room alone and close the door. Pray to your Father in private. He knows what is done in private and will reward you. [Find a quiet, secluded place so you won't be tempted to role-play before God. Just be there as simply and honestly as you can manage. The focus will shift from you to God, and you will begin to sense his grace.]*[Matt.6:6]

Over the next few weeks we will be watching the video "*Reflections on the Lord's Prayer*" with Bill Curtis. Along with Psalm 23, the Lord's Prayer is probably the most well-known passage in the Bible as Liturgical Churches recite the Lord's Prayer at every service and even Non-Conformist Churches regularly use this prayer in their services. *One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples." He said to them, "When you pray, say: Our Father in heaven…*[Lk.11:1-2] Nevertheless, merely repeating words in a prayer doesn't impress God: *When you pray, don't babble on and on as people of other religions do. They think their prayers are answered merely by repeating their words again and again.*[Matt.6:7] Another Bible Version the addresses the religious hype that has pervaded many Churches who promote a type of religion that ignores the Father/child relationship that Jesus made available to us: *The world is full of so-called prayer warriors who are prayer-ignorant. They're full of formulas and programs and advice, peddling techniques for getting what you want from God. Don't fall for that nonsense. This is your Father you are dealing with, and he knows better than you what you need. With a God like this loving you, you can pray very simply. Like this: Our Father in heaven, reveal who you are… In prayer there is a connection between what God does and what you do*[Matt.6:7-14] (How do you pray to God? As your heavenly Father? As a distant deity? With confidence? With reverence? With arrogance? With fear? With unbelief?) Liturgies and written prayers certainly have their place and I have been to some Churches where I wish that they did use some liturgical prayers because their public prayer was incoherent and unintelligible! If they addressed their own father in the way they addressed their heavenly Father, their family would send them to a psychiatrist! And if they spoke that way in an interview, they would be guaranteed to never be employed! Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote: *We learn to speak to God because God has spoken to us and speaks to us… God's speech in Jesus Christ meets us in the Holy Scriptures. If we wish to pray with confidence and gladness, then the words of Holy Scripture will have to be the solid basis of our prayer.*

However, even when we use Scripture as the basis of our prayers, we still need to make them our own prayer. Godon Baily expresses this point very well in this poem:

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

The Puritan Prayers that we use in our Services are really helpful in expressing our desires to God and helping us see things from His perspective. One of my favourites is the prayer that we used this morning: *O God most high and most glorious, the thought of Your infinite serenity cheers me—*

for when I am toiling and moiling, troubled and distressed, You are for ever at perfect peace. Your designs cause You no fear or care of unfulfillment—they stand fast as the eternal hills. Your power knows no bounds and Your goodness no stint. You bring order out of confusion and my defeats are Your victories: The Lord God Omnipotent reigns! Unbelief will mar my confidence and sin will make me forget You, so let the weeds that grow in my soul be cut at their roots. Grant me to know that I truly live only when I live to You—and that all else is trifling. Gracious God, it is Your presence alone that makes me holy, devout, strong and happy!

Words are easy to say but unless we really believe what we say about God, about ourself, about our past, about our present, about our future, our words will not have any substance and our religion will be shallow and fruitless. That is what the Church at Corinth was like—they were charismatic, they looked "*spiritual*" but Paul said: *Brothers, I could not address you as spiritual but as worldly—mere infants in Christ. I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready.*[1Cor.3:1-2] Those Christians had shoots but no roots—they looked religious and even though their religion was real, it was shallow and had no substance. Jesus warned that if we have no roots, our shoots won't last and we are likely to wither in times of trouble: *The one who received the seed that fell on rocky places is the man who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. But since he has no root, he lasts only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, he quickly falls away. [The one sown on gravel represents the person who gladly hears the kingdom message, but his experience remains shallow. Shortly after he hears it, troubles and persecutions come because of the kingdom message he received. Then he quickly falls away, for the truth didn't sink deeply into his heart.]*[Matt.13:20-21]

Compare this with the blessing of those who delight in God and His Word: *Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers, but whose delight is in the law of the LORD, and who meditates on his law day and night. That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither—whatever they do prospers.*[Ps.1:1-3]

We take God's Word seriously because it is our spiritual food, our spiritual medicine, our spiritual light, our spiritual defence—in fact God's Word is our very life. Jesus said: *The Spirit is the One who gives life. The flesh doesn't help at all. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and are life. But there are some among you who don't believe.*[Jn.6:63-64] *When Moses finished reciting all these words to all Israel, he said to them, "Take to heart all the words I have solemnly declared to you this day, so that you may command your children to obey carefully all the words of this law. They are not just idle words for you—they are your life. By them you will live long in the land you are crossing the Jordan to possess."*[Deut.32:45-47] God's word is not just a manual for life, the very words of God are life-giving, they are filled with power and they work in the life of a Believer: *For no word from God shall be void of power.*[Lk.1:35 (ASV)] *And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is indeed at work in you who believe.*[1Thess.2:13]

And "*believe*" is the key—the effectiveness of God's Word is through faith in Jesus Christ: *The message of Christ has always been "Yes." God has made a great many promises. They are all "Yes" because of what Christ has done. So through Christ we say "Amen." We want God to receive glory. He makes both us and you stand firm because we belong to Christ. He anointed us. He put his Spirit in our hearts and marked us as his own. We can now be sure that he will give us everything he promised us.*[2Cor.1:19-22] Spiritual maturity comes from facing difficulties with God's help and learning to trust Him through those hard times: *"Do you now believe?" Jesus replied. "A time is coming and in fact has come when you will be scattered, each to your own home. You will leave me all alone. Yet I am not alone, for my Father is with me. I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."*[Jn.16:31-33] *Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you, who through faith are*

shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may result in praise, glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed.[1Pet.1:3-7] *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 Savior Jesus Christ.*[2Pet.1:3-11]

Watchman Nee was a Chinese Christian from the last century, who spent many years in prison for his faith and has had a great influence across the world by his teaching on living the Christian life. Perhaps the most well-known book is "*The Normal Christian Life*". He also wrote "*Sit, Walk, Stand*" (available from our Church Website) which is a study from Ephesians on living a victorious Christian life. We are to stand firm in our faith: *Therefore put on the full armour of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place…*[Eph.6:13-14] But if we are going to stand in our faith, we must be walking with God: *I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called, with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love, endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.*[Eph.4:1-3] *Follow God's example, therefore, as dearly loved children and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.*[Eph.5:1-2] And if we are going to walk with God we must first be seated with God: *And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus.*[Eph.2:6] Too many people try to stand without walking and sitting first! If we don't have that secret place with God, that unseen, personal relationship with our heavenly Father and our Elder Brother and our Comforter, our faith will not produce the fruit that it should. *If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all.*[Is.7:9] *Have faith in the LORD your God and you will be upheld.*[2Chron.20:20] *Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the LORD our God. They are brought to their knees and fall, but we rise up and stand firm.*[Ps 20:7-8] Habakkuk understood the logistics of faith: *Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Saviour. The Sovereign LORD is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, he enables me to tread on the heights.*[Hab 3:17-19] Faith is not trusting God only when we have a comfortable life. Faith is trusting God when we have nothing or if we have we have everything—and being content in that situation: *I rejoiced greatly in the Lord that at last you renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you were concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it. I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all this through him who gives me strength.*[Phil.4:10-13] This is not fatalism and neither is it an excuse for living in self-inflicted poverty but it is enjoying fellowship with God regardless of our circumstances. Faith is seeing the spiritual dimension and then acting on it: *Faith makes us sure of what we hope for and gives us proof of what we cannot see. It was their faith that made our ancestors*

pleasing to God.[Heb.11:1-2] *Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."*[Jn.20:29] And faith is what makes us victorious and overcomers: *for everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world? Only the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.*[1Jn.5:4-5]

Here at Deal Pentecostal Church, we emphasise the importance of being able to stand on own faith, and having done all, we are still standing—this is spiritual maturity! We regularly sing some of the great hymns in order to re-enforce the reality of our faith—hymns such as: *"Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine*" "*I know whom I have believed and am persuaded that He is able to keep…*" Last week we sang "*We have an Anchor that keep the soul…"* which is based on*: God did this so that, by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled to take hold of the hope set before us may be greatly encouraged. We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure. It enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain, where our forerunner, Jesus, has entered on our behalf. He has become a high priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek.*[Heb.6:18-20] When the hymn-writer Mary Fawler Maude was dying some friends sang this outside of her door and she sent them a message*: "Tell them that it does not fail – it holds!"* What she knew during her life, was still true and the end of her life.

Let's make sure that our conversation and lifestyle stays in harmony with the Bible and especially with the New Covenant understanding of the Bible. Remember, if we want good shoots, we must have deep roots: *So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.*[Col.2:6-7]

Questions

Why should we pray?

Does it matter how we pray?

What part does our soul (mind, brain, will and personality) have in prayer?

What part does our spirit (the re-created God part of us) have in prayer?

How does our faith develop?

What are the most important things in our life?

Puritan Prayer—Resting on God: O God most high and most glorious, the thought of Your infinite serenity cheers me—for when I am toiling and moiling, troubled and distressed, You are for ever at perfect peace. Your designs cause You no fear or care of unfulfillment—they stand fast as the eternal hills. Your power knows no bounds and Your goodness no stint. You bring order out of confusion and my defeats are Your victories: The Lord God Omnipotent reigns! I come to You, to leave every concern entirely to You, with every sin calling for Christ's precious blood. Revive deep spirituality in my heart and as I live near the great Shepherd, may clearly hear His voice, know His tones and follow His calls. As I abide in the truth, You keep me from deception and as I walk in the power of the Spirit, You keep me from harm. Give me an intenser faith in the eternal verities and burn into me by experience, the things I know. Let me never be ashamed of the truth of the gospel, that I may bear its reproach, seeing Jesus as its essence and knowing in it the power of the Spirit. Lord, help me, lest I become lukewarm and chilled. Unbelief will mar my confidence and sin will make me forget You, so let the weeds that grow in my soul be cut at their roots. Grant me to know that I truly live only when I live to You—and that all else is trifling. Gracious God, it is Your presence alone that makes me holy, devout, strong and happy!

Psalm 134: Praise the LORD, all you servants of the LORD who minister by night in the house of the LORD. Lift up your hands in the sanctuary and praise the LORD. May the LORD bless you from Zion, he who is the Maker of heaven and earth.

Mothering Sunday 15th March Ps.135

Puritan Prayer: Weaknesses—O Spirit of God help my infirmities. If I am pressed down with a load of sorrow, perplexed and knowing not what to do, If I am slandered and persecuted and made to feel the weight of the cross—help me, I pray. If You see in me any wrong thing encouraged, any evil desire cherished, any delight that is not Your delight, any habit that grieves You, any nest of sin in my thought—then grant me the kiss of Your forgiveness and teach my feet to walk the way of Your commandments. Deliver me from carking [*distressing*] care and make me a happy, holy person. Help me to walk the consecrated life with firm and brave steps and to wrestle successfully against weakness. Teach me to laud, adore and magnify You with the music of heaven and make me a perfume of praiseful gratitude to You. I do not crouch at Your feet as a slave before a tyrant but exult before You as a son with a Father. Give me power to live as Your child in all my actions and to exercise sonship by conquering self. Preserve me from the intoxication that comes of prosperity. Sober me when I am glad with a joy that does not comes from You. Lead me safely on to the eternal kingdom, not asking whether the road be rough or smooth. I request only to see the face of Him I love, to be content with bread to eat, with raiment to put on and that I am brought to Your house in peace.

Mothering Sunday 15th March Ps.135

Mothering Sunday was traditionally a day when those in Service (that is, who were servants in the "*big house*") would be able to return home to see their mothers. But it also has roots in church tradition, when, inspired by the Psalm: *I rejoiced with those who said to me: Let us go to the house of the LORD,*[Ps.122:1] mediaeval people would process to their local cathedral (known as the "*mother church*"). In those days Mothering Sunday was not always serene! Robert Grosseteste (Greathead) who was Bishop of Lincoln in C13th wrote this: *In each and every church you should strictly prohibit one parish from fighting with another over whose banners should come first in processions at the time of the annual visitation and veneration of the mother church… Those who dishonour their spiritual mother should not at all escape punishment, when those who dishonour their fleshly mothers are, in accordance with God's law, cursed and punished with death.*

But church traditions aside, it is important that we honour our parents—and this is reinforced with the clear teaching of Scripture. The OT command of honouring our parents is repeated in the NT which affirms that there is a promise attached to honouring our parents: *Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. "Honour your father and mother"—which is the first commandment with a promise—"so that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth."*[Eph.6:1-3] And if we don't respect and care for our family, we are worse than an unbeliever: *If someone curses [insults, despises] their father or mother, their lamp will be snuffed out in pitch darkness.*[Prov.20:20] *If a widow has children or grandchildren, they should learn to serve God by taking care of her, as she once took care of them. This is what God wants them to do… But if someone does not provide for his own, especially his own family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.*[1Tim.5:3-8] Of course we should give due honour to everyone—whether national leaders, local leaders, church leaders, church members and even unbelievers: *Show proper respect to everyone, love the family of believers, fear God, honour the emperor.*[1Pet.2:17] *Remind the people to be subject to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready to do whatever is good, to slander no one, to be peaceable and considerate, and always to be gentle toward everyone.*[Tit.3:1-2]*For the one in authority is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They are God's servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also as a matter of conscience. This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing. Give to*

everyone what you owe them: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honour, then honour. Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law.[Rom.13:4-8] *Paul replied, "Brothers, I did not realize that he was the high priest; for it is written: 'Do not speak evil about the ruler of your people.'"*[Acts.23:5] The command to obey your parents *"in the Lord"* is not a cop-out but rather, it is used to help us see life in the light of God's Kingdom as people who are "in the Lord". To be part of God's Kingdom we must be "*born-again*": *Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again… 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.*[Jn.3:3-6] And to be "*born-again*" we must confess Jesus as Lord—that is how we are saved: *But what does it say? "The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart," that is, the message concerning faith that we proclaim: If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved. As Scripture says, "Anyone who believes in him will never be put to shame."*[Rom.10:8-11] Salvation and belonging to God's Kingdom are inseparable—to be a Christian is to be a citizen of heaven: *Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.*[Eph.2:19-22] *But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.*[Phil.3:20-21]

No-one is a citizen of God's Kingdom because of their natural birth or by where they live because God's Kingdom is a spiritual Kingdom, not a political or a geographical kingdom. Citizens of God's Kingdom confess Jesus as Lord. Confess means to "*say the same*" and so to confess Jesus as Lord means that we have put ourselves under His jurisdiction and have publicly professed to abide by the rules of His Kingdom. T These rules were set out by Jesus during His ministry when He proclaimed the Kingdom of God. We have an insight to God's Kingdom in the "*Sermon on the Mount*"—which can be seen as His "*Kingdom manifesto*": *God blesses those people who depend only on him. They belong to the kingdom of heaven! God blesses those people who grieve. They will find comfort! God blesses those people who are humble. The earth will belong to them! God blesses those people who want to obey him more than to eat or drink. They will be given what they want! God blesses those people who are merciful. They will be treated with mercy! God blesses those people whose hearts are pure. They will see him! God blesses those people who make peace. They will be called his children!*[Matt.5:3-9] Other teachings about God's Kingdom may have different emphasises, but they all share a common theme—God's Kingdom is good, joyful and of great worth but there are severe consequences for rebellion or neglect: *Jesus told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared… The one who sowed the good seed is the Son of Man. The field is the world, and the good seed stands for the people of the kingdom. The weeds are the people of the evil one, and the enemy who sows them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the harvesters are angels. As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. They will throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Whoever has ears, let them hear. The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for*

fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it.[Matt.13:24-46]
When John the Baptist was preparing the way for Jesus, his message was clear: "*Repent for the Kingdom of God is near.*" Repent means to change your mind, to think differently. We need to change our mind to agree with God and align our mind, thoughts and behaviour with God's mind, thoughts and behaviour. But Christianity is not just a better way of living, or being nice to people and caring for those who are in need—lots of unbelievers do that! When we became a Christian, we were born again into God's family. We weren't just adopted into God's family, but we were spiritually re-born into God's family and God became our Father: *But to all who believed him and accepted him, he gave the right to become children of God. They are reborn–not with a physical birth resulting from human passion or plan, but a birth that comes from God.*[Jn.1:12-13] This means that we are now God's children and we have the full rights of family, together with an inheritance! *But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons. Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, "Abba, Father." So you are no longer a slave, but a son; and since you are a son, God has made you also an heir.*[Gal.4:4-7] *See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him.*[1Jn.3:1]
We have an incredible inheritance amongst God's family, the sanctified ones, and that inheritance is guaranteed by the Holy Spirit: *Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified.*[Acts.20:32] *And you also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation. When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession—to the praise of his glory.*[Eph.1:13-14] And God, our heavenly Father has qualified us to share in this inheritance: *giving joyful thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of his holy people in the kingdom of light. For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.*[Col.1:12-14] Our inheritance is eternal and will never perish or fade: *For this reason Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance—now that he has died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant.*[Heb.9:15] *Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you.*[1Pet.1:3-4] But the Bible cautions us that *"an inheritance claimed too soon will not be blessed at the end."*[Prov.20:21]
We have been praying for Ukraine ever since Russia invaded 4 years ago and especially the people that we have had contact with through Dave Smethurst. We have also been praying for Taras Dyatlik from Kieve who is Chairman of the International Evangelical Theological Alliance for Eastern Europe. Last month he wrote an article entitled: *Is the World Tired of Our Suffering?* (available from Christianity Today and there are also printed copies here this morning). Here is an excerpt:

> On the fourth anniversary of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, a Ukrainian theologian meditates on self-interested calls for a comfortable peace. What does a prophetic church look like in real life? I have seen glimpses. It looks like the seminary faculty member who moved to the frontline city of Zaporizhzhia to train pastors caring for traumatized people instead of leaving for safety. It looks like partner churches in Kherson that have stood under Russia's massive shelling for four years, still showing up, asking questions, and refusing to move on to the next crisis. It looks like Christian leaders in Kharkiv who do not let politics decide whether they stand with people who are suffering. The prophetic

church does not offer easy answers to those who are suffering. Instead, it offers support, stands against inhumane treatment, and walks with people through grief even when it sounds like doubting or blaming God. On the 11th day of waiting, I wrote, "*Lord, is it a sin that my thoughts are not in church today but with Andriy in Odesa in the military hospital? Do you understand our pain? Probably you do. You lost your son*." What would it look like for evangelical communities in North America and Europe to hold space for grieving for Ukrainian Christians after four years of war? Not to fix, not to explain, not to rush toward comfortable reconciliation with those still killing us or those who refuse to condemn not just the war but its cause—simply to stay present in the long silence between crucifixion and resurrection. Hezekiah refused to hold that space. He heard the warning and quickly thought about how to make himself comfortable. Peace in my days. Thank you, Isaiah! The next generation would have to take care of themselves. The prophetic church refuses short-term and unjust peace deals that sacrifice future generations for its present comfort. It asks not "*How can we have comfortable peace in our days*?" but "*What legacy of faith and justice are we building for our children*?" We must measure our choices and presence by their impact on those who come after us, not just on ourselves. I do not know how this war will end. I do not know what Western or Russian evangelical churches will choose in the coming months and years or how many will grow tired and turn away, looking for peace in their own time while Ukrainian children live with the results of that silence. But I do know what Hezekiah's story asks of us in Ukraine. Will we show our treasures to those who promise unjust temporary comfort and the protection of Christian values if it means we stay silent? Will we call devastating prophecies good just because the harm falls on someone else's children? Will we measure faithfulness by how well we protect our seats at the tables of power, or will we measure it by whether we stand with the suffering and vulnerable even when it costs us? Will we be like the king Hezekiah or the prophet Isaiah? The answer we give as the church will shape Ukraine's future and our own. History's slow judgment means today's compromises echo for generations—our generations. Let us have the courage to reject any unjust peace that depends on the suffering or exile of our children. True faithfulness insists on justice—without which there is no grace and mercy—that endures beyond the present.

As we celebrate mothers on this Mothering Sunday, let's remember the principles of God's Kingdom—which are now our values because God is our heavenly Father and we are His family. But let us also remember those still in Ukraine who are standing firm in their faith and forgoing the compromised comfortable peace as they try to build a legacy of faith and justice for their children.

Questions

Why should we honour our parents? (*Eph.6:1-3*)

Should we always submit to those in authority? (*1Pet.3:17; Tit.3:1-2*)

What are the benefits of being a citizen of God's Kingdom?

What are the responsibilities of being a citizen of God's Kingdom?

What is the inheritance of God's children?

How can God's Kingdom be peace whilst there is pain and chaos all around us?

Puritan Prayer: Weaknesses—O Spirit of God help my infirmities. If I am pressed down with a load of sorrow, perplexed and knowing not what to do, If I am slandered and persecuted and made to feel the weight of the cross—help me, I pray. If You see in me any wrong thing encouraged, any evil desire cherished, any delight that is not Your delight, any habit that grieves You, any nest of sin in my thought—then grant me the kiss of Your forgiveness and teach my

feet to walk the way of Your commandments. Deliver me from carking [*distressing*] care and make me a happy, holy person. Help me to walk the consecrated life with firm and brave steps and to wrestle successfully against weakness. Teach me to laud, adore and magnify You with the music of heaven and make me a perfume of praiseful gratitude to You. I do not crouch at Your feet as a slave before a tyrant but exult before You as a son with a Father. Give me power to live as Your child in all my actions and to exercise sonship by conquering self. Preserve me from the intoxication that comes of prosperity. Sober me when I am glad with a joy that does not comes from You. Lead me safely on to the eternal kingdom, not asking whether the road be rough or smooth. I request only to see the face of Him I love, to be content with bread to eat, with raiment to put on and that I am brought to Your house in peace.

Psalm 135: Praise the LORD. Praise the name of the LORD; praise him, you servants of the LORD, you who minister in the house of the LORD, in the courts of the house of our God. Praise the LORD, for the LORD is good; sing praise to his name, for that is pleasant… Your name, LORD, endures forever, your renown, LORD, through all generations. For the LORD will vindicate his people and have compassion on his servants. The idols of the nations are silver and gold, made by human hands. They have mouths, but cannot speak, eyes, but cannot see. They have ears, but cannot hear, nor is there breath in their mouths. Those who make them will be like them, and so will all who trust in them. All you Israelites, praise the LORD; house of Aaron, praise the LORD; house of Levi, praise the LORD; you who fear him, praise the LORD. Praise be to the LORD from Zion, to him who dwells in Jerusalem. Praise the LORD.

Sunday 22nd March Ps.136

God most high and God most nigh. *I live in a high and holy place, but also with him who is contrite and lowly in spirit.Is.57:15*

The resurrection of Jesus and the Lordship of Jesus are the two most fundamental doctrines of Christianity—everything depends on these two facts. But after we are converted the most important fact about Jesus, is that He is Emmanuel—God is with us. The fact that God is with us changes everything because we no longer need any 3rd party or religious ritual for us to commune with God. Instead of us trying to get to God, God comes to us—and stays with us: *God has said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you." So we say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?" …Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.*[Heb.13:5-8] Last week we discussed the importance of being part of God's family—of being able to address God as "*our Father in heaven*". Practically every culture and society have a basic belief in a deity or "*god*"—most have many "*gods*". The Egyptians had more than 1,500 deities who ruled over natural and social events and so when God instructed Moses to take Israel out from Egypt, God told Moses not to be concerned about His name—just know that God is: *Then Moses said to God, "Suppose I go to the People of Israel and I tell them, 'The God of your fathers sent me to you'; and they ask me, 'What is his name?' What do I tell them?" God said to Moses, "I-AM-WHO-I-AM. Tell the People of Israel, 'I-AM sent me to you.'" God continued with Moses: "This is what you're to say to the Israelites: 'GOD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob sent me to you.' This has always been my name, and this is how I always will be known.*[Ex.3:13-15] God is not restricted by time or geography because He is the Creator of everything—and the God who blessed Abraham and made him to be a blessing is the same God who blesses us and makes us to be a blessing: *The LORD had said to Abram, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."*[Gen.12:1-3]

Although people may worship things they call "**gods**", there is only one God: *Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.*[Deut.6:4-5] *We know that "An idol is nothing at all in the world" and that "There is no God but one." For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as indeed there are many "gods" and many "lords"), yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live.*[1Cor.8:4-6] And those who worship these made up deities are deceived and make their own destruction: *But those who trust in idols, who say to images, 'You are our gods,' will be turned back in utter shame.*[Is.42:17] *With their silver and gold they make idols for themselves to their own destruction.*[Hosea 8:4] *Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs.*[Jonah 2:8] But we worship the only God, the true God, the God who alone is worthy of praise: *Sing to the LORD, praise his name; proclaim his salvation day after day. Declare his glory among the nations, his marvellous deeds among all peoples. For great is the LORD and most worthy of praise; he is to be feared above all gods. For all the gods of the nations are idols, but the LORD made the heavens. Splendour and majesty are before him; strength and glory are in his sanctuary. Ascribe to the LORD, all you families of nations, ascribe to the LORD glory and strength.*[Ps.96:2-7] Of course, the big question is: How do we know that the Christian God we worship is the only real God? How do we know that the other "*gods*" aren't real? Faith is spiritual and so cannot be proven by science or any other natural methods, so how can we be sure that we are right and other religions are wrong? In the OT, the Israelites were asked remember the miracles and deliverance that God did for them, but if we only look back to the past, we put God into history and God becomes the "*I Was*" instead of the "*I Am*". If we only look forward, we put God into the future and God becomes the "*I Will Be*" instead of the "*I Am*". John introduces the Book of Revelation by affirming that God is the eternal "I Am": *Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was, and who is to come.*[Rev.1:4] and Jesus then confirms John's statement: *I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, "who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty.*[Rev.1:8] Three other times the angels assert the same: *Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come.*[Rev 4:8 (also 11:17; 16:5)] But the God who is the "I Am" is also the Holy One, who is immortal and invisible: *God, the blessed and only Ruler, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone is immortal and who lives in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see. To him be honour and might forever. Amen.*[1Tim.6:15-16] *Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honour and glory for ever and ever. Amen.*[1Tim.1:17] *Who among the gods is like you, LORD? Who is like you—majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, working wonders?*[Ex 15:11] So how can we find God or get to know Him if we can't see Him? God hasn't changed His attributes—He is still *immortal and lives in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see*—but God is now approachable and knowable because He became human in Jesus—He took on a human body, physical flesh that can be seen and touched: *The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.*[Jn.1:14] *Therefore, when Christ came into the world, he said… 'Here I am—it is written about me in the scroll—I have come to do your will, my God.'*[Heb.10:5-7] *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!*[Phil.2:5-8] But sadly, many people still think of God as unapproachable and unknowable—to them God remains high and lofty, dwelling in a holy place that is too far away: *For this is what the high and lofty One says—he who lives forever, whose name is holy.*[Is.57:15] However, that is only part of the verse! God goes on to say: *I live in a high and holy place <u>but also with him who is contrite and lowly in spirit</u>, to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite.*[Is.57:15] God is most high **BUT** He is also God most nigh. The Christian message is that God is now with us—which is why Jesus was

given the name Emmanuel. *Joseph, son of David, don't be afraid to take Mary home as your wife. The baby inside her is from the Holy Spirit. She is going to have a son. You must give him the name Jesus. That is because he will save his people from their sins." All of this took place to bring about what the Lord had said would happen. He had said through the prophet, "The virgin is going to have a baby. She will give birth to a son. And he will be called Immanuel." The name Emmanuel means "God with us."*[Matt.1:20-23] What sets the Christian Gospel apart from all other religions is that we don't go to God, but that God comes to us—He redeems us and He makes His home with us. *Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost."*[Lk.19:9-10] *To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.*[Col.1:27] *Jesus replied, "Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching. My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. Anyone who does not love me will not obey my teaching. These words you hear are not my own; they belong to the Father who sent me.*[Jn.14:23-24] Salvation is by belief/faith/trust in Jesus and His resurrection: *"The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart," that is, the message concerning faith that we proclaim: If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved.*[Rom.10:8-10] And so our hope is dependent on Jesus' resurrection. In fact the Christian message is dependent on Jesus' resurrection—our faith depends on Jesus' resurrection; our salvation depends on Jesus' resurrection; our credibility depends on Jesus resurrection and even God's credibility depends on Jesus' 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… And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead. But he did not raise him if in fact the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.*[1Cor.15:3-20] We are saved by grace through faith: *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.*[Eph.2:8-10] But our salvation is initiated and implemented by the Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit who convinces us of our unbelief in Jesus Christ. It is the Holy Spirit who convinces us that we are now righteous. It is the Holy Spirit who convinces us that the devil has been judged and defeated upon the cross. It is the Holy Spirit who reminds us of what Jesus has said and it is the Holy Spirit who leads us into truth. *When he [the Holy Spirit] comes, he will prove the world to be in the wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment: about sin, because people do not believe in me; about righteousness, because I am going to the Father, where you can see me no longer; and about judgment, because the prince of this world now stands condemned. I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will glorify me because it is from me that he will receive what he will make known to you. All that belongs to the Father is mine. That is why I said the Spirit will receive from me what he will make known to you.*[Jn.16:8-15] When the Holy Spirit convinces us of the sin of unbelief, of Jesus being our righteousness and the judgement of the devil—that is, when the Holy Spirit really convinces us so that we, know that we know that we know, that these are real and apply to us—we are saved. And when we are saved, it is not just our position before God that changes but our very nature changes. We are changed from being spiritually dead to being spiritually alive and our sin-nature is changed to a holy-nature—we are spiritually

righteous. We are a new creation and our new spirit (which is sealed by the Holy Spirit) is absolutely perfect and complete—which is why our spiritual transformation can only be referred to as a new birth. And because we are now spiritually alive with a new nature that is holy and righteous, God is able to make His home in us. *But if Christ is in you, then even though your body is subject to death because of sin, the Spirit gives life because of righteousness. And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies because of his Spirit who lives in you.*[Rom.8:10-11] We become God's Temple—the place where God lives: *Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honour God with your bodies.*[1Cor.6:19-20] God doesn't live in a building made with stones but in a building made of people—which is why we are called "*living stones*": *As you come to him [Jesus], the living Stone—rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him— you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.*[1Pet.2:4-5]

When we grasp the reality of God dwelling in us, it changes everything for us. We no longer try to get God's attention by religious activities or rituals; we no longer use a priest to mediate for us. Instead, we gently and respectfully come to God and address Him as Father: *Because you are his sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, "Abba, Father."*[Gal.4:6] We say "*our Father who is heaven…*"[Matt.6:9] We pray and make petition with thanksgiving: *Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.*[Phil.4:6] Our intercession is made with songs of joy. *For he [Jesus] 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.*[Is.53:12-54:1] No wonder Jesus said "*repent for the Kingdom of God is near*"! The Kingdom of God is the implementation of God's perfect—like the Garden of Eden. Of course whilst the devil is still active and evil abounds, we only have a foretaste of Eden but the day is coming when we will enjoy God's Paradise completely: *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. Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death.*[1Cor.15:20-26] When all dominion, authority and power has been destroyed, the second death (eternal damnation) won't hurt us and we will eat of the Tree of Life in God's Paradise, that Adam was prevented from eating! *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… Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who is victorious will not be hurt at all by the second death.* [Rev 2:7;11] But until then, we must pray for God's Kingdom to come—that is, pray and work for God's will, God's desires, God's plans and God's purposes to come in us and around us.

Yes, God is (and always will be), God most high but He is also God most nigh—let's make every effort to stay in fellowship with Him. *I live in a high and holy place, but also with him who is contrite and lowly in spirit.*[Is.57:15]

Questions

Who is God?

Why will God always be known as "*I Am*"?

What does it mean to be convinced of sin?

What does it mean to be convinced of righteousness?

What does it mean to be convinced of judgement?

How does God live in us?

Puritan Prayer: Vocation—Heavenly Father, You have placed me in the Church—which Your Son purchased by His own blood. Add grace to grace that I may live worthy of my vocation. I am a voyager across life's ocean. Safe in heaven's ark, may I pass through a troubled world into the harbour of eternal rest. I am a tree of the vineyard that You have planted—grant me not to be barren with worthless leaves and wild grapes; prune me of useless branches and water me with dews of blessing. I am part of the Lamb's Bride, the Church—help me to be true, faithful, chaste, loving, pure and devoted; let no strong affection of mine wantonly dally with the world. I am sanctified, cleansed, unblemished and hallowed by Your grace—may I live high above a love of things temporal. Your love is my fullness; Your glory is my joy; Your precepts are my pathway; Your cross is my resting place. My thoughts are not always a flame of adoring love, but resting in Your Son's redemption, I look forward to the days of heaven, where no languor [*laziness or indolence*] shall oppress, no iniquities chill, no mists of unbelief dim the eye and no zeal ever tires. Father, these thoughts are the stay, support and comfort of my soul.

Psalm 136: Give thanks to the LORD, for He is good. His love endures forever. Give thanks to the God of gods. His love endures forever. Give thanks to the Lord of lords: His love endures forever. To Him who alone does great wonders, His love endures forever. Who by His understanding made the heavens, His love endures forever. Who spread out the earth upon the waters, His love endures forever. Who made the great lights, His love endures forever. The sun to govern the day, His love endures forever. The moon and stars to govern the night, His love endures forever... He gives food to every creature. His love endures forever. Give thanks to the God of heaven. His love endures forever.

Sunday 29th March Ps.138 (AGM)

What's new?

Amongst the Pentecostals and Charismatics, probably the most over-used verse in the OT is from Isaiah: *Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing.*[Is.43:18-19] This verse has been used and abused in alleged "*prophecies*" by so many people that the story of the boy who cried "*wolf*" comes to mind. Instead of reading the Bible in context to see what it really says, some people only want to hear happy stories—even if they turn out to be false: *For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths. But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry.*[2Tim.4:3-5] Sadly there doesn't appear to be many Christians who are really Bible-literate and know what the Bible really teaches. And yet the Bible is not a difficult book to understand. The word "*bible*" comes from the Greek word for papyrus (where we get paper from) and is a collection of books. Although the Bible was written over a period of at least 1500 years, there is such a unity within the Book that it is clear that there was a common link between all the authors. The Bible itself explains that this common link is the Holy Spirit: *Above all, here is what you must understand. No prophecy in Scripture ever came from a prophet's own understanding. It never came simply because a prophet wanted it to. Instead, the Holy Spirit guided the prophets as they spoke. So prophecy comes from God.*[2Pet.1:20-21] *The Holy Scriptures… are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.*[2Tim.3:15-17] But knowing about the stories in the Bible is not the same as understanding the meaning of the stories. *The disciples asked [Jesus] "Why do you use stories as illustrations when you speak to people?" Jesus answered, "Knowledge about the mysteries of the kingdom of*

heaven has been given to you. But it has not been given to the crowd. Those who understand these mysteries will be given more knowledge, and they will excel in understanding them. However, some people don't understand these mysteries. Even what they understand will be taken away from them. This is why I speak to them this way. They see, but they're blind. They hear, but they don't listen. They don't even try to understand.[Matt.13:10-13] Believers who are serious about their relationship with God will study and show themselves approved by God—*using the true teaching in the right way.*[2Tim.2:15] Not understanding the Scriptures will lead to error: *Jesus replied, "You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God.*[Matt.22:29]

Jesus taught us to pray for God's Kingdom to come and His will to be done here on earth, just as it is in heaven. The proverb: "*Absence makes the heart grow fonder*" highlights the principle that when something is missing, you want it even more—and with such limited response to the Gospel we live and teach, we yearn for God's Kingdom to come. And so when someone declares: "God says: *See, I am doing a new thing,"* it is easy to become excited and think that it is a word from God. We hope that God is about to do something spectacular so that revival will break out (except no one really explains what "*revival*" is!). However, the new thing that Isaiah was referring to is not some new experience or some new breakthrough, but the New Covenant: *Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing… I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions, for my own sake, and remembers your sins no more. Review the past for me, let us argue the matter together; state the case for your innocence.*[Is.43:18-19;25-26] Jeremiah also refers to God doing a "*new thing*": *"How long will you wander, unfaithful Daughter Israel? The LORD will create a new thing on earth—the woman will return to the man… In those days people will no longer say, 'The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge.' Instead, everyone will die for their own sin; whoever eats sour grapes—their own teeth will be set on edge. The days are coming," declares the LORD, "when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them," declares the LORD. "This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel after that time," declares the LORD. "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will they teach their neighbour, or say to one another, 'Know the LORD,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest," declares the LORD. "For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more."*[Jer.31:22-34] This is passage is quoted in Hebrews where the author explains that the "*new thing*" has nothing to do with natural Israel but everything to do with spiritual Israel and the New Covenant: *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… By calling this covenant "new," he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and outdated will soon disappear.*[Heb.8:7-13] Since the inception of the New Covenant, God is not doing anything new—the Gospel is simple, settled and spiritual. Kate Hankey's hymn "*Tell me the old, old story of Jesus and His love"* describes it well:

Tell me the old, old story of unseen things above; of Jesus and His glory, of Jesus and His love.
Tell me the story simply, as to a little child; for I am weak and weary and helpless and defiled.
Tell me the story slowly that I may take it in; that wonderful redemption, God's remedy for sin.
Tell me the story often for I forget so soon; the early dew of morning has passed away at noon.
Tell me the story softly with earnest tones and grave; remember I'm the sinner whom Jesus came to save.
Tell me the story always if you would really be in any time of trouble a comforter to me.
Tell me the same old story when you have cause to fear that this world's empty glory is costing me too dear.
Yes, and when that world's glory is dawning on my soul;
tell me the old, old story Christ Jesus makes thee whole
Tell me the old, old story of Jesus and His love.

We cannot, and we dare not, tell a different story from the old, old story of Jesus and His love. And neither can we modernize that story—because it would then be a different Gospel, which is no Gospel at all: *Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen. I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you to live in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel— which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let them be under God's curse! As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let them be under God's curse!*[Gal1:3-9] The Gospel has not changed and neither can it change because it is God's plan of salvation—and it is God's only plan of salvation: *For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile. For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed—a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith."*[Rom.1:16-17] God conceived this plan before He even created the world—and He has no other plan of salvation: *For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your ancestors, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect. He was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake.*[1Pet.1:18-20] *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] *Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.*[Matt.25:34] But although the message of the Gospel can never change, the method of communicating the Gospel will change. If people are going to receive the Gospel, they must understand what they are hearing—however we are looking for spiritual results not social results. Only the Holy Spirit can convert people and so we must be careful to keep the atmosphere of heaven in everything that we say and do. It has been said that the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result—but when it comes to preaching the Gospel, we must do the same thing over and over again—regardless of the seen results. The message must not change because it is the only message that is true. And just because we don't see much result, we should never stop sharing the same message because this is the Great Commission: *Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."*[Matt.28:18-20]

We should stop looking for "*new*" things from God because outside of the New Covenant there aren't any "*new things*" going to happen: *History merely repeats itself. It has all been done before. Nothing under the sun is truly new. Sometimes people say, "Here is something new!" But actually it is old; nothing is ever truly new. We don't remember what happened in the past, and in future generations, no one will remember what we are doing now.*[Eccl.1:9-11] Except of course the New Covenant—and with the New Covenant comes conversion when we become a brand new creation: *Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation.*[2Cor.5:17-19]

We have a new self: *For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, and in one body to reconcile*

both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.[Eph.2:14-18] *That, however, is not the way of life you learned when you heard about Christ and were taught in him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus. You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.*[Eph.4:20-24] And the New Covenant opens up for us God's mercies which are new every morning: *Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope: Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. [GOD's loyal love couldn't have run out, his merciful love couldn't have dried up. They're created new every morning. How great your faithfulness!] I say to myself, "The LORD is my portion; therefore I will wait for him." The LORD is good to those whose hope is in him, to the one who seeks him; it is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD.*[Lam.3:21-26] Even our praise is new because God creates the fruit of our lips as a sacrifice of praise to Him: *Therefore by Him let us continually offer the sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to His name.*[Heb.13:15] *I create the fruit of the lips.*[Is.57:19] No wonder the Psalmist said: *This is the day the LORD has made; we will rejoice and be glad in it.*[Ps.118:24]

May we never become distracted with a false expectation that God going to do a "*new thing*" so that we become besotted with anything and everything that looks religious and end up in superstition and deception like seeking a pot of gold at the end of a rainbow! We may or may not see a great number of conversions but we must—and will—continue to share the old, old story of Jesus and His love. This old story is always new, it is always fresh and it is always effective for those who receive it because it is *that wonderful redemption, God's remedy for sin.*

So, what's new? God's Covenant is new and His mercies are new—and this has given us a new self, with a new song on our lips. That's why we started with: *It's a morning of new songs, it's a morning to rejoice in the Lord's loving kindness and to lift up my voice. To sing "Hallelujah!" right from the start and to glorify Jesus, Morning Star of my heart.* And: *He put a new song in my mouth and He made my heart to dance; And my soul does magnify Your Name, O Lord.* Let us never forget that we are God's representatives, we are to sign-post people to Jesus as we live in the blessings of the New Covenant. *See, I am doing a new thing… I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions, for my own sake. The LORD will create a new thing on earth… The days are coming," declares the LORD, "when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah… This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel after that time... I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts… I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.* We must keep to the old, old story of Jesus and His love—but keep that story new!

Questions

What is the "*new thing*" that Isaiah and Jeremiah prophesied that God would do?
How do Old Covenant prophecies apply in the New Covenant?
What else does God do that is new?
Why did Solomon say that there nothing new? (Eccl.1:9-11)
Why doesn't the message of salvation ever change?
If the story of Jesus' love is old, how can we make it new?

Puritan Prayer of Protection

O Lord God, You are our Preserver, Governor, Saviour and coming Judge. We quieten our souls to call upon Your Name. Detach us from the influence of self and our senses. Impress us with the power of faith and promote in us a spirituality of mind that will render our services acceptable to You—and be delightful and profitable to ourselves! Bring us into that state which attracts Your eye and prepare us to receive the proofs of Your love. Show us our danger that we may fly to You for refuge. Make us sensible of sin's disease that we may value the good Physician. Placard to us the cross that it may slay the enmity of our hearts. Help us to be watchful over our ways, jealous over our tempers and diligent over our hearts. If we droop, revive us; if we loiter, quicken us; if we go astray, restore us. Possess us with that faith which is the principle of all vital godliness—that we may be rich in faith, strong in faith, live by faith, walk by faith, experience the joy of faith, hope through faith and do the work of faith. Perceiving nothing in ourselves, may we find our wisdom, righteousness, sanctification and redemption in the Saviour.

Psalm 138: I will praise you, LORD, with all my heart; before the "gods" I will sing your praise. I will bow down toward your holy temple and will praise your name for your unfailing love and your faithfulness, for you have so exalted your solemn decree that it surpasses your fame. When I called, you answered me; you greatly emboldened me. May all the kings of the earth praise you, LORD, when they hear what you have decreed. May they sing of the ways of the LORD, for the glory of the LORD is great. Though the LORD is exalted, he looks kindly on the lowly; though lofty, he sees them from afar. Though I walk in the midst of trouble, you preserve my life. You stretch out your hand against the anger of my foes; with your right hand you save me. The LORD will vindicate me; your love, LORD, endures forever—do not abandon the works of your hands.

April:

God's Glory. *I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed [when God will reveal who his children really are]. Romans 8:18-19*

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

Easter Sunday 5th April Ps. 24

Because Joy C is preaching today, I am using the "ABC of Dos and Don'ts" for our Bible Study

When trouble comes, remember these "Dos" & "Don'ts"

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

ABC of "Dos"

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

Giving thanks to God honours Him and facilitates His solution to our situation: *He who sacrifices thank offerings honours me, and he prepares the way so that I may show him the salvation of God.*[Ps.50:23]

Adoration is not only the best thing to do—it is also the blest thing to do as well!

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

3) Confess. Do confess Jesus: In the Greek language "*confession*" means *to be of one mind; to speak the same; to agree*. Thus "*confession*" is to "*say the same thing*." When we confess Jesus, we say the same as Jesus says about us, our sins and everything included in our redemption because we agree with Him. **We make our lips do their duty by making them harmonize with the Word of God and** not allowing them to say anything to the contrary! Some confess with their lips but deny in their heart—they say, "*Yes, the Word is true*," but in their heart they say, "*But it is not true in my case*." *You think like a man—you don't think like God!*[Mk.8:33] *Your thoughts concerning God are too human.*[Martin Luther] It is what we confess with our lips that really dominates our inner being. It is our privilege and duty to believe and say what we know God says about us in His Word. As we honour God by applying these principles, we will live above our circumstances instead of under them! *But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.*[1Cor.15:57]

ABC of "Don'ts"

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

2) Blame. Don't Blame others and certainly don't blame God. God is always right because He is God—but God is also good and can't be contaminated with evil: *You are good, and what you do is good;* [Ps.119:68] *God can't be tempted by evil. And he doesn't tempt anyone… Every good and perfect gift is from God. It comes down from the Father. He created the heavenly lights. He does not change like shadows that move.*[Jas.1:13-17] If anyone disagrees with God, they are opposing God and are in the wrong—which is sin: *Woe to (what sorrow awaits; how terrible it will be for) anyone who argues with his Maker!*[Is.45:9] We should be careful to always say good things—and especially say good things about God (which is praise): *Therefore, let us offer through Jesus a continual sacrifice of praise to God, proclaiming our allegiance to his name.*[Heb.13:15]

I will extol the LORD at all times; his praise will always be on my lips.[Ps.34:1] *In all this, Job did not sin by charging God with wrongdoing… In all this, Job did not sin in what he said.*[Job.1:22; 2:10] *I will be careful about how I live. I will not sin by what I say. I will keep my mouth closed when sinful people are near me.*[Ps.39:1] Blame brings bitterness which corrupts and defiles: *Look after each other so that none of you fails to receive the grace of God. Watch out that no poisonous root of bitterness grows up to trouble you, corrupting many.*[Heb.12:15] *And do not bring sorrow to God's Holy Spirit by the way you live. Remember, he has identified you as his own, guaranteeing that you will be saved on the day of redemption. Get rid of all bitterness, rage, anger, harsh words, and slander, as well as all types of evil behaviour. Instead, be kind to each other, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, just as God through Christ has forgiven you.*[Eph.4:30-32]

3) Complain. Don't complain: Complaining will destroy contentment! Complaining is a criticism of God and how He is handling our situation! *And don't grumble as some of them did...*

These things happened to them as examples for us. They were written down to warn us... If you think you are standing strong, be careful not to fall. The temptations in your life are no different from what others experience. And God is faithful. He will not allow the temptation to be more than you can stand. When you are tempted, he will show you a way out so that you can endure.[1Cor.10:10-13] Either Jesus is Lord of all or not Lord at all! God never has an "*off-day*" or a "*day off*" and He never sleeps! *My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth! He will not let you stumble; the one who watches over you will not slumber. Indeed, he who watches over Israel never slumbers or sleeps. The LORD himself watches over you!* [Ps.121:2-5] **It's all right to groan but we shouldn't moan!** *For we know that all creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. And we believers also groan, even though we have the Holy Spirit within us as a foretaste of future glory, for we long for our bodies to be released from sin and suffering.*[Rom.8:22-23] *Don't grumble about each other, my brothers and sisters, or God will judge you. For look! The great Judge is coming. He is standing at the door!*[Jas.5:9]

Questions

Why do bad things happen to good people?
Is every trouble a direct attack from the devil?
Why is it important to praise God?
What does it mean to "believe God"?
What does it mean to "confess Jesus"?
Why should we not get angry?
Why do some people blame God for their trouble?
Is it always wrong to complain?

Puritan Prayer of devotion: O God, Your main plan and the end of Your will, is to make Christ glorious and beloved in heaven where He is now ascended and where one day all the elect will behold His glory—and love and glorify Him for ever. In this world You have given me a beginning—one day it will be perfected in the realm above. You have helped me to see and know Christ (though obscurely); to take Him and receive Him; to possess Him and to love Him; to bless Him in my thought, mouth and life. Let me study and stand for discipline and all the ways of worship; to show my thankfulness out of love for Christ; to seek and know His will from love—to hold it in love and daily to care for and keep this state of thought. You have led me to place all my nature and happiness in oneness with Christ, in having thought and mind centred only on Him and in being like Him 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 the way to my 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.

Psalm 24: The earth is the LORD's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it; for he founded it on the seas and established it on the waters. Who may ascend the mountain of the LORD? Who may stand in his holy place? The one who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not trust in an idol or swear by a false god. They will receive blessing from the LORD and vindication from God their Savior. Such is the generation of those who seek him, who seek your face, God of Jacob. Lift up your heads, you gates; be lifted up, you ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in. Who is this King of glory? The LORD strong and mighty, the LORD mighty in battle. Lift up your heads, you gates; lift them up, you ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in. Who is he, this King of glory? The LORD Almighty—he is the King of glory.

Sunday 12th April 139:1-12 Jn.21

Do you love me more than these?[Jn.21:15]

To love God is the first and greatest requirement of humanity—it is actually a command: *"Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" Jesus replied: " 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment.*[Matt.22:36-38] Although this command to love God with all our heart, soul and mind was originally written for the Old Covenant, it is integral to the New Covenant. Sometimes, the Gospel has been overshadowed by the consequences of sin rather than the character of God. God is love[1Jn.4:8] and like all of God's characteristics, this attribute is eternal—God has always been love and God will always be love. God loved us before we were born: *All praise to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realms because we are united with Christ. Even before he made the world, God loved us and chose us in Christ to be holy and without fault in his eyes. God decided in advance to adopt us into his own family by bringing us to himself through Jesus Christ. This is what he wanted to do, and it gave him great pleasure. So we praise God for the glorious grace he has poured out on us who belong to his dear Son. He is so rich in kindness and grace that he purchased our freedom with the blood of his Son and forgave our sins. He has showered his kindness on us, along with all wisdom and understanding.*[Eph.1:3-8] And God loved us after we were born, even though we were sinners. *But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*[Rom.5:8] God loves all those who are not born-again—the world,[Jn.3:16] God loves all those who are born-again—the Church,[Eph.5:25] and God loves you and me as individuals.[Gal.2:20]

God showed His love for us in Jesus, when He died for the unlovely, the enemy, the stranger, the bad or the ugly—this is love in the extreme: *When we were utterly helpless, Christ came at just the right time and died for us sinners. Now, most people would not be willing to die for an upright person, though someone might perhaps be willing to die for a person who is especially good. But God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners.*[Rom.5:6-8] *Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.*[1Jn.4:8-11] Such love should produce a response from us—such as worship, adoration, praise. Of course, we need a new spirit to worship God but the fact that we responded to God's love shows that God is already at work in us. When we accept the Gospel as God's message to us rather than a good idea or helpful philosophy, the Holy Spirit makes it work in our lives: *And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is indeed at work in you who believe.*[1Thess.2:13] And our response to God's message was that we turned to God in faith and started serving 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 know how we lived among you for your sake. You became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering with the joy given by the Holy Spirit. And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. The Lord's message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia—your faith in God has become known everywhere. Therefore we do not need to say anything about it, for they themselves report what kind of reception you gave us. They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.*[1Thess.1:4-10] Now that we are Believers, we have an obligation to love God—and we love God because we want to, not because we must (even though it is a command). We want to walk with the Spirit, we want to keep in step with the Holy Spirit, we want to stay in harmony with God and we want to fellowship with God: *Walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.*

For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.[Gal.5:16-18] It is the willing who enjoy God's blessings: *If you are willing and obedient, you will eat the good things of the land.*[Is.1:19]

The fruit of the Spirit is the character of God, which is dominated by love—and you can't produce love by rules or legislation: *But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law [Legalism is helpless in bringing this about; it only gets in the way]. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other.*[Gal.5:22-26] Love is a willing, personal response and our love for God is a willing, personal response to God's love: *This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.*[1Jn.4:10] When Jesus asked Peter if he loved Him, He was encouraging Peter to examine his innermost thoughts and confess his genuine love for Him. *The third time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, "Do you love me?" He said, "Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you."*[Jn.21:17] We should regularly examine our faith and affirm that we are true Believers—to be sure that Christ Jesus is in our heart as well as in heaven: *Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you—unless, of course, you fail the test?*[2Cor.13:5] Expressing our love in words is important—that is what praise is. Very simply, praise is saying good words about God and worship is saying good words to God—"*benediction*" means "*good words*" and "*doxology*" means "*glory words*". Of course, praise and worship consists of much more than merely saying words, but words are a good place to start. *I will extol the LORD at all times; his praise will always be on my lips.*[Ps.34:1] *May my lips overflow with praise, for you teach me your decrees.*[Ps.119:171] Jesus responded to Peter's declaration of love by saying: *Feed my sheep.*[Jn 21:17] Worship is not singing songs but serving God. When Abraham went with Isaac to worship God on the mountain, God commended him for his obedience: *Early the next morning Abraham got up and loaded his donkey. He took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac. When he had cut enough wood for the burnt offering, he set out for the place God had told him about. On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance. He said to his servants, "Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you." … I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies, and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me."* [Gen.22:3-18]

Last week Joy talked about serving God and mentioned giving and tithing. For many evangelical Christians, giving has almost become a legalistic requirement instead of a demonstration of their love for God. Some Churches teach that because Abraham tithed before the Old Covenant was given, tithing must continue into the New Covenant. *Just think how great he was: Even the patriarch Abraham gave him a tenth of the plunder! Now the law requires the descendants of Levi who become priests to collect a tenth from the people—that is, from their fellow Israelites—even though they also are descended from Abraham. This man, however, did not trace his descent from Levi, yet he collected a tenth from Abraham and blessed him who had the promises. And without doubt the lesser is blessed by the greater. In the one case, the tenth is collected by people who die; but in the other case, by him who is declared to be living. One might even say that Levi, who collects the tenth, paid the tenth through Abraham, because when Melchizedek met Abraham, Levi was still in the body of his ancestor.*[Heb.7:4-10] They also quote from Malachi (Old Covenant) to explain that by not tithing we rob God but by tithing we release more blessings than we can handle: *"Will a mere mortal rob God? Yet you rob me. "But you ask, 'How are we robbing you?' "In tithes and offerings. You are under a curse—your whole nation—because you are robbing me. Bring the whole tithe into*

the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this," says the LORD Almighty, "and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that there will not be room enough to store it. I will prevent pests from devouring your crops, and the vines in your fields will not drop their fruit before it is ripe," says the LORD Almighty. "Then all the nations will call you blessed, for yours will be a delightful land," says the LORD Almighty.[Mal.3:8-12] Let me explain what we believe that Bible teaches about Christian giving. God made this world and He owns everything in this world and so God does not need our money—He is not poor and He is not in want: *The earth is the LORD's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it.*[Ps.24:1] Even under the Old Covenant, God wanted people's love not lambs: *Sacrifice and offering you did not desire—but my ears you have opened—burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not require. Then I said, "Here I am, I have come—it is written about me in the scroll. I desire to do your will, my God; your law is within my heart." I proclaim your saving acts in the great assembly; I do not seal my lips, LORD, as you know.*[Ps.40:6-9] We are in the New Covenant and so we are not under the Law but grace: *For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.*[Jn.1:17] *Do not offer any part of yourself to sin as an instrument of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer every part of yourself to him as an instrument of righteousness. For sin shall no longer be your master, because you are not under the law, but under grace.*[Rom.6:13-14] We were saved by grace and we live our out our saved life by grace, not by giving money. However, there is a principle that God established right from the beginning—the principle of sowing and reaping. When God created the world, He created fruit with seed in it: *Then God said, "Let the land produce vegetation: seed-bearing plants and trees on the land that bear fruit with seed in it, according to their various kinds." And it was so. The land produced vegetation: plants bearing seed according to their kinds and trees bearing fruit with seed in it according to their kinds. And God saw that it was good.*[Gen.1:11-12] God's provisions always include bread to eat and seed to sow: *Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness.*[2Cor.9:10] In other words, God expects us to use some of what we have received but also give (sow) from what we have received: *For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you.*[1Cor.11:23] *Moses received living words to pass on to us.*[Acts.7:38] God established seasons of seedtime and harvest: *As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night will never cease.*[Gen.8:22] And in the New Covenant, this principle of sowing and reaping continues, not just with nature but also with our own lives: *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!*[2Cor9:6-15] Paul is talking explicitly (but not exclusively), about money. When we give at Church, it is not primarily to finance the Church—although of course it does finance the Church, because the money that the Church receives pays the bills and allows us to meet together in a dry warm place. Our giving is a tangible and practical way to express our appreciation of God for our salvation and so we give our Offerings as an expression of our love for God. Our giving is an integral part of our worship, just as our singing

and prayers are part of our worship. Our "*Confession over our Living and Giving*" is taken from the Bible and when we thank God for *"true prosperity in Jesus Name*" we are not referring to an abundance of money but an abundance of blessings: *Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.*[Eph.1:3] We believe that the whole Bible is God's Word and is inspired by the Holy Spirit, but we must interpret everything in the context of the New Covenant. Nevertheless, principle of sowing/reaping is true throughout all generations: *One person gives freely, yet gains even more; another withholds unduly, but comes to poverty. A generous person will prosper; whoever refreshes others will be refreshed.*[Prov.11:24-25] *Sow your seed in the morning, and at evening let your hands not be idle, for you do not know which will succeed, whether this or that, or whether both will do equally well.*[Eccl.11:6] Because our giving is an act of worship (an expression of God's worth-ship to us) we must decide for ourself what we give and not be coerced by others—and when we give, we should give cheerfully, willingly and 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.*[2Cor.9:7]

So, how will you answer Jesus' question: *Do you love me more than these?*[Jn.21:15] I trust that you will respond the same as Peter: "*Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you."* And Jesus will respond: *"Feed my sheep"*. There is work to do, but remember: *And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love. Follow the way of love and eagerly desire gifts of the Spirit, especially prophecy.*[1Cor.13:13-14:1]

Questions

Why is loving God with all our heart, soul and mind the greatest of all the commandments?

How can we show our love for God?

How important are the words that we speak?

If God already owns everything, why do we "*give to God*"?

Explain: *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.*[2Cor.9:10]

How can we feed Jesus' sheep?

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

Psalm 139:1-12 You have searched me, LORD, and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways. Before a word is on my tongue you, LORD, know it completely. You hem me in behind and before, and you lay your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain. Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast. If I say, "Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me," even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you.

Sunday 19th April Ps.139:13-24

Discernment. *You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.*[Matt.16:16]

Last week we mentioned a video testimony of someone in Iran whose life was saved after Jesus apparently appeared in a meeting just before Tehran was bombed in March this year (because the dates are wrong, the video is most likely to be "*fake news*"). This prompted me to think about discernment and especially about what we believe. We should follow the Bereans' example and check what we hear: *Now the Berean Jews were of more noble character than those in Thessalonica, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.*[Acts 17:11]

When Peter declared publicly that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the living God, he was making the most profound statement anyone can make—that Jesus was both human and divine. Mary and Joseph knew of Jesus' true identity: *But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" (which means "God with us").*[Matt.1:20-23] But although Jesus' conception was supernatural, His birth was a natural birth just like any other baby and His childhood was just like any other childhood (except that He committed no sin: *God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*[2Cor.5:21]). Not even Jesus' cousin John knew that He was the Christ—until God told him! *Then John gave this testimony: I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him. I would not have known him, except that the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, 'The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is he who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.' I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God.*[Jn.1:32-34] Jesus' brothers must have treated Him as just another sibling because they did not believe Him to be anything out of the ordinary: *But when the Jewish Feast of Tabernacles was near, Jesus' brothers said to him, "You ought to leave here and go to Judea, so that your disciples may see the miracles you do. No one who wants to become a public figure acts in secret. Since you are doing these things, show yourself to the world." For even his own brothers did not believe in him.*[Jn.7:2-5] *When his family heard about this, they went to take charge of him, for they said, "He is out of his mind."*[Mk.3:21] But after His resurrection, Jesus revealed Himself to His brother James: *For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born. For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.*[1Cor.15:3-9] After James the brother of

John (who was one of the 12 apostles) was executed, it was James, the step-brother of Jesus, who became leader of the Church in Jerusalem. *Then after three years, I went up to Jerusalem to get acquainted with Cephas and stayed with him fifteen days. I saw none of the other apostles—only James, the Lord's brother. I assure you before God that what I am writing you is no lie.*[Gal.1:18-20] And James introduces himself in his letter as, *a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.*[Jas.1:1] Something had changed for James—his step-brother Jesus was no longer Jesus his sibling but the ***Lord Jesus Christ***. James knew that Jesus was the Christ, God's promised Saviour who would save His people from their sins. The same revelation happened to Jude—another brother of Jesus (and James): *Jude, a servant of Jesus Christ and a brother of James, To those who have been called, who are loved in God the Father and kept for Jesus Christ… To him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy— to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen.*[Jude 1-25] The recognition of Jesus' eternal status—*before all ages, now and forevermore*—is what John the apostle wrote about: *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning.*[Jn.1:1-2] *"I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, "who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty."*[Rev.1:8] The belief in Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the Living God is pivotal to true faith and to Christianity. *And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us.*[1Jn.3:23] *In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*[Phil.2:5-11] And yet from the beginning. the Church has been beset with people calling themselves Christians, yet not believing that Jesus is truly God and truly human. *But you have an anointing from the Holy One, and all of you know the truth. I do not write to you because you do not know the truth, but because you do know it and because no lie comes from the truth. Who is the liar? It is whoever denies that Jesus is the Christ. Such a person is the antichrist—denying the Father and the Son. No one who denies the Son has the Father; whoever acknowledges the Son has the Father also. As for you, see that what you have heard from the beginning remains in you. If it does, you also will remain in the Son and in the Father. And this is what he promised us—eternal life. I am writing these things to you about those who are trying to lead you astray.*[1Jn.2:20-26] *Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and everyone who loves the father loves his child as well. This is how we know that we love the children of God: by loving God and carrying out his commands. In fact, this is love for God: to keep his commands. And his commands are not burdensome, for everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world? Only the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.*[1Jn.5:1-5]

John warned about people who promote Jesus as a pleasant person or even a powerful prophet but deny His humanity and/or deity—he calls them "*false teachers*": *Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world.*[1Jn.4:1-3] *I say this because many deceivers, who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh, have gone out into the world. Any such person is the deceiver and the antichrist. Watch out that you do not lose what we have worked for, but that you may be rewarded fully. Anyone who runs ahead and does not continue in the teaching of Christ does not have God; whoever continues in the teaching has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does*

not bring this teaching, do not take them into your house or welcome them. Anyone who welcomes them shares in their wicked work.[2Jn.7-11] This denial of Jesus' humanity and/or deity has continued and the Church still needs to confront this false teaching. When the Roman Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity in 312 A.D., he quickly granted full tolerance to Christianity (as well as to all other religions) and in 325 A.D., Constantine convened a Council where up to 2000 delegates, including 318 Bishops from all across the Empire (all expenses paid!) met at Nicaea (in modern day Turkey). The primary issue was to address the Arian controversy, which taught that Jesus Christ was a created being who was not fully divine and co-eternal with God but was subordinate the Father. The outcome was the Nicene Creed which states that: *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.* The word "*begotten*" here means "*unique, one of a kind*" and is a different word from "*begot*" which means to "*father*": *And Jacob begot Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus who is called Christ.*[Matt.1:16] God the Father did not create or procreate God the Son who was with God from the beginning and was God: *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning.*[Jn.1:1-2] The three Persons of the Trinity are so united that we can call them one God but there are still people who do not believe in the three distinct Persons of the Triune God. The obvious groups are the Jehovah Witnesses and the Mormons (which are not considered true believers) but there are other Unitarians such as Oneness Pentecostals (which includes T.D. Jakes) who emphasize the absolute oneness of God and the full deity of Jesus Christ, but believe that God is a singular divine Spirit, who reveals himself in various ways, as the Father (OT), the Son (in the Gospels), and the Holy Spirit (today).

Dangerous ideas are often promoted by really nice people and it requires discernment to evaluate an idea, teaching, or doctrine without being beguiled by the teacher's charm or winsome personality! This can be especially difficult when it appears that the false teacher is genuinely being used by God to evangelise the lost. But because of the increased number of winsome and charming teachers who have gained a global platform through the sale of their books, television appearances or shows, radio programs podcasts and websites, the need for the gift of discernment has never been greater for Christians. *Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world.*[1Jn.4:1] There seems to be many non-Christian people (and sadly some Christian people) who have realised that there is a lot of money to made from naïve Christians. All they have to do is make their material sound Christian by throwing in vague quotes of Scripture or references to "*God*" or "*Jesus*" and many Christians can never tell the difference.

God is a title rather than a name and a credible example of the Trinity is the joint Monarchy we had after the Glorious Revolution of 1688. King William and Queen Mary were both monarchs who reigned jointly. We believe in one God: *Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.*[Deut.6:4] *Many things in heaven and on earth are called gods and lords, but none of them really are gods or lords. We have only one God, and he is the Father. He created everything, and we live for him. Jesus Christ is our only Lord. Everything was made by him, and by him life was given to us.*[1Cor.8:5-6] But we also believe in the distinctness of each of three Persons of the Godhead—Father, Son and Holy Spirit: *In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light.*[Gen.1:1-3] *You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end." … The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born*

will be called the Son of God.[Lk.1:31-35] *As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."*[Matt.3:16-17] *Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.*[Matt.28:19] *May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.*[2Cor.13:14] The following Scriptures clearly show that Jesus is distinct from the Father: *In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;*[Phil.2:5-6] *Jesus called out with a loud voice, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." When he had said this, he breathed his last.*[Lk.23:46] *So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me."*[Jn.11:41-42]

In order to be able to investigate and discern false claims and dismiss superstitions and myths, we must have at least a basic grasp of who God is. It is only through faith that we are saved—and that faith includes believing that God (the Father) raised Jesus from the dead and publicly declaring our belief that Jesus is Lord (that is God). *If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved.*[Rom.10:9-10] If the Jesus we believe in, was created or was a mere human, then He is not God and is a different Jesus to whom Peter said: *You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.*[Matt.16:16] And he is a different Jesus to whom Martha said: *"Yes, Lord," she told him, "I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world."*[Jn.11:27] And he is a different Jesus who said to John: *"Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades.*[Rev.1:17-18] Believing in the real Jesus is the only way we can be saved: *then know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed. He is "'the stone you builders rejected, which has become the capstone.' Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved."*[Acts.4:10-12] And believing in the real Jesus is the work that God wants us to do: *Then they asked him, "What must we do to do the works God requires?" Jesus answered, "The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent."*[Jn.6:28-29] No wonder the Bible says that keeping God's commands are not difficult! *Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and everyone who loves the father loves his child as well. This is how we know that we love the children of God: by loving God and carrying out his commands. This is love for God: to obey his commands. And his commands are not burdensome, for everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world? Only he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.*[1Jn.5:1-5]

Without good discernment we will be taken advantage of and even abused. Improving our ability to discern will help to guard our credibility from things that have the potential to make us look or sound stupid. May God help us to be more discerning. God knows we need it now more than ever.

Questions

What does the title "*Christ*" mean?
How does Jesus fulfill the title of "*Christ*"?
How can one God be three distinct Persons (*Father, Son and Holy Spirit*)?
Why is it important to have a basic understanding about God?
Why did Jesus mean when He said that we should not judge? (*Luke 6:37*)
Why should we check out what we hear about God and His Kingdom?

Puritan Prayer: The Heart—O God, may Your Spirit speak in me, that I may speak to You. I have no merit but the merit of Jesus which stands for me. I was undeserving—but I looked to Your tender mercy. I was full of infirmities, wants and sin—but You were full of grace. I confessed my sin—my frequent sin, my wilful sin and You gave me another master and lord, Your Son, Jesus. Now my heart is turned towards holiness and my life speeds as an arrow from a bow towards complete obedience to You. Help me in all my doings to put down sin, and save me from the love of the world and the pride of life. Deliver me from everything that is natural to fallen man and let Christ's nature be seen in me day by day. Grant me grace to bear Your will without repining (*feel or express discontent; fret*), so I will delight to be not only chiselled, squared and fashioned, but also separated from the old rock where I was embedded for so long. You have lifted me from the quarry to the upper air, where I am being built in Christ for ever.
Psalm 139:13-24: For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well. My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place, when I was woven together in the depths of the earth. Your eyes saw my unformed body; all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be. How precious to me are your thoughts, God! How vast is the sum of them! Were I to count them, they would outnumber the grains of sand— when I awake, I am still with you. If only you, God, would slay the wicked! Away from me, you who are bloodthirsty! They speak of you with evil intent; your adversaries misuse your name. Do I not hate those who hate you, LORD, and abhor those who are in rebellion against you? I have nothing but hatred for them; I count them my enemies. Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.

Sunday 26th April Ps.145:13

God's Kingdom is here (in part)!

Last week we looked at Peter's profound statement that Jesus was the *Christ, the Son of the living God.*[Matt.16:16] Christ (or Messiah) is the title of the God's promised Saviour who would redeem Israel: *"The days are coming," declares the LORD, "when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. This is the name by which he will be called: The LORD Our Righteous Saviour."*[Jer.23:5-6] The Bible prophesied that the Messiah would establish God's Kingdom on earth. *Then you will know that I, the LORD, am your Saviour, your Redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob... I will make peace your governor and well-being your ruler. No longer will violence be heard in your land, nor ruin or destruction within your borders, but you will call your walls Salvation and your gates Praise.*[Is.60:15-18] The Messianic prophecies are fulfilled in Jesus—in the Lord not the land, in the Child not the city. And when Jesus fulfilled the Messianic prophecies, God's promises were expanded to include all who will believe: *Then Peter began to speak: "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favouritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right. You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, announcing the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all.*[Act.10:34-36] *Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and he is the one whom Timothy, Silas, and I have preached to you—and he has never been both a "yes" and a "no." He has always been and always will be for us a resounding "YES!" For all of God's promises find their "yes" of fulfilment in him. And as his "yes" and our "amen" ascend to God, we bring him glory!*[2Cor.1:19-20] John the Baptist's mission was to prepare the way for the Messiah: *In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah: "A voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.' "*[Matt.3:1-3] And John categorically declared that Jesus was the

Messiah: *This was John's testimony when the Jewish leaders sent priests and Temple assistants from Jerusalem to ask John, "Who are you?" He came right out and said, "I am not the Messiah." …The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Look! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! He is the one I was talking about when I said, 'A man is coming after me who is far greater than I am, for he existed long before me.' I did not recognize him as the Messiah, but I have been baptizing with water so that he might be revealed to Israel."*[Jn.1:19-31] Jesus explained what God's Kingdom is like: *the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it.*[Matt.13:45-46] *Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. [God blesses those people who depend only on him. They belong to the kingdom of heaven!]*[Matt.5:3] Jesus also explained that God's Kingdom was not a political kingdom but a spiritual Kingdom: *Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place." "You are a king, then!" said Pilate. Jesus answered, "You are right in saying I am a king. In fact, for this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me."*[Jn.18:36-37] This was in stark contrast to the Jewish expectation of a Messiah who would deliver them from the Roman oppression. *After the people saw the sign Jesus performed, they began to say, "Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world." Jesus, knowing that they intended to come and make him king by force, withdrew again to a mountain by himself.*[Jn.6:14-15] *The next day the great crowd that had come for the festival heard that Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem. They took palm branches and went out to meet him, shouting, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the king of Israel!" Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it, as it is written: "Do not be afraid, Daughter Zion; see, your king is coming, seated on a donkey's colt." At first his disciples did not understand all this. Only after Jesus was glorified did they realize that these things had been written about him and that these things had been done to him.*[Jn.12:12-16] Kingdom means the domain or rule of a king and so God's Kingdom is God's rule—not over a geographical area or as a political authority but in people's lives: *Once, having been asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, Jesus replied, "The kingdom of God does not come with your careful observation, nor will people say, 'Here it is,' or 'There it is,' because the kingdom of God is within you."*[Lk.17:20-21] And God's Kingdom is His will being done here and now on earth—in the same way as God's will is being done in heaven: *your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.*[Matt.6:10]

We also mentioned last week the Nicene Creed which was formulated in 325A.D. to clarify concisely what we believe about God: *For our sake [Jesus] 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.* The Kingdom that Jesus preached about and established during His ministry on earth did have a beginning but it has no end: *Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this.*[Is.9:7] People have postulated and disputed about God's Kingdom and even fallen out over their particular view—but most of the disagreements stem from ignoring **the purpose of Scripture, which is to reveal God's plan of salvation through Jesus**: *You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life.*[Jn.5:39-40] *He said to them, "How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.*[Lk.24:25-27] *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."*[Jn.1:45] Although reading the Bible should be straightforward, if we don't understand the purpose of Scripture,

we will soon get distracted with apparent discrepancies or technical details. Jesus said: *You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God.*[Matt.22:29] However, the Bible is much more than a text book—it is a spiritual book that needs the Holy Spirit to make it real and relevant: *We are not like Moses, who would put a veil over his face to prevent the Israelites from seeing the end of what was passing away. But their minds were made dull, for to this day the same veil remains when the old covenant is read. It has not been removed, because only in Christ is it taken away. Even to this day when Moses is read, a veil covers their hearts. But whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away.*[2Cor.3:12-16] *However, as it is written: "What no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, and what no human mind has conceived"—the things God has prepared for those who love him—these are the things God has revealed to us by his Spirit. The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God. For who knows a person's thoughts except their own spirit within them? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. What we have received is not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may understand what God has freely given us. This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, explaining spiritual realities with Spirit-taught words. The person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God but considers them foolishness, and cannot understand them because they are discerned only through the Spirit. The person with the Spirit makes judgments about all things, but such a person is not subject to merely human judgments, for, "Who has known the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?" But we have the mind of Christ.*[1Cor.2:9-16] Once we take our eyes off the main focus of Scripture—which is Jesus—we will get lost in the mire of legalism, words and works. *But avoid foolish controversies and genealogies and arguments and quarrels about the law, because these are unprofitable and useless. Warn a divisive person once, and then warn them a second time. After that, have nothing to do with them. You may be sure that such people are warped and sinful; they are self-condemned.*[Tit.3:9-11] Eugene Peterson says: *Don't get so bogged down in the details of doctrine that you miss the point of salvation, or so absorbed in the trees of history that you miss the forest of faith. We need to keep focused on Jesus.* When it comes to God's Kingdom, some people (even evangelical Christians) get so worked up about their particular doctrine that they lose the very characteristics of God's Kingdom—their "*heavenliness*": *For the kingdom of God is not a matter of rules about food and drink, but is in the realm of the Holy Spirit, filled with righteousness, peace, and joy. Serving the Anointed One by walking in these kingdom realities pleases God and earns the respect of others. So then, make it your top priority to live a life of peace with harmony in your relationships, eagerly seeking to strengthen and encourage one another.*[Rom.14:17-19] Instead of focusing on the future and as yet, un-fulfilled, prophesies about God's Kingdom we should make sure that we live in the Kingdom of God that is already here—the rule of Christ in our hearts. *Jesus replied: " 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment.*[Matt.22:37-38] If we are not loving God with all that we have and all that we are, we are building our life on the wrong foundation, which will make everything else in our life out of sync with God and His values. When it comes to the future fulfilment of God's Kingdom, there are some clear descriptions to what will happen and there are some opaque references that when mixed together (perhaps I should say "*bodged together*") with similar passages, become fanciful theories that belong in the category of Science Fiction! One of the fanciful theories about God's Kingdom is that will have utopia here on earth before Jesus returns and it is up to us to make the world ready—when we have peace on earth then Jesus will come back. But Jesus said: *I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.*[Jn.16:33] Jesus also said that He would prepare a place for us—not that we must prepare a place for Him: *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.*[Jn.14:1-3]

Undoubtedly, the simplest and clearest description of the future fulfilment of God's Kingdom is what Paul received direct from Jesus: *But here is the order of events. Christ is the first of those who rise from the dead. When he comes back, those who belong to him will be raised. Then the end will come. Christ will destroy all rule, authority and power. He will hand over the kingdom to God the Father. Christ must rule until he has put all his enemies under his control. The last enemy that will be destroyed is death.*[1Cor.15:23-26] *According to the Lord's word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage one another with these words.*[1Thess.4:15-18] When Jesus returns it will not be in secret with some people wondering what has happened—**Jesus' return will be visible, audible and complete!**

That is why we are encouraged to stay alert: *So keep watch. You do not know the day or the hour that the groom will come.*[Matt.25:13] *So keep watch! You do not know when the owner of the house will come back. It may be in the evening or at midnight. It may be when the rooster crows or at dawn. He may come suddenly. So do not let him find you sleeping. What I say to you, I say to everyone. 'Watch!'*[Mk.13:35-37] *Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful.*[Col.4:2] *Therefore, with minds that are alert and fully sober, set your hope on the grace to be brought to you when Jesus Christ is revealed at his coming.*[1Pet.1:13]

Although God's Kingdom has come in part, it is far from complete because God's Will is not being done here on earth as it is in heaven. Jesus' last words to His Disciples before He ascended to His Father were: *Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."*[Matt.28:18-20] Jesus has done His part and now it is up to us to do our part. Whilst we would like everyone to become Believers, we are realistic and recognise that most people will not become Believers. Nevertheless, our commission is to make Disciples. Christianity is a spiritual religion that requires the Holy Spirit convert people because unless someone is born again, they cannot see God's Kingdon: *Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again."*[Jn.3:3] We are saved by grace through faith,[Eph.2:8] and faith comes from hearing the Word of God—but how can they hear unless someone tells them! *If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved. As Scripture says, "Anyone who believes in him will never be put to shame." For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile—the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, for, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can anyone preach unless they are sent? As it is written: "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!"*[Rom.10:9-15] Let's make sure that we maintain a clear and credible witness for Jesus the Christ, the Son of the Living God.

Questions

What is God's Kingdom?
Why are there so many views about God's Kingdom?
Why did John need to prepare people for the coming Kingdom?
Can this earth be like heaven?
Do we have a role in bringing heaven to earth?
When will God's Kingdom be complete?

Puritan Prayer—Meeting God: Great God, in public and private, in sanctuary and home, may my life be steeped in prayer, filled with the spirit of grace and supplication, and each prayer perfumed with the incense of atoning blood. Help me and defend me, until from praying ground I pass to the realm of unceasing praise. Urged by my need, invited by Your promises and called by Your Spirit, I enter Your presence, worshipping You with godly fear, awed by Your majesty, greatness and glory, but encouraged by Your love. By myself, I am all poverty as well as all guilt, having nothing of my own with which to repay You, but I bring Jesus to You in the arms of faith, pleading His righteousness to offset my iniquities, rejoicing that He will weigh down the scales for me and satisfy Your justice. I bless You that great sin draws out great grace and that although the least sin deserves infinite punishment because done against an infinite God, yet there is mercy for me—for where guilt is most terrible, there Your mercy in Christ is most free and deep. Bless me by revealing to me more of His saving merits, by causing Your goodness to pass before me and by speaking peace to my contrite heart. Strengthen me to give You no rest until Christ reigns supreme within me in every thought, word, and deed, and in a faith that purifies the heart, overcomes the world, works by love, fastens me to You and ever clings to the cross.

Psalm 145:1-13: I will exalt you, my God the King; I will praise your name for ever and ever. Every day I will praise you and extol your name for ever and ever. Great is the LORD and most worthy of praise; his greatness no one can fathom. One generation commends your works to another; they tell of your mighty acts. They speak of the glorious splendour of your majesty—and I will meditate on your wonderful works. They tell of the power of your awesome works—and I will proclaim your great deeds. They celebrate your abundant goodness and joyfully sing of your righteousness. The LORD is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love. The LORD is good to all; he has compassion on all he has made. All your works praise you, LORD; your faithful people extol you. They tell of the glory of your kingdom and speak of your might, so that all people may know of your mighty acts and the glorious splendour of your kingdom. Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and your dominion endures through all generations. The LORD is trustworthy in all he promises and faithful in all he does.

May:

God's Glory. *So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God. 1Corinthians 10:31*

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

Sunday 3rd May Psalm 145:10-21

Give us this day our daily bread. *Matt.6:11*

The Yellowhammer is a bird in the Bunting group and its song sounds a little bit like "*a little bit of bread and no chee-eese*". When Jesus taught us to pray for our daily bread, He didn't mean that we should only eat bread and no cheese, but rather we should daily acknowledge our dependence on God for everything! (Bread in this context refers to food in general rather than the literal baked flour and water that we call bread.) The social benefits in our country are both a blessing and a curse: they are a blessing because, although social benefits haven't eradicated poverty, we no longer have people relegated to a workhouse or dying of starvation—and they are a curse because they have opened up a culture of expecting something-for-nothing and a lifestyle of dependence on the State. And whilst there is no blessing in poverty, it is easier to become rich in faith if we are materially poor: *Listen, my dear brothers and sisters: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him?*[Jas.2:5] *For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.*[2Cor.8:9] But whether we are materially poor or rich, the Gospel is the only way to become rich with God—and right with God: *For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile. For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed—a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith."*[Rom.1:16-17] And to appropriate the benefits of God's Kingdom, we need to acknowledge our dependence on God: *Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. [God blesses those people who depend only on him. They belong to the kingdom of heaven!]*[Matt.5:3] Adam's original work was worship. Before sin entered the world, Adam was told to work the Garden: *The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to <u>work</u> it and take care of it.*[Gen.2:15] But that same word used for work is also translated "*worship*": *And God said, "I will be with you. And this will be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will <u>worship</u> God on this mountain."*[Ex.3:12] It was Adam's sin that caused work to become wearisome and a chore: *By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return.*[Gen.3:19] But when our relationship with God has been restored, we should be able to find enjoyment in our work: *A person can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in their own toil. This too, I see, is from the hand of God, for without him, who can eat or find enjoyment? To the person who pleases him, God gives wisdom, knowledge and happiness.*[Eccl.2:24-25] When we became a Christian, we acknowledged that Jesus is Lord—that is, God is now our ultimate employer and so our work should be an act of worship: *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… Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything; and do it, not only when their eye is on you and to curry their favour, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord. Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving.*[Col.3:17-24] *So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.*[1Cor.10:31]

God provides bread for us to eat but He also provides seed to sow—and when we sow our seed (that is, when we give), it is an expression of our thanks to God and others are blessed as well! *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 made rich 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 God's people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God. Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, men 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.*[2Cor.9:10-13] John Wesley described the Christian work-ethic very succinctly: "*Having first gained all you can, and, secondly saved all you can, then give all you can*". Paul's teaching on work was simple: *For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: "If a man will not work, he shall not eat." We hear that some among you are idle. They are not busy; they are busybodies. Such people we command and urge in the Lord Jesus Christ to settle down and earn the bread they eat. And as for you, brothers, never tire of doing what is right.*[2Thess.3:10-13] Although this initially appears harsh, but the Greek actually says "*If a man does not intend or desire to work"* which is quite different from *cannot* work! And it must be taken in the context of the early Church's practical love of providing for those in need: *All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.*[Acts.2:44-47]

When we were born-again, we received the same spiritual characteristics as Christ because share the same heavenly Father. *Jesus said, "Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.' "*[Jn.20:17] Jesus was totally dependent on His heavenly Father: *For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me.*[Jn.6:38] *Jesus said, "When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am he and that I do nothing on my own but speak just what the Father has taught me. The one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what pleases him." Even as he spoke, many believed in him.*[Jn.8:28-30] And we too are dependent on our Heavenly Father—whether we acknowledge it or not! Moses warned the Israelites not to forget their dependence on God: *When you have eaten and are satisfied, praise the LORD your God for the good land he has given you. Be careful that you do not forget the LORD your God, failing to observe his commands, his laws and his decrees that I am giving you this day. Otherwise, when you eat and are satisfied, when you build fine houses and settle down, and when your herds and flocks grow large and your silver and gold increase and all you have is multiplied, then your heart will become proud and you will forget the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. He led you through the vast and dreadful wilderness, that thirsty and waterless land, with its venomous snakes and scorpions. He brought you water out of hard rock. He gave you manna to eat in the wilderness, something your ancestors had never known, to humble and test you so that in the end it might go well with you. You may say to yourself, "My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me." But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth, and so confirms his covenant, which he swore to your ancestors, as it is today.*[Deut.8:10-18] Saying "*grace*"—giving thanks to God before we eat—is a good habit because as well as showing our gratitude to God for our daily food, it also reminds us that we are dependent on God for everything. Jesus gave thanks to God for His food: *And he directed the people to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the people.*[Matt.14:19] *Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you.*[Matt.26:27] *When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them.*[Lk.24:30] Paul gave public thanks for 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. They were all encouraged and ate some food themselves. Altogether there were 276 of us on board.[Acts.27:35-37] And we too, are told to give thanks for our food: *For everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, because it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer.*[1Tim.4:4-5] *Whoever eats meat does so to the Lord, for they give thanks to God; and whoever abstains does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God.*[Rom.14:6] However, there is more to life than the physical food or possessions: *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… For life is more than food, and the body more than clothes.*[Lk.12:15;23] Human beings are not a body with thinking ability and neither are we a spirit living in a body—we are an integrated unity of spirit, soul and body. *May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it.*[1Thess.5:23-24] *For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.*[Heb.4:12] That is why we must be born again—because until our spirit is made holy (or rather replaced with a righteous spirit), we cannot relate to God and remain dead in our sins. *As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath. But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.*[Eph.2:1-10]

We became a Christian by believing that God raised Jesus from the dead and confessing Jesus as Lord.[Rom.10:10] This means that the Lordship (authority) of Jesus must dominate our whole life—our thoughts, our words and our actions. Our old life is past and we now have a new life to live: *I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.*[Gal.2:20] We now want to submit to God's authority and obey Him: *"Come now, let us settle the matter [let us reason together]," says the LORD. "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool. If you are willing and obedient, you will eat the good things of the land.*[Is.1:18-19] Although our behaviour can affect our relationship with God, physical food cannot make us more spiritual or less spiritual—spirit is eternal and physical is temporal: *"I have the right to do anything," you say—but not everything is beneficial. "I have the right to do anything"—but I will not be mastered by anything. You say, "Food for the stomach and the stomach for food, and God will destroy them both."*[1Cor.6:12-13] *But food does not bring us near to God; we are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do.*[1Cor.8:8] We need physical food for our bodies but we need spiritual food for our spirit—and spiritual food is the Word of God: *Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.*[Matt.4:4] Our spiritual food (God's Word) benefits our body as well as our spirit: *Do not set foot on the path of the wicked or walk in the way of evil men. They eat the bread of wickedness and drink the wine of violence… The path of the righteous is like the first gleam of dawn, shining ever brighter till the full light of day. My son, pay attention to what I say; listen closely to my words. Do not let them out of your sight, keep them within your heart; for they are life to those who find them and health to a man's whole body. Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life. Put away perversity from your mouth; keep corrupt talk far from your lips.* [Prov.4:14-24] To access anything in God's Kingdom we need faith: *And without faith it is impossible to please*

God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.[Heb.11:6] *The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.*[Gal.5:6] *In fact, this is love for God: to keep his commands. And his commands are not burdensome, for everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world? Only the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.*[1Jn 5:3-5] Faith is trusting God and what Jesus accomplished by His death on the cross—and by faith we can "*buy*" the very best spiritual food without spending any money! *Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost. Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labour on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and you will delight in the richest of fare. Give ear and come to me; listen, that you may live. I will make an everlasting covenant with you, my faithful love promised to David.*[Is.55:1-3] God has already given us everything we need for our Chrisitan life: *Grace and peace be yours in abundance through the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord. His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature, having escaped the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.*[2Pet.1:2-4] We have been blessed with every spiritual blessing and now it is up to us to participate in God's blessings: *Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will— to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and understanding, he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfilment—to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.*[Eph.1:3-10] We enjoy God's blessings by staying in harmony with Him—this is called "*fellowship*": *May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.*[2Cor.13:14] *We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. We write this to make our joy complete.*[1Jn 1:3-4] *So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh… But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other.*[Gal.5:16-26] So let's ask God for our daily needs—including bread (with cheese). As we acknowledge our dependence on Him and share what He has given us, God will be honoured and we will be a blessing to others.

Questions

Why should we ask God for our daily bread when He has given us everything we need?
How does physical food affect our spiritual life?
How does spiritual food affect our physical life?
What does "*Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost"* mean?
How do we access God's blessings?

Puritan Prayer—Openness: Lord of immortality, before whom angels bow and archangels veil their faces, enable me to serve You with reverence and godly fear. You who are Spirit and require truth in the inward parts, help me to worship You in spirit and in truth. You who are righteous, let me not harbour sin in my heart, or indulge a worldly temper, or seek satisfaction in things that perish. I hasten towards an hour when earthly pursuits and possessions will appear vain, when it will be indifferent whether I have been rich or poor, successful or disappointed,

admired or despised. But it will be of eternal moment that I have mourned for sin, hungered and thirsted after righteousness, loved the Lord Jesus in sincerity, gloried in His cross. May these objects engross my chief solicitude (*consideration*)! Produce in me those principles and dispositions that make Your service perfect freedom. Expel from my mind all sinful fear and shame, so that with firmness and courage I may confess the Redeemer before men, go forth with Him hearing His reproach, be zealous with His knowledge, be filled with His wisdom, walk with His circumspection, ask counsel of Him in all things, repair to the Scriptures for His orders, stay my mind on His peace, knowing that nothing can befall me without His permission, appointment and administration.

Psalm 145:10-21: All your works praise you, LORD; your faithful people extol you. They tell of the glory of your kingdom and speak of your might, so that all people may know of your mighty acts and the glorious splendour of your kingdom. Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and your dominion endures through all generations. The LORD is trustworthy in all he promises and faithful in all he does. The LORD upholds all who fall and lifts up all who are bowed down. The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food at the proper time. You open your hand and satisfy the desires of every living thing. The LORD is righteous in all his ways and faithful in all he does. The LORD is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth. He fulfils the desires of those who fear him; he hears their cry and saves them. The LORD watches over all who love him, but all the wicked he will destroy. My mouth will speak in praise of the LORD. Let every creature praise his holy name for ever and ever.

Sunday 10th May 10 Ps.146

And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. Matt. 6:12

The forgiveness of sins makes true Christianity unique. Other religions may ignore the consequences of wrong living, some may offer a hope of a better life after death, and some offer a bartering service where you may be able to barter or buy your way to a better future—if you are lucky—but only by faith in Jesus Christ can we have forgiveness of sins and the assurance of that forgiveness. God's forgiveness is unconditional and so when Jesus taught us to pray: *forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors*[Matt. 6:12] He was not saying that we will only be forgiven our sins if we forgive others. The word translated "*debt*" means something that is owed, or an obligation and so Jesus was reminding us that we have an obligation to live as one who has been forgiven! We will never live in fellowship (harmony) with God, if we hold grudges against others—but until we know that we are forgiven by God, we are incapable of truly forgiving others. *This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.*[1Jn.4:10-11] Jesus came to forgive sins: *You are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.*[Matt.1:21] *But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins…*[Matt.9:6-7] *Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.*[1Tim.1:15] Sin is unbelief and the behaviour that we call "*sin*" is a manifestation of unbelief: *everything that does not come from faith is sin.*[Rom.14:23] However, the one great sin that condemns all mankind is not living up to God's standard of perfection and holiness—we fall short of God's glory: *for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.*[Rom.3:23] The only way we are saved from our sins is by believing in Jesus and so the sin of unbelief leaves us unforgiven. Although belief in Jesus Christ as God's Son and our Saviour is logical for anyone who wants to look at the facts—because we are blinded by belief, we need the Holy Spirit to open our eyes to the spiritual evidence: *But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.*[Lk.2:10-11] *Jesus answered, "The work of God*

is this: to believe in the one he has sent."[Jn.6:29] *You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.*[Matt.16:16] *If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not be guilty of sin; but now they have no excuse for their sin. Whoever hates me hates my Father as well.*[Jn.15:22-23] *When he comes, he will prove the world to be in the wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment: about sin, because people do not believe in me; about righteousness, because I am going to the Father, where you can see me no longer; and about judgment, because the prince of this world now stands condemned.*[Jn.16:8-11]

Illiteracy is a grave disadvantage to anyone and in most countries a formal education is compulsory. We normally call basic literacy the "3 **R**s" and reading, writing and arithmetic are mentioned in the late 4th Century by Augustine in his "*Confessions*" Chapter 13: "*For the Latin I loved; not what my first masters, but what the so-called grammarians taught me. For those first lessons, reading, writing and arithmetic, I thought as great a burden and penalty as any Greek… For those first lessons were better certainly, because more certain; by them I obtained, and still retain, the power of reading what I find written, and myself writing what I will."* However the phrase of "3 **R**s" — **R**eading, (W)**R**iting and (A)**R**ithmatic — was coined by the English banker and Lord Mayor of London, Sir William Curtis at an after-dinner toast to the Board of Education in 1807. But there are also "3 **R**s" of Christianity literacy—**R**ighteousness, **R**edemption and **R**econciliation. These are "3 **R**s" absolutely basic to Christian maturity and fellowship with God. *The words "it was credited to him" were written not for him alone, but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness—for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.*[Rom.4:23-25] *For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.*[Col.1:13-14] *Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behaviour. But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation* [Col 1:21-22] Our right standing before God is fundamental to spiritual maturity and so we need to be absolutely sure about these "3 **R**s"—that we are **righteous** (right with God), that we are **redeemed** and are **reconciled** to God. These "3 **R**s" must become embedded in our spirit and our soul—they must become integral to the way we see life and respond to our circumstances. *We must try to become mature and start thinking about more than just the basic things we were taught about Christ. We shouldn't need to keep talking about why we ought to turn from deeds that bring death and why we ought to have faith in God. And we shouldn't need to keep teaching about baptisms or about the laying on of hands or about people being raised from death and the future judgment. Let's grow up, if God is willing.*[Heb.6:1-3]

If we are not sure whether we are forgiven, or whether we are saved, or whether we really have peace with God, instead of living by faith we will live by feelings and end up in doubt and unbelief. It is only by faith that we please God and only faith that we overcome the world (*i.e.* live in the benefits of God's Kingdom). *The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.*[Gal.5:6] *In fact, this is love for God: to keep his commands. And his commands are not burdensome, for everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world? Only the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.*[1Jn 5:3-5] *So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh… Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other.*[Gal.5:16-26]

Some Christians are still wondering if they are good enough for God to love them, or if they are good enough for God to forgive them—they forget those basic "3 **R**s" of Christianity. No one is good enough to merit God's favour or love! *As it is written: "There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands; there is no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one."*[Rom.3:10] And because no one was good enough to merit God's favour or love, Jesus became like us so there was a human being who was good enough to merit God's favour and love: *The LORD watches and is displeased, for*

there is no justice. He sees there is no advocate; he is shocked that no one intervenes. So he takes matters into his own hands, his desire for justice drives him on. He wears his desire for justice like body armour, and his desire to deliver is like a helmet on his head. He puts on the garments of vengeance and wears zeal like a robe.[Is.59:15-17] *For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God.*[1Pet.3:18] *But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*[Rom.5:8] If there was another way God would have found it! *Then he said to them, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me." …He went away a second time and prayed, "My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done."*[Matt.26:38-42] By becoming human, and taking our sin on Himself, Jesus could—and did—die in our place: *Jesus, the Holy One, makes us holy. And as sons and daughters, we now belong to his same Father, so he is not ashamed or embarrassed to introduce us as his brothers and sisters! …Since all his "children" have flesh and blood, so Jesus became human to fully identify with us. He did this, so that he could experience death and annihilate the effects of the intimidating accuser who holds against us the power of death. By embracing death Jesus sets free those who live their entire lives in bondage to the tormenting dread of death. For it is clear that he didn't do this for the angels, but for all the sons and daughters of Abraham. This is why he had to be a man and take hold of our humanity in every way. He made us his brothers and sisters and became our merciful and faithful King-Priest before God; as the One who removed our sins to make us one with him. He suffered and endured every test and temptation, so that he can help us every time we pass through the ordeals of life.*[Heb.2:11-18] But Jesus didn't die for His own sin and so death could not hold Him: *God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*[2Cor.5:21] *Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead, and now look, I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades.*[Rev.1:17-18] *For we know that since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him. The death he died, he died to sin once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God.*[Rom.6:9-10]

The heart of the "3 **R**s" of Christian literacy is forgiveness—and we should settle this Scripture matter once and for all: *"Come now, let us settle the matter [let us reason together]," says the LORD. "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool. If you are willing and obedient, you will eat the good things of the land.*[Is.1:18-19] We have been forgiven because of God's righteousness, not because there was a miscarriage of justice or because God overlooked our sins. God's mercy and love are embedded in holiness and justice and God doesn't override justice or violate His holiness in order to show mercy. God's justice in forgiving us is founded upon the fact that Jesus paid the penalty for every sin—and so our confidence comes from the fact that judgment has been fully executed. Our acquittal is founded firmly on judgment satisfied and not judgment avoided! *But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith. He did this to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished— he did it to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.*[Rom.3:21-26] *When people work, their wage is not given as a gift, but as something earned and due to them. But people cannot do any work that will make them right with God. So they must trust in him who makes even evil people right in his sight. Then God accepts their faith, and that makes them right with him.*[Rom.4:4-5] Because Jesus has paid the price for all our sins—in full—God is no longer angry with us. *God was reconciling the world to himself, not charging men's transgressions to their account.*[2Cor.5:19] *"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.*[Is.54:9] God is not

making a case against us or making a list of our sins so that He can call us to account for them and then confront us with them some time in the future. *This is the covenant I will establish with the people of Israel after that time, declares the Lord. I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people…For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.*[Heb.8:10-12] God is not calling us to account for our sins, but to account for His gift of life in Jesus Christ. Jesus is *the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!*[Jn.1:29] And He is *the propitiation [atoning sacrifice or the payment] for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world.*[1Jn.2:2] God is not holding our sins against us—and He is not holding the world's sins against them either. When Jesus died, He paid and removed the sins of sinners—Believers and unbelievers alike! *God gives proof of his love to us in Christ's dying for us while we were still sinners.*[Rom.5:28] There is no outstanding debt or any unpaid account as far as anyone's sin is concerned. "*It is finished,*" was a statement of fact! Scripture tells us that we were made alive together with Him after He had *forgiven us all our transgressions* and *cancelled out the certificate of debt.*[Col.2:13-14] Yes, the certificate of debt and the invoice for our sins has been cancelled. Sins that are forgiven are sins that are cancelled—they do not exist. When Jesus died 2000 years ago, we weren't even born and so had not even committed one sin, but His death paid for all of our sins. Jesus will never die again for any sins—not even our future sins: *Just as people are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.*[Heb.9:27-28] *Then he said, "Here I am, I have come to do your will." He sets aside the first to establish the second. And by that will, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.*[Heb.10:9-10] God has placed **all** our sins upon His Son: *God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*[2Cor.5:21] **We have total forgiveness!**

However, although we will not be judged and made to pay for our sins, we will be judged and held to account for the way we have lived. *For whatever is in your heart determines what you say. A good person produces good things from the treasury of a good heart, and an evil person produces evil things from the treasury of an evil heart. And I tell you this, you must give an account on judgment day for every idle word you speak. The words you say will either acquit you or condemn you.*[Matt.12:34-37] Some people will be saved but with nothing to show for their life: *No one can lay any other foundation than the one that has already been laid. That foundation is Jesus Christ. A person may build on it using gold, silver, jewels, wood, hay or straw. But each person's work will be shown for what it is. On judgment day it will be brought to light. It will be put through fire. The fire will test how good everyone's work is. If the building doesn't burn up, God will give the builder a reward for his work. If the building burns up, the builder will lose everything. The builder will be saved, but only like one escaping through the flames. Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple? God's Spirit lives in you. If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. God's temple is holy. And you are that temple.*[1Cor.3:10-17] So let's make sure we maintain our Christian literacy, studying the "3 **R**s" of **righteous**, **redemption** and **reconciliation—**and live as people who have been forgiven: *For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you. We continually ask God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives, so that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, and giving joyful thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of his holy people in the kingdom of light.*[Col.1:9-12]

Questions
What does it mean to be righteous
What does it mean to be redeemed?
What does it mean to be reconciled to God?
Why did Jesus die on the cross?
When did God forgive our sins?
What difference does forgiveness make?
Puritan Prayer—In Prayer: O Lord, in prayer, I launch far out into the eternal world and on that broad ocean my soul triumphs over all evils on the shores of mortality. Time, with its gay amusements and cruel disappointments, never appears so inconsiderate as then. In prayer, I see myself as nothing; I find my heart going after You with intensity and long with vehement thirst to live to You. Blessed be the strong gales of the Spirit that speed me on my way to the New Jerusalem. In prayer, all things here below vanish, and nothing seems important but holiness of heart and the salvation of others. In prayer, all my worldly cares, fears, anxieties disappear and are of as little significance as a puff of wind. In prayer, my soul inwardly exults with lively thoughts at what You are doing for Your church, and I long that You should get Yourself a great name from sinners returning to Zion. In prayer I am lifted above the frowns and flatteries of life and taste heavenly joys; entering into the eternal world I can give myself to You with all my heart, to be Yours for ever. In prayer, I can place all my concerns in Your hands, to be entirely at Your disposal, having no will or interest of my own. In prayer I can intercede for my friends, ministers, sinners, the church and for Your kingdom to come, with greatest freedom, ardent hopes, as a son to his father, as a lover to the beloved. Help me to be all prayer and never to cease praying.
Psalm 106—Praise the LORD. Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his love endures forever. Who can proclaim the mighty acts of the LORD or fully declare his praise? Blessed are those who act justly, who always do what is right. Remember me, LORD, when you show favour to your people, come to my aid when you save them, that I may enjoy the prosperity of your chosen ones, that I may share in the joy of your nation and join your inheritance in giving praise… Save us, LORD our God, and gather us from the nations, that we may give thanks to your holy name and glory in your praise. Praise be to the LORD, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting. Let all the people say, "Amen!" Praise the LORD.

Sunday 17th May Ps.146

Will God lead us into temptation? *And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.*[Matt.6:13]

Language is different from maths—in maths, 2+2 can only make 4, but words can have different meanings according to their context. The meaning of words have changed over the years—for instance "*silly*" used to mean *blessed* or *happy* but now it means to *foolish*; "*naughty*" used to mean *poor* but now it means *misbehaving*; "*artificial*" used to mean a *work of art*, but now it means *fake* or *man-made*. Our modern English language has evolved from our Roman, Anglo Saxon, Viking, and Norman heritage which explains the large assortment of words and spellings including words that are spelled the same but have different meanings, such as lead, object, project, bow, bass.
This poem shows the complexities of our language:

I take it you already know of tough and bough and cough and dough?
Others may stumble, but not you, on hiccough, thorough, laugh and through.
Well done! And now you wish, perhaps, to learn of less familiar traps?
Beware of heard, a dreadful word, that looks like beard and sounds like bird.
And dead—it's said like bed not bead—and for goodness' sake don't call it deed!
Watch out for meat and great and threat (they rhyme with suite and straight and debt).
A moth is not the same as moth in mother, nor both in bother, or broth in brother.
And here is not a match for there, nor dear and fear, or bear and pear.
And then there's dose and rose and lose—just look them up—
and goose and choose, and cork and work and card and ward,
and font and front and word and sword, and do and go and thwart and cart—
come, come I've hardly made a start. A dreadful language? Man alive. I'd mastered it when I was five.

When we pray: *lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one* we are not implying that God might lead us into temptation. God will never tempt us to sin because there is no evil or trickery in His character: *Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him. When tempted, no one should say, "God is tempting me." For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; but each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death. Don't be deceived, my dear brothers and sisters. Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created.*[Jas.1:12-18] So if we are tempted to do wrong, it is our own flesh that is tempting us because God will never encourage us to do anything wrong! Temptations *per se* are not sin—it is yielding to the temptation to do something wrong that is sin (remember, sin is missing God's standard of glory: *for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*[Rom.3:23]). Oscar Wilde is reputed to have said "*The only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it*." But we don't have to yield to temptation to get rid of it—we can pray: *Pray that you will not fall into temptation.*[Matt.22:40] We can say No! *For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people. It teaches us to say "**No**" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope—the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.*[Tit.2:11-14] And we can ask God to be spared from difficult circumstances that would tempt us to sin—the NIrV puts it this way: *Keep us from falling into sin when we are tempted. Save us from the evil one.*[Matt.6:13]

Another meaning of the word that is translated "*temptation*" is "*testing*": *Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.*[1Pet.4:12] And that same word is also translated "*trial*": *Since you have kept my command to endure patiently, I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come on the whole world to test the inhabitants of the earth.*[Rev.3:10] God will sometimes lead us into situations to test us or "*assay*" us. Assay means "*to test (especially a metal) to determine its ingredients and quality*": *See, I have refined you, though not as silver; I have tested you in the furnace of affliction.*[Is.48:10] *I will refine them like silver and test them like gold. They will call on my name and I will answer them; I will say, 'They are my people,' and they will say, 'The LORD is our God.'*[Zech.13:9] Although God won't tempt us to sin. He will test us for purity! *But he knows the way that I take; when he has tested me, I will come forth as gold.*[Job 23:10] *And the words of the LORD are flawless, like silver purified in a crucible, like gold refined seven times. You, LORD, will keep the needy safe and will protect us forever from the wicked.*[Ps.12:6-7] God will allow us to go through difficult situations—not for His benefit so He can see how well we are doing, but for our benefit, so that we can know how well we are doing. *Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of*

Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may result in praise, glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed. Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls.[1Pet.1:3-9]
When we go through difficult times, our response will show how much of our faith is genuine and how much is merely theory. When Job went through a very difficult time, his response was to praise God. He refused to blame God but instead he said good things about God: *After Job heard all of those reports, he got up and tore his robe. He shaved his head. Then he fell to the ground and worshiped the LORD. He said, "I was born naked. And I'll leave here naked. You have given, and you have taken away. May your name be praised." In spite of everything, Job didn't sin by blaming God for doing anything wrong.*[Job.1:20-22] Paul's contentment was not from his circumstances but from Jesus who gives him strength: *I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all this through him who gives me strength.*[Phil.4:11-13]
Spiritual maturity is not learnt from books (not even from reading the Bible) but it comes from living out the Kingdom principals that are found in the Bible. *We have much to say about this, but it is hard to make it clear to you because you no longer try to understand. In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.*[Heb.5:11-14]
Spiritual maturity is not about getting everything right but learning to do what is right! The following translations of this passage help explain what spiritual maturity is—spiritually mature people *have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil; have their perceptions trained by practice to discern both good and evil; have trained themselves with a lot of practice... to tell the difference between good and evil; have through training the skill to recognize the difference between right and wrong; have their minds trained by practice to know the difference between good and evil; have some practice in telling right from wrong; have, by using their senses, been trained to distinguish between good and evil.*
The clear message from this passage is that it takes time and practice to become mature. Another word for mature is complete or perfect. Jesus is our Model—the One we copy, emulate and follow. But even though Jesus was (and still is) the Son of God, He still had to become mature as a Human. It was through suffering (difficult and painful circumstances) that Jesus learnt obedience and became perfect (complete or mature) as a man: *During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him and was designated by God to be high priest in the order of Melchizedek.*[Heb.5:7-10] Obedience and humility are inseparable and if we are going to become mature we have to learn obedience and stay humble: *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!*[Phil.2:6-8] The opposite of humility is pride—and God gives grace to the humble: *Do you think the Scriptures have no meaning? They say that God is passionate that the spirit he has placed within us should be faithful to him. And he gives grace generously. As the Scriptures say, "God opposes the proud but gives grace*

to the humble." So humble yourselves before God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come close to God, and God will come close to you.[Jas.4:5-8]

We will never become spiritually mature unless we take our place in the Body of Christ—that is, the local Church. As we know, Church is not a building but a body and although it is called a "*temple*" it is not made of hard stones but human stones—of Believers. And although within the Church, some people are more visible and audible than others, everyone has a unique place and function. We become complete (mature) as we takes our place in the Body of the Church, under the Headship of Jesus. *(What does "he ascended" mean except that he also descended to the lower, earthly regions? He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe.) So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.*[Eph.4:9-16]

Last week we said that we need to have a clear grasp of the "3 **R**s" of Christianity—we need to know that we are **righteous** (right with God), that we are **redeemed** and that we are **reconciled** to God. David had 3 mighty warriors: Josheb, Eleazar and Shammah, however he also had 2 more mighty warriors who were just as important as those 3: *Such were the exploits of Benaiah son of Jehoiada; he too was as famous as the three mighty warriors. He was held in greater honour than any of the Thirty, but he was not included among the Three. And David put him in charge of his bodyguard.*[2Sam.23:22-23] *Abishai the brother of Joab was chief of the Three… he became as famous as the Three. He was doubly honoured above the Three and became their commander, even though he was not included among them.*[1Chron.11:20-21] So perhaps we should add another **R** to list of 3 "**R**s": **Refining—**and maybe a 5th "**R**" too: **Repentance**! Let's get these "**R**s" become so embedded in our hearts that they become integral to the way we see life and how we respond to our circumstances. *We must try to become mature and start thinking about more than just the basic things we were taught about Christ. We shouldn't need to keep talking about why we ought to turn from deeds that bring death and why we ought to have faith in God. And we shouldn't need to keep teaching about baptisms or about the laying on of hands or about people being raised from death and the future judgment.*[Heb.6:1-3] And the way to embed these important truths in our hearts is by pondering (meditating) on them and talking about them. *Keep this Book of the Law always on your lips; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful. Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go.*[Josh.1:8-9] *Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness*. The word "*infant*" is literally "*a non-speaker*". It is as we share what we believe that we understand what God has given us: *I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith, so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ.*[Phile.6] No! God doesn't tempt us to sin but He does test us to strengthen our faith and bring us to maturity. But let's make sure that we don't fall away when we are tested: *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.*[Lk.8:13] Remember, God is with us and we can endure anything when God leads us: *So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall! No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it.*[1Cor.10:12-13]

God is the Good Shepherd who leads us in paths of righteousness and His goodness and mercy follow us all the days of our life!

Questions

How does God lead us?
Where does God lead us?
How can we overcome temptations?
What is the difference between tempting and testing?
How does God refine us?
How important is it to become spiritually maturity?

Puritan Prayer—The "Nevers" of the Gospel: O Lord, May I never fail to come to the knowledge of the truth, never rest in a system of doctrine, however scriptural, that does not bring or further salvation, or teach me to deny ungodliness and worldly lusts, or help me to live soberly, righteously, godly; never rely on my own convictions and resolutions, but be strong in You and in Your might; never cease to find Your grace sufficient in all my duties, trials, and conflicts; never forget to repair to You in all my spiritual distresses and outward troubles, in all the dissatisfactions experienced in creature comforts; never fail to retreat to Him who is full of grace and truth, the Friend that loves at all times, who is touched with feelings of my infirmities, and can do exceeding abundantly for me; never confine my religion to extraordinary occasions, but acknowledge You in all my ways; never limit my devotions to particular seasons but be in Your fear all the day long; never be godly only on the sabbath or in Your house, but on every day abroad and at home; never make piety a dress but a habit, not only a habit but a nature, not only a nature but a life. You do good to me by all Your dispensations, by all means of grace, by worship, prayers, praises—and at last, I will enter that world where is no temple, but only Your glory.

Psalm 147:1-20: Praise the LORD. How good it is to sing praises to our God, how pleasant and fitting to praise him! The LORD builds up Jerusalem; he gathers the exiles of Israel. He heals the broken-hearted and binds up their wounds. He determines the number of the stars and calls them each by name. Great is our Lord and mighty in power; his understanding has no limit. The LORD sustains the humble but casts the wicked to the ground. Sing to the LORD with grateful praise; make music to our God on the harp. He covers the sky with clouds; he supplies the earth with rain and makes grass grow on the hills. He provides food for the cattle and for the young ravens when they call. His pleasure is not in the strength of the horse, nor his delight in the legs of the warrior; the LORD delights in those who fear him, who put their hope in his unfailing love. Extol the LORD, Jerusalem; praise your God, Zion. He strengthens the bars of your gates and blesses your people within you. He grants peace to your borders and satisfies you with the finest of wheat. He sends his command to the earth; his word runs swiftly. He spreads the snow like wool and scatters the frost like ashes. He hurls down his hail like pebbles. Who can withstand his icy blast? He sends his word and melts them; he stirs up his breezes, and the waters flow. He has revealed his word to Jacob, his laws and decrees to Israel. He has done this for no other nation; they do not know his laws. Praise the LORD.

Sunday 24th May Ps.148

For yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.Matt.6:37

The Kingdom of God is similar to the Church and yet different from the Church. The Church is people—people who are Believers in Jesus Christ; people who are **righteous**, **redeemed, reconciled**, who have **repented** and are being **refined**. The Church has no ethnic, social or gender distinctions—if you belong to Christ, you are the Church: *So in Christ Jesus you are all*

children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.[Gal.3:26-29] *And they sang a new song, saying: "You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased for God persons from every tribe and language and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God and they will reign on the earth."*[Rev.5:9-10] The Kingdom of God is not people but the rule of Christ within people—it is the spiritual domain of Jesus within people who submit to His authority (*i.e.* confess that Jesus is Lord): *But what does [Scripture] say? "The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart," that is, the message concerning faith that we proclaim: If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved. As Scripture says, "Anyone who believes in him will never be put to shame." For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile—the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, for, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."*[Rom.10:8-13] And so, God's Kingdom is not us but Jesus' dominion within us: *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 in your midst [within you]."* [Lk.17:20-21]

We describe God as *Omnipresent*, *Omniscient*, *Omnipotent* and *Omnibenevolent*, meaning that God is "*all-present*," "*all-knowing*," "*all-powerful*" and "*all-good*". God is also eternal: *Abraham planted a tamarisk tree in Beersheba, and there he called on the name of the LORD, the Eternal God.*[Gen.21:33] *Do you not know? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom.*[Is.40:28] *Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come.*[Rev.4:8] This means that God has always existed as God: *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning.*[Jn.1:1-2] And because God has always had all authority and all power, He can never be usurped or defeated. Nevertheless, God can be opposed—actually the word "*satan*" means "*opposer*" or "*adversary*": *Balaam got up in the morning, saddled his donkey and went with the Moabite officials. But God was very angry when he went, and the angel of the LORD stood in the road to oppose [literally "satan"] him. Balaam was riding on his donkey, and his two servants were with him.*[Nu.22:21-22] But God laughs at the futility of people's opposition: *Why are the nations so angry? Why do they waste their time with futile plans? The kings of the earth prepare for battle; the rulers plot together against the LORD and against his anointed one. "Let us break their chains," they cry, "and free ourselves from slavery to God." But the one who rules in heaven laughs. The Lord scoffs at them. Then in anger he rebukes them, terrifying them with his fierce fury. For the Lord declares, "I have placed my chosen king on the throne in Jerusalem, on my holy mountain."*[Ps.2:1-6] The devil is a liar and accuser who opposes God's authority and deceives people. *Then the LORD God said to the woman, "What is this you have done?" The woman said, "The serpent deceived me, and I ate."*[Gen.3:13] *The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel that displays the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.*[2Cor.4:4] *You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies.*[Jn.8:44] And sadly, the devil can even deceive Believers: *But I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent's cunning, your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ. For if someone comes to you and preaches a Jesus other than the Jesus we preached, or if you receive a different spirit from the Spirit you received, or a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it easily enough.*[2Cor.11:3-4] So when John the Baptist proclaimed that God's Kingdom was coming, he was exhorting people to come under God's authority and power. *John went into all the country*

around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet: "A voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him. Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth. And all people will see God's salvation.' " … The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Messiah. John answered them all, "I baptize you with water. But one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire." And with many other words John exhorted the people and proclaimed the good news to them.[Lk.3:2-18] This is what John's father had prophesied over him: *And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace.*[Lk.1:76-79]

Ever since the devil rebelled against God and deceived Adam and Eve into disobeying God, the world (the people, not the land) has been in conflict with God. Over the many years, little by little, God revealed His plan to bring mankind back under His domain and gave glimpses of what that restored Kingdom would be like. But the theme that ran through all of God's prophesies and promises was that the Messiah, God's own King, would establish His Kingdom and the devil would be defeated: *So the LORD God said to the serpent…"I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel."*[Gen.3:14-15] *The one who does what is sinful is of the devil, because the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work.*[1Jn.3:8] Faith has always been a personal trust in God: *By faith Abel… by faith he was commended as righteous, when God spoke well of his offerings. And by faith Abel still speaks, even though he is dead. By faith Enoch… And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him. By faith Noah… By faith Abraham… obeyed…By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau… By faith Jacob… blessed each of Joseph's sons, and worshiped… By faith Joseph… spoke… By faith Moses' parents…were not afraid... By faith Moses… regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward.*[Heb.11:4-26]

Before Jesus was born, God dealt with people collectively and punished people groups, which is why the Jews went into exile: *If you ever forget the LORD your God and follow other gods and worship and bow down to them, I testify against you today that you will surely be destroyed. Like the nations the LORD destroyed before you, so you will be destroyed for not obeying the LORD your God.*[Deut.8:19-20] Nebuchadnezzar had been told by God that future world kingdoms would be brought to an end by a supernatural Kingdom: *In the time of those kings, the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed, nor will it be left to another people. It will crush all those kingdoms and bring them to an end, but it will itself endure forever. This is the meaning of the vision of the rock cut out of a mountain, but not by human hands—a rock that broke the iron, the bronze, the clay, the silver and the gold to pieces. The great God has shown the king what will take place in the future. The dream is true and its interpretation is trustworthy."*[Dan.2:44-45] And so, the promise of the coming Messiah always gave the Jews hope—but they only expected the Messiah to deliver them from the symptoms of their problems—the Roman occupation—not the source of their problems—sin. And so when the promised King and Kingdom came, not even Jesus' Disciples expected a spiritual Kingdom: *Jesus himself came up and walked along with them…He asked them, "What are you discussing together as you walk along?" … they replied "About Jesus of Nazareth, He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people. The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him; but we had hoped that he was the*

one who was going to redeem Israel…" He said to them, "How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.[Lk.24:15-27]

Because of Jesus' submission and obedience to His Father, all of God's plans are fulfilled exactly as He planned them. Jesus has been declared Lord and has been given all authority: *Then Jesus came to them and said: All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.*[Matt.28:18] *But we do see Jesus, who was made lower than the angels for a little while, now crowned with glory and honour because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.*[Heb.2:9] *And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*[Phil.2:8-11] *I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True. With justice he judges and wages war. His eyes are like blazing fire, and on his head are many crowns. He has a name written on him that no one knows but he himself. He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is the Word of God. The armies of heaven were following him, riding on white horses and dressed in fine linen, white and clean. Coming out of his mouth is a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations. "He will rule them with an iron sceptre." He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh he has this name written: KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS.*[Rev.19:11-16]

At the beginning of the Lord's Prayer (more accurately called, "*the Disciples' Prayer*" because it was given for Jesus' disciples to pray), we pray for God's Kingdom to come and His Will to be done, but here at the end of the prayer we are told we can expect God to answer our prayer because He has the authority and power to make it happen. Talk is easy but unless someone has the power and authority to make it happen, their words are just that—words. But God's Words are never empty, God's Words are creative, they are living and life-giving, they are spiritual food and drink: *The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you—they are full of the Spirit and life. Yet there are some of you who do not believe.*[Jn.6:63-64] *For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.*[Heb.4:12] *The Scriptures cannot be denied or found to be in error.*[Jn.10:34] *The Scriptures say: Bread alone will not satisfy, but true life is found in every word that constantly goes forth from God's mouth.*[Matt.4:4] *God can do anything because no word from God will ever fail.*[Lk.1:37]

Yes! God has the authority to establish His Kingdom here on earth in people's hearts and minds and God has the authority to implement His Will here on earth. *As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.*[Is.55:10-11] This should give us the courage and confidence to pray in faith—and to continue to pray without giving up: *One day Jesus told his disciples a story to show that they should always pray and never give up. "There was a judge in a certain city," he said, "who neither feared God nor cared about people. A widow of that city came to him repeatedly, saying, 'Give me justice in this dispute with my enemy.' The judge ignored her for a while, but finally he said to himself, 'I don't fear God or care about people, but this woman is driving me crazy. I'm going to see that she gets justice, because she is wearing me out with her constant requests!'" Then the Lord said, "Learn a lesson from this unjust judge. Even he rendered a just decision in the end. So don't you think God will surely give justice to his chosen people who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will grant justice to them quickly! But when the Son of Man returns, how many will he find on the earth who have faith?"*[Lk.18:1-8] Faith is a spirit: *It is written: "I believed; therefore I have spoken." Since we have that*

same spirit of faith, we also believe and therefore speak, because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you to himself.[2Cor.4:13-14] And so faith is spiritual—it is not just knowing the facts about God in our head but applying those facts in our heart. Faith is that assured and contented connection with God—it is that simple trust in who He is and what He has said. *that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured.*[Col.4:12] *Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for.*[Heb.11:1-2] That is why we need live out our faith by maintaining a clear conscience. *Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water.*[Heb.10:22] As Juliene of Norwich wrote in the C14th *And for the tender love that our good Lord hath to all that shall be saved, He comforteth readily and sweetly, signifying thus: It is sooth (true) that sin is cause of all this pain; but all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner [of] thing shall be well*. Yes, the Kingdom, the power and the glory all belong to God—now and forever! *For yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.*[Matt.6:37]

Questions

Is there a difference between God's Kingdom and God's Church?
How much influence does the devil have today?
Why are people deceived?
How can we ensure that we are not deceived?
Why is faith described as a "*spirit*"? *(2Cor.4:13)*
Why can we be at peace when everything around us is not at peace?

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

Psalm 148: Praise the LORD. Praise the LORD from the heavens; praise him in the heights above. Praise him, all his angels; praise him, all his heavenly hosts. Praise him, sun and moon; praise him, all you shining stars. Praise him, you highest heavens and you waters above the skies. Let them praise the name of the LORD, for at his command they were created, and he established them for ever and ever— he issued a decree that will never pass away. Praise the LORD from the earth, you great sea creatures and all ocean depths, lightning and hail, snow and clouds, stormy winds that do his bidding, you mountains and all hills, fruit trees and all cedars, wild animals and all cattle, small creatures and flying birds, kings of the earth and all nations, you princes and all rulers on earth, young men and women, old men and children. Let them praise the name of the LORD, for his name alone is exalted; his splendour is above the earth and the heavens. And he has raised up for his people a horn, the praise of all his faithful servants, of Israel, the people close to his heart. Praise the LORD.

Sunday 31st May Ps.149

Amen—I make this payer mine!

My family background was chapel (as opposed to "church") and some of the differences between us was "*amen*". Chapel people pronounced "*amen"* to rhyme with "*hay*" (but never said it out loud at the end of a prayer in the Chapel services), whereas "church people" pronounced "*amen*" to rhyme with "*arm*" (and they did say it out loud at the end of their prayers!). The word "*amen*" is a Hebrew word and means "*truly*" — Jesus used the word when wanted to emphasis something (in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus said "amen" 31 times): *And he said: "Truly I tell you, unless*

you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.[Matt.18:3] Other translations use "*verily I say unto you*," "*assuredly*," "*I tell you the truth,*" "*I can guarantee this truth*." We usually say "*amen*" at the end of our prayers, *Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever!* ***Amen****.*[Eph.3:20-21] Although it is a useful (and subtle) way to let people know that we have finished praying, saying "*amen*" should primarily be an affirmation that we have truly meant the words used in the prayer—by saying "*amen*" we are saying "*assuredly, I tell you the truth this prayer is from my heart and I mean what I have said (or heard someone else pray)*". *For no matter how many promises God has made, they are "Yes" in Christ. And so through him the "Amen" is spoken by us to the glory of God.*[2Cor.1:20]

Of course, we should always mean what we say and being honest is the basis for trust. We can trust God because He is exactly who He says He is: *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.' …This is my name forever, the name you shall call me from generation to generation.*[Ex.3:14-15] And it is the same for Scripture—we believe that the Bible is exactly what it says it is—the Word of God: *Jesus replied, "And why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition? For God said, 'Honour your father and mother' and 'Anyone who curses their father or mother is to be put to death.' But you say that if anyone declares that what might have been used to help their father or mother is 'devoted to God,' they are not to 'honour their father or mother' with it. Thus you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition.*[Matt.15:3-6] That is why we can trust what the Bible says and believe that those words apply to us: *This is my Bible; I am what it says I am. I have what it says I have. I can do what it says I can do. Today I will be taught the Word of God. I boldly confess that my mind is alert, my heart is receptive, I am about to receive the Incorruptible, Indestructible, Ever-living seed of the Word of God. I will never be the same. In Jesus Name. Amen*

God is light: *They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever.*[Rev.22:4-5] *When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."*[Jn.8:12] And there are never any shadows with God: *Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.*[Jas.1:17] Of course we should be honest and truthful, and especially when we speak with God or for God—even though some preachers are renowned for exaggerating their stories in order to make a point (which is possibly why Paul made this comment: *I speak the truth in Christ—I am not lying, my conscience confirms it through the Holy Spirit.*[Rom.9:1]) Nevertheless, there are a few occasions recorded in Scripture when people have been commended for misleading others—even telling lies! *But Rahab had taken the two men and hidden them. She said, "Yes, the men came to me, but I did not know where they had come from. At dusk, when it was time to close the city gate, they left. I don't know which way they went. Go after them quickly. You may catch up with them." (But she had taken them up to the roof and hidden them under the stalks of flax she had laid out on the roof.)*[Josh.2:4-6] *By faith the prostitute Rahab, because she welcomed the spies, was not killed with those who were disobedient.*[Heb.11:31] In our Law Courts, witnesses make a commitment to tell the truth when giving evidence—and if they are later found to have lied, they can often be charged with the crime of perjury. The normal procedure is for the witness to hold the Bible in their hand and say: *I swear by Almighty God that the evidence I shall give shall be the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth*. It is interesting how our "*Christian*" country has normalised the opposite of what the Bible teaches! *Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not break your oath, but fulfill to the Lord the vows you have made.' But I tell you, do not swear an oath at all: either by heaven, for it is God's throne; or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black. All you need to say is simply*

'Yes' or 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.[Matt.5:33-37] *Above all, my brothers and sisters, do not swear—not by heaven or by earth or by anything else. All you need to say is a simple "Yes" or "No." Otherwise you will be condemned.*[Jas.5:12] I waited years to put these Scriptures into practice and when I eventually went to court (to give a character reference), I stated that since I was a Christian, I would not swear to tell the truth—and so I made the Affirmation instead: *I do solemnly and sincerely and truly declare and affirm that the evidence I shall give shall be the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.* The Solicitor asked why I would not swear an oath and when I explained that both Jesus and James said we should not take oaths, he said he would go back and read the Bible!

Church is family and when we come together, we should aim to encourage one another and build each other up in the faith—and we do this by speaking the truth in love: *Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.*[Eph.4:15-16] *Pay attention and turn your ear to the sayings of the wise; apply your heart to what I teach, for it is pleasing when you keep them in your heart and have all of them ready on your lips. So that your trust may be in the LORD, I teach you today, even you. Have I not written thirty sayings for you, sayings of counsel and knowledge, teaching you to be honest and to speak the truth, so that you bring back truthful reports to those you serve?*[Pr.22:17-21]

Although prayer is personal, it is not solitary—we pray: our Father… give us… forgive us… as we… lead us… deliver us. And when we pray collectively as a Church, we should be in harmony with God, and also with each other. We should aim to make our prayers scriptural, simple and succinct—and then others can understand what we have prayed and make that prayer their own by saying "*amen*" to it: *For this reason the one who speaks in a tongue should pray that they may interpret what they say. For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful. So what shall I do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will also pray with my understanding; I will sing with my spirit, but I will also sing with my understanding. Otherwise when you are praising God in the Spirit, how can someone else, who is now put in the position of an inquirer, say "Amen" to your thanksgiving, since they do not know what you are saying? You are giving thanks well enough, but no one else is edified.*[1Cor.14:13-17] Jeremiah used "*amen*" to affirm his agreement with what God had just spoken to him: *This is the word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD: "Listen to the terms of this covenant and tell them to the people of Judah and to those who live in Jerusalem. Tell them that this is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: 'Cursed is the one who does not obey the terms of this covenant— the terms I commanded your ancestors when I brought them out of Egypt, out of the iron-smelting furnace.' I said, 'Obey me and do everything I command you, and you will be my people, and I will be your God. Then I will fulfill the oath I swore to your ancestors, to give them a land flowing with milk and honey'—the land you possess today." I answered, "Amen, LORD."*[Jer.11:1-5]

There is a difference between simple prayers and simplistic prayers. Simple prayers are short, succinct and sound—they are in harmony with New Covenant doctrine and people can understood them; simplistic prayers are naïve and difficult understand. Simple prayers are the expressions of our heart to God that are meaningful and should be realistic (or "*faithfulistic*" *i.e.* we can actually believe God will answer them) so that others can say "*amen*" to them. Simplistic prayers are often unrealistic and so become merely wishful thinking. Some years ago I resolved not to pray "silly prayers"—prayers that God can't answer, won't answer or has already answered. Greg Koukle uses the acronym **SIP** for prayer—**S**pecific, **I**ntelligible and **P**ersuasive. He says:

> Here is the key observation that has helped improve my own prayer life: Prayer is harder when it is rambling. It is harder for the person praying, and it is harder for those listening when prayer is in a group. One of my frustrations when praying with others is that Christians often don't pray intelligibly. We tell young Christians who are unaccustomed to

prayer to simply talk normally when speaking to God. "*Prayer is conversation*," we say. And it is. That is what we tell them, but that is not what we do when we pray with them. When it comes to God, our normal way of speaking often goes out the window. We lace our prayers with contrived Christian mumbo jumbo (some have called it "*Christian psycho-babble*"). We insert useless words like "*just*" in virtually every phrase. Then we use the words "*Lord*," "*Father*," and "*Jesus*" as if they were punctuation marks. In short, we talk to God in ways we wouldn't think of talking when speaking with any other intelligent person. This habit is hard to break. I know from personal experience. But I have a solution that has helped me trim down the nonsense. I have instructed our staff at STR that when we meet for prayer, we pray according to the acronym **SIP**: **S**pecifically, **I**ntelligibly, and **P**ersuasively. I take this cue from the prayers in the Bible (Daniel 9:3-19 is an example). Biblical prayers have content, clarity, and power. There is no spiritual blather. In many cases, they include reasons why God should act, as if the person praying were persuading Him of something He wouldn't do apart from their entreaty. Sometimes the reasons are based on the need. Other times they are based on God's character or what might happen to His reputation if He ignored the request (this was a favourite ploy of Moses'). These are the things you would normally—and quite naturally—say if you were speaking to someone of importance making request for help or provision. You'd explain your need, why you need it, and why your request should be granted. I think we should do the same with God. We should pray in full sentences, intelligibly, with complete thoughts. Our prayers should include clear, specific requests, and straightforward, genuine expressions of feeling and thanks. We should also give reasons why God ought to respond to our appeals. Some people find that occasionally writing their prayers out is helpful. It forces them to put more clarity and substance into their entreaties… First, apply the **SIP** principle to your own prayer life. Train yourself to pray specifically, intelligibly, and persuasively. Even if prayer is not as difficult for you as it is for me, I think you'll find that this practice will help your prayers be more powerful and fulfilling. Second, instruct those in your spiritual charge how to pray "*conversationally*." Then model it for them when you pray together. There is no need to be pious, just clear and genuine. In this way, you will be helping yourself and also those around you.

The ancients defined prayer as an *Ascensus mentis ad Deum*, which means a "*climbing up of the heart unto God*." The Lord's Prayer was never meant to be a liturgical prayer that was repeated as a religious talisman but a model or pattern on which to base our own prayers so that we touch God's heart. But we can and should pray with the borrowed words of the Bible because God has spoken to us—and still speaks to us—in the Scriptures. When we use the words of Scripture we can pray with confidence and gladness because we have a solid basis for our prayer. A simple way of doing this is to paraphrase Scripture or exchange the words with synonyms—which is Christian meditation (or what the Psalmist calls "selah"). This will fill our minds with Scripture so that our entire life is affected—our heart, soul and strength. *Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.*[Rom.12:1-2] *Let the Spirit change your way of thinking and make you into a new person [let the Spirit renew your thoughts and attitudes]. You were created to be like God, and so you must please him and be truly holy.*[Eph.4:23-24]

When we pray in Jesus' name, we acknowledge that our prayers depend on Jesus Christ. And even if suffering or grief make it difficult for us to pray, we can rest in the reality that the Holy Spirit and Jesus Christ will continue to intercede on our behalf. So let's keep our prayers

Specific, **I**ntelligible, and **P**ersuasive as we commune with God our heavenly Father—and say "amen" with conviction and passion because we really do believe what we have prayed!

Questions

Why did Jesus teach His disciples how to pray?
Why can we trust God?
Should we take everything in the Bible as literally true?
How important is it to understand what we are praying?
How can we pray confidently when facing difficult situations?
Does it matter if we do (or don't!) say "*amen*" to a prayer?

Puritan Prayer—A Colloquy on Rejoicing: Remember, O my soul, it is your duty and privilege to rejoice in God: He requires it of you for all His favours of grace. Rejoice then in the Giver and His goodness. Be happy in God, O my heart, and in nothing but Him, for whatever a person trusts in, from that they expect happiness. He who is the ground of your faith should be the substance of your joy. From whence then comes heaviness and dejection, when joy is sown in you—promised by the Father, bestowed by the Son, inwrought by the Holy Spirit? This joy is yours by grace and your spiritual birthright through believing. Are you seeking to rejoice in yourself from a motive of pride or self-reputation? You have nothing of your own to move God to be gracious or to continue His grace towards you. If you forget this you will lose your joy. Are you grieving under a sense of indwelling sin? Let godly sorrow work repentance, as the true spirit which the Lord blesses and which creates fullness of joy—godly sorrow opens rejoicing in God and draws down divine delights. Have you sought joys in some creature comfort? Look not below God for happiness; fall not asleep in Delilah's lap. Let God be all in all to you and joy in the fountain that is always full.

Psalm 149: Praise the LORD. Sing to the LORD a new song, his praise in the assembly of his faithful people. Let Israel rejoice in their Maker; let the people of Zion be glad in their King. Let them praise his name with dancing and make music to him with timbrel and harp. For the LORD takes delight in his people; he crowns the humble with victory. Let his faithful people rejoice in this honour and sing for joy on their beds. May the praise of God be in their mouths and a double-edged sword in their hands, to inflict vengeance on the nations and punishment on the peoples, to bind their kings with fetters, their nobles with shackles of iron, to carry out the sentence written against them— this is the glory of all his faithful people. Praise the LORD.

S	A	T	O	R
A	R	E	P	O
T	E	N	E	T
O	P	E	R	A
R	O	T	A	S

The sator square is an acrostic palindrome—the earliest one discovered is from Pompeii (and dating from before the earthquake of AD 62). **AREPO** is taken to be a proper name; **SATOR** (the gardener/ sower); **TENET** (holds); **OPERA** (works); **ROTAS** (the wheels/plough)—which means something like: '*The sower Arepo guides the plough with care*'—or "*you reap what you sow*".

But the letters also form: **PATER NOSTER**—Latin for '*Our Father*'—plus a spare *A* and *O*, which can refer to *Jesus, the Alpha and Omega, the First and the Last.*

Although the SATOR SQUARE may be intriguing, it only causes speculation and controversy—however, faith is spiritual and does not come from human reasoning but from hearing the Word of God. *Abraham answered, "Your brothers can read what Moses and the prophets wrote. They should pay attention to that." Then the rich man said, "No, that's not enough! If only someone from the dead would go to them, they would listen and turn to God." So Abraham said, "If they won't pay attention to Moses and the prophets, they won't listen even to someone who comes back from the dead." Lk.16:29-31*

June:

God's Glory. *The Law that sentences people to death is glorious. How much more glorious is the work of the Spirit! His work makes people right with God. The glory of the old covenant is nothing compared with the far greater glory of the new. The glory of the old is fading away. How much greater is the glory of the new! It will last forever. Since we have that kind of hope, we are very bold. 2Corinthians 3:9-12*

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

Sunday 7th June Ps.150

As Dave Smethurst is with us today, I have borrowed this article from **Evangelii Gaudium** *(Joy of the Gospel)* that was presented on 24 November 2013 at Saint Peter's in Rome by Pope Francis to "*The Bishops, Clergy, Consecrated Persons And The Lay Faithful On The Proclamation Of The Gospel In Today's World*" at the end of his first year as pope.

The Joy of the Gospel.

The joy of the Gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus. Those who accept his offer of salvation are set free from sin, sorrow, inner emptiness and loneliness. With Christ joy is constantly born anew. In this Exhortation I wish to encourage the Christian faithful to embark upon a new chapter of evangelization marked by this joy, while pointing out new paths for the Church's journey in years to come.

A joy ever new, a joy which is shared. The great danger in today's world, pervaded as it is by consumerism, is the desolation and anguish born of a complacent yet covetous heart, the feverish pursuit of frivolous pleasures, and a blunted conscience. Whenever our interior life becomes caught up in its own interests and concerns, there is no longer room for others, no place for the poor. God's voice is no longer heard, the quiet joy of his love is no longer felt, and the desire to do good fades. This is a very real danger for believers too. Many fall prey to it, and end up resentful, angry and listless. That is no way to live a dignified and fulfilled life; it is not God's will for us, nor is it the life in the Spirit which has its source in the heart of the risen Christ.

I invite all Christians, everywhere, at this very moment, to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ, or at least an openness to letting him encounter them; I ask all of you to do this unfailingly each day. No one should think that this invitation is not meant for him or her, since "*no one is excluded from the joy brought by the Lord*". The Lord does not disappoint those who take this risk; whenever we take a step towards Jesus, we come to realize that he is already there, waiting for us with open arms. Now is the time to say to Jesus: "*Lord, I have let myself be deceived; in a thousand ways I have shunned your love, yet here I am once more, to renew my covenant with you. I need you. Save me once again, Lord, take me once more into your redeeming embrace*". How good it feels to come back to him whenever we are lost! Let me say this once more: God never tires of forgiving us; we are the ones who tire of seeking his mercy. Christ, who told us to forgive one another "*seventy times seven" (Matt.18:22*) has given us his example: he has forgiven us seventy times seven. Time and time again he bears us on his shoulders. No one can strip us of the dignity bestowed upon us by this boundless and unfailing love. With a tenderness which never disappoints, but is always capable of restoring our joy, he makes it possible for us to lift up our heads and to start anew. Let us not flee from the resurrection

of Jesus, let us never give up, come what will. May nothing inspire more than his life, which impels us onwards!

The books of the Old Testament predicted that the joy of salvation would abound in messianic times. The prophet Isaiah exultantly salutes the awaited Messiah: "*You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy" (9:3).* He exhorts those who dwell on Zion to go forth to meet him with song: *"Shout aloud and sing for joy!" (12:6).* The prophet tells those who have already seen him from afar to bring the message to others: "*Get you up to a high mountain, O herald of good tidings to Zion; lift up your voice with strength, O herald of good tidings to Jerusalem" (40:9).* All creation shares in the joy of salvation: "*Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth! Break forth, O mountains, into singing! For the Lord has comforted his people, and will have compassion on his suffering ones" (49:13).* Zechariah, looking to the day of the Lord, invites the people to acclaim the king who comes "*humble and riding on a donkey*": *"Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he" (9:9).* Perhaps the most exciting invitation is that of the prophet Zephaniah, who presents God with his people in the midst of a celebration overflowing with the joy of salvation. I find it thrilling to reread this text: "*The Lord, your God is in your midst, a warrior who gives you the victory; he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing, as on a day of festival" (3:17).* This is the joy which we experience daily, amid the little things of life, as a response to the loving invitation of God our Father: "*My child, treat yourself well, according to your means... Do not deprive yourself of the day's enjoyment" (Sir.14:11,14).* What tender paternal love echoes in these words!

The Gospel, radiant with the glory of Christ's cross, constantly invites us to rejoice. A few examples will suffice. "*Rejoice*!" is the angel's greeting to Mary (*Lk.*1:28). Mary's visit to Elizabeth makes John leap for joy in his mother's womb (*cf. Lk.1:41*). In her song of praise, Mary proclaims: "*My spirit rejoices in God my Saviour" (Lk.1:47).* When Jesus begins his ministry, John cries out: *"For this reason, my joy has been fulfilled" (Jn.3:29).* Jesus himself *"rejoiced in the Holy Spirit" (Lk.10:21).* His message brings us joy: "*I have said these things to you, so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete" (Jn.15:11).*

Our Christian joy drinks of the wellspring of his brimming heart. He promises his disciples: *"You will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy" (Jn.16:20).* He then goes on to say: *"But I will see you again and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you" (Jn.16:22).* The disciples "*rejoiced*" (*Jn.20:20*) at the sight of the risen Christ. In the Acts of the Apostles we read that the first Christians *"ate their food with glad and generous hearts" (2:46).* Wherever the disciples went, "*there was great joy*" (8:8); even amid persecution they continued to be *"filled with joy" (13:52*). The newly baptized eunuch *"went on his way rejoicing" (8:39)*, while Paul's jailer "*and his entire household rejoiced that he had become a believer in God" (16:34).* Why should we not also enter into this great stream of joy?

There are Christians whose lives seem like Lent without Easter. I realize of course that joy is not expressed the same way at all times in life, especially at moments of great difficulty. Joy adapts and changes, but it always endures, even as a flicker of light born of our personal certainty that, when everything is said and done, we are infinitely loved. I understand the grief of people who have to endure great suffering, yet slowly but surely we all have to let the joy of faith slowly revive as a quiet yet firm trust, even amid the greatest distress: "*My soul is bereft of peace; I have forgotten what happiness is... But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning. Great is your faithfulness... It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord" (Lam.3:17, 21-23, 26).* Sometimes we are tempted to find excuses and complain, acting as if we could only be happy if a thousand conditions were met. To some extent this is because our "*technological society has succeeded in*

multiplying occasions of pleasure, yet has found it very difficult to engender joy". I can say that the most beautiful and natural expressions of joy which I have seen in my life were in poor people who had little to hold on to. I also think of the real joy shown by others who, even amid pressing professional obligations, were able to preserve, in detachment and simplicity, a heart full of faith. In their own way, all these instances of joy flow from the infinite love of God, who has revealed himself to us in Jesus Christ. I never tire of repeating those words of Benedict XVI which take us to the very heart of the Gospel: "*Being a Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction*".

Thanks solely to this encounter—or renewed encounter—with God's love, which blossoms into an enriching friendship, we are liberated from our narrowness and self-absorption. We become fully human when we become more than human, when we let God bring us beyond ourselves in order to attain the fullest truth of our being. Here we find the source and inspiration of all our efforts at evangelization. For if we have received the love which restores meaning to our lives, how can we fail to share that love with others?

The delightful and comforting joy of evangelizing. Goodness always tends to spread. Every authentic experience of truth and goodness seeks by its very nature to grow within us, and any person who has experienced a profound liberation becomes more sensitive to the needs of others. As it expands, goodness takes root and develops. If we wish to lead a dignified and fulfilling life, we have to reach out to others and seek their good. In this regard, several sayings of Saint Paul will not surprise us: "*The love of Christ urges us on" (2Cor.5:14*); "*Woe to me if I do not proclaim the Gospel" (1Cor.9:16).*

The Gospel offers us the chance to live life on a higher plane, but with no less intensity: "*Life grows by being given away, and it weakens in isolation and comfort. Indeed, those who enjoy life most are those who leave security on the shore and become excited by the mission of communicating life to others"*. When the Church summons Christians to take up the task of evangelization, she is simply pointing to the source of authentic personal fulfilment. For "*here we discover a profound law of reality: that life is attained and matures in the measure that it is offered up in order to give life to others. This is certainly what mission means*". Consequently, an evangelizer must never look like someone who has just come back from a funeral!

Let us recover and deepen our enthusiasm, that "*delightful and comforting joy of evangelizing, even when it is in tears that we must sow... And may the world of our time, which is searching, sometimes with anguish, sometimes with hope, be enabled to receive the good news not from evangelizers who are dejected, discouraged, impatient or anxious, but from ministers of the Gospel whose lives glow with fervour, who have first received the joy of Christ*".

Eternal newness. A renewal of preaching can offer believers, as well as the lukewarm and the non-practising, new joy in the faith and fruitfulness in the work of evangelization. The heart of its message will always be the same: the God who revealed his immense love in the crucified and risen Christ. God constantly renews his faithful ones, whatever their age: "*They shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not be faint" (Is.40:31*). Christ is the "*eternal Gospel" (Rev.14:6*); he "*is the same yesterday and today and forever" (Heb.13:8),* yet his riches and beauty are inexhaustible. He is for ever young and a constant source of newness. The Church never fails to be amazed at *"the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God" (Rom.11:33).* Saint John of the Cross says *that "the thicket of God's wisdom and knowledge is so deep and so broad that the soul, however much it has come to know of it, can always penetrate deeper within it*". Or as Saint Irenaeus writes: "*By his coming, Christ brought with him all newness"*. With this newness he is always able to renew our lives and our communities, and even if the Christian message has known periods of darkness and ecclesial weakness, it will never grow old. Jesus can also break through the dull categories with

which we would enclose him and he constantly amazes us by his divine creativity. Whenever we make the effort to return to the source and to recover the original freshness of the Gospel, new avenues arise, new paths of creativity open up, with different forms of expression, more eloquent signs and words with new meaning for today's world. Every form of authentic evangelization is always "*new*". Though it is true that this mission demands great generosity on our part, it would be wrong to see it as a heroic individual undertaking, for it is first and foremost the Lord's work, surpassing anything which we can see and understand.

Jesus is "*the first and greatest evangelizer*". In every activity of evangelization, the primacy always belongs to God, who has called us to cooperate with him and who leads us on by the power of his Spirit. The real newness is the newness which God himself mysteriously brings about and inspires, provokes, guides and accompanies in a thousand ways. The life of the Church should always reveal clearly that God takes the initiative, that "*he has loved us first" (1Jn.4:19)* and that he alone "*gives the growth" (1Cor.3:7).* This conviction enables us to maintain a spirit of joy in the midst of a task so demanding and challenging that it engages our entire life. God asks everything of us, yet at the same time he offers everything to us.

Nor should we see the newness of this mission as entailing a kind of displacement or forgetfulness of the living history which surrounds us and carries us forward. Memory is a dimension of our faith which we might call "*deuteronomic*", not unlike the memory of Israel itself. Jesus leaves us the Eucharist as the Church's daily remembrance of, and deeper sharing in, the event of his Passover (*cf. Lk.22:19*). The joy of evangelizing always arises from grateful remembrance: it is a grace which we constantly need to implore. The apostles never forgot the moment when Jesus touched their hearts: *"It was about four o'clock in the afternoon" (Jn.1:39*). Together with Jesus, this remembrance makes present to us "*a great cloud of witnesses" (Heb.12:1),* some of whom, as believers, we recall with great joy: *"Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God" (Heb.13:7).* Some of them were ordinary people who were close to us and introduced us to the life of faith: "*I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that dwelt first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice" (2Tim.1:5).* The believer is essentially "*one who remembers*".

If we are to share our lives with others and generously give of ourselves, we also have to realize that every person is worthy of our giving. Not for their physical appearance, their abilities, their language, their way of thinking, or for any satisfaction that we might receive, but rather because they are God's handiwork, his creation.

God created that person in his image, and he or she reflects something of God's glory. Every human being is the object of God's infinite tenderness, and he himself is present in their lives. Jesus offered his precious blood on the cross for that person. Appearances notwithstanding, every person is immensely holy and deserves our love. Consequently, if I can help at least one person to have a better life, that already justifies the offering of my life. It is a wonderful thing to be God's faithful people. We achieve fulfilment when we break down walls and our heart is filled with faces and names!

Questions

Can we learn from people who have different doctrines from us?

What is the joy of the Gospel?

What is "*the world*" that we are not to love? (*1Jn.2:15-17)*

How can we live a dignified and fulfilled life?

Why is the Gospel always new?

What does it mean to be "*God's faithful people*"?

Puritan Prayer of devotion: God of my end, it is my greatest and noblest pleasure to be acquainted with You. It is sweet to look into my being when all my powers and passions are united and engaged in pursuit of You; when my soul longs and passionately breathes after conformity to You and the full enjoyment of You. No hours pass away with so much pleasure as those spent in communion with You. O how desirable, O how profitable to the Christian life is a spirit of holy watchfulness and godly jealousy over myself; when my soul is afraid of nothing except grieving and offending You, the blessed God, my Father and Friend, whom I love and long to please, rather than be happy in myself! May my joy derive from glorifying and delighting You. I long to fill all my time for You, whether at home or in the way; to place all my concerns in Your hands; to be entirely at Your disposal, having no will or interest of my own. Help me to live to You for ever, to make You my last and only end.
Psalm 150: Praise the LORD. Praise God in his sanctuary; praise him in his mighty heavens. Praise him for his acts of power; praise him for his surpassing greatness. Praise him with the sounding of the trumpet, praise him with the harp and lyre, praise him with timbrel and dancing, praise him with the strings and pipe, praise him with the clash of cymbals, praise him with resounding cymbals. Let everything that has breath praise the LORD. Praise the LORD.

Sunday 14th June Ps.1. Acts 1

The return of Jesus—Compelling Truth or Conspiracy Theory? *It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority.*[Acts.1:7]
Foundational to Christianity is that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God;[Matt.16:16] that He died for our sins, rose from the dead;[1Cor.15:3] but also that He will come again to judge the living and the dead: *I solemnly call on you in the presence of God and Christ Jesus, who is going to judge those who are living and those who are dead. I do this because Christ Jesus will come to rule the world.*[2Tim.4:1]
The return of Jesus Christ is one of the four emphases of the Foursquare Gospel: *Jesus Christ, Saviour, Healer, Baptizer and Coming King.* And it is included in the Apostles' Creed: *I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried; he descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again; he ascended into heaven, he is seated at the right hand of the Father, and he will come again to judge the living and the dead.* But even though the return of Jesus is so integral to our faith, it has brought speculation, division and heresy to the Church. The main reason why the return of Jesus is misunderstood is because people are ignorant of the Scriptures: *Jesus replied, "You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God.*[Matt.22:29]
Many have predicted the date of Jesus return—and still do! "*The world will not last past 1734.*" (Nicholas of Cusa, 1401-1464). "*The second coming will take place in the year 1533.*" (Melchior Hofmann, 1531). "*The last day is at hand. My calendar has run out. I know nothing more in my Scriptures.*" (Martin Luther, 1532). "*I predict the absolute fullness of man's operation on planet Earth by the year 2000 A.D. Then Jesus Christ shall reign from Jerusalem for 1000 years.*"(Lester Sumrall, "*I Predict 2000 A.D.*" 1990). Yet one of the very last things that Jesus said to His Disciples was: *It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority.*[Acts.1:7] Not content with speculating the date of Jesus' return, they spice up their supposition with all sorts of speculation, which then leads to superstition! Jesus told Paul very explicitly that His return will not be a secret affair but will be audible, visible and final: *For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. According to the Lord's word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left*

will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage one another with these words.[1Thess.4:14-18] The early Church greeted each other with "*Maranatha*" meaning "*Come Lord*" because Jesus' return should inspire hope not instigate fear: *I, Paul, write this greeting in my own hand. If anyone does not love the Lord, let that person be cursed! Come, Lord [Maranatha]! The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you. My love to all of you in Christ Jesus. Amen.*[1Cor.16:21-24] The last book in the Bible concludes with an expectation of Jesus' return: *The Holy Spirit and the bride say, "Come!" Let those who hear say, "Come!" Anyone who is thirsty should come. Anyone who wants to take the free gift of the water of life should do so… This book tells about these things. He who gives witness to these things says, "Yes. I am coming soon." Amen. Come, Lord Jesus! May the grace of the Lord Jesus be with God's people. Amen.*[Rev.22:16-21]

Conspiracy theories have always been around but with today's instant communication, conspiracies spread quicker and easier than ever before. Conspiracists thrive on events that cause uncertainty or fear and they usually suggest that they have information that the general population has missed. But a common trait with conspiracists is that they refuse to accept the simple straightforward truth—and when their latest focus has been thoroughly disproved, they either stick with it regardless, or move on to another cause to defend! And although their supporters are often unwittingly deceived, the hardliner conspiracists themselves are so entrenched in their opinions that that they refuse to look objectively at their ideas and theories, and become quite literally "*unreasonable*"—you cannot reason with them. And whilst their theories usually contain some real facts, those facts are normally irrelevant—either because they are unconnected or they are taken out of context. We should be very cautious of anything that is promoted as a new revelation or that is contrary to common sense and reasonable logic. Of course, mankind is still making new discoveries but as the Bible says—there is nothing new under the sun. *History merely repeats itself. It has all been done before. Nothing under the sun is truly new. Sometimes people say, "Here is something new!" But actually it is old; nothing is ever truly new. We don't remember what happened in the past, and in future generations, no one will remember what we are doing now.*[Eccl.1:9-11] Conspiracy Theories are built on trust rather than truth, and the more evidence you present to the people who believe conspiracies, the less likely they are to accept the evidence. Of course, there is relevant evidence and irrelevant evidence, but truth will always stand up to scrutiny—especially spiritual truth. *But test everything; hold fast what is good.*[1Thess.5:21] This misuse of truth is not new—in 1885 the Journal "*Nature*" had this article: "*A well-known lawyer, now a judge, once grouped witnesses into three classes: simple liars, damned liars, and experts. He did not mean that the expert uttered things which he knew to be untrue, but that by the emphasis which he laid on certain statements, and by what has been defined as a highly cultivated faculty of evasion, the effect was actually worse than if he had.*" In 1892 Robert Giffen assistant editor of "*The Economist*" wrote: "*There are lies, there are outrageous lies, and there are statistics."* The devil will try to flood our minds with truth in order to float a lie, which is why we need discernment and wisdom! *A discerning person keeps wisdom in view, but a fool's eyes wander to the ends of the earth.*[Prov.17:24] *Who is wise? Let them realize these things. Who is discerning? Let them understand. The ways of the LORD are right; the righteous walk in them, but the rebellious stumble in them.*[Hos.14:9] *And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God.*[Phil.1:9-11]

The conspiracy theorists have much in common with the Gnostics of Bible times. The Gnostics believed that they had secret knowledge which made them superior to the rest of society—and if you had this secret knowledge, you too could become "*superior*". They emphasized personal spiritual knowledge (*gnosis*) above the orthodox teachings and rejected the concepts of sin and

repentance in favour of illusion and enlightenment. The Bible says we should avoid such people: *But avoid foolish controversies and genealogies and arguments and quarrels about the law, because these are unprofitable and useless. Warn a divisive person once, and then warn them a second time. After that, have nothing to do with them. You may be sure that such people are warped and sinful; they are self-condemned.*[Tit.3:9-11] *Watch out for people who cause divisions and upset people's faith by teaching things contrary to what you have been taught. Stay away from them. Such people are not serving Christ our Lord; they are serving their own personal interests. By smooth talk and glowing words they deceive innocent people. But everyone knows that you are obedient to the Lord. This makes me very happy. I want you to be wise in doing right and to stay innocent of any wrong. The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. May the grace of our Lord Jesus be with you.*[Rom.16:17-20]

Some of the theories that have emerged around the "*end times*" and the return of Jesus are fanciful but harmless but some are complete fantasies and dangerous. However, if we keep to the historical interpretation of Scripture, the return of Jesus will bring us encouragement, not discouragement; faith not fear. [Note that the "*Coming of the Lord*" is not the same as the "*Return of Jesus*"—the expression "*the Lord is coming*" is a warning of God's impending judgment, not the physical return of Christ.]

So how can we be sure that the return of Jesus is a Compelling Truth and not a Conspiracy Theory? Jesus' return has been integral to the Church's doctrine throughout the last 2000 years, but it can be argued logically and credible—which makes Jesus' return more believable than unbelievable. The denial of Jesus' return is not an *argument* but an *assertion*. An argument is something that can be debated logically because there are supporting claims—an assertion has no supported claims but is just an opinion and flies in the face of reliable evidence. Nevertheless, the specifics of Jesus' return continues to divide the Church—usually because people promote their ideas without any real arguments. It takes discernment to recognise that someone's arguments are without substance. **Spiritual maturity is the ability to know, understand, and apply Scripture in every circumstance**! We take the Scriptures as being true and trustworthy with good reason—they not only purport to be God's Word, but they have stood up to genuine scrutiny for over 2000 years. And the Scriptures testify of Jesus who not only spoke the truth but is the Truth (real/genuine): *For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.*[Jn.1:16] *Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.*[Jn.14:6] Jesus is trustworthy and His life confirmed this: *Believe me when I say I am in the Father. Also believe that the Father is in me. Or at least believe what the miracles show about me.*[Jn.14:11] But the clearest proof that Jesus is trustworthy, was His resurrection—He was brought back to life with an immortal body that was seen and handled by many different people over 40 days: *He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.*[Mk.8:31-32] *Jesus himself suddenly stood among them. He said, "May peace be with you!" They were surprised and terrified. They thought they were seeing a ghost. Jesus said to them, "Why are you troubled? Why do you have doubts in your minds? Look at my hands and my feet. It is really I! Touch me and see. A ghost does not have a body or bones. But you can see that I do." After he said that, he showed them his hands and feet. But they still did not believe it. They were amazed and filled with joy.*[Lk.24:36-41]

There were conspiracy theories about Jesus' resurrection, so we shouldn't be surprised that there are conspiracy theories about Jesus' return: *When the chief priests had met with the elders and devised a plan, they gave the soldiers a large sum of money, telling them, "You are to say, 'Jesus' disciples came during the night and stole him away while we were asleep.' If this report gets to the governor, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble." So the soldiers took the money and did as they were instructed. And this story has*

been widely circulated among the Jews to this very day.[Matt.28:12-15] Jesus said He would rise from the dead—and He did—and Jesus said that He would return—and He will! *Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me. My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. You know the way to the place where I am going.*[Jn.14:1-4] No one knows the time and date of Jesus' return so speculation will only lose us credibility. However, we know that His return is nearer now than when we first believed: *When you do those things, keep in mind the times we are living in. The hour has come for you to wake up from your sleep. Our full salvation is closer now than it was when we first believed in Christ. The dark night of evil is nearly over. The day of Christ's return is almost here. So let us get rid of the works of darkness. Let us put on the armour of light.*[Rom.13:11-12] And so, as the hymn puts it, Jesus' return is a blessed hope, rest for our soul and a song in the night: *But Lord, 'tis for Thee, for Thy coming we wait, the sky, not the grave, is our goal; Oh, trump of the angel! Oh, voice of the Lord! Blessed hope, blessed rest of my soul. And Lord, haste the day when the faith shall be sight, the clouds be rolled back as a scroll; the trump shall resound, and the Lord shall descend, a song in the night, oh my soul!*

But instead of treating Jesus' return as an escape from the troubles of this world, it should be an incentive share our faith—Jesus' Commission is our "*Go-mission*" and so we have a duty to be His witnesses: *All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. So <u>you must go</u> and make disciples of all nations… And you can be sure that I am always with you, to the very end.*[Matt.28:18-20] And the ever-nearing time of Jesus' return should also motivate us to live godly, holy and pure lives: *Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful. And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains. Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should. Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.*[Col.4:2-6] A lady once asked John Wesley how he would spend the intervening time, if he knew he would die at midnight tomorrow. His reply: "*Why madam, just as I intend to spend it now. I would preach this evening at Gloucester, and again at five tomorrow morning; after that I would ride to Tewkesbury, preach in the afternoon, and meet the societies in the evening. I would then go to Rev. Martin's house, who expects to entertain me, talk and pray with the family as usual, retire to my room at 10 o'clock, commend myself to my heavenly Father, lie down to rest, and wake up in Glory."* Wesley was then asked what he would do if he knew his Lord would return at that time the next day and he replied: "*I would go to bed and go to sleep; wake up in the morning, and go on with my work, for I would want Him to find me doing what he had appointed.*"

The return of Jesus is a Compelling Truth and not a Conspiracy Theory and although we don't know <u>when</u> Jesus will come, we do know that He <u>will</u> come—so let's be ready because: *the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him.*[Lk.12:40]

Questions

How can we keep a balanced understanding of life?
How can we keep a balanced understanding of Scripture?
What are the basic facts of Jesus' return?
What will heaven be like?
How can we stay both spiritual and sensible?

Puritan Prayer of Divine Support: You are the blessed God, happy in Yourself, source of happiness in Your creatures, my Maker, Benefactor, Proprietor and Upholder. You protect and sustain me, support and indulge me, save and keep me—in every situation, You are able to meet my needs and wants. May I live by You and live for You—never being satisfied with my Christian progress save as I resemble Christ. May conformity to His principles, character and conduct grow

hourly in my life. Let Your unexampled love, constrain me into holy obedience and render my duty my delight. If others deem my faith, folly; my meekness, infirmity; my zeal, madness; my hope, delusion; my actions, hypocrisy—may I rejoice to suffer for Your Name. Keep me walking steadfastly towards the country of everlasting delights—that paradise-land which is my true inheritance. Support me by the strength of heaven, that I may never turn back or desire false pleasures that will disappear into nothing. And as I pursue my heavenly journey, let me be known as a person with no aim but that of a burning desire for You and the good and salvation of my fellow man.

Psalm 1: Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers, but whose delight is in the law of the LORD, and who meditates on his law day and night. That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither—whatever they do prospers. Not so the wicked! They are like chaff that the wind blows away. Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous. For the LORD watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked leads to destruction.

Sunday 21st June Ps.2

Pentecost—the beginning of the Church.

When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place.[Acts.2:1]

Everyone who is right with God is because of their faith—even the OT Believers: *By faith, Abel, by faith Abraham…*[Heb.11] But it is the Finished Work of Jesus that makes the Church different from those OT Believers. The Church actually began 50 days after Jesus rose from the dead, when He sent the Holy Spirit to continue the work that He had started. But right at the beginning the Apostles had to address issues that had brought divisions within the Church—and their deliberations are recorded in Scripture. Some of the disagreements were doctrinal: *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!*[1Cor.11:18-19] But there were also personality and cultural disagreements too. *In those days the number of believers was growing. The Jews who followed Greek practices complained against the Jews who followed only Jewish practices. They said that the widows of men who followed Greek practices were not being taken care of. They weren't getting their fair share of food each day.*[Acts.6:1] *Barnabas and Paul strongly disagreed with each other. So they went their separate ways.*[Acts.15:39] And today, there are still doctrinal, cultural and personality disagreements within the Church. There are episcopalian vs congregational, conformist vs non-conformist, liberal vs fundamentalism, charismatics vs cessationists, *etc.*—but our perception of the Church is usually very English, modern and narrow! When we think of Church, we usually think of church steeples, church bells, church organs, church pews, church crosses, church hymn books and church dress (gowns and collars). Or maybe we think of a hall like ours with a guitar, keyboard, media projector and moveable seats. But at the beginning of the Church era, Church activities were nothing like they are today—even our worship format is relatively modern. Singing is now an important part of our Church worship and we normally call our singing time our "*worship*" time—but actually, **worship** is **obedience** not singing: *Abraham said to his servants, "Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will* ***worship*** *and then we will come back to you." … "I swear by myself, declares the LORD, that because you have done this… through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have* ***obeyed*** *me."*[Gen.22:5-18] Nevertheless, singing is an invaluable (and Biblical) way of expressing our soul (personality) to God—which is why the hymns and songs we use should be a proclamation and exclamation of the wonders of Christ in God. By s*inging and making melody in our hearts to the Lord* we can savour the great

Bible truths—and these themes should excite us! **Christian worship is extoling who Jesus was, who Jesus is, what Jesus did, what Jesus does**. The Gospel has the most exalted themes on earth, such as the glory of the Son of God; the mystery of His incarnation; His incredible life; the fathomless depths opened at Calvary; the awesome vistas of His Resurrection! Jesus is the reason we worship and it is the Holy Spirit who gives us the ability to speak and sing—no other religion has that distinction! And there have been many gifted poets and composers who have gracefully and majestically articulated the truths about Jesus and our salvation—and there are still some today!

The Old Testament is full of songs and the Psalms is actually a hymn-book: *My heart, O God, is steadfast; I will sing and make music with all my soul.*[Ps.108:1] Because the early Church began with converted Jews, they sang the psalms and hymns that they had been singing for generations: *What then shall we say, brothers and sisters? When you come together, each of you has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. Everything must be done so that the church may be built up.*[1Cor.14:26] *be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.*[Eph.5:18-20] And we too, should teach one another through our singing: *Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.*[Col.3:15-17] **But we are New Covenant Believers now and if we base our songs on the Psalms alone we will lose the wonder of our salvation!** We have a right in Church to expect songs with **Christian content** not just Biblical content. Isaac Watts (1674–1748) actually revised all but twelve of the 150 psalms because he was committed to directing the attention of worshippers the person and work of Jesus Christ and it is said that he made "*David speak like a Christian*". Today congregations fervently sing songs that sometimes have no identifiable Bible base—often no deity is named and some could even be sung by followers of any religion. John Wesley was always anxious that his brother Charles' verses should have sound theology and we too need to be careful that the hymns and songs that we use give expression to the wonderful works of God in Christ.

When Christianity was legalized by Constantine in 313 A.D., the Church was beset by divisions from within. One of the most well-known heretics was Arius, born in 250. He was a public-relations expert who combined catchy tunes with lyrics that denied Christ's divine equality with the Father. Devout Arians would blanket local communities at dusk with the sound of their hymns and Church leaders like Ambrose of Milan and Ephraim Syrus, countered them with doctrinally accurate songs that exalted Christ as God—they even set some of these to Arian melodies! In this pre-cursor to the battle of the bands, biblical truth eventually won out. By the C4th the power and usefulness of congregational song as a teaching tool had been established beyond question. But church leaders had growing concerns. Partly to counteract heresy, and partly to exercise greater authority in a rapidly expanding church, church leaders began to address specific practices of congregational song. The use of instruments was discouraged due to their worldly associations with the theatre, immorality, and idolatry. There was a strong movement toward a professional clergy. Finally, in A.D.367, the Council of Laodicea declared, "*Besides the appointed singers who mount the ambo and sing from the book, others shall not sing in the church.*" As a formal liturgy developed, the congregation increasingly shifted from active worshipers to passive spectators and during the Middle Ages the people were forbidden to sing. Not surprisingly, congregations became less and less familiar with the truths that singing had been

designed to reinforce and corporate worship was no longer truly corporate and worship became more spectator than participator. However, the Reformation began to reverse this as people became personally involved in the Church services. Martin Luther was at the forefront of promoting communal singing of Christian songs in public worship and was convinced that *"next to the Word of God, music deserves the highest praise"*. He saw music as a gift from God intended to carry theological truths into our hearts and claimed that anyone who does not regard music "*as a marvellous creation of God, must be a clodhopper indeed and does not deserve to be called a human being."* However not all Reformers were as enthusiastic as Luther about congregational worship with one author commenting if "*Luther recovered the congregations' singing, Zwingli denied it, and Calvin restricted it*." Luther believed that, in worship, God's people should sing hymns, Zwingli thought they should not sing at all, but Calvin taught that they should only sing directly from God's Word. Calvin saw "*hymns of human composure*" as unfit for the sacred assembly. Interestingly, in 1688 the Baptist Assembly in England, decided that singing Psalms was "*so strangely foreign to the evangelical worship that it was not conceived anyways safe for the churches to admit to such carnal formalities*." They held that the singing of psalms in public worship should be by single voices only. "*As the prayer of one in the church is the prayer of the whole church so the singing of one in the church is the singing of the whole church*." By 1733, the Baptist Assembly had moved a little and could say: "*There are very few that belong to this Assembly who either practise or approve the way of singing men's composures with tuneable notes and a mixed multitude; but... we do not think it justifiable for us to refuse to join with them in a General Assembly*." Notwithstanding the past controversies of singing in Church, our current style of singing is very modern—until the 1980's most Churches had a "*hymn sandwich*" format of singing, where they would have a hymn and a reading followed by another hymn and a prayer, *etc.*, rather than our medley of songs where we can express our feelings and emotions about God through music.

But Church is greater than a style of worship—Church is a gathering, an assembly of saints. The word "*Church*" in our Bible is translated from the word *Ekklesia* (ἐκκλησία) and was used by the Greeks to describe the local town council who were a *body of free citizens called together by a herald. Thayers Lexicon* defines Church as "*a gathering of citizens called out from their homes into some public place for the purpose of deliberating*" (*deliberating* is defined as a *discourse or debate with action taken after careful consideration*). **We are Church when we come together in public to make quality decisions to change after spending time in God's presence.**

Gathering: Church is always a gathering of people never just 1 or 2 people in their home.

Citizens: Christians are citizens of heaven. This has nothing to do with our natural or first birth but solely to do with our second birth from above: *So you are no longer strangers and outsiders. You are citizens together with God's people. You are members of God's family.*[Eph.2:19] *But we are citizens of heaven. And we can hardly wait for a Saviour from there. He is the Lord Jesus Christ.*[Phil.3:20]

Called: We have responded to God's call and are doing something about it. Church is when we leave our home thinking—our lunch, business, family, friends, leisure, etc. to worship God with a single mind: *His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness.*[2Pet.1:3]

Public Place: Church meets in public not in private. We aspire to be transparent and accountable—we are not a secret society or cult. *Now this is our boast: Our conscience testifies that we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially in our relations with you, with integrity and godly sincerity. We have done so, relying not on worldly wisdom but on God's grace. For we do not write you anything you cannot read or understand. And I hope that, as you have understood us in part, you will come to understand fully that you can boast of us just as we will boast of you in the day of the Lord Jesus.*[2Cor.1:12-14] *Unlike so many, we do not*

peddle the word of God for profit. On the contrary, in Christ we speak before God with sincerity, as those sent from God.[2Cor.2:17]

Deliberating: Our meetings are deliberate and we encourage deliberation—we intend to take action after hearing the facts: *Now the Berean Jews were of more noble character than those in Thessalonica, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.*[Acts 17:11]

We are Church when we come together with the purpose of gathering in the Name of Jesus to honour Him, to encourage others and to conform to Jesus' likeness—to be blessed and to be a blessing. We don't come together casually but circumspectly, determined to give our best to God because He deserves it. Worship means *worth-ship—what God is worth to me*. Church is the meeting of Believers who are *praise-ers* and *pray-ers*—who worship God, who fellowship with God and who listen to God. We do this by reading God's Word—and then ponder what we have read (in the Psalms it is called "*selah*"), talk about it and then do what we have learned. Church is the gathering of Believer who are in fellowship with God and God's people and who are giving and receiving for the benefit of God's Kingdom. Church is the Body of Christ and so we should reflect Him: *Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Saviour.*[Eph.5:23]

Church is the assembly of joyful spiritual beings—including the angelic spiritual beings and the redeemed human spiritual beings (both in heaven and on earth): *But you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the Judge of all, to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.*[Heb.12:22-24]

So today we are **Church** because we *gather as heavenly citizens who are called out from our homes into this public place for the purpose of deliberating* on God and His Word. Although times and cultures have changed, Jesus is still the focus of our worship as well as the reason why we worship. We extol who Jesus was, who Jesus is, what Jesus did, and what Jesus is doing. We teach one another in spiritual songs that express the wonderful works of God in Christ. Although the Church began at Pentecost, the Church has continued, and will continue, because Jesus is building His Church—that means you and me—to become a dwelling in which God live by His Spirit. *Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.*[Eph.2:19-22]

Questions

Were there any Believers before the Church began at Pentecost?

Is there a difference between the OT saints and the NT saints?

If Jesus is building His Church, why are there so many divisions and disputes in the Church?

What should Christian songs and hymns be about?

How important are the Psalms in the Church?

If the Church is the gathering of believers, should we allow unbelievers to take part in Church activities?

How can we deliberate at Church? (*Deliberate* means *discourse or debate with action taken after careful consideration.)*

Puritan Prayer—Evening Praise: Giver of all, when today is ended, I will take my place beneath my great Redeemer's cross, where healing streams continually descend, where balm is poured into every wound, where I wash anew in the all-cleansing blood, assured that You see in me no spots of sin. Yet a little while and I shall go to Your home and be no more seen. Help

me to gird up the loins of my mind, to quicken my step and to speed as if each moment were my last, so that my life is joyous and my death is glorious. I thank You for the temporal blessings of this world—the refreshing air, the light of the sun, the food that renews strength, the raiment that clothes, the dwelling that shelters, the sleep that gives rest, the starry canopy of night, the warm summer breeze, the flowers' sweetness, the music of flowing streams, the happy endearments of family, kindred and friends and the animate and things inanimate things that minister to my comfort—my cup runs over. Suffer me not to be insensible to these daily mercies—Your hand bestows blessings and Your power averts evil. I bring my tribute of thanks for the full warmth of faith, the cheering presence of Your Spirit, the strength of Your restraining will and Your spiking of hell's artillery—Blessed be my sovereign Lord!

Psalm 2—Why do the nations conspire and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth rise up and the rulers band together against the LORD and against his anointed, saying, "Let us break their chains and throw off their shackles." The One enthroned in heaven laughs; the Lord scoffs at them. He rebukes them in his anger and terrifies them in his wrath, saying, "I have installed my king on Zion, my holy mountain." I will proclaim the LORD's decree: He said to me, "You are my son; today I have become your father. Ask me, and I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession. You will break them with a rod of iron; you will dash them to pieces like pottery." Therefore, you kings, be wise; be warned, you rulers of the earth. Serve the LORD with fear and celebrate his rule with trembling. Kiss his son, or he will be angry and your way will lead to your destruction, for his wrath can flare up in a moment. Blessed are all who take refuge in him.

Sunday 28th June Ps.3 Acts 3

But I'll give you what I have. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth… [Acts3:6]

What do you have to give? We can't give something that we don't have and we shouldn't give something that is not ours—but we can (and should) give what we do have: *I passed on to you what I received from the Lord.* [1Cor.11:23] And there is a great blessing in giving! *In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'* [Acts.20:35] In fact, to give freely and generously is to be like God: *For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son.* [Jn.3:16] *To the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us.* [Eph.1:6-8] God created everything that exists: *For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.* [Col.1:16-17] That means that everything that exists really belongs to God—He is "*Lord of all*"! *Our God, we thank you and praise your wonderful name. But who am I and who are my people that you enable us to give so generously? Everything comes from you. We give you only what has come from your hands.* [1Chron.29:13-14] What we call <u>our</u> possessions are actually <u>God's</u> possessions; we are merely stewards—and God expects us to be good stewards: *Let a man so consider us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover it is required in stewards that one be found faithful.* [1Cor.4:1-2] *Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms. If anyone speaks, they should do so as one who speaks the very words of God. If anyone serves, they should do so with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen.* [1Pet.4:10-11] And as God's stewards, we should not only take care of God's possessions but use them for the purpose that God intended— use is not the same as abuse and we are to use God's creation, not abuse it: *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 of it you will surely die.'[Gen.2:15-17] We should always remember that God is our Provider and it is He who gives us the ability to work and enjoy life: *Be careful that you don't forget the LORD your God. Don't fail to obey his commands, rules, and laws that I'm giving you today. You will eat all you want. You will build nice houses and live in them. Your herds and flocks, silver and gold, and everything else you have will increase. When this happens, be careful that you don't become arrogant and forget the LORD your God, who brought you out of slavery in Egypt. He was the one who led you through that vast and dangerous desert—a thirsty and arid land, with poisonous snakes and scorpions. He was the one who made water come out of solid rock for you. He was the one who fed you in the desert with manna, which your ancestors had never seen. He did this in order to humble you and test you. But he also did this so that things would go well for you in the end. You may say to yourselves, "I became wealthy because of my own ability and strength." But remember the LORD your God is the one who makes you wealthy. He's confirming the promise which he swore to your ancestors. It's still in effect today.*[Deut.8:11-18] And so we have an obligation to use our possessions and wealth wisely: *Here's the lesson: Use your worldly resources to benefit others and make friends. Then, when your earthly possessions are gone, they will welcome you to an eternal home. If you are faithful in little things, you will be faithful in large ones. But if you are dishonest in little things, you won't be honest with greater responsibilities. And if you are untrustworthy about worldly wealth, who will trust you with the true riches of heaven? And if you are not faithful with other people's things, why should you be trusted with things of your own?*[Lk.16:9-12] *Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life.*[1Tim.6:17-19] And, regardless of whether we are rich or poor in this world's wealth, every Believer is rich in spiritual wealth: *The brother in humble circumstances ought to take pride in his high position. But the one who is rich should take pride in his low position, because he will pass away like a wild flower.*[Jas.1:9-10] *But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.*[2Cor.12:9-10] Whilst we are not responsible for other people's actions, we are each responsible for our own actions and one day each of us will have to answer to God for what we have said and done: *For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each of us may receive what is due us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.*[2Cor.5:10] *Good people do the good things that are in them. But evil people do the evil things that are in them. I can guarantee that on judgment day people will have to give an account of every careless word they say. By your words you will be declared innocent, or by your words you will be declared guilty.*[Matt.12:35-37] And we have an obligation to pass on what we have received—both material blessings and spiritual blessings: *I praise you for remembering me in everything and for holding to the traditions just as I passed them on to you.*[1Cor.11:2] *For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve.*[1Cor.15:3-5]

God gives us bread to eat AND He gives us seed to sow! In other words, God expects us to use and enjoy what we have but also to be generous to others. This is the principle of sowing and reaping—the more we sow, the more we grow, and the greater the harvest! *Invest what you have, because after a while you will get a return. Invest what you have in several different businesses, because you don't know what disasters might happen.*[Eccl.11:1-2] *Sow your seed in the morning, and at evening let not your hands be idle, for you do not know which will succeed, whether this or that, or whether both will do equally well.*[Eccl.11:6] And there is great blessing in giving: *For we must always cherish the words of our Lord Jesus, who taught, 'Giving brings a far greater blessing than receiving.'*[Acts.20:35] The principle of sowing and reaping is

universal, but as citizens of God's Kingdom, it especially applies to us in spiritual matters. God's Kingdom consists of righteousness, peace and joy: *God's kingdom does not consist of what a person eats or drinks. Rather, God's kingdom consists of God's approval and peace, as well as the joy that the Holy Spirit gives. The person who serves Christ with this in mind is pleasing to God and respected by people.*[Rom.14:17-18] And if we are going to reap righteousness, peace and joy we must sow righteousness, peace and joy. But God's Kingdom is not "ethereal" and it is certainly not disconnected from everyday life, and God's spiritual blessings overflow into our physical life. *Although a wicked person who commits a hundred crimes may live a long time, I know that it will go better with those who fear God, who are reverent before him.*[Eccl.8:12] *Then Jesus asked them, "When I sent you without purse, bag or sandals, did you lack anything?" "Nothing," they answered.*[Lk.22:35] However, we should be careful not to get distracted by material possessions—in fact, they can become a curse if they take our attention away from God's Kingdom. *Lawful blessings can be my secret idols and can do the most harm—the greatest injury is in the having, and the greatest good is in the taking away. In love, divest me of the dominion of material blessings that I may glorify You the more... Keep me from all things that turn to unbelief or lack the felt union with Christ.*[Puritan Prayers] *Jesus said to them, "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions."*[Lk.12:15] *These are the things you are to teach and insist on. Whoever teaches false doctrine and doesn't agree with the accurate words of our Lord Jesus Christ and godly teachings is a conceited person. He shows that he doesn't understand anything. Rather, he has an unhealthy desire to argue and quarrel about words. This produces jealousy, rivalry, cursing, suspicion, and conflict between people whose corrupt minds have been robbed of the truth. They think that a godly life is a way to make a profit. A godly life brings huge profits to people who are content with what they have. We didn't bring anything into the world, and we can't take anything out of it. As long as we have food and clothes, we should be satisfied. But people who want to get rich keep falling into temptation. They are trapped by many stupid and harmful desires which drown them in destruction and ruin. Certainly, the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil. Some people who have set their hearts on getting rich have wandered away from the Christian faith and have caused themselves a lot of grief. But you, man of God, must avoid these things. Pursue what God approves of: a godly life, faith, love, endurance, and gentleness. Fight the good fight for the Christian faith. Take hold of everlasting life to which you were called and about which you made a good testimony in front of many witnesses.*[1Tim.6:2-12] Paul felt it was important to remind people that he had financial and ethical integrity: *And so now, I entrust you into God's hands and the message of his grace, which is all that you need to become strong. All of God's blessings are imparted through the message of his grace, which he provides as the spiritual inheritance given to all of his holy ones. I haven't been after your money or any of your possessions. You all know that I've worked with my hands to meet my own needs and the needs of those who've served with me. I've left you an example of how you should serve and take care of those who are weak.*[Acts.20:32-34]

Christians are stewards of the message of Salvation: *Now to him who is able to establish you in accordance with my gospel, the message I proclaim about Jesus Christ, in keeping with the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past, but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all the Gentiles might come to the obedience that comes from faith—to the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen.*[Rom.16:25-27] We have an obligation to share the spiritual riches of God's Kingdom by declaring Jesus as both Lord and Christ. But preaching is not restricted to the pulpit—our sermons include the way we live as well as the way we talk. We have to practice God's Word as well as preach God's Word! *Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it.*[Lk.11:28] *My mother and brothers are those who hear God's word and put it into practice.*[Lk.8:21] *Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.*[Phil.4:9] *So then, brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold fast to the teachings we passed on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter.*[2Thess.2:15] If we are honest and transparent, our communication of Jesus will be clear and credible: *For if I preach the gospel, I have no reason to boast, because an obligation is placed on*

me. And woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! For if I do this willingly, I have a reward, but if unwillingly, I am entrusted with a stewardship. What then is my reward? To preach the gospel and offer it free of charge and not make full use of my authority in the gospel.[1Cor.9:16-18] But those who don't "*walk the talk*" are hypocrites—and Jesus pronounced lots of "*woes*" to hypocrites! *Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the kingdom of heaven in men's faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to.*[Matt.23:13] *So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honoured by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.*[Matt.6:2-4] *In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we command you, brothers and sisters, to keep away from every believer who is idle and disruptive and does not live according to the teaching you received from us.*[2Thess.3:6]

So, what do we have that we can give? Christina Rossetti's "*A Christmas Carol*", correctly says that we can give Jesus our heart: *In the bleak mid-winter Frosty wind made moan; Earth stood hard as iron, Water like a stone; Snow had fallen, snow on snow, Snow on snow, In the bleak mid-winter Long ago… What can I give Him, Poor as I am? If I were a shepherd I would bring a lamb, If I were a Wise Man I would do my part—Yet what I can I give Him, Give my heart.* And once we have given Jesus our heart (that is, asked Him to forgive us and give us a new heart), we can give that Good News to others. *Freely you have received; freely give.*[Matt.10:8] What God has given to us, we can give to others—whether spiritual, emotional or material blessings: *Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God.*[2Cor.1:3-4] This is God's cycle of giving—God first gives to us, we give to God (either directly as praise or indirectly to other people) and God gives us yet more: *"In that day I will respond," declares the LORD—"I will respond to the skies, and they will respond to the earth; and the earth will respond to the grain, the new wine and oil and they will respond to Jezreel [Jezreel means "God plants"]. I will plant her for myself in the land; I will show my love to the one I called 'Not my loved one.' I will say to those called 'Not my people,' 'You are my people'; and they will say, 'You are my God.'"*[Hos.2:21-23] But, like Peter and John, let's ensure that when we give what we have, we give in the name of Jesus—or else it will have no spiritual value: *I'll give you what I have. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth…*

Questions

What has God given for us: 1) to keep; 2) to share?
What is the difference between ownership and stewardship?
What is the greatest gift we can receive?
What is the greatest gift we can give to others?
Do the principles of God's Kingdom only work for Believers or do they work for unbelievers too?
Can non-Christians give anything of spiritual value?
Can we give as a Believer if we don't have a generous attitude?

Puritan Evening Prayer

O lover of Your people, You have placed my whole being in the hands of Jesus, my Redeemer, Commander, Husband and Friend and You care for me in Him. Keep me holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners; may I not know the voice of strangers, but go to Him where He is, and follow where He leads. You have bathed me once for all in the sin-removing fountain, cleanse me now from this day's defilement, from its faults, deficiencies of virtue and harmful extremes, that I may exhibit a perfect character in Jesus. O Master, who washed the disciples' feet, be very patient with me, be very condescending to my faults; go on with me till Your great work in me is completed. I desire to conquer self in every respect, to overcome the body with

its affections and lusts, to keep under my flesh, to guard my manhood from all grosser sins, to check the refined power of my natural mind, to live entirely to Your glory, to be deaf to unmerited censure and the praise of men. Nothing can hurt my new-born inner man, it cannot be smitten or die; nothing can mar the dominion of Your Spirit within me; it is enough to have Your approbation (*approval)* and that of my conscience. Keep me humble, dependent, supremely joyful, as calm and quiet as a sucking child, yet earnest and active. I wish not so much to do as to be, and I long to be like Jesus; if You make me right I shall be right. Lord, I belong to You, make me

Psalm 3: LORD, how many are my foes! How many rise up against me! Many are saying of me, "God will not deliver him." But you, LORD, are a shield around me, my glory, the One who lifts my head high. I call out to the LORD, and he answers me from his holy mountain. I lie down and sleep; I wake again, because the LORD sustains me. I will not fear though tens of thousands assail me on every side. Arise, LORD! Deliver me, my God! Strike all my enemies on the jaw; break the teeth of the wicked. From the LORD comes deliverance. May your blessing be on your people.

July:

God's Glory. *For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal. 2Corinthians 4:17-18*

Thought for the Month: Treat people as equally valuable, but treat ideas as if some are better than others—because they are! Tolerance requires that everyone is free to express their ideas without fear of abuse or reprisal, not that all views have equal validity, merit, or truth. Be egalitarian regarding persons. Be elitist regarding ideas. *Greg Koukle.*

Sunday 5th July Ps.4 Acts 4

hey were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly.*Acts.4:31*

Last week we saw that even though we may not be responsible for other people's actions, we are responsible for our own behaviour. When Cain tried to excuse himself with the statement: *Am I my brother's keeper?,* he forgot that God would hold him to account: *The LORD said, "What have you done? Listen! Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground.*Gen.4:10 We are not responsible for what other people do but we are responsible for what we do: *The word of the LORD came to me: "What do you people mean by quoting this proverb about the land of Israel: 'The parents eat sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge'? As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, you will no longer quote this proverb in Israel. For everyone belongs to me, the parent as well as the child—both alike belong to me. The one who sins is the one who will die.*Ezek.18:1-4 We will each have to give an account to God for what we do and what we say: *For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each of us may receive what is due us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.*2Cor.5:10 *Good people do the good things that are in them. But evil people do the evil things that are in them. I can guarantee that on judgment day people will have to give an account of every careless word they say. By your words you will be declared innocent, or by your words you will be declared guilty.*Matt.12:35-37 God has freely forgive us and so we should freely forgive others: *Speak and act like people who will be judged by the law that sets us free. Do this, because on the day of judgment there will be no pity for those who have not had pity on others. But even in judgment, God is merciful!* Jas.2:12-13 That's why we should never try to take revenge: *Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord.*Rom.12:17-19 *For it is commendable if someone bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because they are conscious of God. But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth. When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. 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.*1Pe 2:19-25And although as individuals, we should not try to mete out justice, God has established Governments as His delegated authority to deal with injustice and crime—which is why we should honour our country's leaders as God's servants (even when they are unbelievers): *Every person should obey the government in power. No government would exist if it hadn't been established by God. The governments which exist have been put in place by God. Therefore, whoever resists the government opposes what God has established. Those who resist will bring punishment on themselves… The government is God's servant working for your good… People in the government are God's servants while they do the work he has given them.*Rom.13:1-6 *Make the Master proud of you by being good citizens. Respect the authorities, whatever their level; they are God's emissaries for keeping order. It is God's will that by doing good, you might cure the ignorance of the fools who think you're a danger to society. Exercise your freedom by serving God, not by breaking the rules. Treat everyone you meet with dignity. Love your spiritual family. Revere God. Respect the government.*2Pet.2:13-17 We have an

obligation to live by the accepted rules of Christian conduct—which includes being a loyal citizen of our Country. We have this clause in our Church's Constitution: *We render loyalty to His Majesty's Government as far as conscience and morality permit.* Of course, there are times when we may have to choose between conscience and country—like Peter and John had to: *Once again the leaders called in Peter and John. They commanded them not to speak or teach at all in Jesus' name. But Peter and John replied, "Judge for yourselves. Which is right from God's point of view? Should we obey you? Or God? There's nothing else we can do. We have to speak about the things we've seen and heard."*[Acts.4:18-20] But the situation they faced was not whether to be a good citizen or not but whether they should say the truth about Jesus: *"What can we do with these men?" they asked. "Everybody in Jerusalem knows they have done an outstanding miracle. We can't say it didn't happen. We have to stop this thing. It must not spread any further among the people. We have to warn these men. They must never speak to anyone in Jesus' name again."*[Acts.4:16-17]

The Holy Spirit empowers us to be an effective witness for Jesus Christ: *But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.*[Acts.1:8] Actually all of the Holy Spirit's giftings are to be used to make Jesus known—either through action (signs, wonders, healings, *etc.*) or voice (word of wisdom, a word of knowledge, prophesy, tongues, *etc.*): *They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly.*[Acts.4:31] *Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. To one there is given through the Spirit a message of wisdom, to another a message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit, to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another distinguishing between spirits, to another speaking in different kinds of tongues, and to still another the interpretation of tongues. All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he distributes them to each one, just as he determines.*[1Cor.12:7-11] Prophesy in particular is to give a clear witness for Jesus: *I am a servant of God, just like you and your brothers and sisters who testify about their faith in Jesus. Worship only God. For the essence of prophecy is to give a clear witness for Jesus.*[Rev.19:10] *I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will glorify me because it is from me that he will receive what he will make known to you. All that belongs to the Father is mine. That is why I said the Spirit will receive from me what he will make known to you.*[Jn.16:12-15] This is because Jesus is God's plan of salvation for mankind: *Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved.*[Acts.4:12] The Holy Spirit's ministry is not to make life comfortable but to challenge, convict and convert—and when the Holy Spirit has challenged, convicted and converted, then He changes, counsels and comforts! *But I tell you the truth: It is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Counsellor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. When he comes, he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment: in regard to sin, because men do not believe in me; in regard to righteousness, because I am going to the Father, where you can see me no longer; and in regard to judgment, because the prince of this world now stands condemned.*[Jn.16:7-11]

Although the Holy Spirit empowers us to witness, we aren't given power but a Person! However, when the Holy Spirit dwells within us, He doesn't dominate us like a dictator, but is gentle like a dove. *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.*[Matt.3:16] The Holy Spirit led Jesus: *Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, left the Jordan and was led by the Spirit.*[Lk.4:1] And the Holy Spirit leads us too—not by fear as slaves afraid of punishment, but by faith as sons in fellowship with God: *For those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God. The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father." The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children.*[Rom.8:14-16]

When we are led by the Holy Spirit, we are liberated from the domination of the law. But although we no longer have a set of written rules to follow (like a liturgy), we still have to follow the Holy Spirit's leading: *So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.*[Gal.5:16-18] The Holy Spirit leads us through the Scriptures. The Scriptures were written by the Holy Spirit and we need the help of the Holy Spirit to apply them: *Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation of things. For prophecy never had its origin in the human will, but prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.*[2Pet.1:20-21] *The Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.*[2Tim.3:15-17] The Holy Spirit gentle guides us by applying the Scriptures to our lives—He nudges us: *He replied, "You've been given insight into God's kingdom. You know how it works. Not everybody has this gift, this insight; it hasn't been given to them. Whenever someone has a ready heart for this, the insights and understandings flow freely. But if there is no readiness, any trace of receptivity soon disappears. That's why I tell stories: to create readiness, to nudge the people toward receptive insight. In their present state they can stare till doomsday and not see it, listen till they're blue in the face and not get it. I don't want Isaiah's forecast repeated all over again: Your ears are open but you don't hear a thing. Your eyes are awake but you don't see a thing. The people are blockheads! They stick their fingers in their ears so they won't have to listen; They screw their eyes shut so they won't have to look, so they won't have to deal with me face-to-face and let me heal them. But you have God-blessed eyes—eyes that see! And God-blessed ears—ears that hear! A lot of people, prophets and humble believers among them, would have given anything to see what you are seeing, to hear what you are hearing, but never had the chance.*[Matt.13:11-17] *But do not worry about how to stand up for yourselves or what to say. The Holy Spirit will teach you at that time what you should say.*[Lk.12:11-12] The Holy Spirit also leads us through our conscience, which why we need to stay spiritually and morally clean—God's Spirit is called the Holy Spirit! *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. As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: "Be holy, because I am holy."*[1Pet.1:13-16] *Let the one who does right continue to do right; and let the holy person continue to be holy.*[Rev.22:11] However, not all religious people are guided by the Holy Spirit. Some people pretend to be spiritual by using a religious vocabulary, but they are not connected to the Head: *Some people enjoy pretending they aren't proud. They worship angels. But don't let people like that hold you back from winning the prize. They tell you every little thing about what they have seen. Their minds are not guided by the Holy Spirit. So they are proud of their useless ideas. They aren't connected to the Head. But the whole body grows from the Head. The muscles and tendons hold the body together and God causes it to grow.*[Col.2:18-19] The Church is the Body and the Head of the Body is Jesus Christ: *The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy.*[Col.1:15-18] The members of Jesus' Body are His Church—the Church consists of those who are born-again and who are living as the gathered saints. Because we are Christ's Body, we are to live in love and unity with God's peace ruling our conscience (heart): *Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put*

on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful.[Col.3:12-15]
We all need to be continually filled, empowered and embolden with the Holy Spirit: *And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly.*[Acts.4:31] Of course, we are not all extroverts and we certainly won't all be preachers in a pulpit but we should all be bold and stout-hearted: *I will bow down toward your holy temple and will praise your name for your love and your faithfulness, for you have exalted above all things your name and your word. When I called, you answered me; you made me bold and stout-hearted.*[Ps.138:2-3] *The righteous are as bold as a lion.*[Prov.28:1] However, the result of being filled with the Holy Spirit is much more than speaking boldly or even speaking in tongues. In 1909, the early British Pentecostals made a Declaration that the Baptism of the Holy Spirit included these seven results: **1**. The Consciousness of the Deity of our Lord Jesus Christ; **2**. The Consciousness of our "*Dwelling in Him*"; **3**. Divine Illumination concerning His Word and Will; **4**. The Testimony of Jesus; **5**. The Three-fold Conviction of the World by the Spirit in us (*He reproves the World of Sin, of Righteousness and of Judgment*); **6**. Our continual guidance into the deep things of God; **7**. The continual glorification of Christ (*to the exclusion of self*). By sharing what we believe (our faith), we have a greater understanding of what we believe: *I pray that you will be active in sharing what you believe. Then you will completely understand every good thing we have in Christ.*[Phile.1:6]
Spiritual maturity is faith in action—it is living out our faith by doing what we say we believe and the Holy Spirit is helping us to become mature: *So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.*[Eph.4:11-16] So let's continue to boldly share what we believe and stay clean with a clear message.

Questions

Are we responsible for other people's actions?
Can we repent on behalf of someone else?
Explain: *I can guarantee that on judgment day people will have to give an account of every careless word they say.*[Matt.12:36]
Explain *Do not take revenge.*[Rom.12:17]
What does "*filled with the Holy Spirit*" mean?
What does spiritual maturity mean?

Puritan Prayer: Evening Renewal—My Father, if Your mercy had bounds, where would be my refuge from just wrath? But Your love in Christ is without measure. Thus, I present myself to You with sins of commission and omission, against You, my Father; against You, adorable Redeemer; against You and Your strivings, O Holy Spirit; against the dictates of my conscience; against the precepts of Your Word; against my neighbours; against myself. I often stumble and have to confess my weakness and sin. But I bless You that the finished work of Jesus needs no addition from my doings, that His oblation is sufficient satisfaction for my sins. If future days be mine, help me to amend my life, to hate and abhor evil and to flee the sins I confess. Make me more resolute, more watchful, more prayerful. Let no evil fruit spring from any evil seeds my hands have sown; Let no neighbour be hardened in vanity and folly by my want of circumspection. If this day I have been ashamed of Christ and His Word, or have shown unkindness, malice, envy, lack of love, unadvised speech or heavy temper, then let it be no

stumbling block to others or dishonour to Your Name. O help me to set an upright example that will ever rebuke vice, allure to goodness and evidence that the ways of Christ are lovely.
Psalm 4—Answer me when I call to you, my righteous God. Give me relief from my distress; have mercy on me and hear my prayer. How long will you people turn my glory into shame? How long will you love delusions and seek false gods? Know that the LORD has set apart his faithful servant for himself; the LORD hears when I call to him. Tremble and do not sin; when you are on your beds, search your hearts and be silent. Offer the sacrifices of the righteous and trust in the LORD. Many, LORD, are asking, "Who will bring us prosperity?" Let the light of your face shine on us. Fill my heart with joy when their grain and new wine abound. In peace I will lie down and sleep, for you alone, LORD, make me dwell in safety.

Sunday 12th July Ps.5 Acts 5:1-16

Integrity! *You didn't lie to people but to God!*[Acts.5:4]
Integrity is the quality of honesty with a refusal to compromise your strong moral principles. We see this in Job, who in the midst of absolute anguish, kept his integrity—he understood that it was sin to recant his trust in God! *"Still holding on to your precious integrity, are you? Curse God and be done with it!" He told [his wife], "You're talking like an empty-headed fool. We take the good days from God—why not also the bad days?" Not once through all this did Job sin. He said nothing against God.*[Job.2:9-10]
David said that he would **betray God's people** if he failed to maintain his integrity! *I was envious of arrogant people when I saw the prosperity that wicked people enjoy… They ridicule. They speak maliciously. They speak arrogantly about oppression. They verbally attack heaven, and they order people around on earth… Then wicked people ask, "What does God know? Does the Most High know anything?" Look how wicked they are! They never have a worry. They grow more and more wealthy. I've received no reward for keeping my life pure and washing my hands of any blame. I'm plagued with problems all day long, and every morning my punishment begins again. If I had said, "I will continue to talk like that," I would have betrayed God's people.*[Ps.73:3-15] The story of Ananias and Sapphira is a sombre reminder that we should maintain our integrity and do the right thing in a reliable way. Doing the wrong thing in an unreliable way is dishonesty and dishonesty is actually lying to God: *You didn't lie to people but to God! …But Peter said to her, Why have you made an agreement together to be false to the Spirit of the Lord?*[Acts.5:4;9] Ananias and Sapphira wanted to look "*spiritual*" but without the personal commitment! Worship is personal—you can vote on behalf of someone else by proxy but you can't worship God on behalf of someone else—there is no proxy worship! *No one is to appear before me empty-handed.*[Ex 34:20] *Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water.*[Heb.10:22]
Although we should maintain our integrity in every area of our life, there are three areas in particular in which we should be particularly careful: **Faith, Finances and Friendships.**
Integrity in our Faith. We maintain integrity in our faith by being careful not to compromise our beliefs. This is especially important when we are facing difficulties or hardships—if we are a Believer then we need to believe God through every circumstance, whether we can see a way through or not! When we come together each Sunday to worship God, we should be aiming to strengthen our faith so we are more than ready to trust God throughout the coming week: *I thank my God through Jesus the Anointed for all of you because we are joined by faith as family… I know that when we come together something beautiful will happen as we are encouraged by each other's faith.*[Rom.1:9-12] Our Sunday Services are deliberately planned so that we read, hear, sing and share together the wonderful truths of Jesus Christ. This enables everyone to be able to build themselves up in the faith as they reflect on God's Word (His promises) in the Service and also after the Service. That is why our Vision statement is: *We proclaim Jesus, admonishing and teaching everyone with all*

wisdom so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ.[Col.1:28] We must make every effort to maintain a lifestyle that is consistent with our faith. Some people have more faith in the devil to destroy than they do in God to deliver. If you listen to their conversations, they do not really believe that God has saved them or actually hears their prayers—they are blown around by every thought, doubt and unbelief. That is why it is important to make our lips do their duty and only allow them to say what God says about us and our situation: *May my lips overflow with praise;*[Ps.119:171] *I will extol the LORD at all times; his praise will always be on my lips.*[Ps.34:1] We need to keep God's Word in our mind and in our lives: *Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly.*[Col.3:16] *My mother and brothers are those who hear God's word and put it into practice.*[Lk.8:21] *Be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.*[Eph.4:23-24] Joshua gave these instructions to the Israelites: *Study this Book of Instruction continually. Meditate on it day and night so you will be sure to obey everything written in it. Only then will you prosper and succeed in all you do. This is my command—be strong and courageous! Do not be afraid or discouraged. For the LORD your God is with you wherever you go.*[Josh.1:8-9] Scriptures are the only reliable resource that we have of God's will and desire—they are God's revealed plan of salvation and are given for us to read and inwardly digest so that we can align our mind, will and desire with God's revealed mind, will and desire. This week, why don't you take a "***Praise-Break***" at least once each day—stop what you are doing, think about a few attributes of God and then say them out loud. For example, try these Scriptures: *The Lord is my Shepherd, He leads me…*[Ps.23:1] *Praise be to the Lord, to God our Saviour, who daily bears our burdens.*[Ps.68:19] *Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory!*[Rev.19:6-7] We should make a habit of involving God in our thinking, planning and conversations each day and not just in our "*devotion*" times or Sunday services. Jesus said: *Everyone who acknowledges me publicly here on earth, I will also acknowledge before my Father in heaven. But everyone who denies me here on earth, I will also deny before my Father in heaven.*[Matt.10:32-33]

Integrity in our Finances. We maintain integrity in our finances by doing the right things in a reliable way. Ananias and Sapphira wanted to seem "*spiritual*" by **appearing to give everything** they had to the apostles whilst **still keeping some back** for themselves. Peter confronted them and exposed their **lie**. *Then Peter said, "Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land? Didn't it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn't the money at your disposal? What made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied just to human beings but to God."*[Acts.5:3-4] God sees everything we do—even the intentions of our heart. *Worship and serve [God] with your whole heart and a willing mind. For the LORD sees every heart and knows every plan and thought.*[1Chron.28:9] To lie about what we do in the name of God is dangerous—as Ananias and Sapphira found out! Another time, Peter confronted Simon when he tried to buy God's gifts with money and exposed the real issue, which was bitterness and captivity to sin: *May your money perish with you, because you thought you could buy the gift of God with money! You have no part or share in this ministry, because your heart is not right before God. Repent of this wickedness and pray to the Lord in the hope that he may forgive you for having such a thought in your heart. For I see that you are full of bitterness and captive to sin.*[Acts.8:20-23] Our finances belong to God and so we dare not lose our integrity with finances. **God has not promised to make us financially rich but He has promised to make us spiritually rich. Christian giving is an act of worship, not an investment for a financial return.** *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. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that. Those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge*

people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.[1Tim.6:4-10] Trying to get rich through religion is not a new heresy though—Balaam tried to get rich that way: *Like Balaam, they deceive people for money.*[Jude.11] *They have wandered off the right road and followed the footsteps of Balaam son of Beor, who loved to earn money by doing wrong. But Balaam was stopped from his mad course when his donkey rebuked him with a human voice.*[2Pet.2:15-16] When Balaam couldn't get his money from cursing the Israelites he incited the Moabite women to seduce the Israelites: *King Balak flew into a rage against Balaam. He angrily clapped his hands and shouted, "I called you to curse my enemies! Instead, you have blessed them three times. Now get out of here! Go back home! I had planned to reward you richly, but the LORD has kept you from your reward."*[Nu.24:10-11] *They also killed Balaam son of Beor with the sword… But Moses was furious with all the military commanders who had returned from the battle. "Why have you let all the women live?" he demanded. "These are the very ones who followed Balaam's advice and caused the people of Israel to rebel against the LORD at Mount Peor.*[Nu.31:8-16] Balaam had no integrity with money or morality (they often go hand-in-hand). The early Church also had problems with both: *But I have this complaint against you. You are permitting that woman—that Jezebel who calls herself a prophet—to lead my servants astray. She teaches them to commit sexual sin and to eat food offered to idols. I gave her time to repent, but she does not want to turn away from her immorality. Therefore, I will throw her on a bed of suffering, and those who commit adultery with her will suffer greatly unless they repent and turn away from her evil deeds. I will strike her children dead. Then all the churches will know that I am the one who searches out the thoughts and intentions of every person. And I will give to each of you whatever you deserve.*[Rev.2:20-23] Consumerism in the Church is abhorrent but sadly still common—people rush to get blessings at bargain prices in order to look good or feel better. It didn't work in Bible times and it doesn't work today. *What sorrow awaits them! For they follow in the footsteps of Cain, who killed his brother. For they mouth empty, boastful words and, by appealing to the lustful desires of the flesh, they entice people who are just escaping from those who live in error. They promise them freedom, while they themselves are slaves of depravity—for "people are slaves to whatever has mastered them."*[2Pet.2:17-19] God warned Cain that sin would master him if he didn't master sin: *The LORD asked Cain. "Why are you so angry? Why do you look so dejected? You will be accepted if you do what is right. But if you refuse to do what is right, then watch out! Sin is crouching at the door, eager to control you. But you must subdue it and be its master."*[Gen.4:6-7] The only real way to master sin is for Jesus to set us free—which He does at conversion. *Therefore, my friends, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. Through him everyone who believes is set free from every sin, a justification you were not able to obtain under the law of Moses.*[Acts.13:38-39] True faith believes God but also believes that God will reward our faith with forgiveness.[Heb.11:6] **Conversion sets us free from sin** and also **gives us the assurance that we are set free from sin** so we can actually live as sons of God! *Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.*[Jn.8:34-36] Finances can be a blessing but not at the cost of our soul: *What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit their very self?*[Lk.9:25]

Integrity in our Friendships. We can maintain integrity in our friendships by keeping right and reliable people as our friends. Friends have great influence over us because we share our lives together and so we should choose our friends carefully: *Bad company corrupts good character.*[1Cor.15:33] *A righteous man is cautious in friendship, but the way of the wicked leads them astray.*[Prov.12:26] *Do not make friends with a hot-tempered man, do not associate with one easily angered.*[Prov.22:24] *Don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred towards God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God.*[Jas.4:4-5] There is strength in friendship: *If one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no-one to help him up! ...By yourself you're unprotected. With a friend you can face the worst. Can you round up a third? A three-stranded rope isn't easily snapped.*[Eccles.4:10-12] A true friend will see us through adversity:

A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity.[Prov.17:17] *Do not forsake your friend and the friend of your father, and do not go to your brother's house when disaster strikes you— better a neighbour nearby than a brother far away.*[Prov.27:10] *For the despairing man there should be kindness from his friend; Lest he forsake the fear of the Almighty.*[Job.6:14] However, even friends may sometimes let us down: *Even my close friend, whom I trusted, he who shared my bread, has lifted up his heel against me.*[Ps.41:9] *Wealth brings many friends, but a poor man's friend deserts him.*[Prov.19:4] *You will be betrayed even by parents, brothers, relatives and friends, and they will put some of you to death.*[Lk.21:16] But God will never forsake us: *God has said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you." So we say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?"*[Heb.13:5-6] *Praise be to the Lord, to God our Saviour, who daily bears our burdens.*[Ps.68:19] **Jesus introduced a new level of friendship as a command.** *Here is my command. Love each other, just as I have loved you. No one has greater love than the one who gives his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command. I do not call you servants anymore. Servants do not know their master's business. Instead, I have called you friends. I have told you everything I learned from my Father.*[Jn.13:12-15] The Christian friendship that Jesus introduced, develops beyond an acquaintance (*fellowship of soul*) into a spiritual fellowship (*fellowship of spirit*). Our closest friends should be people who will have a spiritually good influence on us but we should still make friends (acquaintances) with others whilst still maintaining our integrity: *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?*[Lk.16:9-12]

If we don't maintain our integrity, we have no credible testimony, and even if God does something amazing for us, no one will take us seriously. *You must worship Christ as Lord of your life. And if someone asks about your hope as a believer, always be ready to explain it. But do this in a gentle and respectful way. Keep your conscience clear. Then if people speak against you, they will be ashamed when they see what a good life you live because you belong to Christ.*[1Pet.3:15-16] So let's make every effort to maintain our integrity in every area of our life by doing the right things in reliable ways but pay particular attention to maintain our integrity in our Faith, Finances and Friendships. The benefits of maintaining our integrity are eternal but the consequences of failing are serious—it's our choice!

Questions

What is integrity?
Can we have spiritual integrity without moral integrity?
How can we maintain integrity in our Faith?
How can we maintain integrity in our Finances?
How can we maintain integrity in our Friendships?

Puritan Prayer: grace active—

O God, as Your Spirit speaks in me, so I speak to You. Lord Jesus, great High Priest, You have opened a new and living way by which a fallen creature can approach You with acceptance. And now I contemplate the dignity of Your Person, the perfectness of Your sacrifice and the effectiveness of Your intercession. O what blessedness accompanies devotion, when under all the trials that weary me, the cares that corrode me, the fears that disturb me and the infirmities that oppress me, I can come to You in my need and feel peace beyond understanding! Your grace estores, preserves, leads, guards, supplies, and helps me. Here Your saints encourage my hope—they were once poor but are now rich; they were once bound bbut are now free; they were once tried but are now victorious. Every new duty calls for more grace, but not more grace than is found in You, the Divine Treasury, in whom all fullness dwells. To You I repair for grace upon grace, until every void made by sin is replenished and I am filled with all Your fullness. May my

desires be enlarged and my hopes emboldened, that I may honour You by my entire dependency and the greatness of my expectation. Prepare me for all the smiles of prosperity, the frowns of adversity, the losses of substance, the death of friends, the days of darkness, the changes of life, and that last great change of all. Your grace is sufficient for all my needs.

Psalm 5

Listen to my words, LORD, consider my lament. Hear my cry for help, my King and my God, for to you I pray. In the morning, LORD, you hear my voice; in the morning I lay my requests before you and wait expectantly. For you are not a God who is pleased with wickedness; with you, evil people are not welcome. The arrogant cannot stand in your presence. You hate all who do wrong; you destroy those who tell lies. The bloodthirsty and deceitful you, LORD, detest. But I, by your great love, can come into your house; in reverence I bow down toward your holy temple. Lead me, LORD, in your righteousness because of my enemies—make your way straight before me. Not a word from their mouth can be trusted; their heart is filled with malice. Their throat is an open grave; with their tongues they tell lies. Declare them guilty, O God! Let their intrigues be their downfall. Banish them for their many sins, for they have rebelled against you. But let all who take refuge in you be glad; let them ever sing for joy. Spread your protection over them, that those who love your name may rejoice in you. Surely, LORD, you bless the righteous; you surround them with your favour as with a shield.

Sunday 19th July 10.30am Ps.8

May I never lose the wonder of Your mercy!

Christianity is not an ethnic, racial or social classification but a spiritual identity—Christianity describes who we are. We are followers of Christ who have received mercy and now belong to God. *Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.*[1Pet.2:10] At conversion we signed up to become like Jesus Christ who is also our role model—the one we emulate: *When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. "Do you understand what I have done for you?" he asked them. "You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. Very truly I tell you, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.*[Jn.13:12-17] *To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. "He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth [not once said anything amiss]."*[1Pet.2:21-22] *In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus [You should think in the same way Christ Jesus does; Let his mindset become your motivation; Think of yourselves the way Christ Jesus thought of himself; Live with His attitude in your hearts].*[Phil.2:5] Jesus is the perfector and pioneer of our faith: *Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter [pioneer] of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.*[Heb.12:2] *In bringing many sons and daughters to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through what he suffered.*[Heb.2:10]

Something incredible and supernatural happened at conversion—we were born again. We received a new spirit, a new heart (motivation), a new status and a new identity: *But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.*[1Pet.2:9-10] *Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a*

dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.[Eph.2:19-22] Some think that because God created man in His image, everyone has the spark of divinity within them and new birth is simply an awakening, a blowing the spark of deity into flame. But before conversion we were spiritually dead and separated from God and our minds were in harmony with our unregenerate spirit. *As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient.*[Eph.2:1-2] This is a legacy from Adam and Eve's disobedience: *God said, '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. "For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it.*[Gen.3:3-6] Our spirit is the is the God-conscious part of us that "*died*" (that is was separated from God) when Adam sinned. God had breathed His life into Adam but that "*breath-of-God*" or spiritual life died—which is why we must be born-again. But at conversion, God breathes His life into us and the Holy Spirit re-creates our spirit and makes His home in our physical body—we become spiritually alive. After conversion, the Holy Spirit brings our spirit and mind into harmony. This change in our thinking (our minds) happens by yielding to the Word of God (both the incarnate Word—Jesus—and the written Word—Scripture): *Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.*[Rom.12:2] At conversion, God gave us everything we need to live a godly life: *His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature, having escaped the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.*[2Pet.1:3-4] But after conversion, the Holy Spirit teaches us what belongs to us in Christ and empowers us to walk in those realities. *Be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.*[Eph.4:23-24]

We are told that our society is bedevilled with problems caused by poor mental health, but actually the root problem is that people are separated from God—that is why the main work of the Church is open help people to see Jesus: *I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles. I am sending you to them to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.*[Acts.26:17-18] *"The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour." Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him. He began by saying to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."*[Lk.4:18-21] Holy Spirit convicts people of unbelief: *When he comes, he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment: in regard to sin, because men do not believe in me; in regard to righteousness, because I am going to the Father, where you can see me no longer; and in regard to judgment, because the prince of this world now stands condemned.*[Jn.16:8-11] Nevertheless poor mental health is a real problem and is often the result of people making wrong choices when they should have made the right ones—and then they become unable to make the right choices! If only Eve had not made that wrong choice! But we can (and must) train ourselves to distinguish good from evil: *Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.*[Heb.5:13-14] We need to know how to settle our heart whilst we can make the right choices so that we don't get to that place where we are trapped by unbelief and its symptoms of depression, distress, disillusionment,

despair, or even death. *This is how we know that we belong to the truth and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence: If our hearts condemn us, we know that God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. Dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God and receive from him anything we ask, because we keep his commands and do what pleases him. And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us. The one who keeps God's commands lives in him, and he in them. And this is how we know that he lives in us: We know it by the Spirit he gave us.*[1Jn.3:19-24]
God's Word is alive and works in the life of a Believer: *And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe.*[1Thess.2:13] *Great peace have they who love your law, and nothing can make them stumble.*[Ps.119:165] *You will keep him in perfect peace, Whose mind is stayed on You, Because he trusts in You.*[Is.26:3] *Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*[Phil.4:4-7]
We should always keep the wonder of God's mercy resplendent and untarnished—it is as we contemplate God's glory that we are changed into more glory: *And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.*[2Cor.3:18] And as we appreciate God's glory, we will express our wonder in praise. Praise is more that saying good words (benediction) or glory words (doxology) about God—praise is saying those words from our heart because we believe them. Some say the right things with their lips but deny in their heart. They say, "*Yes, the Word is true*" but in their heart they say, "*It is not true in my case."* The confession of our lips has no value as long as our heart repudiates it. We must make our lips do their duty and refuse to allow them to say anything contrary to what God says about us and our situation. Affirmations are not a technique to get what you want in life (*i.e.* positive confession philosophy) but rather a means of building the truths of God's Word into the life and consciousness of the believer in dependence on the Holy Spirit. We do well to heed Isaiah's advice and ensure that we agree with God: *Woe to those who quarrel with their Maker.*[Is.45:9] Actors recite words and the Greek word for actor that is used in the Bible is "*hypocrite*"! Jesus had some harsh words for "*actors*": *Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness.*[Matt.23:27-28] We need to keep God's Word in our heart and our head—in our lives and on our lips: *Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly.*[Col.3:16] *My mother and brothers are those who hear God's word and put it into practice.*[Lk.8:21] *Study this Book of Instruction continually. Meditate on it day and night so you will be sure to obey everything written in it. Only then will you prosper and succeed in all you do. This is my command—be strong and courageous! Do not be afraid or discouraged. For the LORD your God is with you wherever you go.*[Josh.1:8-9]
Faith is an such a well-known word in the Christian vocabulary that we often gloss over the implications of its true meaning. Faith is one of the highest ingredients of our walk with God: *And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.*[Heb.11:6] *So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.*[1Cor.13:13] Faith demands a sweet fellowship with God, an abandonment to His Word, a recognition of His Lordship and a walk in love. If we will keep the wonder of God's mercy alive and untarnished, we will not have any room for fear, doubt or unbelief. And if we ever start going down that road of oppression or depression, remember David's exhortation: *Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God.*[Ps.42:11]

Questions
Define "*Christianity*" in your own words.
Explain what happens when someone is converted.
What does the Holy Spirit do for us after conversion?
What does this mean "*Peace I leave with you.*"? *(Jn14:27)*
Is God's peace guaranteed to all Christians?
How can we put our hearts at rest? (*1Jn.3:19*)
Explain what faith is.
Puritan Prayer: Longings after God—My dear Lord, You know I yearn for nothing but Yourself, nothing but holiness, nothing but union with Your will. You have given me these desires and You alone can give me the thing desired. My soul yearns for communion with You. How precious it is to have a tender sense and clear apprehension of the mystery of godliness and of true holiness! What a blessedness to be like You as much as it is possible for a creature to be like its Creator! Lord, give me more of Your likeness, enlarge my soul to contain fullness of holiness and engage me to live more for You. Blessed Lord, You are in me and I am in You. You wrap my life in divine love—keep me ever desiring You and more fixed on You. May I always be humble and resigned to Your will, that I may serve You with honour and humility.
Psalm 8—O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory in the heavens. Through the praise of children and infants you have established a stronghold against your enemies, to silence the foe and the avenger. When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is mankind that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them? You have made them a little lower than the angels and crowned them with glory and honour. You made them rulers over the works of your hands; you put everything under their feet: all flocks and herds, and the animals of the wild, the birds in the sky, and the fish in the sea, all that swim the paths of the seas. LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!

Sunday 26th July Ps. 9

How is your soul? *Dear friend, I pray that you may enjoy good health and that all may go well with you, even as your soul is getting along well.*[3Jn.2]
We are not a spirit with a soul that lives in a body but a trinity of spirit, soul and body: *May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it.*[1Thess.5:23-24] Our soul is where our will, emotions, desires and decisions are—and all living creatures have a soul. But for our soul to get along well (prosper) we must bring it under the control of our spirit—and our spirit is either dead to God or alive to God. We are born with a spirit that is separated from God (dead) but at conversion we are born-again and our spirit is made alive and united with God. God's will is in our spirit, our will is in our soul. The Holy Spirit harmonises our spirit and soul as we yield to Him, in obeying God's Word.
Disappointments, difficulties, diseases and even delays in hope (including not-yet-answered prayers) can lead to depression: *Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a longing fulfilled is a tree of life.*[Prov.13:12] Christians are not exempt from difficulties and diseases but we should be able to handle them better than non-Christians. *I know that it will go better with those who fear God, who are reverent before him.*[Eccl.8:12] We belong to Jesus Christ and so we should think like citizens of His Kingdom: *Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things.*[Col.3:1-2] At its peak, the British Empire was so vast that the sun never set over its domain and a British citizen could travel to practically

any country in the world without the need of a visa. The song "*Rule Britannia*" epitomises the British Empire mindset: *Rule, Britannia! Britannia rule the waves: Britons never, never, never shall be slaves. The nations, not so blest as thee, Must, in their turns, to tyrants fall; While thou shalt flourish great and free, The dread and envy of them all… Thee haughty tyrants ne'er shall tame: All their attempts to bend thee down, Will but arouse thy generous flame; But work their woe, and thy renown.* Of course, those days have gone but they do remind us of our spiritual citizenship where we never, never shall be slaves—we are *more than a conqueror*, we are *a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession*. But being *a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession* is not just a status but a qualification to: *declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.*[1Pet.2:9] Being a Christian is not an ethnic, racial or social classification but a spiritual identity—we are followers of Christ. We are now citizens of heaven and live in a spiritual dimension that is bigger, brighter and better than anything this world can offer. *Join together in following my example, brothers and sisters, and just as you have us as a model, keep your eyes on those who live as we do. For, as I have often told you before and now tell you again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is set on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.*[Phil.3:17-21]

Privileges come with obligations and the privilege of belonging to God's Kingdom comes with the obligation to live as children of the day not children of the night: *But you, brothers and sisters, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief. You are all children of the light and children of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness. So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be awake and sober. For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, get drunk at night. But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet. For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him. Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.*[1Thess.5:4-11] That does not mean we isolate ourselves from other people—even those with problems. David had problem people join him and he welcomed them—if they came in peace: *All those who were in distress or in debt or discontented gathered around David and he became their commander. About four hundred men were with him.*[1Sam.22:2] *Some men from Judah also came to David in his stronghold. David went out to meet them and said to them, "If you have come to me in peace to help me, I am ready for you to join me. But if you have come to betray me to my enemies when my hands are free from violence, may the God of our ancestors see it and judge you."*[1Chron.12:16-17]

Instead of focusing on the problems, we should focus on God and His Kingdom: *But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own. [Steep your life in God-reality, God-initiative, God-provisions. Don't worry about missing out. You'll find all your everyday human concerns will be met. Give your entire attention to what God is doing right now, and don't get worked up about what may or may not happen tomorrow. God will help you deal with whatever hard things come up when the time comes.]*[Matt.6:33-34] As we contemplate God's glory (that is, God's Person, God's Presence, God's majesty and honour) we are changed—we become more like Jesus: *But the moment one turns to the Lord with an open heart, the veil is lifted and they see. Now, the "Lord" I'm referring to is the Holy Spirit, and wherever he is Lord, there is freedom. We can all draw close to him with the veil removed from our faces. And with no veil we all become like mirrors who brightly reflect the glory of the Lord Jesus. We are being transfigured into his very image as we move from one brighter level of glory to another. And this glorious transfiguration comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.*[2Cor.3:16-18] Jesus came with glory: *The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and*

truth.[Jn.1:14] *Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress. In the past he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the future he will honour Galilee of the nations, by the Way of the Sea, beyond the Jordan— The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned. You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy; they rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest, as warriors rejoice when dividing the plunder.*[Is.9:1-3] And God's glory is getting brighter in our lives: *But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its rays. And you will go out and frolic like well-fed calves. Then you will trample on the wicked; they will be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day when I act," says the LORD Almighty.*[Mal.4:2-3] Now that we are citizens of Heaven, we need to ensure that we think, talk and walk like citizens of Heaven. *Be diligent in these matters; give yourself wholly to them, so that everyone may see your progress. Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers.*[1Tim.4:15-16]

Something incredible and supernatural happened at conversion—we were born again. We received a new spirit, a new heart (motivation), a new status and a new identity: *But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.*[1Pet.2:9-10] *Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.*[Eph.2:19-22] Before conversion we were alive to the world but dead to God and our minds were in harmony with our unregenerate spirit. *As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath. But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved.*[Eph.2:1-5] This separation from God is a legacy from Adam and Eve's disobedience: *God said, '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. "For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it.*[Gen.3:3-6] At conversion, God gave us everything we need to live a godly life: *His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature, having escaped the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.*[2Pet.1:3-4] But after conversion, the Holy Spirit teaches us what belongs to us in Christ and empowers us to walk in those realities. *Be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.*[Eph.4:23-24] We need to prioritise eternal matters rather than focus on the temporal: *Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, love for the Father is not in them. For everything in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but whoever does the will of God lives forever.*[1Jn.2:15-17] *What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?*[Matt.16:26]

Our society is bedevilled with problems caused by poor mental health, but actually the root problem of society is that people are separated from God—that is why the main work of the Church is open help people to see Jesus: *I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles. I am sending you to them to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to*

God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.[Acts.26:17-18] *"The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour." Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him. He began by saying to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."*[Lk.4:18-21] Nevertheless poor mental health is a real problem and is often the result of people making wrong choices when they should have made the right ones, which results in them becoming unable to make the right choices! If only Eve had not made that wrong choice! But we can (and must) train ourselves to distinguish good from evil: *Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.*[Heb.5:13-14] We need to settle our heart and make the right choices so that we don't get to that place where we are trapped by unbelief and its symptoms of depression, distress, disillusionment, despair, or even death. *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 [Whenever our hearts make us feel guilty and remind us of our failures, we know that God is much greater and more merciful than our conscience, and he knows everything there is to know about us]. Dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God and receive from him anything we ask, because we keep his commands and do what pleases him. And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us. The one who keeps God's commands lives in him, and he in them. And this is how we know that he lives in us: We know it by the Spirit he gave us.*[1Jn.3:19-24] God's Word is living and works in our life (if we are a Believer): *And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe.*[1Thess.2:13] *Great peace have they who love your law, and nothing can make them stumble.*[Ps.119:165] *You will keep him in perfect peace, Whose mind is stayed on You, Because he trusts in You.*[Is.26:3] *Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*[Phil.4:4-7]

And as we appreciate God, His Person and His Presence, we will express our wonder in praise. Praise is more than just saying good words (benediction) or glory words (doxology) about God—praise is saying those words from our heart because we believe them. Some say the right things with their lips but deny in their heart. They say, "*Yes, the Word is true*" but in their heart they say, "*It is not true in my case."* The confession of our lips has no value as long as our heart repudiates it. We must make our lips do their duty and refuse to allow them to say anything contrary to what God says about us and our situation. Affirmations are not a technique to get what we want in life but rather a means of building the truths of God's Word into our life so that we think, talk and walk Kingdom values by agreeing with God: *Woe to those who quarrel with their Maker.*[Is.45:9] Actors learn their words and even act them out in a make-believe world. The Greek word for actor is "*hypocrite*" and Jesus had some harsh words for "*actors*": *Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness.*[Matt.23:27-28] We need to keep God's Word in both our head and our heart—on our lips and in our lives: *Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly.*[Col.3:16] *My mother and brothers are those who hear God's word and put it into practice.*[Lk.8:21] *Study this Book of Instruction continually. Meditate on it day and night so you will be sure to obey everything written in it. Only then will you prosper and succeed in all you do. This is my command—be strong and courageous! Do not be afraid or discouraged. For the LORD your God is with you wherever you go.*[Josh.1:8-9]

If we will keep the wonder of God's mercy vibrant and untarnished, we will not have any room for fear, doubt or unbelief. And if we ever start going down that road of oppression or depression, never forget David's exhortation: *Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Saviour and my God.*[Ps.42:11] Remember, the reason we are a royal priesthood, a holy nation and God's special possession is to *declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.*[1Pet.2:9]

Questions

What does it mean to be a citizen of heaven?
How can we "*set our hearts on things above"?* [Col.3:1]
Why is it important to know the Bible?
How much attention should we give to "*prophecy*"?
What responsibilities come with belonging to God's Kingdom?

Puritan Prayer: Meeting God—Great God, in public and private, in sanctuary and home, may my life be steeped in prayer, filled with the spirit of grace and supplication—and may each prayer be perfumed with the incense of atoning blood! You help and defend me so that I pass from praying ground to the realm of unceasing praise. Invited by Your promises and called by Your Spirit, I enter Your presence with thanksgiving in my heart and worship You with godly fear—awed by Your majesty, greatness and glory, but encouraged by Your love. I have nothing of my own with which to repay You—but in the arms of faith, I bring Jesus to You, declaring His righteousness, rejoicing that He has weighed down the scales for me and has satisfied Your justice. Although the least sin deserves infinite punishment because it is done against an infinite God, I bless You that that there is mercy for me. Bless me by revealing to me more of Christ's saving merits, by causing Your goodness to pass before me, by speaking peace to my contrite heart. Strengthen me to give You no rest until Christ reigns supreme within me—in every thought, word and deed—in a faith that purifies the heart, overcomes the world, works by love, fastens me to You, and ever clings to the cross.

Psalm 9. I will give thanks to you, LORD, with all my heart; I will tell of all your wonderful deeds. I will be glad and rejoice in you; I will sing the praises of your name, O Most High. My enemies turn back; they stumble and perish before you. For you have upheld my right and my cause, sitting enthroned as the righteous judge. You have rebuked the nations and destroyed the wicked; you have blotted out their name for ever and ever. Endless ruin has overtaken my enemies, you have uprooted their cities; even the memory of them has perished. The LORD reigns forever; he has established his throne for judgment. He rules the world in righteousness and judges the peoples with equity. The LORD is a refuge for the oppressed, a stronghold in times of trouble. Those who know your name trust in you, for you, LORD, have never forsaken those who seek you. Sing the praises of the LORD, enthroned in Zion; proclaim among the nations what he has done.

August:

God's Glory. *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. Ephesians 3:20-21*

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

Sunday 2nd August Ps. 11 Acts 5:17f

How confident are you in your faith? *God exalted [Jesus] to his own right hand as Prince and Saviour that he might give repentance and forgiveness of sins.*[Acts.5:31]

We recently looked at **Integrity** and saw that integrity is the quality of honesty with a refusal to compromise your strong moral principles—it is **moral soundness**, doing the right thing in a reliable way. We need to maintain our integrity, especially in our faith, finances and friendships. The story of Ananias and Saphira reminded us of the ultimate cost of lack of integrity—they wanted to look "*spiritual*" yet didn't want to pay the price and it cost them their lives! This week we are looking at **Confidence**—which is **being certain about the truth of something**. Christian faith is being confident and certain that God is who He said He is: *I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him until that day.*[2Tim.1:12] But sincerity and conviction alone is not enough because they are subjective—they are what I believe, what I think, but I can be sincerely wrong! If my thoughts and convictions are wrong, I am deluded—regardless of how sincere or zealous I am! Sincerity and zealousness is not the same as being right! Paul was sincere in his convictions and zealously persecuted Christians believing that he was serving God—until he met Jesus: *Paul said: "I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city. I studied under Gamaliel and was thoroughly trained in the law of our ancestors. I 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 the high priest and all the Council can themselves testify. I even obtained letters from them to their associates in Damascus, and went there to bring these people as prisoners to Jerusalem to be punished.*[Acts.22:2-5] *For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them—yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me.*[1Cor.5:9-10] We have to base our spiritual confidence on something more than our own convictions—and the only sure basis of our spiritual confidence is God's Word: *Look to God's instructions and teachings! People who contradict his word are completely in the dark.*[Is.8:20]

Gamaliel was a well-respected religious leader, but although he had sincere convictions and knew about God, he didn't have any confidence in God because he didn't know Jesus! *Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.*[Jn.17:3] *Who is the liar? It is whoever denies that Jesus is the Christ. Such a person is the antichrist—denying the Father and the Son. No one who denies the Son has the Father; whoever acknowledges the Son has the Father also.*[1Jn.2:22-23] Other religions depend upon the teachings of a person—which means if that person turns out to be a liar or even mythological, that religion still continues because it is a teaching or a set of values. But Christianity is dependent on Jesus Himself, not just His teachings. *Whoever does not honour the Son does not honour the Father, who sent him.*[Jn.5:23] Just following the teachings of Christ doesn't make someone a Christian. A Christian is someone who has put their trust in Christ Himself by confessing that Jesus is Lord and believing that God raised Jesus from the dead: *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. As the Scripture says, "Anyone who trusts in him will never be put to shame."[Rom.10:9-11] Gamaliel was the most prominent and influential Rabbi of his day: *[Paul was] a Jew, born in Tarsus, a city in Cilicia, and was brought up and educated here in Jerusalem under Gamaliel. As his student, he was carefully trained in the Jewish laws and customs.*[Acts.22:3] And so the Jews looked to Gamaliel for direction: *So let me give you some advice. Leave these men alone! Let them go! If their plans and actions are only human, they will fail. But if their plans come from God, you won't be able to stop these men. You will only find yourselves fighting against God.* [Acts.5:38-39] And although Gamaliel's advice may have appeared sensible and accommodating, it was actually a **compromise** (which is the opposite of **confidence**). You cannot be **confident** about something if you are **unsure whether it is true or not**. When someone is unsure if Jesus really is the Christ, God's Son, then they are not a Believer and they are not from God. This is the spirit of antichrist (literally: *against Christ*): *Who is the liar? It is the man who denies that Jesus is the Christ. Such a man is the antichrist—he denies the Father and the Son. No one who denies the Son has the Father; whoever acknowledges the Son has the Father also.*[1Jn.2:22-23] *But every person who doesn't declare that Jesus Christ has come as a human has a spirit that isn't from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist that you have heard is coming. That spirit is already in the world.*[1Jn.4:3] Because Gamaliel was not a Believer, we should not take his advice as being from God—remember, God was taking the Kingdom away from the unbelieving Israel and giving it those who would believe: *Then Jesus asked them, "Didn't you ever read this in the Scriptures? 'The stone that the builders rejected has now become the cornerstone. This is the LORD's doing, and it is wonderful to see.' I tell you, the Kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a nation that will produce the proper fruit. Anyone who stumbles over that stone will be broken to pieces, and it will crush anyone it falls on." When the leading priests and Pharisees heard this parable, they realized he was telling the story against them—they were the wicked farmers. They wanted to arrest him, but they were afraid of the crowds, who considered Jesus to be a prophet.*[Matt.21:42-46] Unbelief is rebellion—and both unbelief and rebellion disqualify us from inheriting the promises of God: *That is why the Holy Spirit says, "Today when you hear his voice, don't harden your hearts as Israel did when they rebelled, when they tested me in the wilderness… Be careful then, dear brothers and sisters. Make sure that your own hearts are not evil and unbelieving, turning you away from the living God. You must warn each other every day, while it is still "today," so that none of you will be deceived by sin and hardened against God. For if we are faithful to the end, trusting God just as firmly as when we first believed, we will share in all that belongs to Christ… And who was it who rebelled against God, even though they heard his voice? …Wasn't it the people who disobeyed him? So we see that because of their unbelief they were not able to enter his rest.*[Heb.3:7-19] We need to ensure that we continue to trust God—not just with our head but with heart as well! To trust God means to have **complete confidence** in Him as God and as Lord. Our **confidence in God** is based on God's Word and on God's Name—what He has said (the Scriptures) and what He has done (His reputation): *The only accurate way to understand ourselves is by what God is and by what he does for us, not by what we are and what we do for him.*[Rom.12:3] *I will praise your name for your love and your faithfulness, for you have exalted above all things your name and your word.*[Ps.138:2]

Gamaliel's advice was this: if it succeeds, it is of God and if it fails, it is not of God but only human. *Therefore, in the present case I advise you: Leave these men alone! Let them go! For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God."*[Acts.5:38-39] Although Gamaliel acknowledged that there was a God, he had no confidence in God—Gamaliel had the same sort of "*faith*" in God that the devil has: *You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder.*[Jas.2:19] True faith in God acknowledges that Jesus is the Christ, God's Son—and acts on that fact: *I say this because many deceivers, who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh, have gone out into the world. Any*

such person is the deceiver and the antichrist. Watch out that you do not lose what we have worked for, but that you may be rewarded fully. Anyone who runs ahead and does not continue in the teaching of Christ does not have God; whoever continues in the teaching has both the Father and the Son.[2Jn.1:7-9] Gamaliel's advice means that all the religions that have been around for hundreds of years, such as Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, Spiritualism, *etc*., must be "*of God*" because they have not "*failed*"! Similarly, the cults like Mormons, Jehovah Witnesses, etc., must be "*of God*" too—but every Christian congregation that has closed down was only of human origin!!! Pluralism says that it doesn't matter what you believe so long as you are sincere in your belief—all religions are good, regardless of truth! No! Our "*benchmark*" for accuracy and righteousness is not how long it has been in existence or how much influence it has or even how many supporters it has, but **what does it say about Jesus Christ**. *"Who do people say the Son of Man is?" "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven.*[Matt.16:13-17]
Legal evidence has to be confirmed by at least two witnesses. *In your own Law it is written that the testimony of two men is valid. I am one who testifies for myself; my other witness is the Father, who sent me.*[Jn.8:17-18] Jesus' claim to be God's Son, the Messiah, was confirmed by many witnesses. The Old Testament recorded clear and concise statement about the coming Messiah, including His name;[Is.62:11] His ancestry (descendant of Judah,[Gen.49:10] and David[2Sam.7:12]); His place of birth;[Mic.5:2] the date of His ministry *(69 weeks = 69x7years = 483 years—the decree to rebuild Jerusalem = B.C.455 + 483years = 25A.D.);*[Dan.9:26] His childhood;[Is.9:6-7;Hos.11:1] His ministry;[Is.7:4;9:1;42:1-4;61] His death;[Ps.22;Is.53] His resurrection;[Ps.16:10] His ascension.[Ps.68:18;Dan.7:13-14] Besides the Scriptures, God the Father and God the Holy Spirit also confirmed Jesus' claim, as did John the Baptist. And Jesus' own ministry of miracles and teaching also confirmed His claim as Messiah. *We accept man's testimony, but God's testimony is greater because it is the testimony of God, which he has given about his Son. Anyone who believes in the Son of God has this testimony in his heart. Anyone who does not believe God has made him out to be a liar, because he has not believed the testimony God has given about his Son. And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life.*[1Jn.5:9-12] *Don't believe me unless I do what my Father does. But what if I do it? Even if you don't believe me, believe the miracles. Then you will know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father.*[Jn.10:37-38] But Jesus' claims are so extreme that He cannot be half-right: *I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.*[Jn.14:6] *I tell you the truth, before Abraham was born, I am!*[Jn.8:58] C.S.Lewis wrote:

> *Jesus was either* ***Lord, Liar, or Lunatic!*** *Either this man was, and is, the Son of God; or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit on Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about Him being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.*

The religious leaders of Jesus' time exerted a lot of influence and threatened people with excommunication if they accepted Jesus' claim (unbelieving religious leaders still exert a lot of influence today!): *His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews. The Jews had already decided that anyone who said Jesus was the Christ would be put out of the synagogue.*[Jn.9:22] *At the same time that Jesus did those miracles, many of the leaders believed in him. But because of the Pharisees, they would not admit they believed. They were afraid they would be thrown out of the synagogue. They loved praise from people more than praise from God.*[Jn.12:42-43]
When people have no confidence in God or His Word they are easily led astray. *Jesus replied, "You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God.*[Matt.22:29] But when confronted with the truth there can be no excuse to *hedge-your-bets* or *sit-on-the-fence* over who Jesus is. *If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save*

his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit his very self? If anyone is ashamed of me and my words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his glory and in the glory of the Father and of the holy angels. I tell you the truth, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God.[Lk.9:23-27] Interestingly, soon after Gamaliel gave his compromise-advice and "*sit-on-the-fence*" opinion on who Jesus was, many priests became believers! *So God's word spread. The number of believers in Jerusalem grew quickly. Also, a large number of priests began to obey Jesus' teachings.*[Acts.6:7] If we have confidence in who Jesus is, then we will have confidence in what He does. We will be confident that God will continue what He has started: *being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.*[Phil.1:6] *And now, dear children, continue in him, so that when he appears we may be confident and unashamed before him at his coming. If you know that he is righteous, you know that everyone who does what is right has been born of him.*[1Jn.2:28-29] *I am still confident of this: I will see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living. Wait for the LORD; be strong and take heart and wait for the LORD.*[Ps.27:13-14] And we will can be confident that He will take care us: *He will also keep you firm to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, who has called you into fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.*[1Cor.1:8-9]

May we never "*hedge-our-bets*" or "*sit-on-the-fence*" over who Jesus is, because **Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God**. We **can** be confident in God and His Word and **know for sure** that everything Jesus said is true and will happen—including our eternal salvation.

Questions

Define "*confidence*".
How did the OT portray the coming Messiah (Christ)?
How can we be confident in Jesus' claim to be the Messiah?
What is the basis for our confidence in God?
How can we be sure that our confidence is real?
Can we still be confident in God if our life appears a failure?

Puritan Prayers for the morning:

Compassionate Lord, Your mercies have brought me to the dawn of another day. Its gift will be in vain unless I grow in grace, increase in knowledge and ripen for spiritual harvest. Let me this day, know You as You are, love You supremely, serve You wholly and admire You fully. Here is my grateful heart—overflow it with Your choicest gifts; here is my understanding—chase away any mists of ignorance. O ever watchful Shepherd, lead, guide and tend me this day; without Your restraining rod I err and stray. Hedge up my path lest I wander into unwholesome pleasure and drink its poisonous streams; direct my feet that I be not entangled in satan's secret snares, nor fall into his hidden traps. Defend me from assailing foes, from evil circumstances and from myself. My adversaries are part and parcel of my old nature, they cling to me as my very skin so that I cannot escape their contact. In my rising up and sitting down they barnacle me, they entice with constant baits—my enemy is within the citadel. Come with almighty power and cast him out, pierce him to death, and abolish in me every particle of carnal life this day.

Psalm 10: In the LORD I take refuge. How then can you say to me: "Flee like a bird to your mountain. For look, the wicked bend their bows; they set their arrows against the strings to shoot from the shadows at the upright in heart. When the foundations are being destroyed, what can the righteous do?" The LORD is in his holy temple; the LORD is on his heavenly throne. He observes everyone on earth; his eyes examine them. The LORD examines the righteous, but the wicked, those who love violence, he hates with a passion. On the wicked he will rain fiery coals and burning sulphur; a scorching wind will be their lot. For the LORD is righteous, he loves justice; the upright will see his face.

Sunday 9th August Ps. 12 Acts 6

Disciples and Deacons. *So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together. Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.*[Acts.6:2-3]

The Jewish Old Testament religion revolved around the Temple in Jerusalem where priests acted as mediators between God and people. The priests ministered according to God's instruction and they offered sacrifices to God on behalf of the people. Once a year, the high priest would enter the holiest part of the temple and offer a sacrifice for the sins of all the people, including himself and all of the other priests. These priests were not self-appointed but chosen by God according to their family line—they had to be descended from Aaron who was Moses' brother. The priests dedicated themselves to serve God by living holy lives so they could offer holy sacrifices. The OT worship (including the priesthood) served as a picture of the coming ministry of Jesus Christ—and so, once Jesus offered Himself as a sacrifice on the cross, that picture was no longer needed. *Don't let anyone judge you about holy days. I'm talking about special feasts and New Moons and Sabbath days. They are only a shadow of the things that were going to come. But what is real is found in Christ.*[Col.2:16-17] Now that Jesus Christ is the great High Priest, we come directly to God through Him. *We have a great high priest. He has gone up into the heavens. He is Jesus the Son of God. So let us hold firmly to what we say we believe. We have a high priest who can feel it when we are weak and hurting. We have a high priest who has been tempted in every way, just as we are. But he did not sin. So let us boldly approach the throne of grace. Then we will receive mercy. We will find grace to help us when we need it.*[Heb.4:14-16] There is no other mediator between God and man beside Jesus Christ and so Judaism and the priesthood is now obsolete and defunct. *There is one God. There is also one mediator between God and humans—a human, Christ Jesus. He sacrificed himself for all people to free them from their sins. This message is valid for every era.*[1Tim.2:5]

Before the Reformation, the Church had divided the Christians into two classes: "*spiritual*" (*clergy*) and the "*secular*" (*laity*). When Martin Luther began to actually read the Bible, he re-discovered that all Christians are now "*priests*" and are "*spiritual*" in the sight of God. *That the pope or bishop anoints, makes tonsures, ordains, consecrates, or dresses differently from the laity, may make a hypocrite or an idolatrous oil-painted icon, but it in no way makes a Christian or spiritual human being. In fact, we are all consecrated priests through Baptism.*[M.Luther] The word "*priest*" comes from the Greek *presbytes*, meaning "*age*" or "*seniority*"—derived from *presbys* meaning "*one who leads the cattle*" (*bous* meaning ox)—interestingly, Isaiah prophesies that in God's Kingdom a child will lead an ox: *The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them.*[Is.11:6] Although Episcopalian Churches still maintain a "*priesthood*" of ordained Clergy, it is now accepted by the "*Protestants*" and other Free Churches that all Believers are priests: *To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father—to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen.*[Rev.1:5-6] *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.*[1Pet.2:9] That is why we are not a sacramental Church and do not have a clergy/laity divide. And neither are we an Episcopalian Church (governed by a hierarchal structure of bishops). We do not regard the *apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers*[Eph.4:11] as titles but descriptions of the Holy Spirit giftings to the Church—Paul and Peter did not refer to themselves as "*Apostle Paul*" or "*Apostle Peter*" but rather *Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God*[Eph.1:1] and *Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ.*[1Pet.1:1] John doesn't even use the word *apostle* when introducing his Letters but says: *The Elder*[2Jn.1] and in Revelation, he just says: *John.*[Rev.1:4] Although Paul had founded the Church at Corinth,[Acts18] he asked them to regard him as a *servant* of Christ and as a *father*: *So then, men ought to regard us as servants of Christ*

and as those entrusted with the secret things of God. Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful… Even though you have ten thousand guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers, for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel. Therefore I urge you to imitate me.[1Cor.4:1-2;15-16] Even though Paul carried authority in the Church, he did not elevate himself over the Church but talked about the authority the Lord gave "***<u>us</u>***" (Paul and Timothy): *For even if I boast somewhat freely about the authority the Lord gave <u>us</u> for building you up rather than pulling you down, I will not be ashamed of it.*[2Cor.10:8] Paul insisted that he had no dominion over people's faith: *Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy, because it is by faith you stand firm.*[2Cor.1:24] Just as parents provide for their children, so Paul was determined that he would provide for Church in Corinth because he was their *"spiritual father*": *After all, children should not have to save up for their parents, but parents for their children. So I will very gladly spend for you everything I have and expend myself as well. If I love you more, will you love me less? Be that as it may, I have not been a burden to you.*[2Cor.12:14-16] *I ought to have been commended by you, for I am not in the least inferior to the "super-apostles," even though I am nothing. The things that mark an apostle—signs, wonders and miracles—were done among you with great perseverance. How were you inferior to the other churches, except that I was never a burden to you? Forgive me this wrong!*[2Cor.13:11-13]

There is no hierarchy in God's Kingdom! Jesus said that we shouldn't use titles to impress or "*pull rank*" and anyway that isn't the way for us to behave. *Also a dispute arose among them as to which of them was considered to be greatest. Jesus said to them, "The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority over them call themselves Benefactors. But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who is at the table? But I am among you as one who serves. You are those who have stood by me in my trials. And I confer on you a kingdom, just as my Father conferred one on me, so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom and sit on thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.*[Lk.22:24-30] God is our true Teacher and Father and if we elevate one person above another, we dishonour God: *But you are not to be called 'Rabbi,' for you have one Teacher, and you are all brothers. And do not call anyone on earth 'father,' for you have one Father, and he is in heaven. Nor are you to be called teacher, for you have one Teacher, the Messiah. The greatest among you will be your servant. For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.*[Matt.23:8-12] Obviously, Jesus was not saying we should not use the term "*teacher*" or "*father*" or Paul would not have used them: *And for this purpose I was appointed a herald and an apostle—I am telling the truth, I am not lying—and a true and faithful teacher of the Gentiles.*[1Tim.2:7] But rather, we should not elevate people above others. *Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.*[Matt.10:37-39]

God expects us to respect every person, whatever their social or academic position—and we should give those in authority the honour due to their position: *Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's.*[Matt.22:21] *Show proper respect to everyone: Love the brotherhood of believers, fear God, honour the king.*[1Pet.2:17] *I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone—for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. This is good, and pleases God our Saviour, who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.*[1Tim.2:1-4] But in the Church, we are to treat everyone as brothers and sisters in Christ. This is why we use the words *pastor, teacher, elder, deacon, elder (bishop*) as job-descriptions not titles. And these functions are important gifts that God has given to the Church because they are essential for the Body to function, grow and mature: *And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of*

Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.[Eph.4:11-16] *This is a trustworthy saying: "If someone aspires to be an elder he desires an honourable position." So an elder must be a man whose life is above reproach.*[1Tim.3:1-7] We should honour those who work hard in the Kingdom: *Elders who provide effective leadership must be counted worthy of double honour, especially those who work hard in speaking and teaching.*[1Tim.5:17] And although preaching is God's ordained method of providing spiritual food to the Church (the "*gathered saints*")—**ALL** Christian service (*ministry*) is important to the well-being of the Church. That means the less prominent ministries (such as helps and encouragements) are as valid as the more public ministries (such as preaching and teaching). *The way God designed our bodies is a model for understanding our lives together as a church: every part dependent on every other part, the parts we mention and the parts we don't, the parts we see and the parts we don't. If one part hurts, every other part is involved in the hurt, and in the healing. If one part flourishes, every other part enters into the exuberance. You are Christ's body—that's who you are! You must never forget this. Only as you accept your part of that body does your "part" mean anything. You're familiar with some of the parts that God has formed in his church, which is his "body": apostles, prophets, teachers, miracle workers, healers, helpers, organizers, those who pray in tongues. But it's obvious by now, isn't it, that Christ's church is a complete Body and not a gigantic, unidimensional Part? It's not all apostle, not all prophet, not all miracle worker, not all healer, not all prayer in tongues, not all interpreter of tongues. And yet some of you keep competing for so-called "important" parts. But now I want to lay out a far better way for you.*[1Cor.12:25-31]

All disciples are deacons. The word *disciple* means follower or pupil—someone who accepts the instruction given to them and makes it their rule of conduct: *Then they hurled insults at him and said, "You are this fellow's <u>disciple</u>! We are <u>disciples</u> of Moses!* [Jn.9:28] The word "*deacon*" comes from the Greek word meaning "*working in the dust*" and is used for a *servant. Just as the Son of Man did not come to be <u>served</u>, but to <u>serve</u>, and to give his life as a ransom for many.*[Matt.20:28] The early Church insisted that the people who did the "*menial*" ministry of serving food were *well respected and full of the Spirit and wisdom.*[Acts.6:3] These "*servants*" (*deacons*) were "*only*" caring for the widows and serving food but they were the reason why God's word spread. *the number of believers in Jerusalem grew quickly. Also, a large number of priests began to obey Jesus' teachings.*[Acts.6:7] Because they were faithful in their service (ministry), God gave them more opportunities to serve Him: *They chose Stephen. He was full of faith and of the Holy Spirit… Stephen was full of God's grace and power. He did great wonders and miraculous signs among the people… [Some Jews] began to argue with Stephen. But he was too wise for them. They couldn't stand up against the Holy Spirit who spoke through him.*[Acts.6:5-10] Under the New Covenant, the very least of us is greater than any of those under the Old Covenant: *I tell you, of all who have ever lived, none is greater than John. Yet even the least person in the Kingdom of God is greater than he is!*[Lk.7:41] And so God doesn't require us to have any social or academic status before He will use us—only that we belong to Christ and are faithful: *Those who have been given a trust must prove that they are faithful.*[1Cor.4:2] *Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when God chose you. Not many of you were considered wise by human standards. Not many of you were powerful. Not many of you belonged to important families. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise. He chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. God chose the things of this world that are common and looked down on. He chose what is not considered to be important to do away with what is considered to be important. So no one can boast to God. Because of what God has done, you belong to Christ Jesus. He makes us holy and sets us free. It is written, "The one who boast should boast about what the Lord has done."*[1Cor.1:26-31] Actually, our natural ability can

become a hinderance to our spiritual success because God's Kingdom is a spiritual Kingdom: *We don't place any confidence in physical things, although I could have confidence in my physical qualifications. If anyone else thinks that he can trust in something physical, I can claim even more… These things that I once considered valuable, I now consider worthless for Christ. It's far more than that! I consider everything else worthless because I'm much better off knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. It's because of him that I think of everything as worthless. I threw it all away in order to gain Christ and to have a relationship with him. This means that I didn't receive God's approval by obeying his laws. The opposite is true! I have God's approval through faith in Christ. This is the approval that comes from God and is based on faith that knows Christ.*[Phil.3:3-10]

God is still looking for deacons (servants) from among His disciples (followers)—people like Stephen who are *full of faith and of the Holy Spirit… full of God's grace and power.* As we are faithful in the little, God give us more: *You have done well, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things. I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!*[Matt.25:21] Being a Disciple of Jesus Christ is a high-calling and whatever we do in the Name of Jesus becomes an act of worship: *So here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering.*[Rom.12:1] *And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.*[Col.3:17] So, as committed Disciples of Jesus Christ, let's be faithful in our deaconing (service) and take every opportunity God gives us.

Holy Spirit, rise up within me and cause me to triumph every moment of today. Thank You that every meeting, conversation and activity I engage in today will be ordered by You. I will respond in obedience to Your directions and I will choose the way of righteousness when faced with many paths of judgment. Trust me with opportunities to show Your power and I will gladly take them. Thankyou for using me.

Questions

What are the main differences between the Old and New Covenants?
What is the difference between a priest and a pastor?
Who can be a minister (servant) in the New Covenant?
What are the Scriptural requirements to be a servant of Christ?
How can we become great in God's Kingdom?

Puritan Prayer: Dedication

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

Psalm 12: Help, LORD, for no one is faithful anymore; those who are loyal have vanished from the human race. Everyone lies to their neighbour; they flatter with their lips but harbour deception in their hearts. May the LORD silence all flattering lips and every boastful tongue—

those who say, "By our tongues we will prevail; our own lips will defend us—who is lord over us?" "*Because the poor are plundered and the needy groan, I will now arise*," says the LORD. "*I will protect them from those who malign them.*" And the words of the LORD are flawless, like silver purified in a crucible, like gold refined seven times. You, LORD, will keep the needy safe and will protect us forever from the wicked, who freely strut about when what is vile is honoured by the human race.

Sunday 16th August Ps.13 Acts 7

Like Father, Like Son *You are just like your fathers.*[Acts.7:51]

The word "*hypothesis*" is from Greek: *hupo* (*under*), *thesis* (*placing*) and literally means *a foundation* or *under-girding*. The foundation that undergirds each individual person is the person's family likenesses and values. Some of these likenesses (which can be good, bad or ugly), are inherent in our DNA and some are imprinted on us through contact. Our physical characteristics, such as our build, the colour of our skin, eyes and hair, *etc.*, are determined by our DNA but our non-physical characteristics, such as likes, dislikes, logic, thought patterns, *etc.* are determined by our soul. Our human will, emotions and intellect are based in our soul but God's will, wisdom and faith are based in our spirit. Natural knowledge, wisdom and belief are human and of the soul but spiritual knowledge, wisdom and belief are from God who resides in our spirit. *What we have received is not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may understand what God has freely given us. This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, explaining spiritual realities with Spirit-taught words. The person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God but considers them foolishness, and cannot understand them because they are discerned only through the Spirit.*[1Cor.2:12-14] *Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to your care. Turn away from godless chatter and the opposing ideas of what is falsely called knowledge, which some have professed and in so doing have departed from the faith.*[1Tim.6:20-21] *It is written: "I believed; therefore I have spoken." Since we have that same spirit of faith, we also believe and therefore speak.*[2Cor.4:13] *Then a shoot will come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from its roots will bear fruit. The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him— the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of advice and power, the Spirit of knowledge and fear of the LORD.*[Is.11:1-2] Even though culture and environment play an important part in our development, we always retain some of our family values (either consciously or subconsciously), because they are instilled into us from our mother's womb. And although the culture of Church and Christian family play an important part in our spiritual development, unless we are born-again we will never become like God!

The majority of Jews in Jesus' time believed that they were Jews because of their family ancestry—which they traced back to Abraham, who they called their "*father*". However, they knew nothing of their father Abraham's faith, let alone the God that their father Abraham worshipped. Jesus shocked them by telling them that it was not their physical family ancestry that determined who they really were but their spiritual family ancestry! He then went on to tell them that they were not God's children at all but they were the devils children! *Jesus said to the people who believed in him, "You are truly my disciples if you remain faithful to my teachings. And you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." "But we are descendants of Abraham," they said. "We have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean, 'You will be set free'?" Jesus replied, "I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave of sin. A slave is not a permanent member of the family, but a son is part of the family forever. So if the Son sets you free, you are truly free. Yes, I realize that you are descendants of Abraham. And yet some of you are trying to kill me because there's no room in your hearts for my message. I am telling you what I saw when I was with my Father. But you are following the advice of your father." "Our father is Abraham!" they declared. "No," Jesus replied, "for if you were really the children of Abraham, you would follow*

his example. Instead, you are trying to kill me because I told you the truth, which I heard from God. Abraham never did such a thing. No, you are imitating your real father." They replied, "We aren't illegitimate children! God himself is our true Father." Jesus told them, "If God were your Father, you would love me, because I have come to you from God. I am not here on my own, but he sent me. Why can't you understand what I am saying? It's because you can't even hear me! For you are the children of your father the devil, and you love to do the evil things he does. He was a murderer from the beginning. He has always hated the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, it is consistent with his character; for he is a liar and the father of lies. So when I tell the truth, you just naturally don't believe me! Which of you can truthfully accuse me of sin? And since I am telling you the truth, why don't you believe me? Anyone who belongs to God listens gladly to the words of God. But you don't listen because you don't belong to God."[Jn.8:31-47] Paul made the same point when he wrote to the Church in Rome: *For you are not a true Jew just because you were born of Jewish parents or because you have gone through the ceremony of circumcision. No, a true Jew is one whose heart is right with God. And true circumcision is not merely obeying the letter of the law; rather, it is a change of heart produced by God's Spirit. And a person with a changed heart seeks praise from God, not from people.*[Rom.2:28-29]

Adam was created directly by God and the Bible calls him *the son of God*[Lk.3:38] but when Adam sinned, he died spiritually and lost his spiritual family status. Death is separation, so when Adam sinned, he was separated from God, *i.e.* he died spiritually. *And the LORD God commanded the man, "You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die."*[Gen.2:16-17] God banished Adam and Eve from the Garden so they couldn't eat from the Tree of Life and live for ever in that state of spiritual death: *Then the LORD God said, "Look, the human beings have become like us, knowing both good and evil. What if they reach out, take fruit from the tree of life, and eat it? Then they will live forever!" So the LORD God banished them from the Garden of Eden, and he sent Adam out to cultivate the ground from which he had been made. After sending them out, the LORD God stationed mighty cherubim to the east of the Garden of Eden. And he placed a flaming sword that flashed back and forth to guard the way to the tree of life.*[Gen.22-24] This spiritual death (separation from God) has been inherited by all of Adam's descendants—and so, other than Jesus, who was already God, no-one since Adam, can legitimately claim to be *the son of God.* [When Jesus was born of Mary, He didn't become half-God and half-human but He added humanity to His Deity. *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.*[Nicene Creed] *The Word became a human being. He made his home with us. We have seen his glory. It is the glory of the one and only Son. He came from the Father. And he was full of grace and truth.*[Jn.1:14]]

Mankind is called "*God's offspring*" *'For in him we live and move and have our being.' As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.' 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.*[Acts.17:28-30] But we are not "*sons of God*" until God becomes our Father and the only way for us to become "*sons of God*" is to be re-born—to be *born-again.*[Jn.3:3] That's why Jesus became human: *Because God's children are human beings—made of flesh and blood—the Son also became flesh and blood. For only as a human being could he die, and only by dying could he break the power of the devil, who had the power of death. Only in this way could he set free all who have lived their lives as slaves to the fear of dying. We also know that the Son did not come to help angels; he came to help the descendants of Abraham. Therefore, it was necessary for him to be made in every respect like us, his brothers and sisters, so that he could be our merciful and faithful High Priest before God. Then he could offer a sacrifice that would take away the sins of the people. Since he himself has gone through suffering and testing, he is able to help us when we are being tested.*[Heb.2:14-18]

Because Jesus is both God and Human, He is **God's Son**[Jn.3:16] and also **Abraham's Son** *(Seed)*: *The promises were given to Abraham. They were also given to his seed. Scripture does not say, "and to seeds." That means many people. It says, "and to your seed." That means one person. And that one person is Christ.*[Gal.3:16] When a seed is planted in the ground, it produces a harvest—and when Jesus was planted in the ground, He produced a harvest of Christ-*ians*—people who are re-born: *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.*[Jn.12:23-24] And we are born-again of an imperishable (incorruptible, sinless and eternal) seed *For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God.*[1Pet.1:23] And so, those who are born-again and are now truly *sons of God,* have Adam's heritage restored. This means we may eat of the "*Tree of Life*" and live forever—however, our Tree of life is not in the Garden of Eden but in the Garden of Paradise. *He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.*[Rev.2:7] It is only by faith (*trusting God*) at we are saved through the re-birth and it is only by faith (*trusting God*) that we are victorious: *God's grace has saved you because of your faith in Christ. Your salvation doesn't come from anything you do. It is God's gift. It is not based on anything you have done. No one can boast about earning it.*[Eph.2:8-9] *Everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world? Only the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.*[1Jn.5:4-5] This "Tree of Life" is also described as "Wisdom" and "Fruit of Righteousness": *She [Wisdom] is a tree of life to those who embrace her; those who lay hold of her will be blessed.*[Prov.3:18] *The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life, and he who wins souls is wise.*[Prov.11:30] Jesus is that Tree of Life which we now have access to by the new birth which gives a new nature of Righteousness: *For if, by the trespass of the one man, death reigned through that one man, how much more will those who receive God's abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ!*[Rom.5:17] This new nature of Righteousness now controls us and we are now beholden to it. *But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you have come to obey from your heart the pattern of teaching that has now claimed your allegiance. You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness.*[Rom.6:17-18] This means that sin is contrary to our new nature and un-natural—but if we do sin, there is forgiveness through Jesus: *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.*[1Jn.2:1] Although Adam lost his status of "*son of God,*" we regain that status of "*son of God*" in Christ Jesus!

As Isaac Watts wrote:

Jesus shall reign where'er the sun, does his successive journeys run;
His kingdom stretch from shore to shore, till moons shall wax and wane no more.
Blessings abound wherever He reigns; the prisoner leaps to lose his chains;
The weary find eternal rest, and all the sons of want are blessed.
Where He displays His healing power, death and the curse are known no more:
In Him the tribes of Adam boast more blessings than their father lost.

When Samuel told Saul that he would be king, he also said that he would be a prophet: *The Spirit of the LORD will come powerfully upon you, and you will prophesy with them; and you will be changed into a different person. Once these signs are fulfilled, do whatever your hand finds to do, for God is with you.*[1Sam.10:6-7] But someone had the fore-sight to ask who his father was: "*Is Saul also among the prophets?" A man who lived there answered, "And who is their father?"*[1Sam.10:10-12] Going to church and joining in the church activities doesn't make us a Christian—we need to have the same Spiritual Father as Jesus Christ. *So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's*

seed, and heirs according to the promise.[Gal.3:26-29] The new-birth of conversion gives all Believers the same spiritual DNA as Jesus and the same faith as Abraham! *We have been saying that God accepted Abraham's faith, and so his faith made him right with God... So Abraham is the father of all believers.*[Rom.4:9-11] *Listen to me, you who pursue righteousness and who seek the LORD: Look to the rock from which you were cut and to the quarry from which you were hewn; look to Abraham, your father, and to Sarah, who gave you birth.*[Is.51:1-2] Because we are sons of God we should live as sons of God—holy, honourably and honestly, full of faith and the Holy Spirit. *"Jesus answered them, "Is it not written in your Law, 'I have said you are gods' If he called them 'gods,' to whom the word of God came—and the Scripture cannot be broken—what about the one whom the Father set apart as his very own and sent into the world? Why then do you accuse me of blasphemy because I said, 'I am God's Son' Do not believe me unless I do what my Father does.*[Jn.10:34-37] *Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.*[Matt.5:8-9] However, if we choose to live like mere sons of humans instead of sons of God, we will eventually die as mere humans. *I said, 'You are "gods"; you are all sons of the Most High.' But you will die like mere men; you will fall like every other ruler."*[Ps.82:6-7]

We have a high calling and a wonderful future with Jesus who is not ashamed of us: *Both the one who makes men holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers. He says, "I will declare your name to my brothers; in the presence of the congregation I will sing your praises."*[Heb.2:11-12] So whoever our physical father is, let's remember who our spiritual Father is—and live as children of God. Like Father, like son! *And now, dear children, continue in him, so that when he appears we may be confident and unashamed before him at his coming. If you know that he is righteous, you know that everyone who does what is right has been born of him. See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. All who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.*[1Jn.2:28-3:3]

Questions

Does God make any distinction between nations, families or gender?

Who belongs to God's family?

What happened to us when we were born-again?

What are the advantages of belonging to God's Family?

Name some spiritual family traits come from our Heavenly Father.

Are generational curses real?

Puritan Prayer—Morning Needs. O God the author of all good, I come to You for the grace another day will require for its duties and events. I step out into a wicked world; I know that without You I can do nothing, that everything with which I shall be concerned, however harmless in itself, may prove an occasion of sin or folly, unless I am kept by Your power. You hold me up and so I shall be safe. Preserve my understanding from subtilty of error, my affections from love of idols, my character from stain of vice, my profession from every form of evil. May I engage in nothing in which I cannot implore Your blessing, and in which I cannot invite Your inspection. Prosper me in all lawful undertakings, or prepare me for disappointments. Give me neither poverty nor riches. Feed me with food convenient for me, lest I be full and deny You and say, "*Who is the Lord*?" or be poor, and steal, and take Your name in vain. May every creature be made good to me by prayer and Your will. Teach me how to use the world and not abuse it; to improve my talents and to redeem my time; to walk in wisdom toward those without and in kindness to those within; to do good to all people and especially to my fellow Christians. And to God be all the glory.

Psalm 13—How long, LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and day after day have sorrow in my heart? How long will my enemy triumph over me? Look on me and answer, LORD my God. Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death, and my enemy will say, *"I have overcome him,"* and my foes will rejoice when I fall. But I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation. I will sing the LORD's praise, for he has been good to me.

Sunday 23rd August Ps. 14 Acts 8

od told me! *The Spirit told Philip…*[Acts.8:29]

When did you last hear God speak to you? That depends entirely on what we mean by "*speak*"! God does speak to us—He speaks to us directly by the Holy Spirit and He speaks to us indirectly through people, creation and circumstances. God also convicts, challenges, counsels, comforts and directs us—and He gives us godly desires, ideas, wisdom, insight and understanding. But God will never say or act contrary to His Word: *Look to God's instructions and teachings! People who contradict his word are completely in the dark.*[Is.8:20] God's Word is Jesus (the Incarnate Word): *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning.*[Jn.1:1-2]and God's Word is Scripture (the written Word): *Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation of things. For prophecy never had its origin in the human will, but prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.*[2Pet.1:20-21] The Scripture explains Jesus: *And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.*[Lk.24:27] God's Word is as important and trustworthy as God's Name: *I will bow down toward your holy temple and will praise your name for your love and your faithfulness, for you have exalted above all things your name and your word.*[Ps.138:2]

Many Christians use the phrase "*God told me*" in ways the Bible doesn't support. We don't have to individually hear directly from God in order to live the optimal Christian life—hearing voices is a sure way to be sectioned!! And there is great danger in assigning divine authority to our own thoughts and impulses. Some Christians choose jobs, schools, investments, careers, and even spouses this way—but there is no biblical justification for this—and it is particularly dangerous. God is sovereign and we can't dictate what He can or cannot do. Of course God can speak to us directly—even with an audible voice (as He did at least 3 times in the Gospels)—but God now speaks to us through Jesus: *In the past, God spoke to our people through the prophets. He spoke at many times. He spoke in different ways. But in these last days, he has spoken to us through his Son. He is the one whom God appointed to receive all things.*[Heb.1:1-3] When we say that God speaks to us through Jesus, we mean that God speaks to us through the Bible because the Bible is God's testimony of Jesus: *The Father who sent me has himself given witness about me. You have never heard his voice. You have never seen what he really looks like. And his word does not live in you. This is because you do not believe the One he sent. You study the Scriptures carefully. You study them because you think they will give you eternal life. The Scriptures you study give witness about me. But you refuse to come to me and receive life.*[Jn.5:37-40] There is a song (that we don't sing!) which goes: *"We need to hear from you, we need a word from you. If we don't hear from you, what will we do. Wanting you more each day, show us your perfect way, there is no other way that we can live?"* We don't need another "*word from God*" because we have the Word of God—Jesus Christ. Jesus is all we need—He is the Word that heals,[Ps.107:20] He is our wisdom, righteousness, holiness and redemption.[1Cor.1:30] And we can read all about Him for ourself in the Bible!

Time and again the Bible urges us to listen for God in the pages of His Word rather than waiting for our private, personalized marching orders directly from God. Perhaps the greatest

movement of God's Spirit in the last 1000 years was the Reformation—but it wasn't started by a whisper from God. It was started by a verse of Scripture: "*The just shall live by faith.*" Martin Luther was simply listening to the only Word of God that we are ever enjoined to hear, know, and obey—the Bible. In 2013, Pope Francis in his *Joy of the Gospel* said: *We do not blindly seek God, or wait for him to speak to us first, for God has already spoken, and there is nothing further that we need to know, which has not been revealed to us. Let us receive the sublime treasure of the revealed word.* Everything that God wants us to know about Himself and His plan of salvation has been written in the Bible: *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.* And so, although the Holy Spirit will never give any new revelation about God, He does make the Scripture come alive to us. Before Jesus came, God was distant and far away because sin was a barrier and separated people from God. When anyone approached God they had to confess their sin and offer a sacrifice in order to cover (atone for) their guilt. This was a holy and sacred event that required detailed rituals performed by a priest who was a direct descendant from Aaron (Moses' brother). But when Jesus came, He offered Himself as the true Sacrifice that all the previous sacrifices had pointed to: *We have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, and since that time he waits for his enemies to be made his footstool. For by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy.*[Heb.10:10-14] Jesus' sacrifice made all other sacrifices obsolete and redundant. *Unlike the other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself.*[Heb.7:27] Under the Old Covenant, God would meet with the High Priest once a year in an inner room in the Temple. In order to remind people that God was holy and separate, there was a Curtain (Veil) that hid this inner room from view but when Jesus died, that Curtain was torn from top to bottom. *With a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last. The curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom.*[Mk.15:37-38] This was to illustrate that we now have direct access to God: *I have not been speaking to you plainly. But a time is coming when I will speak clearly. Then I will tell you plainly about my Father. When that day comes, you will ask for things in my name. I am not saying I will ask the Father instead of you asking him. No, the Father himself loves you because you have loved me. He also loves you because you have believed that I came from God.*[Jn.16:25-27] Because sin was a barrier between people and God, heaven was inaccessible and no-one was ever sure if their prayers even reached God: *Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down.*[Is.64:1] *But if you do not give ear to the voice of the Lord your God, and take care to do all his orders and his laws which I give you today, then the heaven over your heads will be brass, and the earth under you hard as iron.*[Deut.28:15-23] But when Jesus came, He said we would see an open heaven: *What I'm about to tell you is true. You will see heaven open. You will see the angels of God going up and coming down on the Son of Man.*[Jn.1:51] When Jesus ascended to His Father, He became our Intercessor in heaven: *Christ Jesus who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.*[Rom.8:34] *Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess… Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.*[Heb.4:14-16] So now, any Believer, whatever their status, can pray to God with confidence. *You must, then, learn a species of prayer which may be exercised at all times; which does not obstruct outward employments; which may be equally practised by princes, kings, prelates, priests and magistrates, soldiers and children, tradesmen, labourers, women, and sick persons; it is not the prayer of the head, but of the heart.*[Mme Guyon] We pray to our Father who is in heaven—but God's heaven is not on earth or in the sky, or even in outer space. You can't place God's heaven on a map, you can't walk there, drive there or fly there because

heaven is not a geographical place. God's heaven is a spiritual place—it is where God dwells: *As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."*[Matt.3:16-17] *A large group of angels from heaven also appeared. They were praising God. They said, "May glory be given to God in the highest heaven! And may peace be given to those he is pleased with on earth!" The angels left and went into heaven.*[Lk.2:13-15]

In any relationship, the most important factor is time. When we spend time with someone, we get to know their likes and dislikes, their passions, their joys, hurts, their family—we get to know them as a person. After a while, we get to recognise their voice and their mannerisms—time spent together develops into trust. So it is with God! When we spend time with Him, we get to recognise God's likes and dislikes, His passions, His joys, His family—we get to know Him a Person. We spend time with God by reading the Bible, praying, and worshipping God **individually** and also by reading the Bible, praying, and worshipping God **collectively** (*i.e.* together with other believers—which is called *fellowship*). When we pray and praise, we speak to God and when we study (read, reflect and recall) the Bible, God speaks to us. Bonhoeffer puts it this way: *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.* By praying, praising and studying with other Believers (and especially within the security of Church, where there is accountability and credibility) we get to recognise God's voice for ourself: *He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognise a stranger's voice.*[Jn.10:3-5]

With so many different opinions and ideas around, it is essential for us to recognise God's voice, especially when it comes to doctrine and morality. Sadly, not all who think they hear God's voice, are actually hearing from Him. Most misguided people are simply naïve and mistake their imagination for God's leading—however, there are some misguided people who are deceived by demons. *I urge you, brothers and sisters, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them. For such people are not serving our Lord Christ, but their own appetites. By smooth talk and flattery they deceive the minds of naive people.*[Rom.6:17-18] *Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. [So always let his Word become like poetry written and fulfilled by your life!] Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it—not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it—they will be blessed in what they do. Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves, and their religion is worthless.*[Jas.1:22-26] If we are going to hear God clearly and accurately, we must filter what we believe God is saying to us through the general teaching of Scripture and especially the basic principles of the New Covenant. We don't need a specific "*word from God*" but we do need to apply the principles of God's Kingdom: *love what is good, self-controlled, upright, holy and disciplined… hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it... teach what is appropriate to sound doctrine… to be temperate, worthy of respect, self-controlled, and sound in faith, in love and in endurance.*[Tit.1:8-9;2:1-2] Fellowship means participating, partnering and sharing together and Christian fellowship includes: Participating, partnering and sharing together with God: *This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. If we claim to have fellowship with him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live out the truth.*[1Jn.1:5-6] Participating, partnering and sharing together with God's Word

(the Living Word—Jesus and the written Word—the Scriptures): *Tell them, "No, we're going to study the Scriptures." People who try the other ways get nowhere—they are completely in the dark!*[Is.8:20] Participating, partnering and sharing together with God's people (especially with those who don't quite see eye-to-eye with us): *Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed.*[Prov.15:22] *A man who isolates himself seeks his own desire; He rages against all wise judgment (defies all sound judgment).*[Prov.18:1] *But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.*[1Jn.1:7] If we stay in fellowship with God, His Word and His people, we will not wander too far off the *tracks of righteousness.*[Ps.23:3] God is the source of understanding—He makes us aware of answers to hard questions and gives us insight on difficult problems—and He also gives us wisdom: *If you need wisdom, ask our generous God, and he will give it to you. He will not rebuke you for asking. But when you ask him, be sure that your faith is in God alone.*[Jas.1:5-6] This is not the same as God simply telling us what to do: God speaks—we listen. That is not wisdom—even a fool can follow directions. Wisdom is skill at living—it is applying the information we have, it is insight into the way the world works. Merely following orders requires no discernment, no deliberation, no knowledge, no reflection, no understanding—in short, no wisdom. There's a vast difference between receiving revelation of some sort ("*God told me*…") and growing in wisdom. Special revelation is extremely rare and carries with it a unique authority. By contrast, creative inspiration or insight is common, especially for the Christian actively depending on God and leaning on Him for help. *Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight.*[Prov.3:5-6] There's a distinction between receiving revelation: "*God gave me this song*" or "*God told me how to fix my sink,"* and growing in wisdom: *"My ability or inspiration or insight come from the Lord.*" If God really gave us a song, we're not free to rewrite it—partly because it would be God's words not ours, and partly because improving God's song is a contradiction in terms. However, if we see God as the spiritual force behind our gifts and accomplishments, we can pray for wisdom, help, inspiration and creative solutions to vexing problems and expect Him to respond—without being committed to saying "*God gave me*…" or "*God told me*…" or "*God spoke to me about how to*…" Spiritual maturity is not the ability to hear God's voice but the ability to know, understand and apply Scripture in every circumstance And so we don't need a direct word from God to live a successful Christian life but we do need to know, understand and apply God's Word (Scripture) in every circumstance. Yes, we can hear God speak to us, but we hear God through the Holy Spirit's application of the knowledge He has given to us. So long as we continue in fellowship with God, His Word and His people, we can be sure God will direct our paths and we will stay on those paths of righteousness!

Questions

What does it mean to "*draw near to God*"? (*Heb.10:22; Jas.4:8*)
How do we approach God?
How does God speak to us today?
How can we know if God is speaking to us?
What should we do when we hear from God?
What are "*paths of righteousness*"[Ps.23] and how to do we stay on them?

Puritan Prayer—Purification: Lord Jesus, I sin. Grant that I may never cease grieving because of it, never be content with myself and never think I can reach a point of perfection. Kill my envy, command my tongue, trample down my self. Give me grace to be holy, kind, gentle, pure and peaceable; to live for You and not for self; to copy Your words and Your acts; to be transformed into Your likeness; to be consecrated wholly to You; to live entirely to Your glory. Deliver me from attachment to things unclean, from wrong associations, from the

predominance of evil passions and from the sugar of sin—so that with deep contrition and earnestness of heart, I will approach Your throne of grace with confidence, so that I may receive mercy and find grace to help in the time of need. O God, the Eternal One, help me to know that all things are shadows—but You are the substance; that all things are quicksands—but You are the rock; that all things are shifting—but You are the anchor; that all things are ignorance—but You are true wisdom. If my life is to be a crucible amid burning heat, so be it—but You sit at the furnace mouth to watch the ore so that nothing is lost. If I sin wilfully, grievously or tormentedly, in grace take away my mourning and give me music; remove my sackcloth and clothe me with beauty; still my sighs and fill my mouth with song—and then give me summer weather as a Christian!

Psalm 14: The fool says in his heart, "*There is no God.*" They are corrupt, their deeds are vile; there is no one who does good. The LORD looks down from heaven on all mankind to see if there are any who understand, any who seek God. All have turned away, all have become corrupt; there is no one who does good, not even one. Do all these evildoers know nothing? They devour my people as though eating bread; they never call on the LORD. But there they are, overwhelmed with dread, for God is present in the company of the righteous. You evildoers frustrate the plans of the poor, but the LORD is their refuge. Oh, that salvation for Israel would come out of Zion! When the LORD restores his people, let Jacob rejoice and Israel be glad!

Sunday 30th August Ps. 15 Acts 9

What's your Testimony?

Christians should be the happiest people in earth and so our conversation should be *edifying, encouraging and exhorting*—which is what prophesy is![1Cor.14:3] And so our testimony should be *edifying, encouraging and exhorting*—and it should be about Jesus because *the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.*[Rev.19:10] Our testimony should never be a moany about our testing!

Paul was a tent-maker from Tarsus in Turkey, but he was also an aristocrat and an academic—he loved studying the Bible and spent years studying at the best religious university of his time, under the best lecturer. *Then Paul said, "I am a Jew, born in Tarsus, a city in Cilicia, and I was brought up and educated here in Jerusalem under Gamaliel. As his student, I was carefully trained in our Jewish laws and customs. I became very zealous to honour God in everything I did, just like all of you today.*[Acts.22:3-4] However, Paul was also a fanatical religious bigot who refused to examine the facts or even look beyond the actual words of the Scriptures that he had studied and learnt by heart—he was more concerned with proving that he was right than being right! His eyes weren't just blinkered to the truth—he was completely blinded to the truth. Spiritual matters were beyond his understanding because he did not have the Holy Spirit. He later wrote: *The person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God but considers them foolishness, and cannot understand them because they are discerned only through the Spirit.*[1Cor.2:14] Paul was so fanatical in his religion that he travelled hundreds of miles to arrest, imprison and execute fellow countrymen whose only "*crime*" was to be a Christian! *Saul was uttering threats with every breath and was eager to kill the Lord's followers. So he went to the high priest. He requested letters addressed to the synagogues in Damascus, asking for their cooperation in the arrest of any followers of the Way he found there. He wanted to bring them—both men and women—back to Jerusalem in chains.*[Acts.9:1-2] *And I persecuted the followers of the Way, hounding some to death, arresting both men and women and throwing them in prison. The high priest and the whole council of elders can testify that this is so. For I received letters from them to our Jewish brothers in Damascus, authorizing me to bring the Christians from there to Jerusalem, in chains, to be punished.*[Acts.22:5] Andronicus and Junias were close relatives of Paul but were also Christians: *Greet Andronicus and Junias, my relatives who have been in prison with me. They are outstanding among the apostles, and they were*

in Christ before I was… Greet Herodion, my relative… Lucius, Jason and Sosipater, my relatives [send their greetings to you].[Rom.16:7-21] Imagine what it was like for them when Paul came for tea!

But something happened to Paul—he had an encounter with Jesus Christ. Jesus had been crucified but was resurrected (not resuscitated) and had ascended to heaven in glory. Ezekiel had a glimpse of this heavenly glory: *I saw that from what appeared to be his waist up he looked like glowing metal, as if full of fire, and that from there down he looked like fire; and brilliant light surrounded him. Like the appearance of a rainbow in the clouds on a rainy day, so was the radiance around him.*[Ezek.1:27-28] Peter, James and John also had an glimpse of this glory at the Transfiguration: *Jesus took with him Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light.*[Matt.17:1-2]

Paul's encounter with Jesus had turned his life right around. Paul's belief was no longer in a God who he did not know, but in a God whom he had met, and now trusted because he met Jesus Christ. *We have all received one blessing after another. God's grace is not limited. Moses gave us the law. Jesus Christ has given us grace and truth. No one has ever seen God. But God, the one and only Son, is at the Father's side. He has shown us what God is like.*[Jn.1:16-18] Paul's initial encounter with the resurrected, ascended and glorified Jesus, was very dramatic and he was blinded by the light. *As he was approaching Damascus on this mission, a light from heaven suddenly shone down around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul! Saul! Why are you persecuting me?" "Who are you, lord?" Saul asked. And the voice replied, "I am Jesus, the one you are persecuting! Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do." The men with Saul stood speechless, for they heard the sound of someone's voice but saw no one! Saul picked himself up off the ground, but when he opened his eyes he was blind.*[Acts.9:3-8] Although Paul's encounter with Jesus temporally closed his physical eyes, the encounter permanently opened his spiritual eyes. *Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord—Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here—has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit." Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength.*[Acts.9:17-19] Paul was commissioned by Jesus to go throughout the known world and open the spiritual eyes of those he encountered. *I am sending you to the Gentiles to open their eyes, so they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of satan to God. Then they will receive forgiveness for their sins and be given a place among God's people, who are set apart by faith in me.*[Acts.26:17-18] Paul was obedient to Jesus' commission and took every opportunity to tell others about his Lord, testifying to the lowest and the greatest including the Jewish High Priest, Provincial kings, Roman Governors and even the Emperor. Paul's prayer was that others would have eyes to see Jesus too: *I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and his incomparably great power for us who believe.*[Eph.1:17-21] This commission was not unique to Paul but was prophesied by Isaiah: *This is what God the LORD says—the Creator of the heavens, who stretches them out, who spreads out the earth with all that springs from it, who gives breath to its people, and life to those who walk on it: I, the LORD, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles, to open eyes that are blind, to free captives from prison and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness. I am the LORD; that is my name! I will not yield my glory to another or my praise to idols.*[Is.42:5-8] And Jesus has commissioned each of us to open people's eyes—He put it this way: *Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned. And these signs will accompany those who believe: In my name they will…* [Mk.16:15-17] We call this opening of spiritual eyes "Conversion", which literally means to *turn around and face the other way*. Christian

conversion is to turn from the way we were going, to follow God. *They told them–much to everyone's joy–that the Gentiles, too, were being converted.*[Acts.15:3] Conversion is a rebirth—it is to be changed from darkness to light; from death to life; from lost to found; from dirty to clean. *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.*[1Thes.1:9-10] *But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.*[1Cor.6:11] *But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.*[1Pet.2:9-10] People refer to new-born babies as "*little miracles*"—which they are—but when we are re-born into God's family, it is an even greater miracle. When Jesus spoke to Nicodemus about being converted, He used the idea of being "*born-again*": *You must be born again.*[Jn.3:7] This was a completely new concept to Nicodemus because the New Covenant had not yet been introduced. Just as at creation God breathed His life into Adam: *the LORD God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being,*[Gen.2:7] so at the new creation—conversion—Jesus breathes His life into us. Jesus breathed physically onto His disciples after the resurrection: *And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit".*[Jn.20:22] And at conversion Jesus still breathes on us—not physically but spiritually. Jesus imparts His life to us by the Holy Spirit and we are born-again. The old things of our life have passed away and everything is now new—we have traded sin for salvation; disgrace for God's grace; doubts for shouts!

So what is your Testimony? You may not have had a physical encounter with Jesus Christ like Paul did, but every Believer has had a spiritual encounter with Jesus Christ at their conversion. If you are a Christian, you have a testimony to share because you have been converted and have had your life turned right around—from darkness to light, from death to life, from despair to hope, from shame to glory. Regardless of what you were before you became a Christian, you are now an Ambassador for Jesus Christ. *And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God.*[2Cor.5:19-20] Your testimony is the story of your life in God's family. Peter explains some important pointers to sharing your testimony *But make sure in your hearts that Christ is Lord. Always be ready to give an answer to anyone who asks you about the hope you have. Be ready to give the reason for it. But do it gently and with respect. Live so that you don't have to feel you've done anything wrong [Keep your conscience clear]. Some people may say evil things about your good conduct as believers in Christ. If they do, they will be put to shame for speaking like that about you. It is better to suffer for doing good than for doing evil if that's what God wants.*[1Pet.3:15-17]

1. Stay respectful (ensure Jesus is Lord in your heart)**.**

2. Stay reliable (always be ready to give a reasoned answer for your hope—but in a gentle way)**.**

3. Stay right (keep your conscience clear).

Everyone loves a story with a good ending; our testimony is the story of what God has done for us—and it has a great ending. *Being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.*[Phil.1:6] So continue to share what God has done for you and let others know *how you turned away from false gods to serve the real, living God and to wait for his Son to come from heaven. His Son is Jesus, whom he brought back to life.*[1Thess.1:9-10]

Tips for Testimony

The aim of your testimony is to whet the appetite of others to know God for themselves—if God has changed your life, then He can change theirs too! Your testimony is simply saying what you know about God—so make it personal to you and be conversational. Your testimony

is not a sermon, so try to avoid religious phrases or church jargon. Don't exaggerate your past and make it appear that you were terrible or people agree that you needed saving but they don't because thy are not so bad! The reason people need God is because He loves them and wants the best for them, not because they have done something extremely wicked. God does not condemn (*Jesus has paid for the sins of the whole world*[1Jn.2:2] *Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death.*[Rom.8:1-2]) but unbelief will condemn us (*Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.*[Jn.3:18])! Only include necessary detail and information in your Testimony and keep it brief and to the point. You are aiming your testimony at non-Christians who have little or no interest in God and so if you are any longer than about 3 minutes you will probably have lost their interest—and if you are too specific about your details, you will fail to relate to them. Be careful that your testimony honours God and not the devil. Don't dwell on something that God has removed or recall what God will not remember—Jesus is Lord and He works all things out for His glory and our good.[Rom.8:28]

The Gospel is the good news that God's Kingdom is here among us—right now;[Lk.17:21] but it is more than talk—it is power,[1Cor.14:20] it is righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.[Rom.14:17] After you have whetted a person's appetite to know more about God, you are then in a position to share the Gospel. Ask questions such as:

- ✓ If you died today are you sure you would go to heaven?
- ✓ Are you secure in your relationship with God?
- ✓ What does Jesus mean to you?

Whichever way they respond to your question you are in a position to tell them the Good News. Normally you can ascertain from their answer if they are born again but listen to what they don't say as much as to what they do say! A Muslim believes in God (Allah) but is not secure in his relationship with him. A Buddhist may think he is secure in his relationship with God but is not sure that he is going to heaven. A Jew may think he is going to heaven but has a different perception of Jesus than a Christian. Actually, there are many "*Jesus's*" in the world, of whom some are even worshipped but there is only one Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God who is the Eternal Word!

Jesus declared, "*I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.*[John 3:3] To be born again is as simple as **ABC** and as profound as knowing God—**A**dmit: Admit you are a sinner: separated from God and spiritually dead. **B**elieve: in Jesus—that He paid the penalty for your sin; that God raised Jesus from the dead and He is your Lord (owner). **C**hange: Repentance is making a quality decision to change the ownership of your life to Jesus. **D**o: "Believing" alone is not enough—you must act on what you say you believe. **E**xperience: experience this spiritual new birth by asking God to forgive your sins.

Questions

What are the advantages of being brought up in a Christian family?
How are the eyes of our heart enlightened? (*Eph.1:17-21)*
How can we open people's eyes to see God? *(Acts.26:17-18)*
How do we set apart Christ as Lord in our heart? (*1Pet.3:15)*
Why should we present our testimony with *gentleness and respect*? (*1Pet.3:15)*
How can we keep our conscience clear? (*1Pet.3:15-16)*
What is the most memorable encounter with God that still brings you joy when you recall it? *(Make that your main testimony!)*

Puritan Prayer: Refuge—O Lord, whose power is infinite and wisdom infallible, order things that they may not hinder me or discourage me—or prove obstacles to the progress of Your cause. Stand between me and all strife so that no evil befalls me and no sin corrupts my gifts, zeal or attainments. May I follow duty and not any foolish device of my own. Permit me not to labour at work which You will not bless, so that I may serve You without disgrace or debt. As I dwell in Your most secret place under Your shadow, there is safe impenetrable protection from the arrow that flies by day, the pestilence that walks in darkness, the strife of tongues, the malice of ill-will, the hurt of unkind talk, the snares of company, the perils of youth, the temptations of middle life, the mournings of old age and the fear of death. I am entirely dependent upon You for support, counsel and consolation. You uphold me by Your Spirit and so I will go forward, abounding in the work You give me to do. You strengthen me by Your Spirit in my inner self for every purpose of my Christian life. All my jewels I give to Your safe keeping—my new name in Christ, my body, my soul, my talents, my character, my success, my spouse, my children, my friends, my work, my present, my future and my end. Take them all—they are Yours. And I am Yours, both now and for ever.
Psalm 15: LORD, who may dwell in your sacred tent? Who may live on your holy mountain? The one whose walk is blameless, who does what is righteous, who speaks the truth from their heart; whose tongue utters no slander, who does no wrong to a neighbour, and casts no slur on others; who despises a vile person but honours those who fear the LORD; who keeps an oath even when it hurts, and does not change their mind; who lends money to the poor without interest; who does not accept a bribe against the innocent. Whoever does these things will never be shaken.

Never deny in the darkness what God has shown you in the light

September:

God's Glory. *I have received full payment and have more than enough. I am amply supplied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent. They are a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God. And my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus. To our God and Father be glory for ever and ever. Amen. Philippians 4:18-20*

Thought for the Month: Faith is believing but it's irrelevant what you believe if God hasn't said it! Faith is staying in fellowship with God and enjoying Him—even when you are sick and everything seems to be going wrong. *Andrew Corbett*

Sunday 6th September Ps. 16 Acts 10

New Creation Realities. *Do not call something unclean if God has made it clean.*[Acts.10:15]

The six elements of oxygen, carbon, hydrogen, nitrogen, calcium, and phosphorus, make up 99% of the human body but we are much more than mere chemicals. Whilst chemicals can be analysed and quantified, they don't make us into a living being. When a person dies, they have exactly the same chemicals in their body as when they were alive, but there is something important missing—life! We are not just a *body* being that has a *personality* and neither are we just a *personality* being that has a *body*. Human beings are unique among all of God's creation because we are the sum of **spirit, soul and body**—we are a *spirit-soul-body* being! **The physical and the non-physical components in a creature combine together to form life—but it is only humans that have an eternal spirit that belongs to God and is accountable to God.** And God has set a moral code for humans that animals have no awareness of—which is why some human behaviour is not just an alternative lifestyle but plain wrong! The Bible calls the parts of us that cannot be measured by physics, our breath, heart, life, soul and spirit (sometimes these terms can be interchangeable). *Now may the God of peace make you holy in every way, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless until our Lord Jesus Christ comes again. God will make this happen, for he who calls you is faithful.*[1Thess.5:23-24] When God created Adam, it was God's "*breath*" that made him a "*living soul*": *Then the LORD God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being [soul].*[Gen.2:7] We usually think of our spirit as the God-conscious part of us, the soul as our self-conscious part (personality) and our body as our "*home*" or "*tent*"—the container of our spirit and soul and the place where the real "us" lives. *For we know that when this earthly tent we live in is taken down (that is, when we die and leave this earthly body), we will have a house in heaven, an eternal body made for us by God himself and not by human hands. We grow weary in our present bodies, and we long to put on our heavenly bodies like new clothing. For we will put on heavenly bodies; we will not be spirits without bodies. While we live in these earthly bodies, we groan and sigh, but it's not that we want to die and get rid of these bodies that clothe us. Rather, we want to put on our new bodies so that these dying bodies will be swallowed up by life. God himself has prepared us for this, and as a guarantee he has given us his Holy Spirit.*[2Cor.5:1-5]

Conversion is not a natural (physical) event—in fact no physical changes occur when someone is born again (for example, the colour of their skin does not change, nor does the shape of their face or their height). Conversion is a supernatural event where God intervenes deep within the human spirit—**conversion is a spiritual event that produces a spiritual experience**. When someone acknowledges Jesus as their Lord and Saviour by repenting of their sins and turning their life over to Jesus' rule and control, it is because they are re-born into a new species of being that the Bible calls a '*new creation*' (actually there are only 2 species of human beings—those of the old creation (unbelievers) and those of the new creation (Believers). *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.*[2Cor.5:17-18] Our spirit is re-

created and has a new configuration with different characteristics. For example, **the sin-nature in the human spirit is destroyed and righteousness-nature is implanted in its place**: *For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin — because anyone who has died has been freed from sin.*[Rom.6:6-7] At conversion God takes out our old spirit (heart) and gives us new spirit (heart): *And I will give you a new heart, and I will put a new spirit in you. I will take out your stony, stubborn heart and give you a tender, responsive heart. And I will put my Spirit in you so that you will follow my decrees and be careful to obey my regulations.*[Ez.36:26-27] The spirit that we were born with was dead to God and separated from Him, but our new spirit is alive to God and joined to Him. Just as our physical heart animates our physical body, so our spirit or "*heart*" animates our soul (personality). At conversion the Holy Spirit clears our conscience and resides within us, enabling us to obey and honour God and so if we sin (disobey or dishonour God), the Holy Spirit will challenge and convict us. David longed for this clean and loyal heart (spirit) and asked God to make him willing to obey Him: *Create in me a clean heart, O God. Renew a loyal spirit within me. Do not banish me from your presence and don't take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and make me willing to obey you.*[Ps.51:10-12] However, **David's desire is now the Christian's experience** because it is at conversion that God gives us a new heart, a clear conscience and a desire to obey Him. God's kingdom is now within us. *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 in your midst."*[Lk.17:20-21] Jesus explained that the Kingdom of God is about doing God's will, not just talking about it—**God's Kingdom is the rule of Jesus within our hearts**: *"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'*[Matt.7:21-23] When Jesus introduced the New Covenant, the outward rituals of religion **were superseded by the inward obedience of religion**, but if we are to enjoy the benefits of His Kingdom, we still have to **obey** God. *"Come now, let us settle the matter," says the LORD. "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool. If you are willing and <u>obedient</u>, you will eat the good things of the land*[Is.1:18-19]

At our conversion, our old order of life passed away and we began a new order of life. The old pattern of life—the way we used to think, see, talk, act, behave and react, went out and a new pattern of life took its place. *This means that anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun!*[2Cor.5:17] At conversion, we were born-again of an incorruptible seed[1Pet.1:23]—but it was our spirit that was re-born. Our soul (or personality) still has the ability to sin and desire things that are not what God wants for us. That is why after we are converted, our soul still needs to be "*saved*" or "*sanctified*". This happens by our faith (trusting God) and by the renewing our minds. *Though you have not seen [Jesus], you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls.*[1Pet.1:8-9]

Spiritual maturity is not a status that we can achieve because we always have the ability to behave immaturely—and we also have the propensity to sin at any time. Nevertheless, **spiritual maturity is our goal**—it is what we strive for: *I don't mean to say that I have already achieved these things or that I have already reached perfection. But I press on to possess that perfection for which Christ Jesus first possessed me. No, dear brothers and sisters, I have not achieved it, but I focus on this one thing: Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead, I press on to reach the end of the race and receive the heavenly prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us.*[Phil.3:12-14]

Unfortunately, many Christians don't really know what happened when they were born-again and so they don't enjoy the great provisions of God. Many live far below their true rights, privileges and potential in Christ. Some Christians are still living conflict-torn lives, embittered lives, struggling lives, battered lives, weak and defeated lives, greatly stressed lives, beggarly lives, obscure lives, handicapped lives, greatly burdened lives, troubled lives and compromising lives! Some are living in fear and worry, full of cares and anxieties. They live at variance to their true spiritual status and so they are robbed of their rights. The realities of their new creation state have not dawned on them. When God planned and implemented our salvation, His plan and purpose was for every born-again Believer to live at a new level of life higher than that of fallen humanity—it is called the **Kingdom of God.** *I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full (have it abundantly).* [Jn.10:10] This full or abundant life of God's Kingdom is **a new quality of life** for the Believer and is higher than the natural human life. This abundant life is the life of God and flourishes in spiritual prosperity while natural human life is the discordant existence of fallen humanity and plagued with lack, need and shortages. This abundant life of God's Kingdom is also **a new realm of life** for the Believer—*But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.* [1Pet.2:9]

A computer has a hard-drive but needs software to make it work. Our "*hard-drive*" is perfect and works properly—we have been given all we need for life and godliness,[2Pet.1:3-4] we have a new heart (spirit),[Ezek.36:26] we have had all our sins forgiven (past, present and future),[1Jn.2:2] we are accepted.[Acts.15:8] But our "*software*" needs updating and may have a virus! Our "*software*" is the way we think, the way we talk, the way we life. Too often we still think, talk and live as unbelievers instead of Believers—we know what God has said but we don't believe it applies to us! *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.*[2Pet.1:3-9]

God has called us into His marvellous light and so our lives are also marvellous! God's marvellous light should surround our life with its magnificence and make us magnificent. In this abundant life of God's Kingdom, He has provided **a new pattern of life** for us.

Whoever is a believer in Christ is a new creation. The old way of living has disappeared. A new way of living has come into existence. God has done all this. He has restored our relationship with him through Christ, and has given us this ministry of restoring relationships.[2Cor.5:17-18] The governing principles for our lives have changed and our behavioural pattern for our lives has changed—the way we act and react has changed. *For once you were full of darkness, but now you have light from the Lord. So live as people of light! For this light within you produces only what is good and right and true. Carefully determine what pleases the Lord. Take no part in the worthless deeds of evil and darkness; instead, expose them.*[Eph.5:8-11] God's plan is for us to be governed by new spiritual principles which cover every area of life—and we should know these new spiritual principles, get used to them, adopt them and adjust our life to run in line with them. These new spiritual principles also include our conversation and vocabulary. Like Peter, we must not call something unclean if God has made it clean[Acts.10:15] (and we are already clean because of God's Word: *You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, as I also remain in you.*[Jn.15:3-4]) But neither should we call something clean that God has

called unclean! *Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter. Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes and clever in their own sight.*[Is.5:20-21] *"If God were your Father, you would love me, for I have come here from God. I have not come on my own; God sent me. Why is my language not clear to you? Because you are unable to hear what I say. You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies.*[Jn.8:42-44]

If God says that we are spiritually clean, then we must count ourselves spiritually clean—or else we are quarrelling with our Maker! So let's continue to make our lips do their duty, making them say what God says about our situation and not allow our lips to say anything to the contrary—and then make every effort to live in the blessings of our new creation. This is not being super-spiritual but just being a good citizen of God's Kingdom under Lordship of Jesus Christ.

Questions

What makes us more than the physical components of our body?
Describe what happens to us at conversion
How does the Bible say we should deal with guilt, stress and anxiety?
What is the new life that we have after we are converted?
How does the new life affect our daily life?
Are we responsible for being holy (or unholy)?

Puritan Prayer—Resting on God

O God most high and most glorious, the thought of Your infinite serenity cheers me—for when I am toiling and moiling, troubled and distressed, You are forever at perfect peace. Your designs cause You no fear or care of unfulfillment—they stand fast as the eternal hills. Your power knows no bounds and Your goodness no stint. You bring order out of confusion and my defeats are Your victories: The Lord God Omnipotent reigns! I come to You, to leave every concern entirely to You, with every sin calling for Christ's precious blood. Revive deep spirituality in my heart and as I live near the great Shepherd, may clearly hear His voice, know its tones and follow its calls. As I abide in the truth, You keep me from deception and as I walk in the power of the Spirit, You keep me from harm. Give me an intenser faith in the eternal verities and burn into me by experience, the things that I know. Let me never be ashamed of the truth of the gospel, that I may bear its reproach, seeing Jesus as its essence and knowing in it the power of the Spirit. Lord, help me, lest I become lukewarm and chilled. Unbelief will mar my confidence and sin will make me forget You, so let the weeds that grow in my soul be cut at their roots. Grant me to know that I truly live only when I live to You—and that all else is trifling. Gracious God, it is Your presence alone that makes me holy, devout, strong and happy!

Psalm 16: Keep me safe, my God, for in you I take refuge. I say to the LORD, "You are my Lord; apart from you I have no good thing." I say of the holy people who are in the land, "They are the noble ones in whom is all my delight." Those who run after other gods will suffer more and more. I will not pour out libations of blood to such gods or take up their names on my lips. LORD, you alone are my portion and my cup; you make my lot secure. The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; surely I have a delightful inheritance. I will praise the LORD, who counsels me; even at night my heart instructs me. I keep my eyes always on the LORD. With him at my right hand, I will not be shaken. Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body also will rest secure, because you will not abandon me to the realm of the dead, nor will you let your faithful one see decay. You make known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand.

Sunday 13th September Ps. 91 Acts 11

What has the grace of God done for you? *When he arrived and saw what the grace of God had done, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts.*[Acts.11:23]

The Greek word for "*grace*" in the Bible is "*charis*" (from where we get "*charismatic*"). Grace is defined as "*that which causes joy or pleasure for a kindness granted, a benefit, thanks, gratitude; a favour done without expectation of return; the absolutely free expression of the loving kindness of God to us*." Grace also refers to our manner—gracefulness or elegance. These definitions of grace help us understand what it is to be a Christian—**someone who receives joy and pleasure from God's kindness and shows their thankfulness by being both grateful and graceful.** We need grace to worship God. *If then, we have a kingdom which will never be moved, let us have grace, so that we may give God such worship as is pleasing to him with fear and respect.*[Heb.12:28] We often refer to our singing as worship but merely singing songs is not worship—otherwise we would not have been able to worship God during the Covid restrictions! **True worship is obedience**—it is doing what God requires and desires: *Abraham said to his servants, "Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you."… "I swear by myself, declares the LORD, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies, and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me."*[Gen.22:5-18] Our worship of God is expressed through the willing and cheerful giving of ourselves to Him: *Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.*[2Cor.9:7] *When the people willingly offer themselves—praise the LORD!*[Jdg.5:2] *I know, my God, that you test the heart and are pleased with integrity. All these things I have given willingly and with honest intent. And now I have seen with joy how willingly your people who are here have given to you.*[1Chron.29:17]

King David got lots of things wrong—he broke most, if not all of the 10 commandments and had a reputation of being a murderer, an adulterer and bad father! But David is described as a "*man after God's own heart*" because he was a worshipper—he had learned how to become intimate with God. *Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name; bring an offering and come before him. Worship the LORD in the splendour of his holiness.*[1Chron.16:29] *After removing Saul, he made David their king. He testified concerning him: 'I have found David son of Jesse a man after my own heart; he will do everything I want him to do.'*[Acts.13:22] David was also a prophet who spoke by the Holy Spirit: *"What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?" "The son of David," they replied. He said to them, "How is it then that David, speaking by the Spirit, calls him 'Lord'?*[Matt.22:42-23] *The patriarch David was a prophet and knew that God had promised him on oath that he would place one of his descendants on his throne. Seeing what was ahead, he spoke of the resurrection of the Christ.*[Acts.2:30-31] Of course, David did not have the advantage of the indwelling Person of the Holy Spirit as we do today under the New Covenant, but despite his many failings, David was a worshipper. David's worship consisted of loud, active, busy praise—but also of quiet contemplative meditation. His worship was the expression of his heartfelt adoration and appreciation—which is why the disturbances around David did not unsettle him. Although David had lots of problems and difficulties, God did not remove them, but instead, gave him rest in the **midst of his enemies!** Not even enemies could distract David from his grateful and graceful worship! *The LORD had given him rest from all his enemies around him.*[2Sam.7:1] (What distracts you from worship?) This "*rest*" that David had from his enemies was also promised to his son: *But you will have a son who will be a man of peace and rest, and I will give him rest from all his enemies on every side. His name will be Solomon, and I will grant Israel peace and quiet during his reign. He is the one who will build a house for my Name. He will be my son, and I will be his father. And I will establish the throne of his kingdom over Israel forever.*[1Chron.22:9-10] We know from the NT that this was

also a prophecy about David's future son, Jesus Christ: *For to which of the angels did God ever say, "You are my Son; today I have become your Father"? Or again, "I will be his Father, and he will be my Son"?*[Heb.1:5] And when God's Son became human, it opened the way for us humans to become God's sons: *Both the one who makes men holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers.*[Heb.2:11] And if we are God's children, then we too can have "*rest*" regardless of what difficulties or problems we face. However, we must bring our thoughts and imaginations under control and make them do what God wants us to do. Like David, we can (and must) make our soul (*i.e.* our personality with all of its emotions) put its trust in God—especially if we feel downcast: *Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God.*[Ps.43:5] We must make our lips do their duty and only allow them to say what God says about us and our situation. *We capture our rebellious thoughts and teach them to obey Christ.*[2Cor.10:6] This taking control of our thoughts and living gratefully and gracefully is not just for certain special people (the so called "*spiritual elite*") but is for all who experience the grace of God—for those who will *remain true to the Lord with all their hearts*. When we become intimate with God, everyone of us can be at peace in the most disruptive situation. If we *live in the shelter of the Most High,* we will *find rest in the shadow of the Almighty*—but this requires that we *declare about the LORD: He alone is my refuge, my place of safety; he is my God, and I trust him*.[Ps.91:1-2] Although God does not have any favourites, **God does have intimates**—people who know Him personally and closely, who honour Him and respect Him enough to obey Him. And if we know God intimately, we can expect to live dynamic lives: *But the people who know their God will be strong and take action [do exploits].*[Dan.11:32]

Good theology enables us to live consistent, faithful and effective lives that honour God without getting spiritually tired. Good theology makes easy Christianity because we enter into God's rest! Good theology means that we have an accurate and Biblical understanding of God—of who He is, what He has said and what He has done. Good theology will give us the confidence to put God's word into practice—and when we put God's words into practice, we will be able to stand firm in the midst all of life's difficulties, stresses and struggles. But if we don't put God's words into practice, we will fall as surely as the house built on the sand will fall. *Why do you call me, 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I say? I will show you what he is like who comes to me and hears my words and puts them into practice. He is like a man building a house, who dug down deep and laid the foundation on rock. When a flood came, the torrent struck that house but could not shake it, because it was well built. But the one who hears my words and does not put them into practice is like a man who built a house on the ground without a foundation. The moment the torrent struck that house, it collapsed and its destruction was complete.*[Lk.6:46:49] But "*putting God's words into practice*" is much more than just going through the motions of religion—it is re-aligning our thoughts to harmonise with God's thoughts and living by the principles of God's Kingdom. *Paul doesn't tell us that we can be happy, or how to be happy. He simply and unmistakably is happy. None of his circumstances contribute to his joy: He wrote from a jail cell, his work was under attack by competitors, and after twenty years or so of hard traveling in the service of Jesus, he was tired and would have welcomed some relief. But circumstances are incidental compared to the life of Jesus, the Messiah, that Paul experiences from the inside, For it is a life that not only happened at a certain point in history, but continues to happen, spilling out into the lives of those who receive him, and then continues to spill out all over the place. Christ is, among much else, the revelation that God cannot be contained or hoarded. It is this "spilling out" quality of Christ's life that accounts for the happiness of Christians, for joy is life in excess, the overflow of what cannot be contained within any one person. [Introduction to Philippians TM]*

Putting God's words into practice means that we "*walk the talk*"—we live out our beliefs. *As for you, son of man, your countrymen are talking together about you by the walls and at the doors*

of the houses, saying to each other, 'Come and hear the message that has come from the LORD.' My people come to you, as they usually do, and sit before you to listen to your words, but they do not put them into practice. With their mouths they express devotion, but their hearts are greedy for unjust gain. Indeed, to them you are nothing more than one who sings love songs with a beautiful voice and plays an instrument well, for they hear your words but do not put them into practice.[Ez.33:30-32] True worship is spiritual and practical—it is showing our appreciation and reverence for God. True worship is the result of the Holy Spirit gushing out of us: *On the last and greatest day of the Feast, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him." By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive.*[Jn.7:37-39] The formal liturgy of Episcopalian Churches can be an excuse for just going through the motions of worshipping God, but written prayers and responses can also be alive and inspirational when they are mixed with faith and Holy Spirit life. When we know God intimately, we can worship in a formal setting and also in an informal setting; we can worship by following a written script and also by following an unwritten script. Many of Wesley's hymns were originally written as "*holy poems*" to assist with personal devotions!

Faith makes the difference between living religion and dead religion. It is by our faith (our simple trust in God) that we stand and by our lack of faith (our lack of trust—which is unbelief) that we fall: *If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all.*[Is.7:9] *Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy, because it is by faith you stand firm.*[2Cor.1:24] Faith (trusting God) involves love and obedience and enables us to be overcomers: *To love God means that we obey his commandments. Obeying his commandments isn't difficult because everyone who has been born from God has won the victory over the world. Our faith is what wins the victory over the world. Who wins the victory over the world? Isn't it the person who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?*[1Jn.5:3-5] **Faith** and **fear** are opposites and cannot live together. *Phobia* is the medical term for fear and there are literally hundreds of recorded phobias listed, including: *Algophobia*—fear of pain; *Bibliophobia*—fear of books; *Chronophobia*—fear of time; *Zoophobia*—fear of animals; and even *Phobophobia*—fear of phobias! But the antidote to **fear** is **faith—**that simple trust in God based on His Character (who He is and what He has done) and His Word (what He has said). *When I worried about many things, your assuring words soothed my soul.*[Ps.94:19] Faith does not replace fear—faith puts fear in its proper place! No one goes through life without experiencing some sort of fear, but people who fear God (who trust in Him), handle the threats and challenges of life much differently than those crippled by fear or filled with false confidence. *Are you afraid? Remember the "fear nots" of the Bible.*[Elisabeth Elliot] *Fear knocked at the door but when Faith answered it there was no one there!*

Fear and its siblings, **worry** and **anxiety**, will weaken our faith and if we don't deal with them, they will eventually destroy our faith: *So then, banish anxiety from your heart and cast off the troubles of your body, for youth and vigour are meaningless. Remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come.*[Eccl.11:10-12:1] *Be strong and courageous, because you will lead these people to inherit the land I swore to their forefathers to give them. Be strong and very courageous. Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go. Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful. Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go.*[Josh.1:6-9] Of course, we should be hospitable, but Christians should never entertain the family of **fear**, **worry** and **anxiety!** However, we should always make the family of **faith**, **hope** and **love** very comfortable in our home: *And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.*[1Cor.13:13] *Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith; be men of courage; be strong. Do everything in love.*[1Cor.16:13-14] And these triplets: **faith**, **hope** and **love** have other family members too: **gentleness**,

gratefulness and **gracefulness**—so let's make them welcome as well! Because of God's great love for us we no longer need fear the devil or his temptations because God grace enables us to resist temptation: *For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people. It teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope—the appearing of the glory of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.*[Tit.2:11-14]

So, what has the grace of God done for you? The grace of God has enabled us to be worshippers by being intimate with God. The grace of God has made us joyful. The grace of God has made us both grateful and graceful. The grace of God has given us faith and delivered us from fear. The grace of God helps us to resist temptation. So let us *remain true to the Lord with all our hearts* and put His word into practice—then, regardless of our circumstances, we will have peace, be at rest and live graceful lives that are the admiration of all we meet: *Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.*[Col.3:12-17]

Questions

What is "grace"?
What difference has grace made to your life?
What is worship?
How can we worship if we are beset with problems?
How can we set our hearts at rest if we have fear, worry or anxiety?
How can we stay gentle, grateful and graceful?

Puritan Prayer—Spiritual Helps: Eternal Father, it is amazing love, that You have sent Your Son to suffer in my stead; that You have given Your Spirit to teach, comfort and guide; that You have allowed the ministry of angels to wall me round. Permit Your unseen servants to be ever active on my behalf and to rejoice when grace expands in me. Suffer them never to rest until my conflict is over and I stand victorious on salvation's shore. May my heart awake Your pity—and if the enemy gets an advantage, let it be seen that heaven is mightier than hell and that those who are for me are greater than those against me. Arise to my help in the richness of Covenant blessings—keep me feeding in the pastures of Your strengthening Word and searching Scripture to find You there. If my waywardness is visited with a scourge—enable me to receive correction meekly, to bless the reproving hand, to discern the motive of rebuke, to respond promptly and do the first work. Let all Your fatherly dealings with me, make me a partaker of Your holiness. Grant that in every fall, I may sink lower on my knees—and that when I rise, it may be to loftier heights of devotion. May every cross be sanctified, every loss be gain, every denial a spiritual advantage, every dark day a light of the Holy Spirit and every night of trial, a song.

Psalm 91—Whoever dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the LORD, "He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust." Surely he will save you from the fowler's snare and from the deadly pestilence. He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness will be your shield and rampart. You will not fear the terror of night, nor the arrow that flies by day, nor the pestilence that stalks in the darkness, nor the plague that destroys at midday. A thousand may

fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you. You will only observe with your eyes and see the punishment of the wicked. If you say, "The LORD is my refuge," and you make the Most High your dwelling, no harm will overtake you, no disaster will come near your tent. For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways; they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone. You will tread on the lion and the cobra; you will trample the great lion and the serpent. "Because he loves me," says the LORD, "I will rescue him; I will protect him, for he acknowledges my name. He will call on me, and I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble, I will deliver him and honour him. With long life I will satisfy him and show him my salvation

Sunday 20th September Ps. 17 Acts 12

Christian Prayer. *The church was earnestly praying to God for him.*[Acts.12:5]

There is a difference between talking to God and praying to God!

Abimelech talked to God but Abraham—a person who was in a covenant relationship with God—who prayed to God: *But God came to Abimelech in a dream one night and said to him, "You are as good as dead because of the woman you have taken; she is a married woman… Now return the man's wife, for he is a prophet, and he will pray for you and you will live.*[Gen.20:3-7] Eliphaz also talked to God but job prayed to God: *After had said these things to Job, he the LORD said to Eliphaz the Temanite, "I am angry with you and your two friends, because you have not spoken the truth about me, as my servant Job has… My servant Job will pray for you, and I will accept his prayer and not deal with you according to your folly. You have not spoken the truth about me, as my servant Job has." …and the LORD accepted Job's prayer.*[Job 42:7-9] Unbelievers do not have an open line of communication with God. *The LORD is far from the wicked, but he hears the prayer of the righteous.*[Prov.15:29] *The LORD detests the sacrifice of the wicked, but the prayer of the upright pleases him.*[Prov.15:8] Anyone can talk to God, but prayer is different from merely talking to God—it is connecting with God. Before we became a Christian our talking to God could not really be called prayer because we were not righteous—we had no faith in God: *Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.*[Rom.4:3] *Without faith it is impossible to please God.*[Heb.11:6] It is through prayer that we communicate with God—and the hymn puts it this way: *Prayer is the Christian's vital breath, the Christian's native air…*

Prayer is the contrite sinner's voice, returning from his ways. Our first real prayer to God was to call on Him to save us. *Anyone who trusts in him will never be disgraced. Jew and Gentile are the same in this respect. They have the same Lord, who gives generously to all who call on him. For "Everyone who calls on the name of the LORD will be saved." But how can they call on him to save them unless they believe in him? And how can they believe in him if they have never heard about him? And how can they hear about him unless someone tells them?*[Rom.10:11-14] And now after conversion, prayer is our way of life because we relate to God through prayer: *Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.*[1Thess.5:16-18] *Therefore I want the men everywhere to pray, lifting up holy hands without anger or disputing.*[1Tim.2:8] However, to pray effectively we need to keep in faith and keep away from sin: *If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened; but God has surely listened and heard my voice in prayer. Praise be to God, who has not rejected my prayer or withheld his love from me!*[Ps.66:18-20] *But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.*[Matt.6:15] What we say is always important and especially when we pray because we are addressing God Almighty. Although God is our Father, He is also the "*I Am*" who is worshipped by angels who sing: *"Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty.*[Is.6:3] Jesus said that we will have to give an account for every empty word we speak *(i.e.* every word that does not work): *But I tell you that everyone will have to give account on the day of judgment for every empty word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned.*[Matt.12:36-37] This accountability for our words applies to every

conversation, including prayer and so we should aim to make our prayers meaningful and sensible.

Some years ago, I resolved to try not to pray any "*silly*" prayers—that is, prayers that God can't answer, won't answer or has already answered. We can only come to God through Jesus: *Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me… And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it.*[Jn.14:6-14] We usually end our prayers with the phrase "*in the name of Jesus*" because we cannot come to God except through Jesus (which is why inter-faith prayers are anathema to God and to every true Believer). But just as a Police Office will always show their credentials before acting, maybe we should start our prayers with "*in the name of Jesus*"!! But although we don't need to say the phrase "*in the name of Jesus*", when we pray in a formal setting or where there are young Christians or even "*not-yet-Christians*" present, we should make it clear that we are addressing God the Father in the name of Jesus Christ, His Son and our Saviour, through the Holy Spirit.

The Church prayed "*fervently*" for Peter while he was in prison and this word "*fervently*" helps us to understand effective prayer. Peter used this word when he told us to love others: *love one another deeply (fervently), from the heart.*[1Pet.1:22] Prayer should come from the heart as well as from the head: *So what shall I do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will also pray with my understanding; I will sing with my spirit, but I will also sing with my understanding.*[1Cor.4:15] But an **effective prayer** has to prayed by **a righteous person:** *The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective. Elijah was as human as we are, and yet when he prayed earnestly that no rain would fall, none fell for three and a half years! Then, when he prayed again, the sky sent down rain and the earth began to yield its crops.*[Jas.5:16-18] [Note, James writes righteous "*person*" (singular), not "*people*" (plural)!] A righteous person is someone who believes God (not someone who thinks they are perfect or even someone who is religious or who goes to Church): *What does Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness." …The words "it was credited to him" were written not for him alone, but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness—for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.*[Rom.4:3-25] Often when we pray, we are unsure what to pray for or how to actually pray about a situation, but the Bible says that Holy Spirit will help us. *In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God.*[Rom.8:26-27] Extended prayers don't make effective prayers! *When you pray, do not be like those who only pretend to be holy. They love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners. They want to be seen by others. What I'm about to tell you is true. They have received their complete reward. When you pray, go into your room. Close the door and pray to your Father, who can't be seen. He will reward you. Your Father sees what is done secretly. When you pray, do not keep talking on and on the way ungodly people do. They think they will be heard because they talk a lot. Do not be like them. Your Father knows what you need even before you ask him. This is how you should pray. "Our Father in heaven…"*[Matt.6:5-9] **Although God answers prayer, it is faith that He responds to!** We can't manipulate God by our prayers. It is not how long we pray, or how loud we pray, or how many people we have praying that will determine whether God answers our prayers—it is our faith (belief in God): *If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer.*[Matt.21:22] *Then Jesus said, "Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?"*[Jn.11:40] Fate says: "*what will be, will be done"* but Faith says: "*what God's will is, will be done"*! And even though God is Omnipotent, Omniscient, Omnipresent and Omnibenevolent, we should pray that God's will is done and not just leave it to Him. *Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.*[Matt.6:9-10]

Just one prayer from a righteous person will be effective because God responds to faith. We Believers can be sure that God hears us when we pray: *I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life. This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us.*[1Jn.5:13-14] *Yes, I prayed to my God for help. He heard me from his sanctuary; my cry to him reached his ears.*[Ps.18:6] However, we cannot dictate to God how He answers our prayers and "*believing*" for a specific outcome to our prayers is not the same as "*believing God*"! But we can ask God to help us, to intervene and even change our situation. **Maturity is committing our way to the Lord and trusting Him with the outcome**. *Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will direct your paths.*[Prov.3:5-6] God is good and what He does is good—and so true faith is never disappointed however God answers our prayers because our trust is in God, not what He does! *Teach me knowledge and good judgment, for I believe in your commands. Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I obey your word. You are good, and what you do is good; teach me your decrees.*[Ps.119:66-68] As we saw last week, **Fear** and its children, **Worry** and **Anxiety**, will weaken our faith—and if we don't deal with them, they will ultimately destroy our faith: *So then, banish anxiety from your heart and cast off the troubles of your body, for youth and vigour are meaningless. Remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come.*[Eccl.11:10-12:1] Anxiety and fear are banished when we have total confidence in God as our Heavenly Father: *But when you ask, you must believe. You must not doubt. People who doubt are like waves of the sea. The wind blows and tosses them around. A man like that shouldn't expect to receive anything from the Lord. He can't make up his mind. He can never decide what to do.*[Jas.1:6-8] Another translation puts it this way: *People who "worry their prayers" are like wind-whipped waves. Don't think you're going to get anything from the Master that way, adrift at sea, keeping all your options open.* We should be thankful even when sharing our concerns and cares with God: *Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.*[Phil.4:6]

Praying for one another is a partnership (*fellowship or participation*) in the Gospel: *I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.*[Phil.1:3-5] *I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers, because I hear about your love for all his holy people and your faith in the Lord Jesus. I pray that your partnership with us in the faith may be effective in deepening your understanding of every good thing we share for the sake of Christ.*[Phile.4-6] Like Paul, we should pray for our friends and associates with assurance, confidence, joy and thanksgiving: *For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you. We continually ask God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives, so that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, and giving joyful thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of his holy people in the kingdom of light.*[Col.1:9-12] *We always thank God for all of you and continually mention you in our prayers.*[1Thess.1:2] We should also pray for others beyond our circle of friends and associates: *I urge, then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people—for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. This is good, and pleases God our Saviour, who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.*[1Tim.2:1-4] But our prayers are not just words uttered as a religious activity—Believers' prayers are a **memorial offering before God**: *Cornelius stared at him in fear. "What is it, Lord?" he asked. The angel answered, "Your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God.*[Acts.10:4] Prayer in the OT was a priestly ministry offered with incense to symbolise the ascent of the prayers to God *May my prayer be set before you like incense; may the lifting*

up of my hands be like the evening sacrifice.[Ps.141:2] Prayer is also a priestly ministry—but under the New Covenant, instead of the priests being an elite group of hereditary Jews, **EVERY BELIEVER IS A PRIEST**: *And you are living stones that God is building into his spiritual temple. What's more, you are his holy priests. Through the mediation of Jesus Christ, you offer spiritual sacrifices that please God.*[1Pet.2:5] And when we pray, our prayers are like incense reaching up to God. *May my prayer be set before you like incense; may the lifting up of my hands be like the evening sacrifice.*[Ps.141:2] *And when he had taken it, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb. Each one had a harp and they were holding golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of God's people. And they sang a new song.*[Rev.5:8-9] *Another angel, who had a golden censer, came and stood at the altar. He was given much incense to offer, with the prayers of all God's people, on the golden altar in front of the throne. The smoke of the incense, together with the prayers of God's people, went up before God from the angel's hand.*[Rev.8:3-4] And prayer should be a joy! *And will fill them with joy in my house of prayer.*[Is.56:7] **So let us take the priestly ministry of prayer seriously but joyfully as we live in the Kingdom of God.**

How to Pray

Quiet yourself and connect with God: *Our Father in heaven, may Your Name be kept holy [hallowed, honoured, reverenced].*

Sing a hymn or song from the heart to God: *Alter the lyrics to sing <u>to</u> God, not <u>about</u> God.*

Read aloud a prayer (or use a hymn as a prayer): *Read it slowly and thoughtfully, modifying the words to make it your own.*

Ask God for your needs: *Your Kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in Heaven. Keep us from falling into sin when we are tempted. Save us from the evil one.*[Matt.6:13] *Forgive my hidden faults. Keep me also from the sins I want to commit. May they not be my master.*[Ps.19:13]

Devote yourself and your day to God: *LORD, may the words of my mouth and the thoughts of my heart be pleasing in your eyes. You are my Rock and my Redeemer.*[Ps.19:14]

Questions

What is "prayer"?
Can anyone pray?
Is there a difference between talking to God and praying to God? Explain!
How can we pray an "effective prayer"?
What is the difference between "wishing" and "believing"?
Does God answer us if we doubt when we pray?
How should we pray for our political leaders?
Give some examples of prayers in the New Testament.

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

reason I was not amazed, but when I saw You as You are in Your Son, I was overwhelmed to behold You. I bless You that I am Yours in my Saviour, Jesus.

Psalm 17: Hear me, LORD, my plea is just; listen to my cry. Hear my prayer— it does not rise from deceitful lips. Let my vindication come from you; may your eyes see what is right. Though you probe my heart, though you examine me at night and test me, you will find that I have planned no evil; my mouth has not transgressed. Though people tried to bribe me, I have kept myself from the ways of the violent through what your lips have commanded. My steps have held to your paths; my feet have not stumbled. I call on you, my God, for you will answer me; turn your ear to me and hear my prayer. Show me the wonders of your great love, you who save by your right hand those who take refuge in you from their foes. Keep me as the apple of your eye; hide me in the shadow of your wings from the wicked who are out to destroy me, from my mortal enemies who surround me… As for me, I will be vindicated and will see your face; when I awake, I will be satisfied with seeing your likeness.

Sunday 27th September Ps. 18:1-19 Acts 13

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

The Book of Ecclesiastes (which means "*preacher*") begins with: *"Meaningless! Meaningless!" says the Preacher. "Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless."*[Eccl1:1] As Solomon recalls his life of wine, women and wealth, he concludes that life has no purpose unless we involve God: *Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the duty of all mankind. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil.*[Eccl.12:13-14] But in reaching that conclusion, Solomon says: *So then, banish anxiety from your heart and cast off the troubles of your body, for youth and vigour are meaningless. Remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come.*[Eccl.11:10-12:1] God is our Creator and He made us in His image: *So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.*[Gen.1:27] God is glorious and full of glory, but as we know all too well, we no longer reflect God's image. However, God's purpose is to restore us to that glorious image. *For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters.*[Rom.8:29] *He called you to this through our gospel, that you might share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.*[2Thes.2:14] God has given us the Holy Spirit as a deposit to guarantee that we will be transformed into His glory: *For while we are in this tent, we groan and are burdened, because we do not wish to be unclothed but to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. Now it is God who has made us for this very purpose and has given us the Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.*[2Cor.5:4-5] *But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.*[Phil.3:20-21] That transformation into God's glory started at conversion and continues as we contemplate (literally: *mirror* or *reflect*) God's glory: *And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.*[2Cor.3:18]

Glory means honour, splendour, majesty—as well as lots of other superlatives all relating to purity—and God is the God of glory: *Brothers and fathers, listen to me! The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham.*[Acts.7:2] And Jesus is the Lord of Glory: *None of the rulers of this age understood it, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.*[1Cor.2:8] In the beginning, God made Adam in His likeness—which means that Adam also shared in God's glory: *He created him in the likeness of God. He created them as male and female. God blessed them.*[Gen.1:27] But when Adam sinned, he lost his God-likeness—that glory, honour, splendour and majesty. Although it was the devil who

deceived them, Eve and Adam could not escape the consequences of their actions—and since then, every one of Adam's descendants have been born in sin. Sin is falling short of God's glory: *for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.*[Rom.3:23] Adam and Eve's disobedience resulted in work becoming a toilsome effort instead of a joyful experience. *The ground is cursed because of you. Through hard work you will eat food that comes from it every day of your life. The ground will grow thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat wild plants. By the sweat of your brow, you will produce food to eat until you return to the ground, because you were taken from it. You are dust, and you will return to dust.*[Gen.3:17-19] But God did not leave it there—He pronounced the devil's demise and man's deliverance: *I will put hatred between you and the woman. Your children and her children will be enemies. Her son will crush your head. And you will crush his heel.*[Gen.3:15] This statement is called the "*protoevangelium"* meaning the "*first mention of the Gospel*" and Jesus became "*Eve's Son*" when He became human at His incarnation ("*incarnation*" literally means "*becoming flesh*). God prophesied that people could become holy and righteous when He became our glory and light: *Then you will know that I, the LORD, am your Saviour, your Redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob… you will call your walls Salvation and your gates Praise… the LORD will be your everlasting light, and your God will be your glory… the LORD will be your everlasting light and your days of sorrow will end… Then all your people will be righteous and they will possess the land forever.*[Is.60:16-21] Jesus prayed that we would not only see His glory but also share in that glory too! *Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent. I have brought you glory on earth by finishing the work you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began… Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world.*[Jn.17:3-5;24] But in order for us to be restored to God's likeness and glory, Jesus had to crush the devil's head and destroy his work—which was God's intended purpose for Jesus: *For this purpose was the Son of God manifested: to destroy the devil's work.*[1Jn.3:8] And Jesus really did fulfil God's purpose for His life—when Jesus died on the cross, He was not a victim but a Victor and satan's work was destroyed: *But God gave you new life together with Christ. He forgave us all of our sins. He wiped out the written Law with its rules. The Law was against us. It opposed us. He took it away and nailed it to the cross. He took away the weapons of the powers and authorities. He made a public show of them. He won the battle over them by dying on the cross.*[Col.2:13-15] By fulfilling God's purpose for His life in destroying the work of devil, Jesus facilitated God's other purpose for us—which was to re-create a new breed of person who would be reconciled to God and each other: *For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility.*[Eph.2:14-16] Yes! God's purpose for us is that we are clothed in His glory and become a new person living in peace with God and each other. Paul said that king David served God's purpose for his lif: *Now when David had served God's purpose in his own generation, he fell asleep.*[Acts.13:36] But how do we serve God's purpose for our lives, in our generation? God told Adam to serve Him by having dominion over all creation and being fruitful: *God said to them, "Have children and increase your numbers. Fill the earth and bring it under your control. Rule over the fish in the waters and the birds of the air. Rule over every living creature that moves on the ground."*[Gen.1:28] God also gave Adam instructions to serve Him by working and caring for the Garden: *The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.*[Gen.2:15] The word "*work*" also means *serve*, is sometimes translated "*worship*": *You will <u>worship</u> God on this mountain."*[Ex.3:12] Our daily work and service is actually serving God—it is worship! *Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving.*[Col.3:23-24] The work that God requires from

us is first and foremost to believe in Jesus Christ: *"What must we do to do the works God requires?" Jesus answered, "The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent."*[Jn.6:28-29] We are to serve God with every part of our life and being, not just give God a slot in our lives. To love God is the highest attainment we can ever achieve. *"Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" Jesus replied: 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment.*[Matt.22:36-38] Because worship incorporates every part of our life, there is now no secular/sacred divide for us—every part of our life is now "*holy*" and is consecrated to God: *On that day HOLY TO THE LORD will be inscribed on the bells of the horses, and the cooking pots in the LORD's house will be like the sacred bowls in front of the altar. Every pot in Jerusalem and Judah will be holy to the LORD Almighty, and all who come to sacrifice will take some of the pots and cook in them. And on that day there will no longer be a Canaanite [un-consecrated person] in the house of the LORD Almighty.*[Zech.14:20-21] That is why we should live pure lives that honour God: *You know the guidelines we laid out for you from the Master Jesus. God wants you to live a pure life… God hasn't invited us into a disorderly, unkempt life but into something holy and beautiful—as beautiful on the inside as the outside. If you disregard this advice, you're not offending your neighbours; you're rejecting God, who is making you a gift of his Holy Spirit.*[1Thess.4:2-8] That doesn't mean that we become weird or "*religious nuts*" but we should certainly be different and distinct from the world because we have been lifted out of the miry muck of this world's mess and elevated into God's wonderful kingdom. *He lifted me out of the slimy pit, out of the mud and mire; he set my feet on a rock and gave me a firm place to stand. He put a new song in my mouth, a hymn of praise to our God. Many will see and fear and put their trust in the LORD.*[Ps.40:2-3] *But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.*[1Pet.2:9-12]

Jesus has commissioned every one of us to communicate this good news of His Kingdom. We call this "*evangelism*"—but evangelism is not limited to an evangelist preaching to a crowd. Evangelism literally means "*sharing a good message*" and the good message is still the same: **Jesus has crushed satan's head and emancipated us; we are no longer sin's slave because our debt has been paid in full!** We share this good message by sowing the seed of God's word. *The seed is the word of God. Those along the path are the ones who hear, and then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved. Those on the rocky ground are the ones who receive the word with joy when they hear it, but they have no root. They believe for a while, but in the time of testing they fall away. The seed that fell among thorns stands for those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by life's worries, riches and pleasures, and they do not mature. But the seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop.*[Lk.7:5-15] We have each been assigned our own personal and individual roles in the planting the seed of God's Word, but it is God who makes the seed grow—and it is God who will reward us according to our labour! *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 made it grow. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. The man who plants and the man who waters have one purpose, and each will be rewarded according to his own labour. For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, God's building.*[1Cor.3:5-9]

Planting God's seed spiritually and physically refreshed Jesus: *My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work. Do you not say, 'Four months more and then the harvest'? I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest. Even now the reaper draws his wages, even now he harvests*

the crop for eternal life, so that the sower and the reaper may be glad together. Thus the saying 'One sows and another reaps' is true. I sent you to reap what you have not worked for. Others have done the hard work, and you have reaped the benefits of their labour.[Jn.4:34-3] And when we plant God's seed (share the good message), we too will be spiritually and physically refreshed—but if we ignore God's purposes for our life, we can't expect to live in peace and harmony with God (or with other people either). When people refused to be baptised by John, they rejected God's purpose for their life: *All the people, even the tax collectors, when they heard Jesus' words, acknowledged that God's way was right, because they had been baptized by John. But the Pharisees and experts in the law rejected God's purpose for themselves, because they had not been baptized by John.*[Lk.7:29-30] The same principle remains today—if we refuse to be baptised, we reject God's purpose for our life. (Baptism is much bigger than a one-off event—baptism is a the beginning of a new way of life because we are stating that we died to our old life and have been raised to newness of life with Jesus.) Sadly, the Christian message (which is the message about Christ) sometimes loses its impact because of a bad testimony or even just plain ugly sin. Make sure we don't deliver the elegant letter in a dirty envelope! We are called to live a holy life and to focus on what is good and pure.

Nevertheless, regardless of our weaknesses or failings, ultimately God will ensure that His message goes forth effectively: *so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.*[Is.55:11] We know that God will work everything out for His glory and our good[Rom.8:28] and thus fulfil His purpose for us: *The LORD will fulfil his purpose for me;*[Ps.138:8] *I cry out to God Most High, to God, who fulfils his purpose for me.*[Ps.57:2] *Many are the plans in a man's heart, but it is the LORD's purpose that prevails.*[Prov.19:21] So let's continue to play and pray our part, trusting God to fulfil His purpose for our lives in our generation. *With this in mind, we constantly pray for you, that our God may count you worthy of his calling, and that by his power he may fulfil every good purpose of yours and every act prompted by your faith.*[2Thes.1:11] Then like Paul, when we have fought the good fight of our faith and run our race to completion, we will claim our crown of righteousness: *I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.*[2Tim.4:7-8]

Questions

What is God's glory?
In what ways are we now like God?
What is God's purpose for our life.
Can we reject God's purposes for us?
How can we fulfil God's purpose for us?

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

Psalm 18:1-19: I love you, LORD, my strength. The LORD is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer; my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold. I called to the LORD, who is worthy of praise, and I have been saved from my enemies… He reached down from on high and took hold of me; he drew me out of deep waters. He rescued me from my powerful enemy, from my foes, who were too strong for me. They confronted me in the day of my disaster, but the LORD was my support. He brought me out into a spacious place; he rescued me because he delighted in me.

October:

God's Glory. *the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the Lord's people. To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. Colossians 1:26-27*

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

Sunday 4th October Ps. 19 Acts 14

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

There is something very comforting about our childhood experiences which makes us feel secure. When we are stressed or distressed we usually re-visit our family values or childhood experiences because subconsciously, they are our norm and those memories bring comfort and solace. For instance, Peter went fishing after Jesus died;[Jn.21] David wanted water from his childhood home of Bethlehem;[2Sam.23] the Exiles in Babylon longed for Zion.[Ps.137] But not every childhood experience is necessarily good and not all our early values will edify, exhort or encourage us if we dwell on them. However, we can change our conscious and subconscious norm, through continually thinking and speaking godly values—God's values—but we must also put them into practice: *Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.*[Phil.4:8-9] Then when stress or distress comes, rather than reverting to the destructive values of fear, doubt and unbelief we will revert to the constructive values of faith, hope and love. A habit is an established custom, a usual practice—something we do without having to think about it. Here at our Church we promote habits of faith-full ideals, wholesome practices and godly values—and these will sustain us in times of trouble. **Paul's habit was to meet together with other Believers.** *At Iconium Paul and Barnabas went as usual into the Jewish synagogue. There they spoke so effectively that a great number of Jews and Greeks believed.* [Acts.14:1] (At that time, the local synagogue was the place where god-fearing people met as there were no established churches then.)

In the early days of the Church, the persecution of Believers was primarily from the Jews—the very people who were supposed to be the Covenant people of God were persecuting the real Covenant people of God! But under Emperor Nero persecution became much harsher from the Romans and many of the Believers were put to death—including Paul and Peter. Although the persecution of Christians in this country is mostly inconvenience and discomfort, it is not the same everywhere. Last year (2025) there were over 388 million Christians across the world who suffered some sort of persecution and discrimination because of their faith—315 million of them faced very high or extreme levels of persecution, including imprisonment and torture. Of the 4,849 Christians killed worldwide last year, 3,490 were in Nigeria (*Open Doors 2026 Watch list*)! But whatever difficulties we experience in life—whether it is stress, distress, disease, discouragement, disappointment or even persecution, **God's antidote to all of life's difficulties is Jesus—and Jesus' representative on earth is the Church.** *It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption.*[1Cor.1:30] *His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose that he accomplished*

in Christ Jesus our Lord. In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence. I ask you, therefore, not to be discouraged because of my sufferings for you, which are your glory.[Eph.3:10-13]

The Church is not an organisation but the gathering of Believers. **Church is the meeting together of Believers for worship and spiritual encouragement in the Name of Jesus Christ**, **God's Son.** When people meet together there is always physical, social, mental, emotional support—but the distinctive of Church is **spiritual support** because we meet in the Name of Jesus Christ: *We joined up with Jesus Christ, God's son, so we are part of God's family now and we will get our share of all the good things that God gives to his son. But it is also true that we will get a lot of the trouble, just like they gave trouble to Jesus. We will get our share of that trouble and we will get our share of good things. God will make everything really good later. But don't worry about the trouble we get now. Later God will make everything so good for us that we will not even think about the trouble we get now… We are Christians and we have the Holy Spirit in us, but we still get trouble. God gave us that Holy Spirit to show us a little bit of the good that will come later… But sometimes things go wrong for us and sometimes we get trouble. Does this mean that Jesus Christ has stopped loving us? No way. Nobody can ever stop him loving us. Some people don't want us to follow Jesus, so if they hit us and treat us rough, or if we get too cold from not enough clothes, or if we go hungry, can we think that he has stopped taking care of us? No way. Nothing will ever stop him from loving us. Maybe they reckon they will kill us, like we read in God's book, "Some people find out that we belong to God and they try to kill us. hey reckon we are weak like sheep and they can kill us whenever they want to." Don't worry about any of these things. We win every time. Jesus loves us all the time, so he helps us get through it all and win in the end… Nothing anywhere can stop him loving us. We belong to Jesus Christ and God loves us very much.*[Rom.8:17-39 (PEV)]

When Believers gather in the Name of Jesus there should be some very clear expectations:

Church should be a place where God is glorified (honoured). *Glory belongs to God, whose power is at work in us. By this power he can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine. Glory belongs to God in the church and in Christ Jesus for all time and eternity! Amen.*[Eph.3:20-21] God's glory is His presence and Jesus brought God's presence to earth together with the message of peace: *Today your Saviour, Christ the Lord, was born in David's city. This is how you will recognize him: You will find an infant wrapped in strips of cloth and lying in a manger." Suddenly, a large army of angels appeared with the angel. They were praising God by saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those who have his good will!"*[Lk.2:11-14] We saw last week that God's purpose for us is to be clothed in His glory and become a new person living in peace with God and each other. But God will not share his glory with another: *I am the LORD; that is my name! I will not give my glory to another or my praise to idols.*[Is.42:8] That is why we should always honour Jesus and give Him the glory: *Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory!*[Rev.19:6-7]

Church should be a place where God displays His Wisdom: *His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known.*[Eph.3:10-12] Wisdom is the application of knowledge—it is acting on the information we have. And so, Godly wisdom is putting 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.*[Matt.7:24] *My mother and brothers are those who hear God's word and put it into practice.*[Lk.8:21] *Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.*[Phil.4:9] Ultimately, Wisdom is personified in Jesus. *Jesus has become our wisdom sent from God, our righteousness, our holiness, and our ransom from sin.*[1Cor.1:30] And the Holy Spirit imparts God's wisdom to us: *Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. To one there is given through the Spirit the message of wisdom, to another the message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit… All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he gives them to each one, just as he determines.*[1Cor.12:7-11] *Now Joshua son of Nun was filled with the spirit of wisdom because Moses had laid his hands on him.*[Deut.34:9]

Church should be a place where God's Word is preached with prayerful and careful preparation. *Work hard so you can present yourself to God and receive his approval. Be a good worker, one who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly explains the word of truth.*[2Tim.2:15] *They read from the Book of the Law of God and clearly explained the meaning of what was being read, helping the people understand each passage.*[Neh.8:8] But sadly, no matter how ever carefully and prayerfully the message is prepared and presented not everyone will pay attention to God's Word! *For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths.*[2Tim.4:3-4] *Command certain people not to teach false doctrines any longer or to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies. Such things promote controversial speculations rather than advancing God's work—which is by faith. The goal of this command is love, which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith. Some have departed from these and have turned to meaningless talk. They set themselves up as experts on religious issues, but haven't the remotest idea of what they're holding forth with such imposing eloquence.*[1Tim.1:3-7] *As for you, son of man, your countrymen are talking together about you by the walls and at the doors of the houses, saying to each other, 'Come and hear the message that has come from the LORD.' My people come to you, as they usually do, and sit before you to listen to your words, but they do not put them into practice. With their mouths they express devotion, but their hearts are greedy for unjust gain. Indeed, to them you are nothing more than one who sings love songs with a beautiful voice and plays an instrument well, for they hear your words but do not put them into practice.*[Ezek.33:30-32]

Church should be a place where true prophecy is promoted. The first mention in the Bible of a prophet was Abraham—who prayed for others to be healed: *[Abraham] is a prophet and he will pray for you and you will live.*[Gen.20:7] Prophecy is speaking on behalf of God—like Aaron spoke on behalf of Moses: *Then the LORD said to Moses, "See, I have made you like God to Pharaoh, and your brother Aaron will be your prophet. You are to say everything I command you, and your brother Aaron is to tell Pharaoh to let the Israelites go out of his country.*[Ex.7:1-2] Although prophecy may be foretell, its main purpose is to forthtell—it is about promoting Jesus, not predicting the future. True prophecy will always promote Jesus and Jesus' values: *Worship God! For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.*[Rev.3:10] *Follow the way of love and eagerly desire spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophecy… But everyone who prophesies speaks to men for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort... He who prophesies is.. so that the church may be edified.*[1Cor.14:1-5]

Church should be a place where we are committed to one another. We show our commitment by meeting practical and social needs and by edifying, encouraging exhorting one another. *Speak to people for their strengthening, encouraging and comfort… so that the church may be edified.*[1Cor.14:3-5] *They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.*[Acts.2:42-47]

Church should be a joyful place where we find spiritual and emotion strength. *I was glad when they said to me, "Let us go into the house of the LORD."*[Ps.122:1] *Great is the LORD, and most worthy of praise, in the city of our God, his holy mountain. Beautiful in its loftiness, the joy of the whole earth… is Mount Zion, the city of the Great King. God is in her citadels; he has shown himself to be her fortress.*[Ps.48:1-3] The Church is described as Jerusalem (Mt. Zion): *These two women serve as an illustration of God's two covenants. The first woman, Hagar, represents Mount Sinai where people received the law that enslaved them. And now Jerusalem is just like Mount Sinai in Arabia, because she and her children live in slavery to the law. But the other woman, Sarah, represents the heavenly Jerusalem. She is the free woman, and she is our mother… And you, dear brothers*

and sisters, are children of the promise, just like Isaac. But you are now being persecuted by those who want you to keep the law, just as Ishmael, the child born by human effort, persecuted Isaac, the child born by the power of the Spirit. But what do the Scriptures say about that? "Get rid of the slave and her son, for the son of the slave woman will not share the inheritance with the free woman's son." So, dear brothers and sisters, we are not children of the slave woman; we are children of the free woman.[Gal.4:24-31] *I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. 'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death' or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" Then he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true."*[Rev.21:2-5]

Church should be a place where we encourage and are encouraged. *I know that when we come together something beautiful will happen as we are encouraged by each other's faith.*[Rom.1:9-12] Church attendance should not be a formal ritual but a forum to encourage one another: *And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.*[Heb.10:24-25] If we don't encourage others when we meet together, we are not Church—even if we call it a "*Church Service*"! That's why we should always bring something to give: *So here's what I want you to do. When you gather for worship, each one of you be prepared with something that will be useful for all: Sing a hymn, teach a lesson, tell a story, lead a prayer, provide an insight.*[1Cor.14:23] *No one is to appear before me empty-handed.*[Ex 23:15]

Old habits die hard and when life gets difficult we automatically revert to our old habits but if our old habits are good old habits, when times of stress or distress come, we will be safe and secure because we automatically take comfort in God's provision found in the Church! Remember it is at Church that God's glory is experienced, God's wisdom is displayed, God's Word is preached and God's Son is worshipped. So let's keep these standards as "normal" for our Church.

Questions for the Bible Study

What is a habit?
What godly habits should we form?
What is the Church?
What should Church be like?
What are the Biblical essentials for Church?
How can we ensure those Biblical essentials happen in our Church?

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

Psalm 19: The law of the LORD is perfect, refreshing the soul. The statutes of the LORD are trustworthy, making wise the simple. The precepts of the LORD are right, giving joy to the heart. The commands of the LORD are radiant, giving light to the eyes. The fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever. The decrees of the LORD are firm, and all of them are righteous… By them your servant is warned; in keeping them there is great reward… May these words of my mouth and this meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer.

Sunday 11th October Ps. 20 Acts 15

Then Judas and Silas, both being prophets, spoke at length to the believers, encouraging and strengthening their faith… then the believers sent them back to the church in Jerusalem with a blessing of peace.[Acts.15:32-33]

Different but not divided; Bruised but not broken; Best because we are blessed!

Even before the Church began, there were differences and divisions amongst Jesus' Disciples—they rebuked people who brought children to Jesus;[Matt.19:13] they tried to stop others from ministering;[Lk.9:49] they argued over who was the greatest;[Mk.9:33-34] Judas was a thief.[Jn.12:6] And then after the Church began, there were still differences and divisions amongst Jesus' Disciples—there were disputes;[Acts.6:1;.15] criticisms;[Acts.11:2] lawsuits;[1Cor.6:4] cliques and party-spirit.[Acts.15:5;1Cor.3:4] And there has been differences and divisions amongst Jesus' Disciples ever since—but each heresy confronted brought clarity and order.

In the C4th Arius taught that Jesus was a created being, not the Eternal Word—and this heresy became the catalyst for the Nicene Creed: *"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…"*

In the C16th it was the spiritual and moral corruption of the Church that became the catalyst for the Protestant Reformation. Albert of Brandenburg had bought the office of Archbishop of Mainz from the Pope and he was allowed to recuperate his expenses by selling "*indulgences*"—which were permits that were thought to reduce the amount of punishment for sins. By preaching on the horrors of Hell and the fate of those in purgatory, the people would then be offered the chance to buy themselves out of so much time in the fires of purgatory. A verse circulated at the time encapsulated the trust placed in indulgences: "*As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul into heaven springs.*" These Indulgences so incensed Martin Luther that it caused him to really seek God—which resulted in his revelation that we are Justified by Faith alone (*Sola Fides*). From 1525-1530 at least 1000 Anabaptists were killed by Catholics—and similar number were also were killed by the Protestants (both Luther's and Zwingli's supporters). The Anabaptists were known as the Church of Radical Bible Readers because of their passion for reading the Bible—but they maintained that although Scripture was easy to understand, it was costly to obey! They were very strict in their belief that Church is only for Believers and that Christianity is a way of life not a status.

In the early C20th the Pentecostals were ostracised by the main-stream Churches for their doctrine and practices—but within a decade the Pentecostals had a major split. Pentecostals had their roots in the *Holiness Movement* that taught you had to be "*sanctified*" as well as "*converted*" in order to be saved. William Durham taught that Jesus finished His work of Redemption on the Cross and no other experience than conversion will save us—and this *"Finished Work Movement"* divided the Pentecostals. And there continues to be many differences and divisions within the Church—such as *Unitarianism* including *Jesus Only (*denial of the Trinity), *annihilism* (denial of hell so the un-saved are annihilated), *universalism* (denial of God's justice so ultimately all people are saved) *inter-faith services* (a denial of the uniqueness of Christianity) and now we also have the denial of God's moral standards and so any and every sexual status is welcomed!

However, these are not new heresies but only the same old heresies revamped for today's situation! And regardless of these heresies, the Church will triumph because Jesus is building it: *Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ. You are the Son of the living God." Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon, son of Jonah! No mere man showed this to you. My Father in heaven showed it to you. Here is what I tell you. You are Peter. On this rock I will build my church. The gates of hell will not be strong enough to destroy it.*[Matt.16:16-18]

In C19th the Bishop of Natal, South Africa (John William Colenso), denounced much of the Bible as untrue and when he was dismissed for his heretical teachings, he appealed the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council in London. Samuel Stone, was Curate at Windsor at the time and wrote a set of hymns based on the Apostles' Creed to help promote the true doctrine. *The Church's One Foundation* is based on the ninth article of the Creed: *We believe in the holy Catholic Church, the Communion of Saints* and Colenso's heresy is referenced in the lines "*Though with a scornful wonder men see her sore oppressed, by schisms rent asunder, by heresies distressed.*"

The Church's one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord,
she is His new creation by water and the Word.
From heaven He came and sought her to be His holy bride;
with His own blood He bought her and for her life He died.
The Church shall never perish! Her dear Lord to defend,
to guide, sustain, and cherish, is with her to the end:
Though there be those who hate her, and false sons in her pale,
against both foe or traitor she ever shall prevail.
Though with a scornful wonder men see her sore oppressed,
by schisms rent asunder, by heresies distressed:
Yet saints their watch are keeping, their cry goes up, "How long?"
And soon the night of weeping shall be the morn of song!

(This hymn was the inspiration for Rudyard Kipling's 1896 poem, "*Hymn Before Action*".)

At the Last Supper, Jesus said that the broken bread represented His broken body: *And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me."*[Lk.22:19] The Body of Christ was broken once upon the cross when He was punished for our sins: *But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.*[Is.53:5-6] It was on the Cross that God's anger against sin was shown as He hid His face from Jesus: *At the sixth hour darkness came over the whole land until the ninth hour. And at the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?"—which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"*[Mk.15:33-34] Jesus died once and He died for all the sins of all humanity: *Likewise, Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of humanity, and after that he will appear a second time.*[Heb.9:28] *Christ is the sacrifice that takes away our sins and the sins of all the world's people.*[1Jn.2:2] God has promised that He will not be angry again with people in Covenant with Him. *In a surge of anger I hid my face from you for a moment, but with everlasting kindness I will have compassion on you," says the LORD your Redeemer. "To me this is like the days of Noah, when I swore that the waters of Noah would never again cover the earth. So now I have sworn not to be angry with you, never to rebuke you again. Though the mountains be shaken and the hills be removed, yet my unfailing love for you will not be shaken nor my covenant of peace be removed," says the LORD, who has compassion on you.*[Is.54:8-10] After Jesus died, His broken body was laid in the grave, but on the third day, Jesus rose from the dead with an un-broken body—Jesus was alive and His body had been transformed (literally *metamorphosed*)—His mortal body had been exchanged for an immortal body[1Cor.15] and He was whole.

The Church is called the Body of Christ: *Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it. And God has placed in the church first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, of helping, of guidance, and of different kinds of tongues.*[1Cor.12:27:28] Although the Church may look battered and bruised, the Church is actually holy and whole—we may be battered but we are not broken! *Christ loved the church. He gave himself up for her. He did it to make her holy. He made her clean by washing her with water and the word. He did it to bring her to himself as a brightly shining church. He wants a church that has no stain or wrinkle or any other flaw. He wants a church that is holy and without blame.*[Eph.5:25-27] *There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.*[Eph.4:4-6] We should never think like broken people—and certainly not live as broken people. We are whole people, so let's think, speak and act as whole people. And because the Church's unity is a spiritual unity we are united with the Holy Spirit and so we should, if possible, live peaceful unity with other Believers: *If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.*[Rom.12:18] *Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace… Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.*[Eph.4:2-3;11-16]

We can be bruised without being broken: *We now have this light shining in our hearts, but we ourselves are like fragile clay jars containing this great treasure. This makes it clear that our great power is from God, not from ourselves. We are pressed on every side by troubles, but we are not crushed. We are perplexed, but not driven to despair. We are hunted down, but never abandoned by God. We get knocked down, but we are not destroyed. Through suffering, our bodies continue to share in the death of Jesus so that the life of Jesus may also be seen in our bodies.*[2Cor.4:7-10]

We can be different without being divisive: *I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought.*[1Cor.1:10] *I hear that when you come together as a church, there are divisions among you, and to some extent I believe it. No doubt there have to be differences among you to show which of you have God's approval.*[1Cor.11:18-19] *There should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other.*[1Cor.12:25]

And because we are blessed, we can be the best! *Give praise to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. He has blessed us with every spiritual blessing. Those blessings come from the heavenly world. They belong to us because we belong to Christ.*[Eph.1:3] *Blessed is the one whose sin the Lord will never count against them.*[Rom.4:8] *So those who rely on faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.*[Gal.3:9]

The Gospel is simple, settled and spiritual—but we must always keep Christ central: *Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel*[2Tim.2:8] And we must never lose sight of the fact that we are saved by grace: *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.*[Eph.2:8-9] *No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.*[Acts.15:11] There has always been heresy and apostasy in the Church and we need to be on our guard to protect ourselves from those who would deceive us or lead us astray. *I am telling you this so no one will deceive you with well-crafted arguments.*[Col.2:4] *You foolish Galatians! Who has cast a spell on you? Before your eyes Jesus Christ was vividly portrayed as crucified! The only thing I want to learn from you is this: Did you receive the Spirit by*

doing the works of the law or by believing what you heard? Are you so foolish? Although you began with the Spirit, are you now trying to finish by human effort? Have you suffered so many things for nothing? – if indeed it was for nothing. Does God then give you the Spirit and work miracles among you by your doing the works of the law or by your believing what you heard?[Gal.3:1-5] But if we do go astray, there is always a way back: *My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.*[Jn.2:1-2] Even Esau could find a way back: *His father Isaac answered him, "Your dwelling will be away from the earth's richness, away from the dew of heaven above. You will live by the sword and you will serve your brother. But when you grow restless, you will throw his yoke from off your neck."*[Gen.27:39-40] However, although forgiveness is unconditional (that what grace is), restoration is conditional on repentance. *But now God commands all people everywhere to repent.*[Acts.17:30] *But unless you repent, you too will all perish.*[Lk.13:5] *Even if they sin against you seven times in a day and seven times come back to you saying 'I repent,' you must forgive them.*[Lk.17:4] *Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.*[Matt.3:8] *Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret.*[2Cor.7:10] *Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest and repent. Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me.*[Rev.3:19-20]

Repentance will always include these 5 A's

1 Acknowledgement of the wrong
2 Apology for the wrong
3 Action of determination to change
4 Appreciation of God's forgiveness
5 Attitude of grace, gratitude and gentleness towards God and people.

Yes, we can be different but let us never be divided! Yes, we may be bruised but let us never be broken! Yes, we can be the best because we are blessed! So let us **encourage** and **strengthen** one another in our faith and leave each other with a **blessing of peace**. *Then Judas and Silas, both being prophets, spoke at length to the believers, encouraging and strengthening their faith. They stayed for a while, and then the believers sent them back to the church in Jerusalem with a blessing of peace.*[Acts.15:32-33]

Questions

What did Jesus mean by *"this is My body which is broken for you;"*?
How did God show His anger with sin?
Why are there still differences and divisions within the Church?
Who should decide what differences are acceptable or unacceptable?
Should we place any restrictions on divisive people?
Is there a difference between forgiveness and restoration?

Puritan Prayer—The Life-Look: O God, I bless You for the happy moment when I first saw Your law fulfilled in Christ—that Your wrath was appeased; that my death was destroyed; that my sin was forgiven; that my soul was saved. And ever since, You have been faithful to me—daily have I proven the power of Jesus' blood, and daily have I known the strength of Your Spirit, my Teacher, my Director and my Sanctifier. I want no other Rock to build upon than that I have in You; I desire no other hope than that of gospel truth; I need no other look than that which gazes on the cross. Forgive me if I have tried to add anything to that One Foundation; if I have unconsciously relied upon my knowledge, experience or deeds and not seen them as filthy rags; if I have attempted to complete what is perfect in Christ. May my cry be always: Only Jesus! Only Jesus! In You is freedom from condemnation; in Your righteousness, there is fullness of life; in Your given life, there is eternal vitality; in fellowship with You, there is enduring union. In You I have all that I can hold—but enlarge me to take in

more! If I backslide, let me like Peter, weep bitterly and return to You. If I am tempted and have no joy, give me strength enough to trust in You. If I am weak, may I trust in Your eternal love. If in extremity, let me feel that You can deliver me. If driven to the edge of hope and to the pit of despair, grant me grace to fall into Your arms. Thank you my God that You hear me and that You do for me more than I can ask, think or dream.

Psalm 20—May the LORD answer you when you are in distress; may the name of the God of Jacob protect you. May he send you help from the sanctuary and grant you support from Zion. May he remember all your sacrifices and accept your burnt offerings. May he give you the desire of your heart and make all your plans succeed. May we shout for joy over your victory and lift up our banners in the name of our God. May the LORD grant all your requests. Now this I know: The LORD gives victory to his anointed. He answers him from his heavenly sanctuary with the victorious power of his right hand. Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the LORD our God. They are brought to their knees and fall, but we rise up and stand firm. LORD, give victory to the king! Answer us when we call!

Sunday 18th October Ps. 21 Acts 16

Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household.[Acts.16:31]

What does it mean to "saved"? What are we saved from and who saves us? We are saved from our sins by the Saviour who is Jesus—that was the very reason He was born! *[Mary] will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: "The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel"—which means, "God with us."*[Matt.1:21-23]

There are lots of different religions and they all purport to "*connect*" their adherents to an unseen spiritual world as well as give a better, more fulfilled life—and most promise to give a peaceful future beyond the grave. But even though our woke culture tries to eradicate religion or relegate religion to an outdated superstition, every culture throughout history has had religion—and still does today. This is to be expected because God made mankind in His image, we all have that in-built yearning to connect with our Creator. *The thought of God stirs a person so deeply that he cannot be content unless he praises Him—because He made us for Himself and our hearts find no peace until they rest in Him. (Augustine of Hippo)* But because of sin, no one is able to connect with God by themselves—we need the Creator to re-create us, to quicken our spirit so we can rest in God. This is what makes Christianity different from any other religion. Christianity is unique because it explains accurately how God (who is Spirit) became human (flesh) in order to restore our spiritual life. The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. *We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.*[Jn.1:14] *God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*[2Cor.5:21]

Religion can be good for society if the adherents are pious—in fact the Bible describes true religion as being pious: *Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves, and their religion is worthless. Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.*[Jas.1:26-27] But no matter how pious we are, if we don't have God's love in our heart, our piety has no eternal value: *If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.*[1Co 13:1-3] And no matter what we believe about anything—including religion—it's irrelevant what you believe if God hasn't said it! In fact if you believe anything that God says is false, you are making God

out to be a liar. This is especially true about Jesus' resurrection: *if there's no resurrection for Christ, everything we've told you is smoke and mirrors, and everything you've staked your life on is smoke and mirrors. Not only that, but we would be guilty of telling a string of barefaced lies about God, all these affidavits we passed on to you verifying that God raised up Christ—sheer fabrications, if there's no resurrection... But the truth is that Christ has been raised up.*[1Cor.15:14-20] Jesus' resurrection is the very foundation of Christianity: *For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve.*[1Cor.15:3-5]

On our Church cards we have a QR code that links to a page on our website where we ask the questions: *Can you make sense of the chaos all about us? Are you looking for the real purpose of life? Can you know what is true or false?* We then explain some of the uniqueness of Christianity.

Christianity is much more than a philosophy—**Christianity** is the belief that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and **a Christian** is someone who follows Jesus Christ because they have received forgiveness of sins through His death on the Cross.

Only Christianity claims that God became a sinless human being in Jesus Christ. *God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*[2Cor.5:21]

Only Christianity claims that Jesus Christ is God's Son who became our Saviour by dying for our sins. *The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God, as it is written in Isaiah the prophet: "I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way"*[Mk.1:1-2] *And through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.*[Col.1:20]

Only Christianity claims that Jesus Christ rose from the dead with an immortal body. *He has saved us and called us to a holy life—not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.*[2Tim.1:9-10]

Only Christianity claims that Jesus Christ will come again to judge the world with justice and righteousness. *For this is the reason the gospel was preached even to those who are now dead, so that they might be judged according to human standards in regard to the body, but live according to God in regard to the spirit.*[1Pet.4:6]

Only Jesus Christ can reconcile us to God and give us true peace and a real hope.

For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.[Col.1:19-20]

God is only a prayer away! The Bible says that if we will submit our lives to God and come close to Him, He will come close to us.

Jesus said: *"I will never turn away anyone who comes to Me".*

Questions

What is religion?

Why is religion universal to all cultures?

Why is Christianity true?

Why are other religions false?

Does it matter which religion we follow?

Puritan Prayer: A Convert's First Prayer—My Father, unless You had first loved me, I could never have sought my happiness in Your love. Your Spirit has encouraged me by grace to seek You; Your Spirit has made known to me Your reconciliation in Jesus; Your Spirit has taught me to believe it; and Your Spirit has helped me to take You for my God and portion. Grant me to grow in the knowledge and experience of Your love and walk in it all the way to glory. Blessed

for ever be Your fatherly affection, which chose me to be one of Your children by faith in Jesus—thank You for giving me the desire to live as Your child! In Jesus, my Elder Brother, I have my new birth, I have restraining power and I have renewing grace. It is by Your Spirit that I call You Father, that I believe in You and that I love You. Strengthen me inwardly for every purpose of my Christian life. Let Your Spirit continually reveal to me my interest in Christ and open to me the riches of Your love in Him, that I may know my union with Jesus and enjoy constant fellowship with Him. By Your Spirit may I daily live to You and may I daily rejoice in Your love. May I daily find Your love to me to be the same as Your love to Your Son and may I become rooted and grounded in You as a house on rock. I know but little—increase my knowledge of Your love in Jesus. Keep me pressing forward for clearer discoveries of Your love, so that I may find its eternal fullness. Magnify Your love to me according to its greatness and not according to my deserts or prayers—and whatever increase You give, let it draw out greater love to You.

Psalm 21—The king rejoices in your strength, LORD. How great is his joy in the victories you give! You have granted him his heart's desire and have not withheld the request of his lips. You came to greet him with rich blessings and placed a crown of pure gold on his head. He asked you for life, and you gave it to him— length of days, for ever and ever. Through the victories you gave, his glory is great; you have bestowed on him splendour and majesty. Surely you have granted him unending blessings and made him glad with the joy of your presence... Be exalted in your strength, LORD; we will sing and praise your might.

Sunday 25th October Ps. 22 Acts 17

Happy Families. *From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth... God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us.*[Acts.17:26-27]

Why is there so much strife in the world when mankind is actually one big family created by God and for God's pleasure? *For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name.*[Eph.3:14-15] God is completely good and full of love, so we can't blame Him for the world's troubles: *He is the Rock, his works are perfect, and all his ways are just. A faithful God who does no wrong, upright and just is he.*[Deut.32:4] *The LORD is holy and kind. Our God is full of tender love.*[Ps.116:5] And neither can we blame God for our own troubles: *When tempted, no one should say, "God is tempting me." For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone… My dear brothers and sisters, don't let anyone fool you. Every good and perfect gift is from God. It comes down from the Father. He created the heavenly lights. He does not change like shadows that move.*[Jas.1:13-17] Jesus came to give us life not trouble: *I have come so they can have life. I want them to have it in the fullest possible way.*[Jn.10:10] The devil is a liar and murderer and before we were born-again, he dominated our behaviour so perhaps we could blame the devil for the world's troubles: *You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies.*[Jn.8:44] But Jesus came to destroy the devil's work including his dominion over us. *He who does what is sinful is of the devil, because the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work.*[1Jn.3:8] *God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having cancelled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.*[Col.2:13-15] And so Christians are no longer under the dominion of the devil—unless they choose to be! *We know that those who are children of God do not keep on sinning. The Son of God keeps them safe. The evil one can't harm them. We know that we are children of God. We know that the whole world is under the control of the evil one.*[1Jn.5:18-19] *God's*

power has given us everything we need to lead a godly life. All of that has come to us because we know the One who chose us. He chose us because of his own glory and goodness. He has also given us his very great and valuable promises. He did it so you could share in his nature. He also did it so you could escape from the evil in the world. That evil is caused by sinful longings.[2Pet.1:3-4] This means that we must now take responsibility for our own actions and not blame the devil. *A person's own folly leads to their ruin, yet their heart rages against the LORD.*[Prov.19:3] *But your own evil longings tempt you. They lead you on and drag you away. When they are allowed to grow, they give birth to sin. When sin has grown up, it gives birth to death.*[Jas.1:14-15] The paradox of Christianity is the tension between what God has done legally (redeemed us, justified us, sanctified us and freed us from our sin)—and what we experience in our daily life (hardship, hurt, troubles, turmoil, *etc.*): *I truly delight in God's commands, but it's pretty obvious that not all of me joins in that delight. Parts of me covertly rebel, and just when I least expect it, they take charge. I've tried everything and nothing helps. I'm at the end of my rope. Is there no one who can do anything for me? Isn't that the real question? The answer, thank God, is that Jesus Christ can and does. He acted to set things right in this life of contradictions where I want to serve God with all my heart and mind, but am pulled by the influence of sin to do something totally different.*[Rom.7:22-25] Paul later explained that, although he hadn't yet obtained perfection, he pressed on towards the goal of eternal life: *I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.*[Phil.3:10-14]

Another illustration of the difference between what Jesus has done for us and our day-to-day experience is *Armistice*. November 11th is Armistice Day where we commemorate the Armistice of 1918 and the agreement that ended the fighting on the Western Front of WWI. At 11a.m. (Paris time) on 11th November 1918 ("*the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month*") Armistice went into effect and it marked the victory for the Allies and the defeat of Germany. Although the fighting ended at 11.00am on the 11th November, it took a further six months to actually end the war! The state of war between Germany and the Allied Powers (WW1) finally ended with a Peace Treaty (*Treaty of Versailles*) signed on 28th June 1919 in the Palace of Versailles and was registered by the Secretariat of the League of Nations on 21st October 1919. Fifteen years earlier in August 1914, H. G. Wells published some articles in a London newspaper where he argued that only the defeat of German militarism could bring about an end to war. These were later published as a book entitled *The War That Will End War*. Although originally idealistic, this phrase soon became used sarcastically with David Lloyd George saying, "*This war, like the next war, is a war to end war.*" And as we know, WWI didn't stop any future wars (but neither has any war—or armistice—actually brought lasting peace!) Interestingly the 1953 Korean War Armistice Agreement was not followed by a peace treaty and so technically the Korean war has not ended! Although the Trump–Kim summit in 2018 resulted in signing a *Declaration*, it only agreed that both sides would "*make active efforts to seek the support and cooperation of the international community for the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula*".

Although each year, millions remember those who died to set us free from the tyranny of political slavery and oppression, very few remember the One who died to set us free from the tyranny of spiritual slavery and oppression. Unlike WWI, Jesus really has ended all wars because He defeated the greatest despot of all—satan. Jesus completely defeated the devil when He died on the cross—and like the Armistice of WWI in 1918—the agreement has been signed but the Peace Treaty has not been fully implemented! The full implementation of Jesus' victory will happen when Jesus hands the Kingdom back to the Father after He destroys the very last enemy

of all—death itself: *Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. For he "has put everything under his feet."*[1Cor.15:24-26]
God did not sign an Armistice with the devil—Jesus won the war for justice and righteousness outright! And by becoming human, Jesus represented all of humanity. *Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.*[Heb.2:14-15]
God the Father made an agreement (covenant) with Jesus which was ratified by His death (*i.e.* in His blood): *This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you.*[Lk.22:20] *Now may the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.*[Heb.13:20-21] *As for you, because of the blood of my covenant with you, I will free your prisoners from the waterless pit… you prisoners of hope.*[Zech.9:11-12]
After the end of WWII, there was one Japanese soldier did not believe that the war had ended and spent 29 years hiding in the jungle on an island in the Philippines! He eventually surrendered in 1974—but only after his former commander met him and reversed his 1945 orders to stay behind and spy on American troops. Sadly, some people still do not know about the great Victory that Jesus has won for us, nor of the end of hostilities—hostilities between God and mankind and also hostilities between man and man. There are still many, many people who refuse to surrender to God because they do not believe that the war is over. But the Gospel—the Good News—is that God is our Peace: *But the LORD said to him, "Peace! Do not be afraid. You are not going to die." So Gideon built an altar to the LORD there and called it The LORD is Peace.*[Jdg.6:23-24] Jesus is the Prince of Peace: *For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*[Is.9:6] And God has established peace for us: *LORD, you establish peace for us; all that we have accomplished you have done for us.*[Is.26:12] This peace was accomplished at Calvary: *As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it and said, "If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace—but now it is hidden from your eyes… you did not recognize the time of God's coming to you."*[Lk.19:41-44] *But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed.*[Is.53:5] God wants all people to be at peace with Him: *God our Saviour, who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all people. This has now been witnessed to at the proper time.*[1Tim.2:3-6] God wants all people to reach out to Him—in fact God has manoeuvred (manipulated?) all the details of time, both massive and miniscule events, so people would seek Him and find Him. *From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us.*[Acts.17:26-27] God has made it easy for us to find Him: *The truth about God is plain to them. God has made it plain. Ever since the world was created it has been possible to see the qualities of God that are not seen. I'm talking about his eternal power and about the fact that he is God. Those things can be seen in what he has made. So people have no excuse for what they do.*[Rom.1:19-20] However, God is Spirit and until our spiritual eyes are opened, we cannot understand spiritual matters: *Jesus said to them, "This is what I told you while I was still with you. Everything written about me must happen. Everything written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms must come true." Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, "This is what is written. The Christ will suffer. He will rise from the dead on the third day. His followers will preach in his name. They will tell others to turn away from their sins and be forgiven. People from every nation will hear it, beginning at Jerusalem.*[Lk.24:44-47] *But their minds were made stubborn. To this very day, the same veil remains when*

the old covenant is read. The veil has not been removed. Only faith in Christ can take it away. To this very day, when the Law of Moses is read, a veil covers the minds of those who hear it. But when anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. Now the Lord is the Holy Spirit.[2Cor.3:15-17] *Some people don't have the Holy Spirit. They don't accept the things that come from the Spirit of God. Things like that are foolish to them. They can't understand them. In fact, such things can't be understood without the Spirit's help.*[1Cor.2:15] But even after we surrender our lives to God and are born-again, hostilities will remain in our minds unless we renew them. *At one time you were separated from God. You were enemies in your minds because of your evil ways. But because Christ died, God has brought you back to himself. Christ's death has made you holy in God's sight. So now you don't have any flaw. You are free from blame. But you must keep your faith steady and firm. Don't move away from the hope that the good news holds out to you. It is the good news that you heard.*[Col.1:21-23] **We have to change the way we think—and we change way we think by renewing our minds with the Word of God:** *Christ loved the church. He gave up his life for her to make her holy and clean, washed by the cleansing of God's word.*[Eph.5:25-26] *Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.*[Rom.12:2] *The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart, that is, the message concerning faith that we proclaim.*[Rom.10:8] God has given us everything we need: *God's power has given us everything we need to lead a godly life. All of that has come to us because we know the One who chose us. He chose us because of his own glory and goodness.*[2Pet.1:3] But we still have to "*enter*" God's rest: *God's promise that we may enter his place of rest still stands. We are afraid that some of you think you won't enter his place of rest. We have heard the same Good News that your ancestors heard. But the message didn't help those who heard it in the past because they didn't believe. We who believe are entering that place of rest… Therefore, a time of rest and worship exists for God's people... So we must make every effort to enter that place of rest. Then no one will be lost by following the example of those who refused to obey.*[Heb.4:1-11] True peace comes from knowing God and Jesus Christ: *Grace and peace be yours in abundance through the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord.*[2Pet.1:2]

Yes, the war is over and we can live in the blessings of God's Kingdom. These blessings include being right with God; having peace with God; having God as our Father who cares and provides for us. The "*paperwork has been completed and the treaties signed*" but we have to accept God's promises and act on them. **So let's do that, and live in the spiritual victory and freedom that Jesus has obtained for us—then we will truly be a Happy Family!**

Questions

Everything God made was good—so where did evil come from?
Should we blame the devil for our problems?
Jesus defeated the devil at Calvary so why is satan still troubling us?
Will we ever be free from trouble?
How can we overcome our problems?

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

Psalm 23
The LORD is my shepherd, I lack nothing. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he refreshes my soul. He guides me along the right paths for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

November:

God's Glory. *But we ought always to thank God for you, brothers and sisters loved by the Lord, because God chose you as firstfruits to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth. He called you to this through our gospel, that you might share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. 2Thessalonians 2:13-14*

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

Sunday 1st November Ps. 24 Acts 18

What baptism did you receive? *Acts.19:3*

When we talk of baptism we immediately think of a Christian ceremony but "*baptism*" literally means *to dip, immerse, overwhelm or saturate. Jesus answered, "It is the one to whom I will give this piece of bread when I have dipped [baptised] it in the dish." Then, dipping [baptising] the piece of bread, he gave it to Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot.* *Jn.13:26* The early translators didn't know how to translate the Greek word "*baptizo*" into English so they transliterated it and made it into the word "*baptism*". In everyday Greek, the word "*baptizo*" is used to describe washing and the Bible mostly uses the word to describe a washing as a preparation to serve God. *Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. But John tried to deter him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" Jesus replied, "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfil all righteousness." Then John consented. As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."* *Matt.3:11-17* *His host was amazed to see that he sat down to eat without first performing the hand-washing ceremony [baptism] required by Jewish custom.* *Lk.11:38* However, the Bible also uses the word in a metaphorical way to describe being overwhelmed: *I have come to set the world on fire, and I wish it were already burning! I have a terrible baptism of suffering ahead of me, and I am under a heavy burden until it is accomplished.* *Lk.12:49-50* In each use of the word, Baptism always means "*saturated*"—either with water, with the Holy Spirit or with emotion.

The Old Covenant ceremonies were symbolical and illustrated the realities that Christ would bring with the New Covenant. *Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ.* *Col.2:16-17* And so the rituals that the priests performed when they served in the Temple illustrated the spiritual realities that we have in Jesus Christ. Each morning before the priests started their religious duties, they had a ceremonial bath to illustrate their "*spiritual cleanness*" or holiness, which is essential for them to approach a holy God who is spiritually pure. *For the customary bath required to have been taken before the superintending priest came round, since it was a principle that none might go into the court to serve, although he were clean, unless he had bathed. A subterranean passage, lit on both sides, led to the well appointed bath-rooms where the priests immersed themselves. After that they needed not all that day to wash again, save their hands and feet, which they had to do each time, however often, they came for service into the Temple.* *A.Edersheim, The Temple* Under the New Covenant, all Christians are priests: *As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him—you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ… But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.* *1Pet.2:4-9* And we have the "*ceremonial Washing*" of Believer's

Baptism where we are immersed in water to illustrate our holiness or "*spiritual cleanness*". But unlike the OT Priests, we don't need to be "*baptised*" each morning, but once we are clean we only have to wash our feet (*i.e.* the parts that have got dirty) *Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no part with me." Simon Peter replied "Then, Lord, not just my feet but my hands and my head as well!" Jesus answered, "A person who has had a bath needs only to wash his feet; his whole body is clean. And you are clean, though not every one of you."*[Jn.13:8-10] Of course Baptism doesn't save us and neither is it a requirement for serving God, but it serves as an illustration of what Jesus has done for us—that we were spiritually dirty but are now spiritually clean; that we were spiritually dead but are now spiritually alive: *The water of the flood is a picture of the baptism that now saves you also. The baptism I'm talking about has nothing to do with removing dirt from your body. Instead, it promises God that you will keep a clear sense of what is right and wrong. Jesus Christ has saved you by rising from the dead.*[1Pet.3:20-21] That is why Believers' Baptism **always follows conversion** and **can never precede it**: *Each of you must repent of your sins, turn to God, and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ to show that you have received forgiveness for your sins. Then you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. This promise is to you, and to your children, and even to the Gentiles—all who have been called by the Lord our God.*[Acts.2:38-39] *Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.*[Mk.16:16] Because Believer's Baptism is an acknowledgment of faith in Jesus Christ, if a non-Christian is "*baptised*", it is only a religious bath and has no spiritual value: *If you believe with all your heart, you can be baptized. [He answered] I believe Jesus Christ is the Son of God.*[Acts.8:37] Believer's Baptism is an act of obedience: *Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.*[Acts.2:38] The Old Covenant never dealt with the conscience: *The high priest entered the inner room, and that only once a year, and never without blood, which he offered for himself and for the sins the people had committed in ignorance. The Holy Spirit was showing by this that the way into the Most Holy Place had not yet been disclosed as long as the first tabernacle was still functioning. This is an illustration for the present time, indicating that the gifts and sacrifices being offered were not able to clear the conscience of the worshiper. They are only a matter of food and drink and various ceremonial washings—external regulations applying until the time of the new order.*[Heb.9:6-10] But the new order (New Covenant) that was made through the death and resurrection of Jesus, does deal with the conscience—and Believer's Baptism is the demonstration of the New Covenant: *Baptism 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.*[1Pet.3:21-22] Those who aren't baptised, reject God's purpose for their life: *When they heard Jesus' words, [they] acknowledged that God's way was right, because they had been baptized by John. But the Pharisees and experts in the law rejected God's purpose for themselves, because they had not been baptized by John.*[Lk.7:29-30]

The Christians at Ephesus had heard the Gospel from Apollos and were baptised for the forgiveness of their sins but weren't aware of the full Gospel—of Jesus' baptism in the Holy Spirit: *While Apollos was at Corinth, Paul took the road to Ephesus. When he arrived, he found some believers there. He asked them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?" "No," they answered. "We haven't even heard that there is a Holy Spirit." So Paul asked, "Then what baptism did you receive?" "John's baptism," they replied. Paul said, "John baptized people, calling them to turn away from their sins. He told them to believe in the one who was coming after him. Jesus is that one." After hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Paul placed his hands on them. Then the Holy Spirit came on them. They spoke in languages they had not known before. They also prophesied.*[Acts.19:1-6]

[Emperor Justinian (A.D. 529) made rebaptism one of the two heresies penalized by death (the other being Anti-Trinitarianism). During the Reformation this law was enacted by both Catholics and Protestants against the Anabaptists (Zurich decreed the death penalty for Anabaptists in 1526): *Since in both ecclesiastical and civil law Anabaptism is forbidden under severe penalties,*

and since the imperial code decrees and orders, on pain of the highest penalty of death, that no one shall have himself baptized a second time or baptize another.]

Apollos was a very eloquent and enthusiastic evangelist who came to Ephesus where he powerfully preached the Christian message. Although he knew all about the forgiveness of sins through Jesus' death, Apollos did not know about the Holy Spirit being sent after Jesus ascended.*Jn.14:16;16:7;Eph.4:8* However, Apollos had a teachable spirit and Priscilla and Aquila were able to lead him into the Holy Spirit Baptism as they explained the way of God more accurately. *A man named Apollos came to Ephesus. He was a Jew, born in Alexandria, Egypt, and a terrific speaker, eloquent and powerful in his preaching of the Scriptures. He was well-educated in the way of the Master and fiery in his enthusiasm. Apollos was accurate in everything he taught about Jesus up to a point, but he only went as far as the baptism of John. He preached with power in the meeting place. When Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside and told him the rest of the story.*Acts.18:24-26 Later, when Paul returned to Ephesus, he realised that there was something missing—they were saved but they didn't know about the Holy Spirit. The Baptism for repentance of sins is good, but this is only just the beginning of our Christian life—**there is so much more to Christianity than just getting into heaven**. We have an abundant life to live now.*Jn.10:10* We are not living with spiritual ration cards—we have "st*eak on the plate while we wait*" as well as "*pie in the sky when we die*"!!! As Wesley said: *All this and heaven too!*

The Bible refers to "*baptisms*" rather than "*baptism*" and treats it as fundamental to our Christian faith: *So let us stop going over the basic teachings about Christ again and again. Let us go on instead and become mature in our understanding. Surely we don't need to start again with the fundamental importance of repenting from evil deeds and placing our faith in God. You don't need further instruction about baptisms, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment.*Heb.6:1-2 Like a coin that has two sides and an edge, there are three aspects to one Baptism. There is the **Baptism <u>by</u> the Holy Spirit** which is Conversion where we are immersed into the Body of Christ—the Church: *For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body.*1Cor.12:13 *All of us were baptized into Christ Jesus. Don't you know that we were baptized into his death? By being baptized, we were buried with Christ into his death. Christ has been raised from the dead by the Father's glory. And like Christ we also can live a new life. By being baptized, we have been joined with him in his death. We will certainly also be joined with him in his resurrection.*Rom.6:3-5 That is why Church is not optional for Christians because we are integrally united to each other in Christ. There is the **Baptism <u>by</u> water** which the Believer's declaration of conversion (of being Baptised into Christ's Body). *Then Peter said, "Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have." So he ordered that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.*Acts.10:47-48 And then there is also the **Baptism <u>by</u> Jesus** into the Holy Spirit where Jesus immerses us with the Holy Spirit: *'The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.' I have seen and I testify that this is God's Chosen One.*Jn.1:33-34 This is the energy of the full Gospel: *He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire*Matt.3:11 and empowers us to be Jesus' witnesses: *Wait for the gift my Father promised. You have heard me talk about it. John baptized with water. But in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit… But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you. Then you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem. You will be my witnesses in all Judea and Samaria. And you will be my witnesses from one end of the earth to the other.*Acts.1:4-8

The Holy Spirit converts people and so every Believer has the Holy Spirit residing within them. *Therefore I want you to know that no one who is speaking by the Spirit of God says, "Jesus be cursed," and no one can say, "Jesus is Lord," except by the Holy Spirit.*1Cor.12:3 But there is also an outflow of the Holy Spirit: *Rivers of living water will brim and spill out of the depths of anyone who believes in me this way, just as the Scripture says." (He said this in regard to the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were about to receive.*

The Spirit had not yet been given because Jesus had not yet been glorified.)[Jn.7:38-39] As soon as the Believers received the Holy Spirit they were praising God and talking about what He had revealed: *While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. They were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on Gentiles. For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God.*[Acts.10:44-46] *When Paul placed his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came to them, and they began to talk in other languages and to speak what God had revealed.*[Acts.19:6] Conversion is the Holy Spirit coming into a person and Holy Spirit Baptism is the Holy Spirit coming out of a person!

So, what baptism did you receive?[Acts.19:3] Don't be content with one or even two baptisms—you need all three! *So if you sinful people know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him.*[Lk.11:13] Let's receive everything God gives us with thanksgiving and enjoy the blessings of our salvation. Stay continually immersed in God's love and with God's presence. *Always be humble and gentle. Be patient with each other, making allowance for each other's faults because of your love. Make every effort to keep yourselves united in the Spirit, binding yourselves together with peace. For there is one body and one Spirit, just as you have been called to one glorious hope for the future. There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God and Father, who is over all and in all and living through all. However, he has given each one of us a special gift through the generosity of Christ.*[Eph.4:2-7]

Questions

What is Baptism?
Who should be baptised?
What does Baptism do for us?
Is Baptism essential for salvation?
Why do you think that rebaptism used to be penalised by death?
Explain: *buried with him through baptism into death.*[Rom.6:4]

Puritan Prayer—Jesus' Return: O Son of God and Son of Man, You were incarnate, You suffered, You rose and You ascended for my sake. Your departure was not a token of separation but a pledge of return. Your Word, Your Promises and Your Emblems show Your death until You come again. That day is no horror to me, for Your death has redeemed me, Your Spirit fills me, Your love animates me and Your Word governs me. I have trusted You and You have not betrayed my trust; I waited for You and not waited in vain. You will come to raise my body from the dust and re-unite it to my soul by a wonderful work of infinite power and love—greater than that which bounds the oceans' waters, than that which ebbs and flows the tides, than that which keeps the stars in their courses and than that which gives life to all creatures. This corruptible shall put on incorruptible, this mortal shall put on immortality, this natural body shall put on a spiritual body, this dishonoured body shall put on a glorious body, this weak body shall put on a body of power. I triumph now in Your promises as I shall do in their performance. Beyond the grave is resurrection, judgment, acquittal and dominion. Every event and circumstance of my life will be dealt with—the sins of my youth, my secret sins, the sins of abusing You, the sins of disobeying Your Word, the sins of neglecting admonitions, the sins of violating my conscience—all will be judged. And after judgment, for Your elect there is peace and rest, life and service, employment and enjoyment. O God, keep me in this faith, and ever looking for Christ's return.

Psalm 24. The earth is the LORD's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it; for he founded it on the seas and established it on the waters. Who may ascend the mountain of the LORD? Who may stand in his holy place? The one who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not trust in an idol or swear by a false god. They will receive blessing from the LORD and vindication from God their Savior. Such is the generation of those who seek him, who seek

your face, God of Jacob. Lift up your heads, you gates; be lifted up, you ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in. Who is this King of glory? The LORD strong and mighty, the LORD mighty in battle. Lift up your heads, you gates; lift them up, you ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in. Who is He, this King of glory? The LORD Almighty—He is the King of glory.

December:

God's Glory. *The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven. Hebrews 1:3*

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

Theme for the year: God's Glory

January

God's Glory. *Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD rises upon you. See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples, but the LORD rises upon you and his glory appears over you. Isaiah 60:1-2*

Thought for the Month: To hear is to be informed—to believe is to be transformed. *Mike Petzer*

February:

God's Glory. *For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what they have done. Matthew 16:27*

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

March:

God's Glory. *The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. John 1:14*

Thought for the Month: Truth and godliness belong together. Truth is a living thing and when it grips our minds, it changes our lives. If we claim to know the truth, then the Bible would require us to prove our claim by the evidence of a way of life that matches the truth

April:

God's Glory. *I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed [when God will reveal who his children really are]. Romans 8:18-19*

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

May

God's Glory. *So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God. 1Corinthians 10:31*

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

June:

God's Glory. *The Law that sentences people to death is glorious. How much more glorious is the work of the Spirit! His work makes people right with God. The glory of the old covenant is nothing compared with the far greater glory of the new. The glory of the old is fading away. How much greater is the glory of the new! It will last forever. Since we have that kind of hope, we are very bold. 2Corinthians 3:9-12*

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

July:

God's Glory. *For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal. 2Corinthians 4:17-18*

Thought for the Month: Treat people as equally valuable, but treat ideas as if some are better than others—because they are! Tolerance requires that everyone is free to express their ideas without fear of abuse or reprisal, not that all views have equal validity, merit, or truth. Be egalitarian regarding persons. Be elitist regarding ideas. *Greg Koukle.*

August:

God's Glory. *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. Ephesians 3:20-21*

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

September:

God's Glory. *I have received full payment and have more than enough. I am amply supplied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent. They are a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God. And my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus. To our God and Father be glory for ever and ever. Amen. Phiippians 4:18-20*

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

October:

God's Glory. *the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the Lord's people. To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. Colossians 1:26-27*

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*

November:

God's Glory. *But we ought always to thank God for you, brothers and sisters loved by the Lord, because God chose you as firstfruits to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth. He called you to this through our gospel, that you might share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. 2Thessalonians 2:13-14*

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

December:

God's Glory. *The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven. Hebrews 1:3*

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

Bible Time Chart

Time Chart of OT

1479B.C.	Exodus under Thutmose II

(Thutmose II is the only Pharaoh's mummy to display cysts, possible evidence of plagues that spread through the Egyptian and Hittite Empires at that time. [Edersheim, A., Old Testament Bible History])

1270B.C.	*Another possible date for the Exodus (under Ramesses 2 also called Ramesses the Great)*
1000B.C.	David
970B.C.	Solomon builds the Temple
722B.C.	Israel's (*Northern Kingdom*) Exile 2Kings 17:6
597/6B.C.	Judah's (*Southern Kingdom*) 1st Exile 2Kings 24:10-17
586B.C.	Judah's (*Southern Kingdom*) 2nd Exile 2Kings 25:1-21
537B.C.	Judah's (*Southern Kingdom*) Return from Exile

Time Chart of NT

20/19B.C.	*Herod's Temple began*
18/17B.C.	*Herod's Temple in use*
c8B.C.	Zechariah in the Temple (Lk.1)
5B.C. April 5th	Birth of Jesus
4B.C.	*Death of Herod the Great*
A.D.14 -37	*Reign of Tiberius Caesar*
A.D.29	Baptism of Jesus *Lk.3:1 15th year of Tiberius reign hence A.D. 29* **
A.D.33 April Wed. 1st	Last Supper (see Colin Humpreys' "*The Mystery of the Last Supper*")
A.D.33 April Fri. 3rd	Crucifixion of Jesus
c A.D.35	Conversion of Paul *Acts 9*
<A.D.37	*Christianity came to Britain.* ***
A.D.37-41	*Reign of Caligula*
A.D.41-54	*Reign of Claudius*
c A.D.44	*Death of Herod Agrippa 1*
< A.D.50	**Letter of James**
A.D.48-49	Paul's 1st missionary journey
A.D.49/50	Jerusalem Conference *Acts.15*
A.D.50	Paul's 2nd missionary journey
A.D.50-52	Paul at Corinth
A.D.51	**1 & 2 Thessalonians** from Corinth
A.D.52	**Galatians** from Corinth
A.D.54	Paul's 3rd missionary journey
A.D.54 -68	*Reign of Nero*
A.D.54-57	Paul at Ephesus
A.D.57	**1Corinthians** from Ephesus
A.D.57	**2Corinthians** from Macedonia
A.D.57/58	**Romans** from Corinth
A.D.58	Paul's arrest at Jerusalem
A.D.58-60	Paul's imprisonment at Caesarea
A.D.60-61	Paul winters at Malta
A.D.61	Paul arrives at Rome
A.D.61-63	Paul's imprisonment at Rome
A.D.62	**Colossians, Ephesians, Philemon** from Rome
A.D.63	**Philippians** from Rome

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

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

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

**** **Reasons for early date for Revelation:**

External evidence:

Clement of Alexandria (A.D.150-220) plainly states that it was Nero who banished John to Patmos, not Emperor Domitian: *And to give you confidence, when you have thus truly repented, that there remains for you a trustworthy hope of salvation, hear a story that is no mere story, but a true account of John the apostle that has been handed down and preserved in memory. When after the death of the tyrant (previously identified as Nero) he removed from the island of Patmos to Ephesus, he used to journey by request to the neighbouring districts of the Gentiles, in some places to appoint bishops, in others to regulate whole churches, in others to set among the clergy some one man, it may be, of those indicated by the Spirit.* ("Who is the Rich Man that shall be Saved?", Section 42)

Cerinthus was a C1st author who wrote *The Pseudo-Apocalypse*. He died well before John, *i.e.* well before A.D.95, but his Pseudo-Apocalypse contains many references to John's Apocalypse (the Book of Revelation).

Internal evidence:

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

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

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

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

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

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

Covenant

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

Christian Guidelines

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

We expect Christians to take their responsibilities and privileges seriously

- by taking an active part in the work and worship of the Church according to their ability and circumstances
- by relating into the Church's system of Pastoral care
- by prayerfully contribute to the unity, encouragement and fellowship of the Church
- by showing a Scriptural regard for those in positions of leadership
- by supporting the Church through regular attendance at services of worship, regular prayer and considered giving

We also expect Christians to live by the accepted rules of Christian conduct—which includes being a loyal citizen of our Country: *We render loyalty to Her Majesty's Government as far as conscience and morality permit;* and also a commitment to Christian marriage: *We uphold the Biblical standard of monogamous, heterosexual marriage between a biological man and biological woman as the only acceptable union*.

True repentance which will always include these 5 A's:

Acknowledgement of the wrong**.**
Apology for the wrong.
Action of determination to change.
Appreciation of God's forgiveness.
Attitude of grace, gratitude and gentleness towards God and people.

Forgiveness is unconditional (because it is by grace); Restoration is conditional on repentance. which involves at least a determination to change Forgiveness is a clean slate; restoration is keeping the slate clean. Forgiveness is mending what was broken; Restoration is making it work again.

Some people have a very distorted view of salvation, believing that salvation was the result of human effort to accept the grace of God. This usually leads them to believe that salvation could be relinquished if a believer sinned and so, if a sin was not repented of it would cancel out a person's salvation. Salvation is entirely by grace—our efforts do not save us.

The Bible only lists one unforgiveable sin: the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit (the rejection of the Holy Spirit's work of regeneration). No-one can determine whether someone is saved or damned, but we can determine from Scripture that *all who come unto Me I will in no wise cast out.*[Jn.6:37]

The grace of God covers more sin and human failure than semi-pelagians (someone who believes that salvation is faith in Christ plus our efforts to be righteous) know! The Biblical doctrine of the grace of God destroys the notion that suicide or any other sin is unforgiveable! This does not necessarily mean that everyone who professes faith in Christ and commits suicide dies in a regenerated state (saved). But it at the least counters the idea that suicide automatically causes a person's salvation to be forfeited. And at the very least, we can be assured that genuine salvation is not easily lost. Remember *I am absolutely sure that not even death or life can separate us from God's love. Not even angels or demons, the present or the future, or any powers can do that. Not even the highest places or the lowest, or anything else in all creation can do that. Nothing at all can ever separate us from God's love because of what Christ Jesus our Lord has done.*[Rom.8:38-39]

Should we read the Bible literally?

Well, it depends on what you mean by literal. Of course, Christians have historically believed that the entire Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, is the inspired and authoritative Word of God. This means that it communicates objective truth that isn't meant to be interpreted subjectively. But reading it literally doesn't mean taking *everything in it* literally. The Bible employs figures of speech like metaphor, simile, euphemism, hyperbole, and personification. It is made up of sixty-six books that were written in different time periods by different authors, who were communicating through different genres. Some books of the Bible are history (like many books in the Old Testament such as Joshua, Judges, and Ruth), and others contain law codes (like Deuteronomy and Leviticus). Some are made up of poetry (like Psalms and Song of Solomon) while others communicate general principles of wisdom (Ecclesiastes and Proverbs). Some are instructive (like Paul's epistles), and some are books of prophecy (like Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel). According to the *Merriam-Webster* dictionary, the word *literal* does not always mean exact equivalence. It's also defined as: "*adhering to fact or to the ordinary construction or primary meaning of a term or expression; free from exaggeration or embellishment; characterized by a concern mainly with facts*." In other words, reading literally means believing that the Bible communicates literal truth, but not always in a literal way. *(The Deconstruction of Christianity by Alisa Childers and Tim Barnett)*

DEAL PENTECOSTAL CHURCH

JESUS IS LORD

A Local Church with a World Vision

69 Mill Hill, Deal, Kent. CT14 9EW — www.dealpentecostal.co.uk

dealpentecostal@gmail.com — 07710 182013