

BUILT *On the* **ROCK**

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For all who are building on the Rock to last forever.

INTRODUCTION

How to get the most from this book

The purpose of this book is to help lay a firm foundation for our Christian lives on Jesus and his word, the Bible. Any building is only as stable as the foundation on which it is built and there is only one sure foundation in this life or the next which is the Lord Jesus Christ himself who died on the cross to provide the way for the things we have done wrong to be forgiven and rose from the dead to give us a new life by his Spirit, **1 Corinthians 3:11**.

We need to build a firm and stable structure on this foundation as we seek to grow in our new life. Failure to do this by neglect or by building with weak and unstable materials will result in weak and unstable Christians who are ill-equipped to face the challenges that come our way as we seek to follow the Lord.

The questions covered are commonly asked by those who are taking the first serious steps in their walk with Jesus and we need to know what God has said about them in his word so that we can build with firm biblical answers. If we are going to trust God with every aspect of our lives, as we should, then let us make sure that we know exactly what he is actually asking of us.

Trying to live the Christian life with a false or distorted idea of what God wants will only lead to disappointment at best or disaster at worst, for example we can become burnt out, exhausted and discouraged if we do not realise the rest that is found in Jesus and that living life joined to him is easy and his burden is light, see **How can we maintain the Christian life?**

If you are not sure what exactly it means to be a Christian then the first chapter, **BUILT ON THE ROCK**, is for you. Read it and discover the joy that God loves you no matter what you have done and has made a way open for you to start a new eternal relationship of love with him through Jesus dying for you. God is perfect, wonderful love and nothing fulfils a human life like knowing him. By comparison, everything else is rubbish and so don't miss out on what you were made for!

The other chapters are divided into themes;

ASSURANCE... The security and peace of being sure where we stand with God.

LOVE... How we should relate to God, the church and others around us.

SPIRIT-LED... Learning to let God fill every aspect of our lives.

PURITY... How to fight temptation and grow in the goodness of God.

PRAYER... Talking to God and seeking his abundant blessings.

There are three chapters for each theme and you can read them in the order that they appear in the book (which is supposed to follow a fairly logical sequence), or pick a theme to study or just go straight to the chapter which has the question that interests or bothers you most. Do not worry if you do not stick to the order of the questions in the book.

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The style and content of each chapter was written to be;

SIMPLE...I have tried to avoid jargon and specialist theological terms as much as possible and 30 years of working with people who have English as a second language have hopefully helped me to keep my vocabulary simple.

CLEAR...Although the Bible deals with deep and often mysterious issues, its main teaching is straightforward and God wants us to be clear on how we should live the Christian life.

CONCISE...So much could be written on each of the questions raised here but these are in bite-sized format so that they can be covered in one sitting and form a foundation for further Bible study.

PRACTICAL...This is not just a book of Christian doctrine or beliefs but every effort has been made to show how these truths from the Bible apply to our every day lives.

Most of the Bible verses quoted in each chapter are actually written out in the text but there are others that illustrate certain points referred to for further study. You might like to study the whole chapter at once or to take it more slowly and read the extra verses as you go along. Whatever you decide to do, it would be good to pray and ask God to speak to you through his word as you read. At the end of each chapter is a suggested memory verse. It is really good to get into the habit of memorising verses from the Bible along with the reference.

If we know the scriptures in this way, God can bring them to our minds in times of need to encourage us and we can also quote them to others who might need that encouragement. If we know the reference then we will be able to find them in the Bible and look at the surrounding verses for further information. We memorise phone numbers, shopping lists, the words of popular songs or vast amounts of material for exams; why not memorise God's word for our lives?

The questions at the end of each chapter can be used for personal reflection or for group discussion. They are aimed at getting us thinking about how to apply what we have learnt further and do not worry if you cannot find absolute answers to all of them. Our understanding and the answers we would give will change and develop as we grow in our experience of walking through life with God and our appreciation of who he is and his holy character deepens. It will take us all a lifetime to work out these truths progressively in our lives and it is always good for those of us who have been Christians longer to review the foundations of our faith.

Leading a group

This book grew out of a course to help Christians grow in their faith. It was run in groups with lots of discussion and opportunities to ask questions. This has the huge advantage of being able to “scratch where it itches” and try to answer people’s current concerns. Christian progress and growth is not just a matter of learning facts or truth but about interaction with others and this is another great bonus of studying in a group. If you are going to lead such a group, you may find the following thoughts helpful.

First of all, do put in time in preparing the study by becoming familiar with all the material yourself. Read around the subject and try to anticipate the questions that might arise. Think about how you can tailor the discussion to fit your particular group, for example you may need to concentrate on just one or two main passages if you have a group with very limited English or if they are brand new believers who need extra background teaching about the context of the verses. Spend time praying for each one in your group.

Create a relaxed and informal atmosphere in which people feel free to question and discuss. Meeting in a home is usually

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more likely to create a friendly atmosphere than meeting in a room at the church. Food always helps! If the group don't know each other, have them all briefly introduce themselves.

Emphasise that people are free to ask questions and that questioning what you do not understand or agree with is good. Do not treat questions as awkward interruptions or people will soon learn not to ask them. Chinese proverb: "He who asks question, fool for moment; he who does not ask question, fool for life!"

Introduce the topic and give a brief summary of what you hope to get out of the session. Expand on the question being studied, for example: **Can we be lost again?**—if it were possible to be lost again, then how could we ever have any assurance that we would eventually get to heaven as we cannot know what our future holds and whether or not we would be strong enough to hold to our faith under all circumstances.

Involve the group in taking turns to read from the Bible as this will break the ice, make them feel involved and encourage them to contribute further. Be sensitive if you know that someone is not a good reader or has English as a second language and maybe offer them to read one of the shorter passages or miss a turn altogether. It helps if you all have the same version of the Bible if people's English is poor and it may need to be a simple translation. The verses quoted in the book are from the New International Version.

Use illustrations and personal anecdotes from your own experience to bring home the application of what you are studying. Some illustrations in the book can be repeated to make various points and repetition always aids memory, for example the illustration of Corrie Ten Boom needing to ask Jesus for help in forgiving a German concentration camp guard demonstrates how Jesus gives us his strength in the Christian

life (chapter 12), being filled with the Spirit (chapter 4), how we should live by the Spirit and not by rules (chapter 5), how to fight temptation (chapter 10) and effective prayer (chapter 11).

Introduce pauses and ask if anyone has a question so far. Maybe ask your own question to bring out the meaning and application in everyday life of what you are trying to communicate but do not answer your own question if at all possible as this will only serve to teach the group that they need not answer questions as you will always answer them yourself! Do not be afraid of a short silence as it will often take people a little time to get the courage to speak but if the silence is prolonged then you may need to clarify the question by putting it in a simpler way, but don't answer it!

Give plenty of opportunities for people to contribute but try not to let one or two people dominate the discussion by encouraging the quieter ones when they say something. Never cut people off in mid flow or be negative about a contribution as this will only make them more reluctant to say anything. React positively even if the remark is off the point or unhelpful. You can always say "That's interesting, thank you" and move on gently to correct an error or to return to the topic from a diversion.

You can play a simple game to memorise a verse at the end. Divide the verse between the group with a word or few words each in order around the room with the last person having the reference. People are not allowed to look at the Bible but must just remember the few words they are given.

The first person then says their word or words and then the next person says theirs going around the group until the whole verse has been said along with the reference. Next, go back to the first person and get them to say their words again

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followed by the second person saying the first person's words and adding their own. This progresses around the group slowly building up the verse until the last person says the whole verse with the reference. Finally it goes back to the first person who then has to say the whole verse and reference and each one around the group follows.

The game makes use of the fact that human memory works by association and it will help people to remember the words of the verse by associating them with each person (their face or position) around the group. In three rounds, most people are able to memorise a Bible verse with its reference!

At the end of the study, encourage folk to share prayer requests and to pray for each other to apply what has been learnt and aim for everyone to be able to pray out loud with each other by the end of the course. Refreshments afterwards provide an opportunity for further discussion and for the group to get to know each other better.

It is actually a great joy and privilege to be involved in helping to build others up in their walk with God and you can be sure that there is a rich reward in heaven for all such efforts, **Matthew 10:42**.



BUILT ON THE ROCK

What makes someone a Christian?

About a third of the world's population are said to belong to the Christian religion. Millions are brought up to go to church and to acknowledge Jesus Christ as the Saviour of the world. If asked they would mostly all say that they believed that Jesus Christ is God who came into the world to die on the cross for our sins and that after three days, he rose from the dead. Many would say that they try to live a fairly good life. But does this make someone a Christian? What does the Bible say?

James 2:19 *"You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder."* It is commonsense that just believing or even knowing the facts about God and his way of forgiveness in Jesus does not change us or make us good people. James says here that evil spirits know who God is but are terrified of him because of course they do not follow him or obey him. What then does the Bible mean by *"Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved,"* **Acts 16:31** and *"All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."* **Acts 10:43?**

The difference is in the use of the words "believe" and "believe in". We may all believe that someone is the Prime Minister but that does not mean that we all believe in that

person to run the country well and so would trust them with another term of office and vote for them. If we say we “believe in” someone, we are saying that we trust them rather than just that we acknowledge the truth of their existence. This trust is what is important in having a real relationship with God.

But isn't it enough to live a good life? Well, yes it would be but the problem is that no-one actually lives a truly good life. If we compare ourselves with each other then we may think that we are “good” because we have never killed anyone or stolen anything and so on but the trouble comes when we begin to see God's standards of goodness. He says that evil is not confined to what we do but also what we think.

Read **Matthew 5: 21-22** and **27-28**. Here Jesus says that it is not just murder that is wrong but anger and hatred and not just cheating on your wife or husband by sleeping around but lustful thoughts are also wrong. He says that these things put us in danger of the fire of hell along with impatience, unkindness, selfishness, lack of compassion, holding grudges and refusing to forgive and so on because it is sin not to obey his command to love our neighbours as ourselves and even to love our enemies, see **Matthew 22:39**, **Luke 6:27-31** and **1 Corinthians 13: 1-7**. Wow, we are all in big trouble!

1 John 3:15 *“Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life in him.”* How can the Bible equate hatred with murder? Imagine two young men who react with identical anger and hatred to someone who insults and humiliates them. One is a stockbroker in the City of London whilst the other is a street kid in Mexico City. The stockbroker had an excellent education and has a good job and affluent lifestyle and he plans to block the man's chances for promotion when they next come up. The street kid never knew his parents who abandoned him, never went to school

and lives by his wits on the violent streets of the Mexican capital and he goes out and shoots the guy. One is a murderer and one is not but the anger and hatred that motivated them was the same. The stockbroker can say that he has never killed anyone but all that separates him from the street kid are the chance circumstances of his upbringing. If the situation was reversed, he would have done the same thing. Who then can say they are good? What might we have done if things had been different?

Romans 3:12 *"All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no-one who does good, not even one."* By God's reckoning, none of us are good because none of us match up to his standard of real goodness which we see in Jesus who said *"Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."* **Matthew 5:48**. If heaven is a perfect place, it would not remain so after we arrived there! This means that there is a barrier between us and the perfect, holy presence of God and the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross was God's way of dealing with that barrier by providing a way of forgiveness, *"Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people"* **Hebrews 9:28**.

Romans 7:18 *"I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature."* The Bible teaches us that we are born with a sinful nature and so it is not just that we commit sins but that we are sinners by nature. This might seem a shocking thought but which parent ever has to teach their toddler to be selfish or to demand their own way, to get angry when they are denied their every wish or to grab something they want from another toddler and fight them for it if necessary? No, they do these things automatically and we teach them to be kind to one another and to learn to share. It was once thought that toddlers pick up how to lie from adults but most parents know that if there is a mess on the floor with a little one in the middle of it

covered with goo, the question "Did you do that?" will meet with the answer "No!" Lying requires no training.

As human beings we are born with tendencies to be selfish and greedy which first exhibit themselves with food and toys and move on to money, possessions and power. Pride and envy too seem to be inborn and watch toddlers if you show attention to one and ignore another. The one that has been ignored often becomes angry with the one who had the attention and may even hit them. This progresses later in life to seeking status by comparing ourselves with each other in terms of wealth or careers and to nations going to war over the honour of their country.

John 3:3 *"I tell you the truth, no-one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again."* Jesus tells us that we need to be born again with a new nature if we are to enter heaven (as our sinful nature cannot be allowed to introduce evil into a perfectly holy place and so would be cast out of God's presence forever into the endless torment of loveless despair which the Bible describes as the fire of hell, **Matthew 13:41-42**). This new nature comes as a gift through receiving the Holy Spirit of God when we put our trust in Jesus Christ as our Lord and Saviour, **1 John 5:1** *"Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God,"* and it enables us to start to change to do the things that God wants us to.

If you were to convince a lion that it is wrong to eat meat, it would try to comply but would never really be happy eating just vegetables and if a young lamb or goat walked by, it would be sorely tempted to revert to its true nature and have a snack. This is what we are like as human beings. God tells us that it is wrong to be selfish, proud, lustful or greedy and we agree but when we try to actually live like that we fail time and time again. This is one of the greatest paradoxes of human existence

that we universally agree what is right (like world peace and the elimination of poverty etc) but fail to do it! How many times do we try to make a change and come unstuck; most New Year's resolutions don't make it to February! If we could kill the lion and have it reborn as a lamb, however, then it would happily eat the grass and what we all need is a new nature from our Creator.

Romans 8:9 *"You, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ."* This new nature, which comes through receiving the Holy Spirit, is what makes someone a Christian. We do not belong to Jesus unless we have his Spirit living within us and the presence of the Spirit of our Creator makes us a whole new person *"if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!"* **2 Corinthians 5:17.**

If you have yet to experience this then it is a free gift to all who will put their trust in Jesus Christ as their Lord for total forgiveness of all that they have done wrong and a new life. He has made the way open by paying the price of all our sins in his sacrifice on our behalf on the cross. This is how much God loves us; he himself would become a man and die a humiliating and torturous death bearing our all guilt, pain and sorrow in order to save us from hell and bring us back to him. He wants to give us this blessing of a new nature and eternal life with him in heaven free without us having to do anything to earn it and this undeserved love and goodness to us is called "grace".

What does it mean to trust Jesus in this way? Well, really much the same as it would mean to trust anyone with your life. Imagine the surgeon says that you need heart surgery to prevent a major heart attack. He will ask you to sign a form

which gives him permission to do whatever he needs to do in the operation to save your life. When you sign that form, you are putting your life in the surgeon's hands and when you trust Jesus to save you, you are giving him control over your life.

Jesus has shown that he is perfectly trustworthy through loving us enough even to die for us and that he has power over life and death by rising from the dead. There is no need to be nervous or afraid of handing control of our lives over to someone who loves us that much. Surely the people we trust most are the ones whom we know love us the most whether parents or children, wife or husband. No-one could love us more than Jesus! He only wants to forgive and sweep away the past and to bring us into a new relationship of love with him and give us a new power to do what is right. All it takes to place that trust in him is a simple prayer from the heart something like this;

“Dear Lord God, I turn away from living life my own way and all the wrong things that I have done. Forgive me through Jesus’ death on the cross on my behalf and I trust in him to be my Saviour and Lord. Jesus, I give you all that I am and have to be the Lord and Master of my life by the power of your Holy Spirit. Amen.”

If you have prayed this prayer or one like it, you can be sure that God has forgiven you and that there is no more punishment for anything you have done wrong (because Jesus already paid that price) and there is a place waiting for you in heaven. God has already entered your life by his Holy Spirit to plant that new nature. You have been born of his Spirit and now need to grow in this wonderful new life God has given you. Being born is not an end in itself but the start of something and you need to build on this beginning.

Matthew 7:24-25 *“everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock.”* Jesus says that we need to build our lives on him and following his teaching. In the rest of this parable, he says that to build on anything else is like building on the sand which does not provide a strong foundation and that the storms and troubles of life will cause such houses to collapse. We need him and his strength to weather all that life can throw at us.

Whilst the weather is fine, the two houses can look the same but it is the storms that reveal the difference. I visited the old communist Yugoslavia back in the mid 1980's and it was a very harmonious society with a low crime rate and little vandalism. Serbs, Croats and Bosnian Muslims lived peacefully side by side but within a few years those same people were massacring each other and committing the worst atrocities and war crimes seen in Europe since the Second World War. What had changed? The hold of communist dictatorship over the country was gone and the different ethnic groups felt insecure and threatened as to which of them would end up controlling different bits of territory. The storm had come!

The purpose of this book is to help those who are starting out in their Christian lives to build on the rock of God's word, the Bible, and so to become strong to face whatever the future holds. It seeks to answer various common questions with firm biblical truth in a simple, clear and concise manner and although it is certainly not the last word on these questions, it will hopefully provide some solid bricks on the foundation of God's love in Jesus Christ.

Memory verse: John 3:3.

Questions for discussion

If people do not put their trust in Jesus, what do they commonly trust in and how might this sand give way in a storm?

How would you answer someone who says “I’m not a Christian but I live a good life; why won’t God accept me?”

How does human nature operate in religious people? What is the result of being religious without being born again of God’s Spirit?



ASSURANCE

How do we understand the Bible?

When it comes to being sure of what God wants and of our relationship with him, we have an objective source of assurance completely separate from our feelings and the ups-and-downs of life. This is God's written word, the Bible. It represents his message and plan of salvation to bring mankind back to himself from the creation of the world, through the history of the chosen people Israel to the coming of the Saviour, Jesus and on to the prophecies of the end of this world and beyond. It consists of the Old Testament, which is divided into books of history (Genesis-Esther), poetry, hymns and proverbs (Job-Song of Songs) and prophecy (Isaiah-Malachi), and the New Testament which has the four gospel accounts of the ministry of Jesus, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, the book of Acts which is a history of the early church, letters of Christian teaching to the churches (Romans-Jude) and a final book, Revelation which is a vision of heaven and the Day of judgement.

The Bible is not a scientific text book or a book of philosophy but is written so that we might enter into and grow in a relationship with the living God. Although it describes many mysteries which are hard, and sometimes impossible for us to fully understand, it is written in commonsense language and

is accessible to everyone. It has the power to touch the depths of the human heart and deals with the most profound truth and yet does so in a way that ordinary folk can relate to. It is the revelation of the nature and heart of God and his will for mankind.

I was brought up in the Roman Catholic Church but, in all the years in Roman Catholic school and in going to mass every week, I never read the Bible for myself. I only heard various Bible stories and parables in church and carried out certain religious duties like serving at the altar and saying confession. As a teenager, I began to hunger after something more. I wanted a real relationship with God which would change my life as just going along to the church didn't seem to change anything.

When I went to university, I decided to buy a Bible (and all the other holy books of the main world religions) and read it. As I read Matthew's gospel, the life of Jesus gripped me. Here was a love and power that could not be found anywhere else in this world and I wanted to know more. I read on quickly, skipping over bits in the first 3 gospels that seemed to be repeating the same stories, and within a week, I had finished John's gospel and was ready to give my life to following this Jesus. A complete turn around in a week! No wonder it says *"the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit"* **Hebrews 4:12.**

2 Timothy 3:16-17 *"All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work."* The Bible is a revelation from God and so is perfectly true and a reliable guide for living. A manual for what it means to be truly human. When it comes to running a human life, it is literally the maker's instructions! If we tried operating any

complex machine whilst ignoring or going against the manufacturer's instructions, we would soon find ourselves in trouble and so it is with our lives. It contains all that we need to be completely equipped for what God wants us to do and so we should not add extra-Biblical philosophies or "revelations" such as the book of Mormon or the Quran. One of the marks of a cult is that they will emphasise extra teaching or peculiar interpretation by a certain individual or organisation, like The Watchtower, that goes beyond the plain meaning of the words of scripture rather than simply rely on the Bible to speak for itself.

Deuteronomy 8:3 *"man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of God."* We need daily spiritual nourishment as much as we need physical food and it is good to read something from the Bible each day. If you do this first thing in the morning, it can serve to focus your mind on God and his will for your life and he can bring those truths to your mind during the rest of the day.

You need to use a translation that you can clearly understand and if you are just starting to read the Bible for the first time then it would be good to start with one of the gospel accounts of the life of Jesus such as **Luke** or **John**. Do not start at **Genesis** and try to read through in order as you will soon get bogged down in ancient Israelite history and laws (which have a relevance to us but are better left until we are familiar with the New Testament so that we can understand them in the context of what Jesus has done for us).

Do not worry if you do not understand everything that you read but leave the passages that you find difficult for later and maybe ask an older Christian or your minister about them. The Bible contains many profound truths and a great depth of wisdom from God and it will take us all our lives to grow in our understanding of all that God has revealed and to work out its practical application in our lives.

Proverbs 3:5-6 *“Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.”* In the Bible, we have a solid foundation of God’s revealed truth by which to evaluate our experience, the surrounding current culture and other teaching and traditions. We should not allow our experience, culture or background to overrule or colour how we view what it teaches. There will be many things that we do not necessarily understand and that the surrounding society may not agree with but we should trust what God says rather than man. As we simply accept and put into practice what the Bible says, life’s path will be clear before us.

As the word of God, it has the highest authority for those who want to follow him. This will often lead those who are faithful to Biblical teaching into disagreements with the prevailing thinking of the world around us. The world’s philosophies change over time as man’s ideas ebb and flow, like the rise and fall of communism, but God’s word about himself, human nature and how we should live remains true forever. Jesus said *“Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away”* **Mark 13:31**.

Matthew 11:25 *“I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children.”* Jesus rejoices that the truth is revealed to little children but hidden from those who seek to judge it by human reasoning. Little children simply trust what their parents tell them. They do not demand to see their father’s driving licence or to learn how a car works before taking a trip in the car to the beach. Travelling by car can be quite a dangerous activity if not done properly but they just jump in the back full of excitement because they trust that their father loves them and that he knows what he is doing. We need to trust our Father in heaven in the same way and just rely on

what he tells us. This is one of the main themes in the book of 1 Corinthians

1 Corinthians 1:19-25 *“For it is written: “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate.” Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe..... For the foolishness of God is wiser than man’s wisdom”* God has made things so that man cannot come to know the truth about God, and the meaning of life, by human thought or wisdom. Philosophers have been debating these things for thousands of years and are still going. In Douglas Adam’s “Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy”, a super-computer is constructed that is programmed to come up with the meaning of life, the universe and everything. It is picketed by philosophers who are concerned that if it succeeds, it will put them out of their jobs! These verses tell us that God is opposed to human philosophy and that he deliberately sets out to frustrate attempts to pin down ultimate meaning through man’s reasoning. He does not want us to approach the Bible in this way but simply to trust him. The seeming foolishness of a man dying on a cross to save us from our sins reveals how much God loves each of us and touches the human heart with a wisdom wiser than man’s.

Have you ever wondered why most of the Bible is not set out like a book of systematic theology with neat and easy sections on God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit, man, sin and salvation etc.? God would surely be able to arrange it like that if he had wanted, even mankind can do that! The book of Romans does contain a systematic explanation of the gospel, and structured teaching can be found in the other letters of the New Testament, but the Bible teaches a lot of spiritual lessons through parables and the stories of God’s people in a way that is

much more open to the common villager down through the ages than to an intellectual elite. Thank God that we don't have to be a professor of Biblical theology to get to know the living God!

Why are there many things that are hard, or even impossible, to understand in the Bible like the idea of God being three in one and predestination and free will? God has given us minds capable of great feats of reasoning, as we can see in the achievements of science, but we cannot perceive ultimate reality or work out true meaning by ourselves. *"He has also set eternity in the hearts of men; yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end.....God does it so that men will revere him."* **Ecclesiastes 3:11-14.** Many things remain mysteries that give us a sense of awe about God and his ways.

Why are many other seemingly quite important things left unspecified, such as the precise form of church meetings and leadership and the way to exercise certain spiritual gifts? The answer to this question is surely that God is more interested in our faith in him leading to loving him and those around us in practical obedience to his will rather than in our precise understanding of these various intellectual points. In fact, having different views on some of these issues is a further test of our love for those different to ourselves as we seek to work together in unity! We must hold to those basic points of the Biblical message which are clearly taught throughout but where there are differences of opinion on minor issues, let us agree to disagree and work together in love.

The theme continues in **1 Corinthians 3:18** *"Do not deceive yourselves. If any one of you thinks he is wise by the standards of this age, he should become a "fool" so that he may become wise."* We must actively set aside the world's ideas of wisdom and simply trust God like little children in order to become truly wise. This does not mean that we should not apply reason to what the Bible teaches but we should use it as a tool to

understand rather than a judge to pick and choose what we consider reasonable to believe. We must trust what God says even when we do not understand or maybe like what he is saying (we need to guard against using reason to twist scriptures around to justify something that we have decided we want it to say). Take the commonsense meaning of the words as literally true but recognise metaphors, such as Jesus being the light, gate, the lamb of God etc., parables and visions, such as the book of Revelation, for what they are.

Also **1 Corinthians 8:1-3** *“Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. The man who thinks he knows something does not yet know as he ought to know. But the man who loves God is known by God.”* Knowledge of facts can often produce pride but it is love that builds up the Christian life. We must realise that our knowledge is not perfect and concentrate on loving and obeying God, **1 Corinthians 13:12** *“Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.”*

If we see vast themes in the Bible, then these are obviously things that God is eager to communicate and wants us to focus on, for example love, faith in God, helping those in need and persevering in trouble are just about everywhere you look in the scriptures. Other things are mentioned less often which should tell us that, although they are important, God does not mean for us to focus on them so much.

Notice the thickness of the Bible. A little more than a single page covers all that God has chosen to tell us about how he made the universe and there are only 11 chapters in Genesis covering everything that came before Abraham. The main point is that God wants us to know that he made everything and has a plan for human history. Yet some people spend most of their Christian lives trying to formulate a pseudo-scientific “Biblical” theory of creation. Others become obsessed with trying to work out how the world will end.

There are many things that God has not told us and we should leave those to him and concentrate on putting into practice what he has clearly revealed, *“The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children for ever, that we may follow all the words of this law”* **Deuteronomy 29:29.**

Jesus criticised the religious leaders of his time for a lack of balance in their approach to God’s word saying that they would *“strain out a gnat but swallow a camel”* **Matthew 23:24** meaning that they would focus on minor issues and neglect the really important things that God wanted them to do.

John 5:39-40 *“You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life.”* The Pharisees thoroughly studied and knew the Old Testament and yet they ended up crucifying Jesus! Bible knowledge is not an end in itself but only a means to knowing more about God so that we love and serve him better. The Bible is like a signpost or map to knowing Jesus who is the truth. It would be ridiculous to just study and memorise a map without using it to get to where we need to go. We must follow it and we must put what we learn from the Bible into practice!

Memory verse: Proverbs 3:5-6.

Questions for discussion

What areas of Bible teaching conflict with society around us?

Are there things in the Bible that you are struggling with?

List some of the big themes you have found in your Bible reading so far. How can we apply these in our own lives?



LOVE

How should we relate to God?

When we put our faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and are born again by his Spirit, we enter a whole new relationship with God. Before this, we can think of God as a distant mysterious force or an exacting judge waiting to punish every wrong. He can seem hopelessly unknowable and far removed from our every day lives and if we think of him at all it may be with an uneasy feeling that we are in trouble because of the things we have done. The idea of coming face to face with God might seem impossible or even frightening and the certainty of death is pushed to the back of our minds as an uncomfortable truth that we would rather not think about.

I spent years as a teenager trying to find a real connection with this mysterious God but it was only when I read the Bible for myself and prayed to give my life to Jesus Christ as my Lord and Saviour that I found a true relationship. It was as if I had been in a dark room calling out to God with my back towards him and suddenly he turned on the light and put his hands on my shoulders and turned me around so that I could see him. Everything changed from that time on.

Romans 5:1 *“since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ”.* Jesus died

for our sins and paid the price of our forgiveness by suffering God's anger against the things we have done wrong. We have "*peace with God*" because of him and we should not be afraid of being punished by God any more. Remember Jesus died for you if you have turned from sin to trust in his forgiveness. If you are still frightened of being punished for something that you have done, you are basically saying that his death on the cross was not good enough to pay for your forgiveness. Accept his forgiveness with a grateful heart!

Read **Luke 7:36-50**. Jesus is anointed by a woman who was known for her bad lifestyle, probably a prostitute or an adulteress. Those present are astounded that he would accept this but he asks them a question. If two men who owe someone 500 and 50 denarii both have their debts cancelled which will love that man more? It is obviously the one who had the bigger debt cancelled and Jesus says in **verse 47** "*he who has been forgiven little loves little.*" The more we realise how much God has forgiven us in Jesus' death for us, the more we will love him and be thankful. Yes it was a hard, humanly impossible thing to forgive all of our sins but that is how much Jesus suffered and how much he loves us!

1 John 4:19 "*We love because he first loved us.*" We need to meditate on the mystery of Christ's death on the cross and what it meant for a pure and holy God to take upon himself all the ugliness, horror and despair of this world's evil. Jesus' physical suffering was terrible but that was not the main torment (sadly many people have been tortured to death). The real agony was the loss of the eternal love of the Father as he suffered the consequences of our evil actions which are to be cut off from God's love forever in "the outer darkness". This is why he cried out "*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*" **Matthew 27:46**.

Jesus had always called God “Daddy” (“Abba” in Aramaic) but here he simply says “God” because he is isolated from the Father’s presence paying the price for our sins. This is a great mystery at the heart of our Christian faith, **1 Timothy 3:16**, and although we cannot really understand exactly what is going on as God tears himself apart to provide a way for our sinful lives to be reconciled to the demands of his perfect goodness, it demonstrates God’s amazing love for each one of us, **Romans 5:6-8**. We see a man dying alone in torturous agony and we understand that at least Jesus has asked us to remember his sacrifice for us by sharing bread and “wine” together as symbols of his body and blood which we were given for us, **1 Corinthians 11:23-26**.

This is sometimes called communion, the breaking of bread or the Lord’s supper and it is a very special, holy time to remember what Jesus has done for us and remind ourselves of his love. To knowingly disrespect this is a serious thing **1 Corinthians 11:27-32**, as it makes light of the greatest act of God’s love. Imagine that someone dies by throwing himself in front of a car to save you and the family asks you to speak at the funeral. As everyone is gathered around the graveside, you casually say a few words and then walk off over the grave! He died to save you; wouldn’t his family be outraged and insulted that you treated his memory so badly? How much more then will God be grieved if we do not love the Saviour of our souls.

The cross speaks to us of God’s burning purity and perfect holiness in judgement and of his all-encompassing mercy and love. “*Our God is a consuming fire*” **Hebrews 12:29** but wonder of wonders, he also accepts us through the sacrifice of Jesus. It helps us to remember that God really loves us and that he is on our side, not against us in any way. If Jesus was willing to die for us, God will surely help us with all the smaller problems in life, **Romans 8:32**. More than this, he adopts us as his children.

Galatians 3:26 *“You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus.”* God has not only forgiven us all the wrong things we have done but has also brought us into a family relationship making us sons and daughters of the King of creation. If you have trusted your life to Jesus, you are a prince or princess of the Kingdom! *“How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!”* **1 John 3:1**. The most feared judge is just “Daddy” to his kids and children have access to their father and his love and attention no matter what position he holds in the world.

Romans 8:15-17 *“For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, “Abba, Father.” The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs.”* We should no longer be afraid of God as *“fear has to do with punishment”* **1 John 4:18**, but rather realise how much he forgives and loves us. We have the Holy Spirit in our hearts to reassure us of our new relationship with God so that even in times of questioning and doubt there is an inward access to his comfort and peace. God also wants us to inherit a part in the family business which in his case is running his whole kingdom of this universe and beyond in heaven.

Someone once said that God is the kind of Father who would pull out a picture of you and show it to the angels, saying *“That’s my boy!”* We can certainly see something of this in God’s attitude to Job in **Job 1:8** and the Bible tells us that he wants to show the church off to the angels, **Ephesians 3:10**. God’s love is not something distant or reluctant, he delights in his children! **Psalms 147:11**.

What should be our response to all this? Jesus taught us to pray to God as *“Our Father”* and to relate to him in this way, trusting him for all our needs and to guide and protect us.

What can we give back to God in thanksgiving for all that he has given us through the death of Jesus on our behalf? The answer is worship, which is derived from “worth ship”, and literally refers to how much something is worth to a person or what they are willing to give or devote to it.

Romans 12:1 *“Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship.”* God’s mercy was achieved by him laying down everything for us in Jesus and the only fitting response on our part is to lay down our lives for him, not by dying on a cross, but as a living sacrifice as we die to our selfish desires and ambitions and live our lives for him each day. This is worship and if we live our lives for anyone or anything else, such as family, career, money or pride, then we are worshipping those things more than God which is not worthy of his love, **Matthew 10:37-38**, and is actually a form of idolatry, **Ephesians 5:5**.

We were created to offer ourselves back to God in worship in this kind of total mutual love. It is love that fulfils what it is to be human (think of the times when you felt happiest in your life) and, whilst hell is the eternal absence of God and his love and goodness, heaven is described as the marriage of God and his people as a picture of the greatest fulfilment of human love, **Revelation 21:2-4**. The Bible tells us that *“God is love”* **1 John 4:8** and that the greatest thing that he wants from his people is love.

Matthew 22:37-40 *“Jesus replied: “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”* But how should this worship and love for God work itself out in practice? What can we do

for God who has everything? How can we show God that we love him; by singing worship songs, reading the Bible and going to church? We should do all these which are good but what does Jesus say?

John 14:15 *"If you love me, you will obey what I command."* His commands, as you will have read in the passage in **Matthew 22** above, are basically to love God and love our neighbour. The first of these sends **John 14:15** around in a circle "If you love me, you will love me" and so it is the second by which we can really show our love for God.

1 John 4:20-21 *"If anyone says, 'I love God,' yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother."* God links our love for him with how we treat those around us and goes as far to say that whatever "love" we think we have for God is meaningless if we do not love our neighbour. In one way, it is easy to say that we love an unseen God who makes no physical demands on us because he has no material needs. He will never be hungry or sick and will not try our patience with demands on our time and energy. People will however. It is no good at all being very religious and getting on a "spiritual high" in church on Sunday if we have no compassion for a suffering world, read **Isaiah 58:1-12**. Our genuine joy in the Lord and praise to him will actually grow as we obey him.

When Jesus comes back to judge the world, will he say to his people, "Well done, you were in church every week, you really knew the Bible and you prayed to me so much and sang my praises so joyfully"? He has already told us what he will say; **Matthew 25:34-36** *"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. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me."

Whatever practical love we give to the least person we meet, we give to Jesus. He takes it all personally because he loves each individual so much just as a human father would count it as helping him if someone saved his son or daughter from hunger or sickness.

How should we relate to God? Accept his love in the free forgiveness and eternal life that is in Jesus and be thankful, try to grasp more of the sheer depth of it by spending time with him in prayer and reading his Word and live out his love through the power of the Holy Spirit within by caring for those in need.

Memory verse: 1 John 4:19-20.

Questions for discussion

How can we increase our appreciation of what God has done for us in Jesus dying for us on the cross?

What does it mean to you to call God, "Father"?

How can we make our worship more meaningful?



SPIRIT-LED

How do we receive the Holy Spirit?

*W*ho is the Holy Spirit? What is his ministry in our lives? How do we receive him? What does the Bible mean by being “baptised” or “filled” with the Holy Spirit? All these questions have been the cause of some controversy and confusion, especially in the twentieth century when there was a much-needed revival in teaching about the ministry of the Holy Spirit. We need to know the answers that God has given us in the Bible if we are to live the Christian life by the power of his Spirit as he wants.

On the night that I gave my life to Christ, I was lying in bed in my room at Oxford. I simply prayed in my mind words like “Dear Lord Jesus, please forgive all my sins and come and take over my life.” I will never forget it as it was immediately as if the whole room was full of someone I couldn’t see coming towards me in the bed. It felt like I was ill and this was like a nurse coming to make me well. I can remember thinking “In all my searching after God, I never imagined that if I had an encounter with him, he would be like a nurse!” His presence was very real and passed into me and I fell asleep peacefully but from that day on, I was never the same again.

1 John 4:15 *“If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in him and he in God.”* All who put their trust in the Lord Jesus Christ receive the Spirit of God and are born through him into a new nature and a new relationship of being children of God, **John 1:12-13**. What a thought—that almighty God would actually come to live within us! The way that this happens, however, differs with each individual and many people do not “feel” anything when they pray to give their lives to Christ. It is not important what we do or do not feel as what saves us and brings us into God’s kingdom is our faith.

John 14:16-17 *“I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counsellor to be with you for ever—the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you.”* Here Jesus promises that God will give someone to help, comfort and counsel his disciples and that this Spirit will live within them. The big change brought about through the new covenant in Jesus is that God himself would live within his people through recreating us with a new nature by his Spirit, **2 Corinthians 5:17** *“if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!”* This means that even the least in this new kingdom are in some way greater than all who went before because of this indwelling of God’s Spirit, **Matthew 11:11**.

Read **John 16:7-14**. Jesus says that it is to our advantage that he goes away and sends the Holy Spirit because as a man he could only be in one place at a time and could only relate to us externally whereas by his Spirit he can be with us always and comfort, counsel and lead us in our hearts. The ministry of the Holy Spirit brings a conviction about what is right and wrong and of the consequences which is meant to guide us into living lives according to God’s truth which will glorify Jesus our Lord when others see how following him has changed us.

Romans 8:9-11 *“You, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ. But if Christ is in you, your body is dead because of sin, yet your spirit is alive 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 through his Spirit, who lives in you.”* Notice here how *“Spirit of God”* and *“Spirit of Christ”* are interchangeable and are one and the same. These are good verses to demonstrate that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are one God.

Birth into a new nature by receiving the Holy Spirit through faith in Jesus is the mark of being a Christian. Being brought up in a Christian home, knowing what to believe from the Bible and going to church or youth group are not what makes someone belong to Jesus. For that we need to give our lives into his hands in simple faith and receive his gift of eternal life. Once we have received the Holy Spirit through this faith, however, we have the very power of God within us! The same power that created the universe and said *“Let there be light”* and there was light and the universe came into being has made a new creation of the light of Christ in our hearts, **2 Corinthians 4:6**. The same power that raised Jesus from the dead is at work in us to give us a new life.

However hopeless we may feel we are; however stuck in bad habits and weighed down by what we have done, the Good News is that the power of God at work in us as we believe in Jesus is greater. Imagine the power that would be needed to give life to a corpse. However bad you and I might be and however incapable of doing the right thing, we are not as incapable of action as a corpse and God can give life to that! This is a strong encouragement to have faith in the power of God within us to help us break free from habitual sins and

change in ways that we would not have thought possible. We may have received the Holy Spirit and belong to Jesus but we need to walk in the power of this new life, **1 Corinthians 4:20**. It is no good having exactly the right electric tool for a job if you don't switch the power on.

Acts 1:5 *“For John baptised with water, but in a few days you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit.”* The prophecy that the one who would come after him would baptise with the Holy Spirit was made by John the Baptist, and is found in all four gospels, and Jesus is quoting that here as he tells his disciples to wait and pray in Jerusalem, after he ascends into heaven, for God's gift to come upon them (they had already received the Holy Spirit, **John 20:22**). Apart from Peter in turn quoting Jesus, **Acts 11:16**, and a reference in a different context in **1 Corinthians 12:13**, these are the only times that this particular phrase is used. The Bible more commonly talks about being filled with the Spirit when describing the same experience.

Being *“baptised with the Holy Spirit”* is a metaphor and a comparison with being baptised by being fully immersed in water. The idea is of being fully immersed in the life of the Spirit with every part of us under his control and usually occurs after seeking God in prayer. After praying in Jerusalem for about ten days, the Holy Spirit fell on the disciples in power on the day of Pentecost and they were filled with courage and boldness to preach about Jesus, read **Acts 2:1-21**.

Previously, the disciples had been too scared to appear in public and they had hidden themselves away in locked rooms and gone back to fishing in Galilee. Being empowered by the Holy Spirit changed them from that fearful state into those who would risk imprisonment, flogging and even death for their witness to the truth about Jesus. Peter was dramatically transformed from denying that he even knew Jesus in the face

of danger on the night of Jesus' arrest into defiantly preaching that Jesus was the Messiah to the very same people who had called for his crucifixion, **Acts 2:36**. This was a clear and open criticism of the authority of the ruling Sanhedrin who had tried Jesus and handed him over to the Romans for execution and was therefore guaranteed to get Peter into trouble with the authorities but he did not seem to be worried about that any more.

Are you scared of what people will say about you if you start to talk about your Christian faith at work or at college? Do you wonder what you would say if they ask you difficult questions about why you believe? Are you worried how your family would react if you became more open about your faith? We too need to pray to be filled with the Holy Spirit to give us courage and inspiration in our witness to Jesus.

On the day of Pentecost, there was also the miracle of the disciples becoming able to speak in other languages and each person in the multi-lingual crowd hearing the message in their own language and part of the ministry of the Holy Spirit is to confirm the truth of the message about Jesus with miraculous signs, healings, dreams or prophecies.

I have met many folk, especially from other faiths, who have had dreams to confirm their interest in following Jesus. One had a dream of a lamb in heaven, one of a rider on a white horse and another of Jesus asking him to choose between doors leading into light and darkness and all before they knew that these images were in the Bible. One Hindu man decided to follow Jesus after prayer in the name of Jesus really helped him with his epilepsy and in the wider Christian world, there are countless testimonies of how the Holy Spirit has worked in various miraculous ways in people's lives.

Some people in the crowd thought that the disciples were drunk and so it seems that they were behaving differently (perhaps with overwhelming joy). Sometimes when the Holy Spirit comes upon people in power they feel dizzy, go into a trance or even fall over, **1 Samuel 19:23-24** and **Acts 10:9-10**, but this is nothing to be afraid of as it is always accompanied by God's peace.

Being "baptised" or filled with the Holy Spirit is not just a one-off event like being baptised in water (which is the only actual Christian baptism, **Ephesians 4:4-5**) but it is rather something that needs to be continually renewed. Read **Acts 4:23-31**. Here Peter and John had been arrested and brought before the chief priests for questioning about their preaching. The priests tried to scare them into not talking about Jesus any more and so on their release they called the believers together to pray. They felt the need to pray for renewed boldness as they were obviously feeling threatened, **verse 29**, and they were again filled with the Holy Spirit. Someone once said that we can be filled with the Holy Spirit but like buckets with holes, we tend to leak! We need to be filled again and again.

Ephesians 5:18 *"Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit."* The idea here is of being continuously filled with the Spirit and it is again contrasted with being drunk. Too much alcohol will take control of someone in a bad way changing them for the worse and leading to excessive behaviour out of their normal character. So being filled with the Spirit results in being controlled by God to love and do good beyond our normal personality in the character of Jesus. This is whilst still in our right mind and not in some kind of out-of-control frenzy, **1 Corinthians 14:32**.

Romans 8:5 *"Those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set on what that nature desires; but those who live*

in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires.” Human nature wants security, success, pleasure and happiness and that is what mostly occupies the minds of all mankind but the Spirit wants love, humility, kindness and giving to the poor. Which of these fill our minds most of the time? God wants us to live a life fully controlled by his Spirit, which would be the life Jesus would live if he was in our position with all our abilities, possessions and limitations, drawing on the life of God as a branch draws sap from a vine, **John 15:4-5**.

Memory verse: Ephesians 5:18.

Questions for discussion

In what ways has God begun to change you since you trusted in Jesus?

What potential blockages are there to stop us from living our lives filled with God’s Spirit?

How does the picture of the branch and the vine in **John 15** illustrate the need to be filled with the Spirit?



PURITY

What are the rules in the Christian life?

Many, especially those from other faith backgrounds, ask this question when they first put their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Religion tends to be practised through keeping various laws, commands, customs and traditions. What are the things that we have to do to live life the way God wants? Read **Matthew 19:16-26**. This is exactly the question that a rich young man asks Jesus. Jesus tries to tell him that only God is good enough to merit eternal life but when he persists with the question, he says to him, *“If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor.”* This is too much and the young man goes away sad. Jesus then says to his disciples, *“it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.”* The disciples are shocked and astonished because they realise that we can all hold onto things that are precious to us and they ask if anyone can be saved and Jesus replies, *“With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.”*

When I started to read the Bible that I bought at university, I thought that it would say something like “Try to be a good boy and you might get into heaven” but Jesus does not say that at all. In his most famous sermon, **Matthew 5, 6 and 7**, Jesus

raises the standards of God's law through the moral roof. He says that it is not just murder that is wrong but also anger and not just adultery that is wrong but also lustful thoughts.

He sets impossible standards and issues impossible commands like love your enemies, pray for those who persecute you and do good to those who hate you. He says not to resist an evil person and if someone hits you once, let them hit you again and if someone steals something from you, give them something else as well! **Matthew 5:39-44**. Just in case we are in any doubt, **Matthew 5:48** *"Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect"* makes it very clear that God's standard of goodness is actually perfection. This is a command! To be honest, we stand no chance.

An expert in the Old Testament law asked Jesus what was the greatest commandment from God. Jesus' reply is found in **Matthew 22:37-40** *"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: "Love your neighbour as yourself." All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.* Who could say that they love God with all that they are 100% even for one minute of the day?

Think how we love ourselves in providing ourselves with food when we are hungry, drink when we are thirsty and sorting out any painful problems that we have as soon as possible. No-one leaves a hand or foot in a painful position; we move it immediately. If we are really hungry or thirsty, all we can think about is getting something to eat or drink. We love ourselves. Jesus is saying that we should be equally concerned about the needs of those around us and in today's global village, where we are daily televised scenes of hunger and disaster from around the world, everyone is our neighbour. Which of us can say that we care for those we see suffering in

those situations as much as we care for ourselves and use our money and resources accordingly?

If God was to count these things against us, none of us would be acceptable to him but the good news of the gospel is of course that Jesus died to pay the price for our sins. **Romans 3:20-23** *“No-one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather through the law we become conscious of sin. But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”* This tells us that through the law we become conscious of sin and as Jesus raised the standard of God’s law, it makes us even more aware of how much we fall short. The good news is that when we put our faith in Jesus, we are forgiven and receive his righteousness to our account.

The Bible goes even further and tells us that when we trust our lives into Jesus’ hands, in some mysterious way we were put to death with him on the cross. Our sinful human nature has been crucified with Christ and we live a new life through receiving his Holy Spirit. **Romans 6:4-5** *“We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection.”* Christian baptism symbolises this identification with Christ’s death and resurrection to a new life when the person “is buried” under the water and rises again from it. Baptism does not make someone a Christian but is an important symbol of the change brought about in their spiritual state by faith in Jesus and is something that he has commanded all his disciples to do.

This spiritual death and resurrection has profound consequences for the place of a Christian regarding God's law. This is explained in **Romans 7:1-6** where it talks about a man being under the authority of the law only as long as he is alive. If we died with Christ then we are no longer under the authority of the law. For example, a person is released from the law against remarriage if their spouse dies. Also, if a judge is about to sentence someone to a fine or a term in jail but they die of a heart attack in the dock when they hear the punishment then there is nothing more that can be done to them. Or after someone has paid for their crimes with the death penalty, it would be ridiculous to add several years in jail or a flogging as well. Jesus paid for our sins by dying on our behalf; there is therefore no more penalty that can be exacted.

Romans 8:1 *"Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."* All of this means that a Christian is no longer bound by God's law and will not suffer the penalty in hell for any sins that he commits against the law. This sounds outrageous but it is God's grace and the gift of eternal life which we do not deserve. You may be asking "Doesn't that mean that Christians can do whatever they like and get away with it?" Good. That question means that we have understood what God has done and you can find it in **Romans 6:1** and the answer in **verse 2** *"What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning, so that grace may increase? By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?"* If we truly have been crucified with Christ and have received the Holy Spirit of God and have Jesus living in us, we could not possibly go on living in the same way. His presence is surely going to change us for the better, **1 John 3:9**.

Galatians 5:13 *"You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather serve one another in love."* We are free from the law's demands but

we should not take this as an excuse to do whatever our old nature wants but walk in the new nature God has given us.

Romans 7:6 *“But now, by dying to what once bound us, we have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code.”* As those who have been born again into a new relationship with God and have received his Spirit, we are not supposed to live by rules or laws but by being filled with his Spirit, allowing him to control us. This is quite different to any other religion and means that there are no set rules about dress, food, festivals and when and how to pray, fast or conduct church services or indeed anything else. God wants us to allow the Spirit of Jesus to lead us in every aspect of our lives and he will lead us into all righteousness and truth, **John 16:13**.

The morning after I prayed to give my life to Christ, I went to the Roman Catholic church as usual. When it came to the time in the mass when they pray to Mary, asking her to intercede with God for them, I could not do it as something inside me was saying that it was wrong and we should only pray to God. I had prayed that prayer all my life but I couldn't do it any more. No-one had said anything to me but it was the prompting of the Holy Spirit within me. I later discovered that the Bible says there is *“one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus”* **1 Timothy 2:5**. This was just the first of many things that I had been doing which I hadn't thought were wrong before but that I was no longer comfortable doing. God's Spirit in my heart had begun to change me.

Galatians 5:16-18 *“So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you*

are not under law." If we allow the Holy Spirit to control us, he will stop us from doing what we would have done before. Sometimes new believers say to me, "I thought that the Christian life was supposed to make you feel good but I feel so bad. I did that sin again the other day and I feel so bad about it." If you ever feel like that, good! Before you gave your life to Christ, you would have done that and not thought any more about it but now the Holy Spirit within you is making you feel bad about it by convicting you about how wrong it is. That will be a good safeguard and incentive against doing it again!

It is always a good thing when we feel worse about some habitual sin after we come to Christ because this is a sign that God is at work in us by his Spirit to begin to change our behaviour for the better. We should allow the Holy Spirit to bring that conviction of sin to our attention and not ignore it. There is a conflict in every believer between the old nature and the new life of God but praise God that the new is stronger!

Galatians 5:22-25 *"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit."* The result or fruit of a life controlled by God's Spirit is gloriously listed above. The Holy Spirit will not just keep us from sinning by obeying the letter of the law but will fill our hearts with the very love of God which goes way beyond any simple keeping of rules. The thief will not only stop stealing but will give his money and his life to serving the poor. God's love is concerned not with just following some written code or customs but with actively searching out ways to bless others. He also fills us with deep-seated joy and peace that remain in any circumstances, even when things are hard and difficult.

There is a lightness and freedom about God's genuine love which led Jesus to heal people on the Sabbath day when Jews were not supposed to do any work, to associate with outcasts like lepers, prostitutes and tax collectors and to show mercy to a woman caught in the act of adultery. His life continually demonstrated that God was more concerned with mercy and kindness than the letter of the law and was in great contrast to the rigidity, self-righteousness and pride of those who thought that they were keeping the law. Those who follow law-based religion often become proud of themselves, blind to their own sin and hard-hearted towards those they perceive as failures.

Micah 6:8 *"He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God."*

Let us keep in step with the Holy Spirit's work in our lives and so fulfil God's will for us. Augustine of Hippo summed up all this by saying "Love and do what you like".

Memory verse: Micah 6:8.

Questions for discussion

What kind of rules can creep into the Christian life?

How would you answer someone who says "Christians can do any bad things they want and God will forgive them!"?

How can we keep "in step with the Spirit" in practice?



PRAYER

How should we pray?

Prayer has been described as “the Christian’s vital breath” because it is through prayer that we enter into and maintain a relationship with God. It is through prayer that we ask for God’s strength to live each day in the power of his Spirit and it is through prayer that we seek his guidance for the future. But how should we pray? Are there set prayers that we should learn or certain words we need to say as there often are in other religions?

When I was a Roman Catholic, I was taught to repeat “Hail Mary” and “Our Father” prayers over and over again as a devotion by counting them off on the beads of a rosary or as a penance for committing sins. This always seemed very mechanical and I could not work out why Mary or God would be pleased by hearing the same old words repeated over and over again. It bored me and I supposed that it would bore them also. It did not get me anywhere in terms of a personal relationship with God and was, in my case, very often a mindless pastime. What does the Bible say about prayer and what did Jesus himself teach about it?

Jeremiah 33:3 “Call to me and I will answer you and tell you great and unsearchable things you do not know.” This verse is

sometimes called “God’s telephone number” as it is an invitation to call out to him and he promises to answer which begins a conversation. At its simplest, prayer is just communicating with God and we can talk to him in a real way as we would to anyone but bearing in mind who he is. It should be the heartbeat of a real relationship with God.

Matthew 6:6 *“when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.”* Jesus teaches that prayer will mostly be a private affair between an individual and God and that each person’s most frequent and most important prayer times should be alone with God. This of course does not exclude times of prayer with others as we will see later but prayer should not be an opportunity for spiritually showing off in public. Jesus also says that there is a reward for praying.

Matthew 6:7-8 *“when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.”* It is a common characteristic of religion generally to keep on repeating the same words in prayer even in a language that the person does not understand, for example Muslim prayers in Arabic, Hindu prayers in Sanskrit and Sikh prayers in Gurmukhi all of which are languages that the majority of Muslims (who are not Arabs), Hindus and Sikhs do not understand. This also crept into Christianity when Roman Catholic prayers in the mass used to be said in Latin which very few people understood.

There is also a widespread tendency to repeat things over and over again such as the Muslim namaaz prayers which are to be repeated five times a day, Hindu repetition of the name of a god or a mantra and saying prayers for each bead on a

string such as the Roman Catholic rosary. The Buddhists in Nepal and Tibet have taken it one step further by writing prayers on a cylinder and rotating it. Each time that the cylinder rotates it is counted that the prayers have been said and the ultimate in mechanical prayer is to tie prayer flags high up and let the wind “send the prayers out”. Automated prayer!

Jesus says that God knows what we need before we ask him and so will not be impressed by certain words or meaningless repetition. If a child went to their father and kept repeating the same words to him over and over again to try to get him to do something, he would probably think that the kid had gone mad! Jesus did however teach his disciples how to pray in the Lord’s prayer or “Our Father” which has itself finished up being endlessly repeated. If we are not supposed to just repeat the same words, what did he mean by this?

Matthew 6:9-13 *“Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation
but deliver us from the evil one.”*

When you eat at a restaurant, there are starters, perhaps fish course dishes, main courses, desserts and maybe cheese and biscuits and coffee on the menu. You don’t always have the same starter, main course and dessert (or there may be some people who do!) but these are just categories representing different stages of the overall meal. In the same way, the prayer above is a sort of prayer menu with sections representing different categories of things to pray for.

It starts by recognising that God is our Father who made us, loves us and provides for and protects us and that he is in

heaven in control of all things. It is good to come to God in prayer by reminding ourselves of his love and power and of our relationship with him. Remembering that the whole universe is in his hands should make us want to praise him for all the wonderful things that he has made and should put our problems and concerns into the right perspective. "*Hallowed*" means honoured and it is right that we should come into God's presence with praise and worship because of how much he has loved us, **Psalm 100:4-5**.

The prayer continues by praying for God's will to be done. So often prayer can be just about our needs and agenda which we are asking God to bless but as believing Christians, we have given our lives to Jesus as our Lord and master and, as his servants, we should be asking him first what he wants us to do! After this, there is a section asking God to supply "*our daily bread*." This phrase points us to asking for our needs, which can be physical, emotional and spiritual (Jesus called himself the "*bread of life*" **John 6:48**) and not our wants and desires (it does not say "*our daily caviar and champagne*"). It also implies that God is expecting us to pray each day because it asks for "*daily bread*".

When the Israelites made the journey through the desert from Egypt to the promised land, God fed them by providing a substance spread across the desert floor each morning. They called it "*manna*" and it was their main food supply. They had to gather it fresh each morning as it would not keep till the next day and when Jesus calls himself the "*bread of life*" in **John 6:48-50**, he is comparing himself to this. We should get our supply of the bread of life fresh each morning from Jesus himself.

Next comes prayer for forgiveness for our sins, which is linked to also forgiving others for what they have done to us, and finally prayer for deliverance from temptation and evil.

In each of these categories of praise, seeking God's will and asking for our needs, forgiveness and safety from temptation and evil, there will be different things to concentrate on and pray for in different circumstances through life but this prayer provides a "menu", framework or pattern of what should be our priorities in prayer.

You cannot say the "Lord's prayer" and say "my" or "me" as it is "our" and "us". This is clearly telling us that we should not just be praying for ourselves but also for others and Jesus was concerned that we would pray in unity with other believers. The church prayer meeting is not supposed to be an optional extra for a few keen Christians but a time when we join our hearts together to seek God.

Matthew 18:19-20 *"if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them."* Jesus is of course everywhere by his Spirit and is with us when we pray by ourselves but he is saying that he is especially present when Christians come together to pray even if it is only a few. This is a special promise to answer united prayer and therefore a strong encouragement for us to pray together.

Ephesians 6:18 *"pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints."* Just in case we were not aware of the importance of prayer, Paul mentions "all" or "always" four times in this one verse! How can we pray in the Spirit at all times? This obviously cannot be in words, and certainly not set prayers, as we have to concentrate on whatever we are doing at the time but it can be an attitude of heart that is looking in dependency to God for the strength we need to live life his way.

When we put our trust in Jesus, we are born into a new life by receiving the Holy Spirit. A baby does not know how to ask for what it needs in words and maybe is not even aware of exactly what is needed but it knows that it needs something and cries out to the parent for help. As new-born Christians, we don't always know how to pray or what exactly to pray for but the simplest prayer is the baby's prayer of "Waaah!" which is just a cry from our hearts to God our Father.

He knows our innermost needs, **Psalm 139:1-4**, and we do not need to communicate with him just through words but with the longings of our hearts which often cannot be put into words adequately anyway. *"We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express,"* **Romans 8:26**. The Holy Spirit helps us in our prayers interceding for us when we do not know how to express ourselves, sometimes with wordless sighs and longings and sometimes by giving the gift of praying in another language that we do not understand which is called "speaking in tongues".

Matthew 7:7-11 *"Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened. Which of you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!"* These are some of my favourite verses in the whole Bible. What amazing promises Jesus is giving us here! He is saying "Come on, ask me and I will give you, seek me and you will find me and I'll open the door when you knock!" An earthly human father does not give bad things to his child and so we can trust God, who is perfect love, to give us only what is good for us.

This all depends on faith because if we really believe that Jesus is just waiting to bless us with good things if we spend time to seek him in prayer, then prayer becomes a very exciting prospect indeed and we will not be reluctant to have times of prayer or to go to prayer meetings. In fact, we will look forward to them as opportunities to receive God's blessings in our lives. And yet the prayer meeting is not usually the most popular and well attended church event. Call a barbecue and just about everyone will try to come but it is not the same if you organise a day to seek the living God in prayer.

Imagine that Jesus is in the next room asking to see you. He wants to tell you about your future and his plan for your life, to give you advice on your problems and to bless you with the love and spiritual gifts that you need to serve him. You might be nervous about meeting him but would you turn down the chance to go and talk with him? Would you say that you are too busy to spare the time for him? Well, he really is there, not as a physical man, but by his Spirit. Don't miss out by not talking to him!

Memory verse: Matthew 7:7.

Questions for discussion

Do you look forward to the prayer meeting? Why not? Why do you think we are so reluctant to spend time in prayer?

What would you ask Jesus if he said "What do you want me to do for you?"

How do we avoid just asking God for our own agenda?



ASSURANCE

Can we be lost again?

This is a really important question in the Christian life and one that often troubles new believers. What if we were to lose our faith in Jesus sometime in the years to come? What if we were to be arrested and threatened with torture for being a Christian and we ended up denying Jesus like Peter? With all the pressures of life, could anyone really be sure that they would still be a believing Christian in 5, 10 or 20 years' time? What does the Bible say about this? Do you know?

As a new believer many years ago, I had not yet read much of the Bible and these questions were really troubling me as I knew that I would never be strong enough to follow Jesus through every potential trouble and trial that I could imagine might happen in the future. I was a student, studying biology at Oxford University, and I was on my way to a lecture with all these thoughts crowding around in my mind. I knew that I would not be able to concentrate on the lecture if this carried on and so I prayed in my mind, "Dear Father, you know the answer to this question, please tell me as I won't be able to study properly like this." I closed my eyes for a split second to pray as I was approaching a kerb to cross a road.

When I opened my eyes, there right in front of me, on the side of a moving lorry, were written two words in very large

letters REST ASSURED. The lorry was driving past and so the words shot by me. I couldn't believe what I had just seen and so I looked down the road after the lorry and there on the back were the same two words REST ASSURED. I was utterly amazed as I had never seen a lorry like that before and I later found out that it was a bedding company that made mattresses! I knew that my Father in heaven wanted me to know the assurance of his love and that I was safe in his hands. Later, I read for myself that this is what he tells us in the Bible.

1 John 5:13 *"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**."* I have highlighted these two words to show that God is concerned that we know that we have received a life from him that will last forever. He wants us to have this assurance and peace. If we could lose this life, it could not be said to be eternal.

John 6:39-40 *"this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all that he has given me, but raise them up at the last day. For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life and I will raise him up at the last day."* Here Jesus says that he will not lose those who put their trust in him. This means that our salvation and eternal life were not just paid for by Jesus but are upheld and guaranteed by him. As God himself, Jesus cannot fail and he says that he will not lose us but keep us right through to the last day.

John 6:44 *"No-one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him up at the last day."* This goes one step further and teaches us that we cannot even put our faith in Jesus unless God the Father has already been at work to draw us to himself. Saving faith itself does not originate with us it seems but is a gift of God, **Ephesians 2:8** *"For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from*

yourselves, it is the gift of God." If our salvation depended on us then we could mess up and lose it but the Bible tells that it originates and depends on God's call and gift of faith.

Philippians 1:6 *"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."* What God begins, he will finish and since he knows everything, he would not begin something that he knew would not work out.

Ephesians 1:4-5 *"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 to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will."* God knew us and loved us before he created the universe—what a thought! He chose us and planned our salvation right back then and made it happen in his time. It is as if salvation is a gate with "Come to me all who weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest" written over it but when you walk through the gate and look back "You have not chosen me but I have chosen you" is written over the other side.

You may be asking, "Where does that leave free will and our choice?" The Bible clearly tells us that as human beings we have the power to choose to defy God's will by disobeying his commands and refusing to come to him. Jesus cried out over Jerusalem, *"how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!"* **Luke 13:34**. Also, in **1 Timothy 2:3-4** *"This is good, and pleases God our Saviour, who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth"* it tells us that it is not God's will for anyone to be lost and so in a sense, he would want and choose for everyone to be saved.

How can we put these two things together—predestination and free will? We can't and if you try, you will only give yourself

a headache! There are many things about God which we cannot understand with our human minds. How did he make the universe out of nothing? How does he exist everywhere at once? How does he control everything? What about Father, Son and Holy Spirit where $1+1+1=1$? God wants us to trust him not necessarily understand him!

Our human mind is very limited and is only able to deal with ideas that it has already experienced in our sensory world. Try thinking of a colour that you've never seen. Got it? Of course not, no-one can and yet we know that colours exist beyond the range of our visible spectrum. How much less could we hope to understand everything about God who made our universe and exists outside of space and time (as well as everywhere within it!).

Our ideas of predestination and free will are dependent on our concept of time. We plan and predestine something beforehand and then make it happen, and we make a choice at one point in time and then things follow from that choice. God, however, exists outside of time, which is simply a characteristic of this universe which he has made, and so with him all our thinking of "before" and "after" and therefore "cause" and "effect" break down. This is why the classic question "If God made everything, what was there before God?" is meaningless as there was no time as we understand it "before" God made this universe and therefore no "before" which is a time-based word.

God always has been and always will be and to him all times are now. Jesus said *"before Abraham was born, I am!"* **John 8:58**. It would have been amazing enough if he had said "before Abraham was born, I was around" as Abraham lived more than 2,000 years before Jesus, and that would have made Jesus more than 2,000 years old, but he says "before Abraham was born, I am!"—right now—outside of time!

Our ideas of cause and effect also depend on time as we assume that the cause takes place before the effect like dropping a plate occurs before it smashing on the floor. Outside of time, however, this does not follow and with God, the cause sometimes comes after the effect in our universe. An example of this that all Christians should be familiar with is that Jesus died for us thousands of years before our sins that caused his suffering. The effect came before the cause because God was at work!

All of this should give us pause for thought before we jump to too many conclusions about what we think we know about the relationship between God's predestination and human free will. We think, choose and operate within time whilst God operates in eternity outside of time. Our minds are incapable of grasping God's perspective on all this. How then should we approach what God has told us? In simple faith.

The message that God wants us to get is that we are totally secure in his love and that he has planned our salvation from all eternity and we could never lose it because it depends on him and not on our efforts. No-one can boast or feel proud about their faith or salvation because it is a gift of God and not their own doing but no-one goes to hell except by their own choice as God wants everyone to be saved.

Romans 8:28-30 *"And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified."* These verses again tell us that God knows everything about us, all our future choices, ahead of time and that he predestines us and calls us to come to Jesus to be forgiven and justified ("just as if I'd" never sinned). They also talk about us being glorified

(going to a perfect life in heaven) in the past tense, as if it has already happened. From God's perspective, outside of time, it already has and so it is an utterly certain future.

Verse 28 in this passage is a fantastic verse and well worth memorising because you are going to need it in your Christian life. It tells us that God controls and orders everything, even the bad times, for our good as we trust in him. This is a wonderful assurance as we face all the uncertainties of this world and there will be times when it will take real faith to continue to stand on this truth but through serious illness, financial loss and setback after setback, I've seen this to be true in my own life. If someone had told me that the manager of the Muslim shop in Southampton, who had spoken in just about every mosque in Britain, would come to faith in Christ, I would have scarcely believed it, but it happened and the only reason that we met up and started to talk about Jesus, just about 10 months before he was to die of cancer, was because I had also become seriously ill at that time.

The book of Romans comes to a triumphant peak of Christian assurance in the face of any kind of trouble, hardship, persecution or danger in **verses 38 and 39** of this chapter "*For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.*" This list includes everything you can imagine and is a glorious affirmation that God's choice and call on us cannot be overturned. If you stand on this in faith, you can face any future trials and difficulties without fear.

Ephesians 1:13-14 "*And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having 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." The picture here is of the Holy Spirit within all who believe in Jesus sealing us as belonging to him as letters used to be sealed with an imprint in wax of the sender to prove who had sent them. We are marked by the change in our lives produced by the work of the Holy Spirit as having been saved by Jesus and this change is a down payment on heaven where we will be made perfect.

If someone promised to give you £10 million pounds, you would probably be highly sceptical but if they gave you £100,000 as a down payment, you would be more likely to believe them. It is amazing to think that one day we will be perfectly changed into the image of Jesus in heaven, which of course we cannot see, but when we see God changing us through the work of the Holy Spirit in us now and we overcome sins and do things we could not do before then it is like that down payment on heaven and encourages our faith and hope in that future transformation.

This whole question of assurance of our salvation and our future with God in heaven forever is a really important foundation stone in our Christian life because we will need a strong faith in God's power to save and keep us safe as we face the opposition and trouble that so often comes our way. 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."* **John 16:33.**

Memory verse: Romans 8:28.

Questions for discussion

Why has God told us that he predestined us to come to him?

What troubles cause you to doubt your salvation? How do these verses help you to have peace and assurance of God's love and plan for you?

Can you apply this principle of simple faith when we cannot understand God's word fully to other questions in the Christian life?



LOVE

How should we relate to the church?

When we find a relationship with God through Jesus, we discover that God measures our love for him by how much we obey him in loving those around us. We also find that we have become part of a new family with God as our Father and a whole new lot of brothers and sisters. Of course, we cannot love this new family without getting to know them and meeting together. There is no such thing as a solitary Christian life as everything in God's kingdom centres on love and you cannot love people that you never meet! You may sometimes feel that it is less complicated to try to follow God on your own but that is not the way he wants it.

Hebrews 10:24-25 *“let us consider how we may spur one another on towards love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another.”* As we meet together, we can be encouraged by other people's experience of God's faithfulness and help in their lives, perhaps realising that we are not the only ones with difficulties and temptations, and we can share our own needs for prayer and pray for our brothers and sisters in Christ. We can also work together to make a difference by helping those in need and so fulfil a practical expression of God's love. God is love

and so Jesus, although he is everywhere, is especially present where his people gather and share his love together in his name, **Matthew 18:20**.

Ecclesiastes 4:10 *“If one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no-one to help him up!”* This speaks for itself and illustrates the point that God has planned for us to help one another in difficult times. A church leader was once visiting a man who had not come to church for quite a while. He knew that the man was familiar with what the Bible had to say about the need for Christian fellowship and so he simply took a burning coal from the fire and set it by itself on the hearth. Slowly the coal cooled down, lost its glow and became dark and then he put it back into the fire where it warmed up to a bright glow again. The man got the point and was back in church the next Sunday. But what is a church?

1 Corinthians 1:2 *“To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.”* A local gathering of God’s family is called a church (the people, not the building!) and although there may be many groupings and denominations, there is only one worldwide Church made up of all those who have a personal, living faith in Jesus and have been born again of his Spirit.

Some churches are bound to rituals and traditions that have been passed from one generation to another but no longer spring from a living faith. These may well have been alive once, perhaps generations ago, but now the Christian faith has become fossilised into an inherited structure lacking the vitality that comes from a real relationship with God. Such a relationship cannot be passed down from parents to their children and people are not Christians just because they were born to Christian parents; they have to make their own step of

faith. God has no grandchildren, only children! We need to join a church where the people have that living faith in Jesus and where the Bible is taught as God's Word and the only authority for instruction in the Christian life rather than church tradition.

Matthew 15:3 *"why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition?"* Here Jesus criticises the Jewish leaders for having traditions that went against what God has said. What would he say about;

Statues in churches, *"You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them."* **Exodus 20:4-5;**

Praying to Mary or saints to intercede and mediate between us and God, *"there is one God and one mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus"* **1 Timothy 2:5.**

Re-enacting Christ's sacrifice, *"we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all"* **Hebrews 10:10-14;**

Calling his ministers "father", *"do not call anyone on earth 'father', for you have one Father, and he is in heaven"* **Matthew 23:9;**

Or worst of all, teaching that you have to do good works to be saved and go to heaven, *"For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no-one can boast."* **Ephesians 2:8-9?**

Let us not try to serve God by keeping to traditions that actually go against his teaching in his Word.

As long as we try to be faithful to biblical teaching, there are still many different ways in which the Christian life, worship and church services can be expressed. Some will be quite structured whilst others are very informal; some will centre their service around the exercise of various gifts of the Holy

Spirit whilst others will give more time to teaching from the Bible. There may be different styles of music and worship and different interpretations of minor areas of Christian teaching which are less clear in the Bible and therefore open to different views. There may even be traditions that have had new life breathed into them. Whatever type of church you join, make sure that it is one where there is an active faith in trying to follow the Bible and reach out with God's love to those around.

Differences of style, emphasis or opinion on minor issues should not keep us apart as Christians. In fact, these things can be a test of our love for one another as it is always easiest to befriend only those who are similar to ourselves. It is good to have friends from other churches, as we can all learn from each other, and we are all part of the same family and members of the body of Christ, sharing in the same Spirit, *"Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit"* **Ephesians 4:3-4**. We have been given this unity in the Spirit and Jesus himself was very concerned that his followers would be of one heart and love. This is what we find him praying for the night before he is about to go to the cross.

John 17:20-21 *"I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me."* Jesus prays that his disciples may have the same level of unity as he has with God the Father with whom he is totally one! This is a very high calling indeed and refers to us all being filled with his love by the power of the Holy Spirit and united despite our differences and diversity. Jesus links this unity to the world believing in him because of the love that it demonstrates, *"By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."* **John 13:35**.

Ephesians 4:11-13 *“It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God.”* It is worth noting here that the role of Christian leaders and ministers is not to do everything themselves but to prepare and help equip all of God’s people to use the gifts that God has given them to serve each other and the wider world outside. We are all part of the “body of Christ” and have a vital role to play within it.

We should not go to church with an attitude only to receive teaching, spiritual care and fellowship but praying about how we can give and help others. This will develop as we grow in our Christian life and it is only as each person in the church plays the part that God has planned for them that the whole fellowship of believers matures together in their understanding and outworking of the faith, **Ephesians 4:16**. We are each unique and have different experiences and individual insights to contribute to building up a fuller, more accurate picture of who God is and how much he loves us.

Acts 2:42 *“They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.”* This is describing the very first church in Jerusalem and records that they were “devoted” (which speaks of serious commitment) to learning from the Scriptures and the apostles’ teaching (which we have in the New Testament), to meeting together and encouraging one another in their new faith, to remembering what Jesus had done for them in his sacrifice on the cross and to seeking God together in prayer. These things still form the heart of church life. The description continues;

Acts 2:44-46 *“All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they*

gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts." This level of mutual commitment and material support is quite a challenge to our modern lifestyle and the radical love that it demonstrated certainly made an impression on the population of Jerusalem, where new people joined the church daily, as it would on folk today. They met together each day which may have been easier in the slower pace of life in bygone eras than in our modern, packed lifestyle so ruled by the clock and appointments but it tells us of a deep involvement in each other's lives. They did not just come together once or twice a week for "meetings" but truly operated as a new family. As Christians, we need to relate together at a much deeper level than some kind of "spiritual social club" and to really be there for each other in times of trouble.

What about financial giving to the church? Some churches teach "tithing", or the giving of ten percent of income to the church, which is actually an Old Testament principle instituted to support the Levites who were priests of God and had not inherited any land in Israel, see **Leviticus 27:32** and **Numbers 18:20-21**. There were twelve tribes of Israelites and eleven of them were allocated land with which to support themselves by agriculture. The twelfth tribe of Levites were to serve God as priests and were not given any land but if each of the other eleven tribes gave ten percent of their produce, it would be more than enough to feed the one tribe of priests. So the figure of ten percent is linked to this Old Testament situation. What does the New Testament, which tells us that we are no longer under the law, say?

2 Corinthians 9:7 *"Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver."* We serve in the new way of being filled with God's Spirit and his love rather than under the old written code of laws. Giving should come from the heart as we are

transformed by God's love to serve him and to have compassion for those in need. This is why God loves a cheerful giver because love delights to help others and it actually pleases us to give something to those we love and, if we are following Jesus, he wants us to love everyone, even our enemies. He was certainly very straight forward in his response to a rich young man who asked him what he should do, **Matthew 19:21**. All of this should mean that most Christians will end up giving far more than just ten percent as we are able but equally, if we are poor, it is the love in our heart that God looks at not the amount that is given, **2 Corinthians 8:12**.

Once we have been born into this new family, the Church, we have fellowship by sharing in one another's joys and trials of following our Lord and a calling from God and responsibility to play our part in helping to build up all whom God is bringing to himself and to proclaim his Good News of forgiveness and new life to the rest of the world.

Memory verse: John 13:35.

Questions for discussion

What happens to Christians that do not meet together with other Christians and why?

What kind of traditions which go against what God has said in the Bible can creep into church life? Are there any good traditions?

How can we decide how much to give to God's work?



SPIRIT-LED

What about the gifts and the fruit of the Spirit?

The Bible teaches that the Holy Spirit gives gifts to all God's people to build up the church fellowship. What are these gifts and how should we use them? How do we receive a particular gift and how should we work together with those who have different gifts? The main teaching on this is found in an extended passage in the first letter to the church in Corinth. Read 1 Corinthians 12:4-31.

Verses 6-7 *"There are different kinds of working, but the same God works all of them in all men. Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good."* This tells us the important truths that we are not all the same and that God will have different things for us to do but that all these things come from the same God and are for the good of the church to build one another up in our faith and walk with God.

Verses 8-10 list various spiritual gifts (it is not the only such list in the Bible, see also **verse 28** and **Romans 12:6-8**). Let us look at what these involve. First of all, every good gift is from God, **James 1:17** and we all have natural gifts and skills which are also given by God but here we are talking about supernatural gifts. We can all have God-given wisdom and knowledge but the message of wisdom involves a supernatural

insight directly from the Lord and the message of knowledge involves knowing something about a situation that could not normally be known, for example when Peter knew that Ananias was lying in **Acts 5:1-4**.

There have been many times in my own experience when I have been faced with a tricky question or a difficult pastoral problem and I have not known the answer. Whilst the other person was still speaking to me, I have simply cried out in my heart to the Lord for his wisdom to know what to say and do. Amazingly, I have found myself learning from what I have gone on to say and thinking to myself, "Wow, that's good; I didn't know that before!"

God knows the secrets of every heart and he can speak directly to innermost thoughts and motives that are hidden from other people. Early in my Christian life, I was visiting doors with a Chinese Christian in Finchley, London as part of an Operation Mobilisation team. My friend was talking to a young English man on his doorstep and getting nowhere. The guy just did not seem to be interested and I was silently praying while my friend did the talking. Suddenly, the Lord said in my mind, "Ask him if he would rather be rich and miserable or poor and happy." When I asked him this, there was instantly a complete transformation in his attitude and he suddenly became interested in what we were saying and ended up coming to the meeting we were advertising. Those same words could have been said to many other people without any effect but God knew that young man's heart and the impact that they would have on him.

We all have faith when we put our trust in Jesus (which is also a gift of God, **Ephesians 2:8**) but the gift of faith is having a supernatural conviction to trust God for a particular outcome. When I started working amongst Asian people in Southampton,

God gave me the conviction in January 1983 to trust him to provide a shop for Christian outreach by August of that year without any appeals for funds. Later on this was repeated in January 1987 praying for another shop by August of that year and in January 1990, he gave the conviction to trust him from then on for at least one Asian person per month to find faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. All these things (and many others) came about to God's glory and you can read the full account in "**Light out of Darkness**" which tells the story of God's miraculous faithfulness to that work over 25 years.

Healing is a topic that can cause much distress. Christians pray, believing that someone is going to be healed, and sometimes they are, praise God, and sometimes they are not. Years ago, I was visiting a lady who had spent months recovering from a disease affecting the fatty sheaths around her nerves. As we were leaving, she showed me her hands which had been paralysed in a claw-like position for a long time. She said, "Look, I'm a Tamil and we eat rice with our hands. How can I do that like this?" God suddenly gave me the conviction that her hands would be healed if we prayed for her and so we did. Nothing happened and we left. When we visited the next week, she rushed up smiling and rapidly moving her fingers. Just after we had left the previous week, her hands had loosened up!

What happens when someone is not healed? Some people say that it is because they did not have enough faith or that they must have done something wrong. Whilst these may be possibilities, they are by no means always the case (Jesus makes this clear in **John 9:1-3**) and it can be quite cruel to blame a sick person for their own lack of healing. The entire book of **Job** in the Old Testament deals with this question and God was not pleased with Job's friends when they said that Job's illness was basically his own fault for doing something wrong. We will

not always be healed in this world otherwise no Christians would ever die (other than accidents or murder) but we will have perfect bodies in the next world! One preacher claiming that all Christians would always be healed of everything delivered his sermon wearing glasses!

Prophecy is another area which can result in confusion and disillusionment if it is not treated wisely. Many people claim to have words from God but the Bible tells us to test everything, **1 Thessalonians 5:19-21** *“Do not put out the Spirit’s fire; do not treat prophecies with contempt. Test everything. Hold on to the good.”* The test for a prophecy is to check if it conforms to Biblical truth and to see if it comes true, **Deuteronomy 18:21-22**. If it contradicts the Bible or does not happen then it was not from God and he views this very seriously as it amounts to misrepresenting him, see **Ezekiel 13:1-12, Jeremiah 23:16-40**. Repeated “prophecies” that do not happen devalue a genuine word from God and do not honour him. If someone claims that God has said something and it does not happen then others may get disillusioned and start to doubt the reality of God altogether.

What exactly is a prophecy? Everywhere in the Bible where it describes how someone received a prophecy, whether Moses, Samuel, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Peter or John etc., they heard God’s voice so clearly that they could carry on a conversation with him or they saw a clear vision or both. It was not just a feeling or an inner conviction that God was saying something in the situation. It was a clear voice and they could declare that this was what God was saying. Listen to God speaking in **Ezekiel 13:2-3** *“Son of man, prophesy against the prophets of Israel who are now prophesying. Say to those who prophesy out of their own imagination: ‘Hear the word of the LORD! This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Woe to the foolish prophets who follow their own spirit and have seen nothing!’”* or **Jeremiah 23:28** *“Let the*

prophet who has a dream tell his dream, but let the one who has my word speak it faithfully. For what has straw to do with grain?" A lot of confusion could be avoided if it was simply said "I think that God may be saying this..." rather than "God has said..." unless it was a clear word from God. It is also worth remembering when dealing with prophecies that all our present understanding has its limits and can be like looking at a reflection in a smudged mirror, **1 Corinthians 13:9-12**.

The first time that God spoke to me in a clear voice was in a communion service in Oxford. He said "If you go and see after the service, he will become a Christian" and so I did and he came to faith in Jesus there and then! By God's grace, whatever he has spoken to me so clearly over the years has always come true.

God knows each person's heart and this brings us to discernment or distinguishing between spirits. Jesus could walk the streets of Israel surrounded by crowds of people but look up into a tree and call out to a short tax collector because he knew that if he ate in his house that night, he would repent and believe. Working to share the Good News about Jesus with Asian folk, I have often prayed that God would show me those who were going to believe in him as there is only a limited amount of time to spend with each person and it is a real help to know which ones God is calling into his kingdom. He has done this many times for me and as you read the book of **Acts**, you can see him guiding to those who would believe, **Acts 18:9-10**.

Speaking in tongues or different languages is the only gift that is for the benefit of the recipient rather than for the whole church, **1 Corinthians 14:4**, unless there is someone who can interpret it. It builds up those who have the gift in their personal prayer lives and if there is no-one to interpret what is said, it should only be practised privately, **1 Corinthians 14:27-28**.

Do not let anyone pressure you into trying to speak in tongues (most people can babble gobbledygook if they try) or trying to prophesy (which is likely to lead to something from our own imagination) etc but let God graciously give *“just as he determines”*, **verse 11**. We should *“eagerly desire the greater gifts”*, **verse 31**, and pray for them and God sometimes chooses to give them through the prayers and laying on of hands of leaders or older Christians, for example **2 Timothy 1:6**.

Verses 12-30 teach us that all true believers in Jesus are parts of his body with differing gifts and abilities and each one has an important role to play. Never feel as if you are a lesser Christian, or not even properly saved, just because you do not have the same spiritual gift as some other person, **verse 15** *“If the foot should say, ‘Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,’ it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body.”* We may have different gifts but each of us is equally loved and important to God who has no favourites, **Acts 10:34**, and who *“has given greater honour to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other,”* **verses 24-25**.

Someone who leads from the front and preaches is just exercising a particular gift that God has given them and is not a more *“important”* Christian in God’s sight than the person who makes the tea or puts the chairs out. Gifts of helping others and administration are listed alongside working miracles and healing in **verse 28**. What God wants is that we are all faithful in whatever he has given us to do and *“many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first,”* **Matthew 19:30**. **Verse 29** makes the point that not everyone can be an apostle, prophet or teacher or work miracles, heal or speak in tongues and so we should not envy the gifts of others or feel inferior because we are different.

Equally we should not be proud of our particular gifting and exclude others who are different, **verse 21** *"The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I don't need you!'"* There is a natural tendency as human beings for "birds of a feather to flock together" and those of similar backgrounds, interests or personalities to become friends. This can translate in the Church to all the eyes meeting together in one congregation and all the hands meeting in another (sometimes this results in some churches being very strong on Bible teaching whilst others emphasise gifts like prophecy and speaking in tongues). At the simplest level this can be because they have more in common and can agree together more easily but just as a human body is disabled if eyes, ears, hands or feet etc are not working properly so the church, the body of Christ, needs all its members to be fully operational, **Ephesians 4:16**. We need each other!

All of this means that you cannot grow as God wants in your Christian life without using the gifts he has given you as a working part of a fellowship of other believing Christians. Becoming a "spiritual hermit" is not God's will and those who permanently isolate themselves from other Christians do not mature in their walk with the Lord.

1 Corinthians 13:1-2 *"If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing."* No spiritual gifts or knowledge or miracle-working faith have any value at all without God's love! You could even know everything that there is to know and have the power to command a mountain to move but it would mean nothing to God. Power and abilities that are not used in love are spiritually useless and have no place in God's kingdom but it is possible to have a gift from God and use it in pride or selfishly to make money, see the story of the prophet

Balaam in **Numbers 22**. Anything done by someone filled with the Spirit, however, will show his fruit of *“love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” Galatians 5:22-23*.

How then do we know if someone is spiritually mature and filled with God’s Spirit? Read **Matthew 7:15-23**. Here Jesus is warning his disciples to beware of false prophets who have the outward appearance of godliness but are inwardly selfish and greedy and in **verses 22-23**, he goes on to specify people who claim to prophesy and do miracles in his name but do not really belong to him. **Verses 16-17** *“By their fruit you will recognise them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit.”* You recognise a particular type of fruit tree by the fruit growing on it; an apple tree will grow apples and a pear tree will grow pears for example. A Christmas tree, however, is not a chocolate tree because it has chocolate gifts tied on it!

So it is the fruit of God’s Spirit, love, joy, peace, patience, kindness etc, that we should look for in someone’s life, rather than how gifted they are, to see whether they are really filled with God’s Spirit and walking with him. Are they a person who shows genuine love, kindness, gentle patience and a concern for the poor and needy or do they seem more concerned about showing how gifted they are, making money, reputation and success? We need to be reminded of this because it is human nature to be impressed by and so respect people who have spectacular gifts in the Lord’s service. If a person has a gift of healing, prophecy or excellent preaching, we tend to rush to honour them as great men of God but when you choose an older Christian to turn to for spiritual counsel and advice you will be wise to choose someone whose life is full of the fruit of the Holy Spirit.

Memory verse: Galatians 5:22-23.

Questions for discussion

Why has God given different gifts to different people rather than make us all the same?

What happens if a church lacks certain gifts and what should we do about it?

How would you find out if someone was really filled with the Holy Spirit?



PURITY

How can we overcome temptation?

All of us are familiar with the struggle to overcome temptation and do the right thing. Temptations mostly come from within us, from the instincts of our human sinful nature; self-preservation, greed, lust, pride etc., see **James 1:14-15**. They constantly assail our thinking and can subtly influence our reasoning on a subconscious level so that we can be unaware of it until it rears its ugly head in a nasty reaction. Temptation itself, however, is not sin but it gives birth to sin when we choose to act on it in thought, word or deed. Someone once said, “You can’t stop the birds from flying over your head but you can stop them from making nests in your hair!”

Many years ago in India, I was waiting in line for a stamp to post a letter to England. Those were the days before mobile phones and this was my only link to my family and friends back home which meant a lot to me. Posting a letter would always involve a long process of queuing to get a stamp and then queuing again to get the letter stamped by a post office official to prevent someone steaming the stamp off for its monetary value and discarding the letter. It was very hot and I was waiting in the queue for at least half an hour. People were pushing in front as was quite common and I waited patiently.

When I finally reached the desk, I asked for a stamp for England. The man behind the desk was obviously pleased to see a foreigner, which was quite a rare sight in those parts, and so he had a big smile on his face when he said, "We don't have any!" I almost hit him. Seemingly from nowhere, a fierce anger erupted into my mind but, by God's grace, I managed to keep control and slink away. I thought that I was being very patient but my inward sinful nature had a surprise waiting for me. We should never relax our guard against temptation as that nature is not going away as long as we are in this world, (one day we will be free of it in heaven!), **1 Corinthians 10:12** "*So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!*"

The Bible does not say that we become perfect as soon as we put our faith in Jesus and so we should not feel discouraged (or guilty) that we still face a battle with the evil within us and around us. In fact, it talks about our old nature being in conflict with God's Spirit within us, **Galatians 5:17**. The great apostle Paul writes about his own struggles in his efforts to follow Jesus as an encouragement to us who face similar battles.

Romans 7: 18-20 "*I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do— this I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it.*" We can see here how much Paul is in conflict with the evil that he finds within his old nature and how he hates it when he keeps on sinning. This battle rages within every Christian as the old and new natures fight it out for control and Paul describes the feeling of a war going on inside him in **verses 22-25** "*For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. What a wretched man I am!*"

Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!”

Paul’s will has been transformed by the Holy Spirit to delight in doing God’s will but he finds that the desires and instincts of his old nature object to this. If God’s Spirit prompts you and you want to give away a significant amount of money or time or anything else precious to you in order to help somebody, then you will soon find human nature objecting—“Surely God didn’t mean for you to give **that** away! The other Christians aren’t doing that, why should you do it?”— and so on. Our old sinful nature does not want to do God’s will and it will fight us every inch of the way. Seeing this wretched state, Paul calls it a body of death. The good news is that God has given us the victory over it through our faith in Jesus.

Romans 6:6 *“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.”* The Bible teaches us that we are all slaves to our natural sinful desires from the day we are born. We grow up through a life-time of learning to try to control and limit that nature. How do we escape it? So many times we may try to turn over a new leaf but so often fail. The only way to escape is for that nature to die and to receive a new one and that is what happens when we put our faith in Jesus!

Romans 6:10-14 *“The death he died, he died to sin once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus. Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires. Do not offer the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer the parts of your body to him as instruments of righteousness. For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace.”* We have been

united with Jesus' death and have received a new life from him and so we need to exercise faith in that day by day by counting ourselves dead to sin and alive to God. It says "count yourselves" because often it will not feel as if we are dead to sin. It may feel just as lively as ever within us.

Unless God does a specific miracle, when we come to put our faith in Jesus we still have the same memories, thought patterns, tendencies and habits that we had before. If we have sown seeds towards particular sinful behaviour, the tempting pull will still be there. The difference after we have come to Christ is that this pull will no longer be able to enslave us and by the power of God's Spirit within us we can break free. God does not make us into puppets however and we need to choose to exercise faith in counting ourselves dead to sin and offering ourselves to God.

Imagine a slave who has been born into slavery in the house of a very cruel master who regularly beats him. One day a stranger sees this and decides to buy the slave his freedom. The next day after he is set free, the slave is walking in the market when he hears the familiar voice of his old master calling him. He has been so used to obeying that voice all his life that he automatically starts to go towards him. Suddenly, he remembers that this man is no longer his master and he just walks away. This is how it can be with us. We can easily start to do the old habitual sins when we are tempted but we need to remember that Christ has set us free from that old life and to offer ourselves in faith to him instead for his Spirit to control us.

Have you ever wondered why there is so much about fighting in the Old Testament? It may seem strange in a book inspired by God who tells us to love our enemies. We are however in a spiritual war and there are many lessons to be

drawn to help us in our inward battles from what happened in the ancient battles of the people of God. The biggest of these is undoubtedly that we need to rely on God's strength and not our own to win the fight.

Ephesians 6:10-11 *"be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armour of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes."* We are encouraged to be strong in our reliance on God's power and we are reminded that we have a supernatural enemy. The devil was once full of wisdom and perfect beautiful love as an angel of God but became proud of his beauty and turned inwards away from God's love to corrupt his wisdom, see **Ezekiel 28:12-17**.

He has become the enemy of God and all that God loves, including us, but he is only a creature originally made by God and no match for God's almighty power. He is however much stronger than we are and can easily defeat us if we fight him on our own and so his main aim is to get us away from trusting God to help us. He will try to undermine our trust in the Bible. "Did God really say...?" was how he first approached Eve to tempt her to mistrust God, **Genesis 3:1**. He will also try to convince us that God has forgotten us or does not care about us.

John 8:44 *"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."* Jesus says that the devil is a liar and all of his temptations are actually lies but when he speaks, something within human nature responds like a string within a piano responds to the vibration of a tuning fork because they both vibrate on the same wavelength. Mankind as a whole will like what the devil has to say because our nature was changed to his wavelength when our first parents trusted his words rather than God.

The biggest lie that he has got the whole world believing and following is "If you get what you want you'll be happy." This more than anything else motivates most of what goes on in the world but it isn't even true. Britain and America are amongst the richest countries in the world but that doesn't make people happier. As long as there is not famine, disease or war, there is often more joy in the villages of India and Africa than on the streets of Western nations. People can have everything they want and not be happy. Jesus says, "*a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions*" **Luke 12:15** and "*whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it.*" **Matthew 16:25**. True happiness is found in laying down our lives to serve God and those around us.

Pride itself is also basically a lie. What do you have that God did not give you? Only sin! Every good thing comes from God including our skills and creative abilities to make things. "*And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?*" **1 Corinthians 4:7**. My father is an artist and has given me a really great picture of a tiger cub which hangs in my lounge. If when people admire that painting, I was to say, "Do you like what I have done in this picture?" I would simply be lying and taking the praise for it for myself rather than giving it where it belongs. Why do we become proud of our intelligence, abilities, good looks or even height or hair etc. when all these things are gifts of God? We should rather praise God who gave them!

In **Ephesians 6:14-18**, Paul likens our defences against spiritual attack to Roman armour, "*Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming*

arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests." As temptations are lies, it is important that we have the "belt of truth" and that we know and trust in the truth of God's word.

The "*breastplate of righteousness*" will protect us as the devil will use any sin we hold onto as a foothold in our lives for further temptation. If we indulge sinful appetites and desires, they soon grow into habits. The devil will also use our sins to accuse us, "How can you be a Christian when you've just done **that** again?" "Surely God will not forgive **that**?"

Having our "*feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace*" suggests a readiness to go and share the gospel with others. We can often think that trying to tell others about Jesus will result in more temptation and trouble as we wonder how we will cope with their questions. Actually, when we obey the Lord in stepping out in faith to spread his good news, he helps us and gives words and wisdom from his Spirit within us which make us spiritually stronger.

The "*shield of faith*" is able to stop every flaming arrow sent against us as it is our faith in God's strength that releases his power to overcome temptations and the "*helmet of salvation*" over our head speaks of the protection of the assurance and peace of mind that comes from knowing that we are saved and have eternal life through our faith in Jesus.

The only offensive weapon in the armoury is "*the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God*" and in the gospel accounts, we see how Jesus himself defeated the devil's temptations by quoting and trusting the Old Testament, see **Matthew 4:1-11**.

We are also told to be calling on God's help by praying in the Spirit at all times. The devil will try to stop us praying as

he knows that he can defeat us on our own and but that he will lose as soon as we call on God's power.

1 Corinthians 10:13 *"No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. 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 stand up under it."* Because we cannot see other people's struggles, we can be inclined to think that we have it worse than anyone else. This verse tells us that all temptations are basically common to all mankind. The circumstances and details may differ but the heart of the desire to be selfish or proud remains fundamentally the same. It is a great encouragement to realise that we are not in this battle alone and we need to support each other through difficult times.

What a promise in the second half of the verse! God will not allow us to be tempted beyond what he knows we can take. No need to worry whether we will be strong enough to face future trials because God will limit them to our ability to get through and will provide some way out. We see an example of this in **Exodus 13:17** when God does not lead the Israelites by the shorter route towards the promised land because if they were to face war, they would be tempted to return to Egypt. The other side of this promise is that we can never say we fell into a particular temptation because it was too strong for us as God has promised that he will not let that happen!

When a coach is training an athlete to run, he will push them to go faster through the pain barrier. It will feel as if they cannot do any more but actually they can. There is a point, however, beyond which further effort would simply damage their muscles and the coach will not push them beyond that. God will allow times when temptation may feel too much for us but actually we can cope but he will never allow it to get to

the point where it would spiritually damage or destroy us. He is allowing these things to come into our lives so that we might learn to trust in his power and grow stronger in our Christian lives.

Memory verse: Romans 6:11.

Questions for discussion

What tempting lies face us in every day life and how can we fight them?

What lies keep us from God?

What keeps us from fighting temptation?

Why does God allow temptation at all?



PRAYER

What makes prayer work?

If we are not careful a lot of our prayer life can consist of not much more than wishful thinking. We pray for God's blessings for various people and situations but it basically amounts to "Wouldn't it be nice if" The truth is that we would be surprised if many of the things that we prayed for really happened and then because we rarely see prayer get answered we lose any enthusiasm for spending time seeking God. What makes prayer actually work and how should we pray to see specific answers to our prayers?

I have always been excited by the thought that prayer gives us access to the loving God who controls the whole universe. All life is in his hands and whatever problems we are facing, he has the answers. He can give us everything we need, whether physical or spiritual, to serve him and can lead us to the specific tasks he wants us to do and people he wants us to help. Right from the beginning of my Christian life, I began to pray for guidance for the way ahead and about whom I should spend time with explaining the gospel.

Later in Operation Mobilisation, where there was a policy not to appeal for funds, I learnt to simply pray to God for my financial needs as I served him. He always provided everything

I needed and this has been a testimony to his glory these last 30 or so years in Christian ministry as I can honestly say that we have lacked nothing including the provision of two shops and a church building in answer to specific prayer (you can read the story of God's provision for 25 of those years in "**Light out of Darkness**").

Hebrews 11:6 *"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."* It might sound obvious that to pray properly, we must believe that God exists and that he rewards those who seek him in prayer but do we believe it? Are you eager to spend time in prayer and to go to your church prayer meeting? If you **really** believe that almighty God is going to reward those prayers, you will be looking forward to coming to him. We must pray in faith.

James 1:6-8 *"when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does."* What exactly does the Bible mean here by "doubt"? It does not mean to have questions about what God has promised or even to find it astounding or unlikely.

Mary, who was still a virgin, questioned the angel Gabriel who told her that she was to have a son, **Luke 1:30-34**, and Abraham, the father of faith who is commended for his unwavering trust in God, fell down laughing when God told him that his wife Sarah was to have a son at the age of 90 whilst he himself was 100 and questioned it, **Genesis 17:17**. God was not angry with these responses. Both people are heroes of faith in the Bible and of course both sons were born as God said. It is okay to have questions and the opposite of faith is not a wondering or questioning mind but unbelief or mistrust. The doubt referred to in these verses is a refusal to

trust, or make a commitment to rely on one outcome, which results in remaining in two minds about the issue.

Imagine that you need to make a journey to London but that you heard that there had been a threat of terrorist bombs on the trains which the government recently announced was over. You cannot decide whether to go trusting that the authorities have got things under control or to leave it but you start out towards the railway station. On the way, you pass a newspaper stand displaying a headline about the terrorist threat and you turn around. Half way back to your house you then decide that you are being silly and turn around again and go to the station but when you arrive there, you hesitate on the platform still undecided whether or not to board the train. This is being double-minded and unstable in belief.

As soon as you actually get on the train, you have committed yourself to one course of action and have trusted the train with your life and you will get to London (provided the authorities are trustworthy) but if you remain undecided on the platform, the train will leave without you and you will not get to your destination. We need to trust God in our prayers and not be undecided about whether God can do it or not.

Luke 17:6 *“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.”* Jesus chooses one of the tiniest seeds that they knew about to make the point that it is not the size of our faith that counts but the size of the God we have faith in! It is God who works miracles not our level of belief and so we don't have to try to work ourselves up into some kind of frenzy of greater faith but simply trust God.

Two men want to cross a river using two separate bridges that both look perfectly strong. The first man approaches his bridge with great confidence but half way across, it collapses and lands him in the river where he gets swept away. The

second man is now really concerned about his bridge. From a distance it had seemed to be exactly like the first bridge which was obviously not strong enough and so now he examines it carefully as close as he can get without walking on it. It looks fine and he really needs to get to the other side and so he decides to trust it. He puts a very faltering faith in this second bridge, walking nervously over it, but it actually is strong and he gets safely across the river. The first man had strong faith but landed in the river whilst the weak faith of the second man got him across. Weak faith in the real God will save us and get answers to prayer whilst the most fanatically certain faith in the wrong thing or a false idea about God will not work.

John 14:14 *“You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it.”* This is another amazing promise but what does it mean to ask in Jesus’ name? It does not mean just saying “in Jesus’ name” at the end of a prayer like some kind of magic words! When an officer of the law does something in the name of the Queen, it has to be in line with the laws enacted by her government or he could not claim to be acting in her name. Similarly, we cannot ask something in Jesus’ name unless it is in line with his will and is something that he wants to happen. When it is, however, we are asking with the authority of the King of kings, who has all power in heaven and earth, behind us and it will be done as everything obeys him.

There are many things that we know are Jesus’ will because they are biblical commands, like loving one another as he has loved us, **John 13:34**, being willing to keep on forgiving those who continually offend us, **Matthew 18:21-22**, sharing our faith with others, **Matthew 28:18-20**, and so on, or promises from God such as providing for all our needs, **Matthew 6:25-34** and giving us his words when we are called to account for our faith, **Matthew 10:19-20**. We will find many of these things really difficult, scary or worrying but we can pray for God’s

strength to carry out the commands and claim his promises in Jesus' name with absolute faith that he has promised that he will answer us. Let us beware of asking for things that he has not promised, however, like a trouble-free life, **John 16:33**, and wealth, **Psalm 37:16**, **James 5:1-5** and **Luke 6:20-26** etc.

James 4:3 *"When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures."* If we pray selfishly, God is not going to answer those prayers and so let us examine our motives as we pray. Of course no-one is perfect but are our prayers primarily being driven by our own wants rather than God's will? Are we praying out of love for God and those around us or out of a desire to succeed in God's work so that we can feel a sense of achievement or have the praise of others? Searching questions and ones that we need to bring to God for his cleansing forgiveness and ask that we might pray in the power and love of his Holy Spirit.

Luke 11:5-8 *"Suppose one of you has a friend, and he goes to him at midnight and says, 'Friend, lend me three loaves of bread, because a friend of mine on a journey has come to me, and I have nothing to set before him.' Then the one inside answers, 'Don't bother me. The door is already locked, and my children are with me in bed. I can't get up and give you anything.' I tell you, though he will not get up and give him the bread because he is his friend, yet because of the man's boldness he will get up and give him as much as he needs."* Jesus tells this story and others like it, **Luke 18:1-8**, to encourage us to persist in prayer.

The man asking for the bread has nothing to give his friend and he is not asking for himself but for someone else. We may often feel as though we have nothing to offer a friend who is in need of spiritual advice or encouragement and we need to go to God in prayer for what we need to help them. In the story, the second man does not give the bread out of friendship but

because he wants to stop the other man from bothering him by keeping on banging on his door in the middle of the night. The point is that even someone who doesn't care will give you what you ask for if you bother them enough, how much more then will God our Father who loves us to bits respond to our prayers without unnecessary delay.

Read **1 Samuel 14:6-15**. This is the account of how Jonathan, son of King Saul, and his armour-bearer alone were used to defeat the entire Philistine army. It happens because Jonathan has faith that **God** can defeat their enemies rather than their own military strength, **verse 6** *"Nothing can hinder the LORD from saving, whether by many or by few,"* and he takes a spiritual initiative. He does not presume that his idea is God's will but asks for a sign to confirm it, **verses 8-10**, and when this occurs, he acts in faith and God brings about a great victory.

In the same way, we need to have the kind of zeal for the Lord that will want to honour his name and call on his help to do that. If we are full of love for God and for those in need, our minds will be searching for new ways to share the Good News about Jesus and to help the poor and in our prayers, we too will take similar spiritual initiatives, asking God to confirm if this is his will, and acting in faith as he commands. This kind of prayer works!

Memory verse: Hebrews 11:6.

Questions for discussion

What promises can we claim in prayer? How would each of them affect our Christian lives?

What kind of prayer doesn't work?

How can we take spiritual initiative and in what practical areas?



ASSURANCE

How can we maintain the Christian life?

*H*ave you ever felt like giving up? Do you feel daunted and intimidated by the challenges facing you ahead? Join the club! We can all get discouraged and downhearted at times and feel that everything that God is asking of us in the Christian life is getting to be too much. Jesus said that following him would be a hard and narrow way and that it would involve dying to ourselves, our possessions, family and dreams and ambitions, and taking up the cross (place of execution) to come after him. See **Matthew 10:37-39** and many other places. The standards of behaviour that Jesus asks of us in loving our enemies, always being patient and kind and fighting the temptations that we all face can seem so out of reach. Who is equal to such things? Many new believers question how they could possibly keep holding onto this new life. There is good news.

Early in my Christian life, I travelled to India to spend a year and a half in training to learn about Indian culture, history and religion to be better able to talk about Jesus to people from that background. Whilst there, I faced the toughest challenge to my 3-year-old walk with Jesus. All the familiar things that had been propping up my life were no longer there.

I had none of my family or friends that I had made at university around me. There was no television, radio or books. The food was radically different from anything that I had eaten before and very hot as was the climate (daytime maximum temperatures varied from the coldest of 28C in the winter up to about 55C in the summer). I was sleeping on the floor with no space to call my own as the bedding had to be taken up every day as that room was used to entertain guests. Washing clothes in a bucket and going to the toilet without toilet paper were new experiences and as I was drinking the local tap water, I had dysentery about every other week for the first 6 months until I was immune to all the local bugs. I counted that we shared the accommodation with at least 14 other species and mosquito and bed bug bites were common.

In addition to all this, I was living in a different culture and, after about 3 months, I began to realise how different this really was. The Indian folk I was with spoke English and were very friendly but I started to understand that we weren't really communicating. They often wanted to talk about different things and had different expectations of friendship. Humour did not seem to translate across the cultural barrier and they were used to not having any personal space as we were constantly surrounded by people and never alone. Long periods of doing nothing at all were not a problem to them but were to me and they could just "simply sit". Being the only Westerner at the base, I had no-one else to share with on a personal basis.

All of this put me and other foreigners in India in similar situations under severe stress. One day, another Westerner visited the base and I noticed that he was acting very strangely. He appeared to be in the throes of a nervous breakdown but the Indians didn't comment on it; perhaps they thought that this was just more strange Western behaviour. With no other foreigner to talk to, I began to wonder if he was going mad or

was it me? This was the last straw and I started to feel my own mental composure beginning to break down.

I went up to the roof as it was the only place where I could get alone to pray and I cried out to God in desperation, "It feels as if my feet are slipping from underneath me and I need your help to avoid losing my balance". I opened my Bible at random and the first verses that I saw were **Psalm 94: 17-19**;

*"Unless the LORD had given me help,
I would soon have dwelt in the silence of death.
When I said "My foot is slipping",
your love, O LORD, supported me.
When anxiety was great within me,
your consolation brought joy to my soul."*

I immediately knew that I was going to be OK and that no matter how bad things became, God would get me through it.

Jude 24 "To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy" also tells us that God is the one who keeps us from falling in the Christian life. His light still shines in the darkest time and He can reach down to lift us out of the deepest pit.

John 10:27-29 "My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no-one can snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no-one can snatch them out of my Father's hand." The Christian life is not ultimately dependent on us holding onto God as our grip can easily weaken and slip away but on God holding onto us! Here Jesus says that there is a double grip on us; both Jesus himself and the Father are holding onto us and since God is almighty, nothing can break that grip.

The picture is not of someone desperately holding onto the outside of a speeding motor rickshaw with hot and sweaty

hands that could lose their grip at any moment as the rickshaw lurches around the crowded streets. We can sometimes feel that life is like this and that we could let go of God at any time. Rather it is as if small children have been running in the road in danger from the traffic and their father has been calling them to come to him. Once they come and put their hand in their father's hand, he isn't going to let go again. If they strain to get away, they will only hurt their arm because he won't let go.

1 Thessalonians 5:23-24 *"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.**"* I have highlighted these words because they emphasise that the Christian life is a work of God from start to finish. He drew us to Jesus, he saved us and he will sanctify us (make us holy like Jesus) right to the end. It depends on the perfection of God's faithfulness to us and not on the weakness and fickleness of our faithfulness to him.

Philippians 2:12-13 *"continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose."* This tells us that God is at work within us once we have been saved both to change our will by the prompting of the Holy Spirit and to give us the power to act on that new will. We are not entirely passive however but just need to cooperate with the Holy Spirit and to "work out" all the implications of our salvation in every area of our lives as he leads us. God has given us an awesome gift in salvation of the indwelling of his own Spirit with all the power that implies. The "fear and trembling" in these verses is not talking about terror but about the seriousness and awe with which we should approach living out this wonderful new life God has given us.

Some years ago I got my first rather expensive computer. I was a total novice when it came to IT and knew nothing about how to work a computer. When a friend came to set it up, he said “Hit the enter button” and I said “Which one is that?” I was very aware that there were all kinds of amazing things that this computer could do if only I could learn how to work it but I was also aware that it was very easy to crash it and cause problems (as I soon found out in practice). All this made me approach using the computer with “fear and trembling” as I realised that I had something with huge potential that I could easily mess up if I wasn’t careful. In the new life of salvation, the very power of God is at work to change us and use us as a blessing in this world but the worst enemy of our Christian growth is our own complacency. How do we “work out” our salvation in practice?

Matthew 11:28-30 *“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.”* These are fantastic verses and we have some of them on banners all down the side of our church. Are there times when you find Jesus’ hard and narrow way a strain? When you feel like giving up and that it is all too much? Here is the answer. Let Jesus take the strain.

The picture here is of two oxen being yoked together to pull a plough or of two slaves being yoked together to pull or carry a load. The yoke is the wooden bar across their shoulders that joins them together and enables them to combine their efforts. In such a situation, the stronger, more experienced one would take all the strain and set the pace whilst the weaker one would only have to walk alongside. With oxen pulling a plough, the more experienced one would set the direction to make a straight furrow.

Jesus is telling us to be yoked and joined up with him so that he will take all the strain of the hard and narrow way and he will set the direction for our lives. His yoke is easy and his burden is light and we find rest for our souls because he does all the work and gives us the strength to walk beside him. **Micah 6:8** *“what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.”* If we are finding the Christian life a strain and a burden, we need to ask God to help us learn this. How do we put it into practice in our daily lives?

Galatians 2:20 *“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.”* It really is worth memorising this verse as it summarises so well how we should live the Christian life. The Bible tells us that once we have trusted our lives to Jesus, our old life died with him and we live a new life through his Holy Spirit living in us (see studies on **Purity**) but how do we make this a daily reality? The answer is in this verse where Paul says *“The life I live in the body, I live by faith.”*

We need to recognise that we are not equal to living the way we know Jesus wants us to live and so stop trying to do things our way and instead rely on him. One of the best illustrations of this that I have ever heard is a true story about a Dutch Christian lady called Corrie Ten Boom. She and her family had been discovered hiding Jews from the Nazis during the Second World War and were arrested to be taken off to the concentration camp. Her father and sister died in all this but she survived and after the war, she went to Germany to talk about Christian forgiveness. Having finished speaking one day, a German man came up to her after the service and held out his hand. She recognised that it was one of the guards from the camp.

She had gone there to talk about forgiveness but faced with this man she found that she could not forgive him. She knew that this was wrong and that God wanted her to be able to forgive and so she prayed something like this “Lord Jesus, I cannot forgive this man but when they nailed you to the cross you cried out “Father forgive them for they don’t know what they are doing” and so you please forgive him.” Before she knew what was happening, her hand was out and she was shaking his hand and was able to forgive him from her heart but she knew that was Jesus’ forgiveness because she had been unable to do it on her own.

We cannot maintain our Christian life in our own strength, to always forgive and never hold a grudge, always be patient and kind and rejoice in every circumstance and so on, and so we need to be constantly exercising faith in Jesus by asking him to live through us by the power of his Holy Spirit. The Bible says *“The righteous will live by his faith”* **Habakkuk 2:4** and **Romans 1:17** *“For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: “The righteous will live by faith.”*

Memory verse: Galatians 2:20.

Questions for discussion

What makes you want to give up in the Christian life?

How can we “work out our salvation”?

How can we daily be yoked to Jesus?



LOVE

How should we relate to others?

Jesus teaches us to love everyone but what does this mean in practice? If we are to be filled with the Spirit of Jesus, how would he treat those around us? What would Jesus do if he really had control of our time, skills, money and possessions? How would this transform our relationships?

1 John 3:16 *“This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers.”* Our human ideas of love are too small. To see what it really means we have to look at the cross where God gave up everything for us in physical torment, desperate loneliness and the loss of the eternal love between God the Father and God the Son. We cannot fully understand this now but we can be filled with the same Spirit of Jesus who will lead us with his love, not to die on a cross, but to lay down our time, money, dreams and ambitions to serve others. He also did this for us whilst we were his enemies, **Romans 5:10**.

Luke 6:27-29 *“Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who ill-treat you. If someone strikes you on one cheek, turn to him the other also. If someone takes your cloak, do not stop him from taking your tunic.”* You may say that this is unnatural. Exactly! This is

supernatural love and can only come as we are filled with the Spirit and not living according to human nature any more. There is no way that we can do these things by ourselves as Jesus said, *“apart from me you can do nothing,”* **John 15:5**.

Ephesians 4:32 *“Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.”* God wants us to forgive each other and not hold grudges which linger and fester and later erupt to spoil relationships. He tells us to deal with our anger before the end of the day, **Ephesians 4:26**, and to forgive generously and repeatedly remembering that this is how God forgives us, see **Matthew 18:21-35** and many similar passages.

1 John 3:17-18 *“If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.”* As those who have received the love of God in Christ, we cannot stand idly by and not help a suffering world. If we seek to love others as much as we love ourselves, **Matthew 22:39**, then we need to be as concerned about their needs as our own and use the money and skills God has given us to make a practical difference. Such practical love will make us reconsider every major purchase as to whether we really need it or perhaps the money could be better spent saving lives in the Third World by providing food, clean water or education to those living on the edge of survival.

Another way that Jesus puts this is the golden rule *“Do to others as you would have them do to you”* **Luke 6:31**. Let us think about that. Imagine that you and your family are suddenly transported to be famine victims or street-dwellers in Africa or India and that a similar family there swap over to have all your possessions here. They now have everything you own and you and your family are suffering malnutrition on

the street. What do you want them to do for you? You would not want them to starve or be on the street here. It would be good for their needs to be met but surely you would want them not to indulge in any luxuries or things they do not need so that they could send that money for your family to survive. The command is *“Do to others as you would have them do to you.”* Do we live like that thinking about the needs of others before we recklessly spend money?

Romans 10:1 *“Brothers, my heart’s desire and prayer to God for the Israelites is that they may be saved.”* Here the apostle Paul shares how he longs and prays that his own people might find forgiveness and eternal salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. If we love people then we also will be concerned that they find God’s forgiveness and avoid a lost eternity in hell and so will want to tell them about the Good News about Jesus.

If a deadly pandemic broke out, overwhelming the health system because so many doctors and nurses also caught the disease and the government called on any remaining healthy people to volunteer to distribute an injection that could cure the plague, would we hesitate to give up our time and effort to save lives? Wouldn’t we give every spare moment to trying to save as many people as we could? Well there is a deadly pandemic called sin which results in eternal death, destruction and separation from God’s love in hell. Those of us sinners who have found God’s forgiveness in Christ know the answer to this plague; will we not give up time and effort to share it?

1 Peter 3:15 *“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.”* We are told to always be ready to tell others about Jesus and how they too can have eternal life through trusting in him. We should be careful however to show respect to other people’s beliefs and

backgrounds. The Bible is very clear that the only way to find God's forgiveness is through Jesus' death on the cross for our sins and so trusting in him is the only way to come to God, see **John 14:6**, **Acts 4:12** and **1 Timothy 2:5** etc, but this should not make us arrogant or disrespectful to others. We need to explain gently about God's love and offer of a real relationship through Jesus. We must remember that we are just sinners sharing with other sinners where we can find forgiveness.

1 Corinthians 9:22 *"I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some."* We should not just expect people to wander into church to ask about Jesus but we should go out to them in genuine friendship. Love will try to build a bridge of understanding across to someone who is different by taking an interest in the things that interest them and learning of their background and way of looking at the world. We can then think of ways of explaining God's message of love and forgiveness that they will readily understand and identify with. God himself left the comfort and joy of heaven to come down and identify with us by becoming a human being. His spiritual teaching was usually in simple stories of agricultural life that his listeners could easily relate to. Let us have the same love that crosses over the barriers that exist between different cultures and ethnic groups.

1 Corinthians 2:1-2 *"When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior 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."* Paul was a highly educated man who had been a prominent figure amongst the Jewish religious leadership but he put all his learning aside to preach about Jesus. How encouraging that we do not have to be experts on the whole Bible and have theological degrees in order to share our faith! It is not necessary to know all the answers to every question that someone could ask to share the

simple message of God's love in sending Jesus to die for our sins because it is the Holy Spirit that convicts people of their need of salvation, not our wisdom! God makes his appeal to each person's conscience (their sense of right and wrong, good and evil) and not primarily to the mind or intellectual understanding, **2 Corinthians 4:2** *"by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God."*

If you are nervous about approaching your friend to talk about your faith, you are in good company as the great apostle Paul, who founded churches all over the eastern Mediterranean, says this about how he felt when he started to talk about Jesus in the big city of Corinth, *"I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling."* **1 Corinthians 2:3**. He was actually trembling as he spoke to them and yet God used him to start another church there which became one of the biggest and most influential he had begun. It is God's power that saves people and not our arguments or persuasion or slick presentation.

Matthew 10:19-20 *"But when they arrest you, do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say, for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you."* Although this is talking about being arrested (which may not have happened to you yet for sharing your faith!), it also applies when we are called to account for our faith at other times too. God promises to help us by giving us wisdom and words to say and so we need not be afraid but rather trust him.

1 Thessalonians 2:7-8 *"we were gentle among you, like a mother caring for her little children. We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us."* If God gives

us the privilege to see someone born again of God's Spirit by putting their faith in Jesus, it is as if we have become their parent in Christ. No loving parent has a baby and then abandons them to get by on their own and if we lead a person to faith in Christ, we should do everything we can to show continued care for them as they grow in that new life. It is a great joy and responsibility and helping others in their Christian growth involves sharing our lives by allowing them to really get to know us in the new Christian family, not just teaching. People learn more by watching an example in action than by just being told facts and it has been said that the Christian life is "more caught than taught". If you are still new in the faith, you will benefit by getting alongside and learning from a trustworthy older Christian.

Romans 15:1-2 *"We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves. Each of us should please his neighbour for his good, to build him up."* As we grow in our walk with Jesus, we should make allowances for those who are newer or who have struggles in their lives. We may need to do things differently for the sake of other people's consciences. These verses are in the context described in **chapter 14** of people who still think that they should keep certain rules in the Christian life such as avoiding "unclean foods". They have not understood that our faith in Christ has given us freedom from such rules through dying to the law (see the chapter on **"What are the rules in the Christian life?"** if you are still confused about this) and so they would be going against their conscience to break them and *"if anyone regards something as unclean, then for him it is unclean."* **Romans 14:14.**

In such a case, we should not ride roughshod over someone's sensibilities by doing what they consider wrong in their presence (this may include abstaining from alcohol or from certain activities on a Sunday) but we should maybe gently try

to explain the real situation. We should certainly not become proud of having a greater knowledge of the Bible or condemn others because of their conscience.

Galatians 6:1-2 *“Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted. Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfil the law of Christ.”* Christ’s law is love and we should show love to one another by sharing together the weight of the various problems and troubles that we face. This is a good and practical way to support each other. If someone falls into sin, we should not sit in condemnation of them but try to help them change in a spirit of humility and gentleness realising that we too are prone to temptation.

Philippians 2:2-4 *“being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.”* This describes a love that unites both hearts and minds and enables people to work together with a common aim. The elimination of pride and ambition is helped when we count others better than ourselves. Whatever we know of the sin of others is only from the outside and on the surface but we know our own sin from the inside and can see the full depth of its ugliness. This should help us consider others as better!

Being careful about the needs and interests of others is not especially natural to man but is what God wants of us in our relationships. Paul says later in this chapter that he only really has Timothy who would take a genuine interest in others. What are we like? All this is an excellent recipe for harmonious living and practical love and of course can only be achieved by being filled with the Holy Spirit’s love.

Memory verse: 1 John 3:16.

Questions for discussion

How can we “lay down our lives” for our brothers in practice?

How should we distribute our money, time and energy?

How can you explain the Christian message to a friend?

What kind of things do we need to bear with for the sake of others?



SPIRIT-LED

How can we know God's guidance?

The Bible tells us that God controls all things and that he has planned for us from before the creation of the universe. Our whole lives are in his hands but as a race, mankind has chosen to go our own way. When we come back to God by putting our trust in the Lord Jesus Christ, we give our lives back to him and as his servants we need to seek his will rather than just “go with the flow” drifting through life. God's loving will is going to be the best way forward, as he knows us better than we know ourselves and also sees what is going to happen in the future and so will make better plans than we ever could, but how can we find out what he wants us to do?

When I was coming to the end of my time of training in India, I spent a few days in prayer and fasting to seek what God would have me do next. My experience in India had been very tough and I was not at all sure that I was cut out for this kind of Christian ministry. What did God want me to do in following him? Whilst I was praying about this, I had a very clear vision of a wooded hillside and God said “I'll meet with you there.” I didn't really know what to make of this and waited to see if something else would happen. Nothing did and I finished my time in India.

Back in Europe, Operation Mobilisation (OM) had their month-long annual conference for the first time in southern Germany (it was usually held in Belgium). As I had already attended quite a few similar conferences, I took time out to pray walking in the nearby hills. One day as I was doing this, I came across a place that looked just like the vision I had in India. I remembered that God had said that he would meet with me there and so I kept on going back there to pray day after day.

I had been asked if I would lead the OM team working amongst Asians in Coventry, UK, but I did not have the financial support that was necessary. This suited me just fine as I did not think that I was a natural leader and certainly did not feel up to leading anything at that time. As our policy was never to ask for funds and there were only a few weeks before the deadline of the end of the conference, I thought that I would be going home but kept going to the wooded spot in the hills to pray.

At the end of that month, quite miraculously, I received the exact amount of money that I needed for my support from an anonymous source! I knew that this was from the Lord and that, although I felt totally weak and inadequate for the task, I could not refuse to take up the post in Coventry. I really did not want to do it but God had clearly led me and it turned out to be a time of personal restoration and a turning point in my emerging Christian ministry.

Ephesians 2:10 *“For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”* God has a specific plan for each of our lives and it is an exciting thought that God has already prepared things that he wants us to do. Each of us as human beings is unique and this means there are good works that God has planned for us

that will not be done in the particular way that he first envisioned unless we do them!

Romans 12:1-2 *“Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer 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.”* Sacrifices in the Old Testament involved killing the animal and burning it on the altar as an offering to God. Here we are urged to offer ourselves as living sacrifices and the idea is of putting all that we are and everything we have at God’s disposal for him to use as he wishes. This is linked to finding out God’s will in our lives.

It is not an easy thing to offer everything to God and to really mean it. God’s will involves sacrificial love and putting others first and is hard for our selfish human nature which likes comfort and getting our own way. Our instincts for security, pleasure, self-preservation and pride may make us reluctant to do what we know God is asking us to do. Even Moses did not jump at the chance to fulfil God’s plan for rescuing the Israelites from slavery in Egypt because he knew he would be risking his life to go to talk to Pharaoh. There is a story about the apostle Thomas which says that, after all the other apostles had gone off to various places to spread the gospel, he was praying to ask God where he should go. He prayed that he would go anywhere that God would send him except please let it not be India. The answer came back that he should go to India! And he did take the gospel to southern India where he is buried.

We may think that we have put things into God’s hands but then when he asks us to do something we don’t like, we

refuse or when he looks like taking a treasured item away, we snatch it back again. The more precious a thing is to us, the harder it is to really let God take control—think of Abraham being asked to sacrifice his son!—and it is not only things but our own plans, dreams and ambitions.

When I left Operation Mobilisation, I applied to do Asian ministry in Southampton and Bristol but received no replies for many weeks. I began to wonder if I was supposed to carry on in Christian work and as I did so, I realised that this was something that I wanted to do. After all the struggles in India, I found myself getting annoyed at the thought that it could all have been for nothing. Finally, after much prayer, I got to the point where I could surrender to whatever God wanted for me and prayed, “Dear Lord, even if you want me to just sit quietly in a church pew each week, I will worship and serve you in that way.” Immediately, a reply came from Southampton calling me to look into Asian ministry there!

Are you sure that you are allowing God control of every aspect of your life? If not, then this is something to pray about. Part of the reason it usually takes time to receive God’s guidance in prayer is because it takes time for us to get to the point when we are really willing to do whatever God tells us to do. There is no point in God telling us his plan for us if we are not going to be willing to follow it!

Another reason for delay is to give time for our minds to be transformed. As we seek God in prayer and learn of his ways in the Bible, the Holy Spirit is at work to change our thinking and renew our minds into the image of Jesus. This takes time but as God changes us to think more in tune with his love and compassion for those around us and less of our selfish desires and ambitions, we are better able to discern and test what God’s will is for us. The human heart is very cunning and we need to

be on our guard against the tendency to want to justify what we had already decided we wanted to do as “God’s guidance.”

When we really do find God’s will for us, however, it will be “*good, pleasing and perfect.*” It will be morally good and loving, noble and right, it will fulfil who we are and what we were made for, as God knows our strengths and weaknesses better than we do, and it will be perfect, fitting us like a glove with all the circumstances slotting into place (this does not mean that there won’t be any problems, however).

Psalm 119:105 “*Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path.*” We should always check any proposed course of action to see if it fits in with God’s word which is a general guide for Christian conduct. God would never lead us to do anything that contradicts his own word, for example the Bible is very clear that we should not marry a non-Christian, **2 Corinthians 6:14-18**, and no amount of “favourable circumstances” should lead us otherwise. The Bible does not of course deal with specific situations and the details of our personal circumstances such as what career to pursue etc.

James 1:5 “*If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him.*” We need to pray to ask God for wisdom to know his will for our lives and to choose between particular options. God gives generously to everyone without finding fault and so we don’t have to reach a “particular level of holiness” before God will answer our prayers (as long as we are not determined to continue sinning). Since he has plans for us, God will be eager to reveal them to us when we are ready. If there is a delay in receiving an answer to our prayers, it is not because God is reluctant but because the time is not yet right.

Read **Judges 6:36-40**. God can confirm his will through miraculous circumstances and it is good to look for this

confirmation of what God wants. Here Gideon asks God to reassure him that he will use him to save the Israelites from their enemies by performing two miracles. One night he asks for a woollen fleece that he places on the threshing-floor to be covered in dew whilst all the ground is dry and then the next night, he asks for this to be reversed with the fleece dry and the ground wet. This happens and Gideon has the faith and courage to go on and obey God by defeating Israel's enemies with a much reduced army.

By God's grace, he has always confirmed his will for me by some miraculous circumstance (you can read many examples in **"Light out of Darkness"** which is the story of 25 years of Asian ministry in Southampton) and if I don't get such a confirmation then I wait and carry on praying. Around February 1995, I began praying about the possibility of moving from Southampton to Coventry. Although everything seemed to be humanly right, with the work in Southampton established and people in Coventry who were eager for me to come, there was no supernatural confirmation from God and so I waited.

In September, I decide to spend a week in Coventry praying for God's guidance. Whilst I was there, I received a phone call that Vincent Nurmahi, a key elder in the Asian Christian Fellowship in Southampton, had had a stroke. I knew that this was a sign that it was not the time for me to leave Southampton and indeed, by January 1996, I had been diagnosed with a serious, progressive disease which knocked me out of action for most of that year whilst the wife of one of the key people in Coventry was found to have cancer. If I had moved to Coventry in mid-1995 without waiting for the Lord's confirmation, then, with Vincent disabled by his stroke, it would have left a serious gap in the ministry in Southampton and I would have had to abandon the new venture shortly afterwards when I became ill. It is good to wait for the Lord!

Acts 13:2 *“While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, ‘Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them’.”* God can lead us through visions and prophecies either directly or through others, especially in times of prayer and fasting as in this case, but we should test everything, **1 Thessalonians 5:19-21**.

Proverbs 15:22 *“Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed.”* It is good commonsense to seek the advice of older Christians and leaders and I have always tried to have an older Christian (or eventually, with advancing years, a contemporary) that I could meet with regularly to discuss spiritual issues and pray together. It is a good confirmation if two or three people come to the same conclusion independently from spending time seeking God.

Colossians 3:15 *“Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace.”* God is a God of peace and he does not want us to worry about the future and finding his guidance but to pray and trust him in it all. If despite all other signs, we still lack peace about a particular course of action that we have been praying about, then it is best to wait and continue praying about it until we find that peace.

We need to persevere in our quest to find God’s long-term purpose for our lives and it usually takes years to grow into Christian maturity and discover the main way God wants us to serve him and others (even the great apostle Paul had been a Christian about 12 years before God called him to his main ministry in Antioch and missionary journeys throughout the eastern Mediterranean). There is always plenty to do in God’s service meanwhile and when we do find God’s major plan for our lives, we need to pray for grace to be willing to be obedient to what God wants. If we do this, it is a tremendous blessing

and peace to know that we are doing what God prepared for us and fulfilling what we were created to be.

Memory verse: Romans 12:2.

Questions for discussion

What things are most likely to prevent us from finding God's will for our lives?

What general guidelines can we find in the Bible for deciding about our future direction?

What kind of issues warrant spending time seeking God's will and waiting for a confirmation before we go ahead and act?



PURITY

What happens when we sin as Christians?

We have learnt that those who have put their trust in the forgiveness and salvation paid for by Jesus Christ on the cross will not suffer punishment in hell for any sins they commit. Does this mean that there are absolutely no consequences when Christians do things that are wrong? What about those who wander off and end up living a life consumed with ambition and selfish gain? Of course, there is always a possibility that they had never really given their lives in faith into Jesus' hands. Many people go to church and associate with Christians without ever having made a solid commitment of putting their faith in Jesus as the Lord and Saviour of their lives. This can be especially true of those born into the Christian community who can just assume that they are Christians without coming to a personal faith. But what about those who truly belong to God and have received his Spirit and new life?

1 John 1:8-9 *"If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness."* Firstly this tells us that all Christians still sin and we would be deceiving ourselves if we thought otherwise. You only have to remember the commands to love God with all that you are, **Matthew 22:37**, and to love each other as

Jesus loved us, **John 13:34**, to realise that we are sinning all the time by falling short of these standards of love. You are not a failed Christian because you still do things wrong and the other Christians are still sinners too, including this author. It says that he will “*purify us from all unrighteousness*” and so this means that the only unforgivable sin, **Mark 3:28-29**, is to refuse to come to God for forgiveness at all, (in the Pharisees’ case because they claimed Jesus was evil).

There was once a Christian preacher who was claiming that God had made him perfect and that he no longer did anything wrong. Someone invited him for dinner and as they sat at the table, the host unexpectedly threw some water over his “perfect” guest who immediately became angry! It is quite easy to test our reactions but few people would ever claim to have achieved perfection. We are usually all too aware of our failures and when we are convicted by the Holy Spirit in our hearts of something we have done wrong, we should acknowledge and turn from it so that God can cleanse us of it and continue to change us.

When I was a Roman Catholic, every few weeks I used to say confession to a priest trying to remember all the things that I had done wrong since the last confession. As those who have been brought into a living relationship with God through faith in Jesus, he is the only mediator that we need and we should keep our relationship with him clear by turning from any sin as soon as he brings it to our attention. However many times we have fallen, God will always forgive and pick us up, **Matthew 18:21-22**, and he always welcomes us back as the father with his wayward son in Jesus’ parable, **Luke 15:11-24**. If however God convicts us that something is wrong and we still want to hang onto it, it will make our relationship with him strained and distant. We are still saved but God’s Holy Spirit within us will be deeply saddened, **Ephesians 4:29-30**.

2 Peter 1:5-8 *“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, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, 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.”* If we languish in sin rather than pursuing holiness, we will fail to bear fruit for the glory of God. Our characters will not reflect that of Jesus and we may bring shame to his name as people conclude that our behaviour represents the result of our Christian faith. We will not be those who shine with the light of God’s love in this world but those who become a stumbling block and barrier to others finding faith in Jesus.

Psalm 66:18 *“If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened.”* A parent asks their child to tidy up their bedroom but they don’t do it. A little later, the ice-cream van comes along the street and the child asks for an ice-cream. The parent is likely to say “First go and tidy your room, then you can have an ice-cream”. Similarly with God our father, we should not expect him to answer our prayers if we are deliberately disobeying him and refusing to turn from something that we know is wrong.

Hebrews 12:6 *“the Lord disciplines those he loves”* tells us that God will introduce various hardships into our lives to keep us from sinning. Sin is harmful to us and God wants to keep us from it because he loves us in the same way that a parent might give a toddler a gentle smack to prevent them from putting their fingers in the electric socket. *“God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness”* **Hebrews 12:10.**

One young man in our fellowship had been drifting away from following God for about two years when he was involved

in a serious car crash due to an epileptic fit. The car swerved off the road and mounted the pavement, just missing a man by the side of the road and some people by a bus stop. Amazingly, although he was not wearing a seat belt, he had no cuts, bruises or whiplash and no-one else was hurt either. Two weeks later, he was reading the Bible when he read the verse “*Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you*” **John 5:14**. This gripped him to the core and was the beginning of turning his life back to serving the Lord.

God in his mercy will allow such things to happen to keep us from “*something worse*”. If we persist in ignoring God’s warnings to us then we risk losing out forever on the treasure we could have had in heaven, **Matthew 6:19-20**. The Bible is very clear that there are rewards in heaven for walking faithfully with the Lord and that we can lose those rewards if we do not do this. Receiving God’s forgiveness and being born of His Spirit are just the start of the Christian life. Some people seem to have the attitude that once we have been saved and forgiven and have our “ticket to heaven”, that is the end of the story but it is just the beginning. Life is so much more than just being born!

1 Corinthians 3:11-15 “*For no-one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, his 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 man’s work. If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames.*” Paul says here that the foundation of our Christian lives is of course Jesus—the rock on which we build—but we need to build on that foundation carefully because our work will be tested on the Day of Judgement by fire, which represents God’s

holiness (think of the burning bush where God met with Moses and the tongues of fire that came upon the apostles when they were filled with the Holy Spirit), **Hebrews 12:28-29**.

We can build with gold, silver or costly stones, which would all withstand fire, or with wood, hay or straw, which would all burn. In other words, we can live our Christian lives being filled with God's Spirit and led by him into good deeds done in his strength and love, which will all receive a reward in heaven, or we can live in our own strength with our own aims of success, comfort and pleasure. It is only things done in the power of the Holy Spirit, which we can only achieve through faith and not by our own efforts, that will survive the test of the standard of God's holiness and everything else will be burned up (even seemingly good things done through our human nature as these will be tainted with sin such as pride or self-satisfaction).

If we live as Christians, ignoring the prompting of God's Spirit, for our own selfish agenda of personal wealth, happiness and comfort, we will still be saved because Jesus died for our sins but we will lose out eternally on the things of real value. All the possessions we so valued and all the achievements we were so proud of will disappear and we will have to face having let down the one who loved us so much. Imagine arriving in heaven and Jesus saying "I had so many things that I wanted you to do and so much that I wanted to give you but you were more interested in serving your career, your family and money". That is not something that I want to hear!

Galatians 6:7-8 *"Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life."* This was written to Christians. Let us take the warning. You cannot

mess around with the living God whose holiness is like a consuming fire. Sin is always destructive and we will reap whatever we sow. A non-Christian sows eternally to human nature and reaps eternal destruction, **2 Thessalonians 1:8-9**, whilst a Christian sows eternally to the Spirit and reaps eternal life, but as Christians, whatever we sow to our old human nature will also be destroyed and not make it into heaven. Sow a thought, reap an action; sow an action, reap a habit; sow a habit, reap a lifestyle.

Jesus said that eternal life was not primarily about just living forever but about knowing God, **John 17:3**, and as we sow to the Spirit, we walk through life with Jesus and get to know him. God has no favourites and wants us all to be equally close to him but we limit how well we get to know him by our own choices. The worst enemy of our Christian progress is not the devil, who cannot do anything that God does not allow, but us who can choose to ignore God's Spirit and continue to live our own way.

In extreme cases, God may call sinning Christians home to heaven as with Ananias and Sapphira who publicly lied to God, **Acts 5:1-11**, and some in the Corinthian church who were disrespecting the Lord's supper, **1 Corinthians 11:27-32**. If parents see their children misbehaving in the street, they are likely to say, "If you're going to behave like that, you had better come inside!" and God, who controls every breath we take, sometimes does the same and people die.

All of this should convince us that sin is not to be taken lightly and we should never be complacent about it. Let us look at an example from the life of King David. Read **2 Samuel 12:1-14**. David had been anointed as the future king of Israel when he was still a shepherd boy and God saved him from King Saul's attempts to kill him and made him king over a

larger kingdom than his predecessor but after all this, he committed adultery with a woman called Bathsheba and arranged for her husband to be killed in battle by being abandoned to the enemy. David was a man of great faith who had won many battles through trusting in God's help and who had been inspired to write many psalms of praise but he still fell into this serious sin.

This passage describes how God sent the prophet Nathan to confront David about his sin. David thought that people did not know what he had done but of course God knew and sent Nathan to him. In fact, what David thought was secret, the whole world knows about 3,000 years later! Never think that sin can remain hidden as Jesus said that everything that is concealed will be made known, **Matthew 10:26**.

In a very dramatic fashion, Nathan tells David a story about a rich man who kills a poor man's pet lamb to feed a visitor and when David has become outraged at this, Nathan says "*You are the man!*" God then proceeds to list all the things that he has done for David and says "*if all this had been too little, I would have given you even more.*" His plan for David's future is not going to include the blessings it might have done and he will miss out on what God would have given him if he had not done this. Sin will cause God to hold back blessings that he would otherwise have planned for us.

There would also be consequences because of David's sin. The son born of that adultery would die, there would never be peace in David's lifetime and someone close to David would do the same thing openly in the future. This happens years later when one of David's sons rapes his step-sister and her brother, Absalom, kills him in revenge and then runs away from his father, David. Absalom ends up leading a successful rebellion against his father and when he has chased David

from Jerusalem, his advisor says that he needs to do something to convince the people that he has completely broken with his father so that they do not change their allegiance back to him. He advises him to set up a tent on the roof of the palace and to sleep with his father's concubines in it so that all the people know what he has done. He does this fulfilling what God had said.

The consequences that flow from David's adultery fit the offence as it is lust that sets it all in motion and Absalom ends up committing the same sin in front of the whole nation. All this happens even though God forgives David immediately he confesses and turns from his sin, **verse 13**. In the same way, there are consequences in this world to our sins even though God forgives us, for example, if you kill someone they remain dead, if you get caught robbing a bank, you will go to jail and if you have a child outside of marriage, there is still a responsibility to provide and care for that child. Even lesser evils like unkind words and gossip, lies or bad habits have their lasting effects. God is gracious and merciful and helps us to put things right but we cannot undo the past. So the better way is not to do it in the first place!

David's deep brokenness and regret over what he had done can be read in **Psalm 51** where he talks about having lost the joy of God's salvation and prays for God to give him a pure heart and a renewed spirit. He remained God's man and God allowed him to continue as king despite his awful sin but his life was never the same again and the consequences were being played out years later. In this account of one of the most dreadful things a person can do, adultery and murder, God has given us a strong example of the destructive consequences of sin and so, by the grace of God, let us strive to live a holy life in the power of the Holy Spirit through faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Memory verse: 1 John 1:9.

Questions for discussion

What do gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay and straw represent in building our Christian lives?

What blessings can we miss out on through sin?

Why is sowing to our sinful nature as Christians described as “mocking God” in **Galatians 6**?

How does sin affect our relationships with others?



PRAYER

How can we spend extended time in prayer?

If we want to see significant breakthroughs in our own Christian lives and in what we seek to do to serve the Lord, there will be no alternative to spending extended amounts of time in serious prayer. We live in an age of instant answers and short attention spans. Everything is packaged to provide our needs as quickly as possible, from instant coffee and microwave meals which are ready in minutes or even seconds to information neatly presented on the internet, but there is no such thing as “instant spirituality”. We have to build on our relationship with God and grow into Christian maturity throughout our entire lifetime, **Ephesians 4:13**.

It has been a great blessing to me personally to take out at least one day per month to seek God’s guidance and strength in prayer. These have often been like oases of spiritual refreshment in troubled times and a much-needed opportunity to refocus on God rather than whatever was going on at the time. This eventually got taken up in our fellowship and further developed in weeks of prayer (six evening prayer meetings in different homes of fellowship members) twice a year, occasional all-night prayer meetings and an annual “pray-away day” seeking God’s guidance for our personal lives and for the ongoing ministry out in the nearby New Forest.

If all this seems to be a bit daunting or difficult, let us remember that God has promised to bless those who seek him and that there are rewards for spending time in prayer as he constantly assures us in the Bible in such verses as **Matthew 7:7-11**, **Hebrews 11:6**, **2 Chronicles 7:14**, **Hosea 6:3** and many more. If we really believe these promises we will not be reluctant to persevere in prayer and to take every opportunity we can to discover the blessings God has for us. Do you really believe? Let us also look at Jesus' example.

Mark 1:35 *"Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed."* You may have heard of the Christian jargon term "quiet time" which simply refers to taking time out from the busyness of each day to get alone with God, read his word and pray. Jesus himself, who was God in human form and totally one with the Father, felt the human need to get away to a quiet place early in the morning to seek God before the day's activities. If Jesus obviously thought that this was so important that he would put himself out to seek a quiet place where he could pray before anyone else was up and about to disturb him, how is it that we often think that we can live the Christian life so casually without seeking God each day or relegate our time with him to a hurried few minutes crammed in amongst so many other distractions?

It is good to set aside time to pray each day (the Lord's prayer assumes this by asking *"give us today our daily bread"*) and how much time we give to this is a measure of our true priorities and beliefs about what really matters in life. We can be busy with so many things but none of it will achieve anything of spiritual value without the power of God's Spirit at work in us as Jesus said, *"apart from me you can do nothing,"* **John 15:5**. An hour would not be an unreasonable amount of time to spend in prayer with the living God each day but if this

seems too difficult, why not start with half an hour or even less and see how things go as something is certainly better than nothing. We do need to exercise some self-discipline in this however so that we do not let it drop after a while.

You may be running all kinds of programmes but when you switch your computer off, it will revert to its default settings when it boots up again. The default setting of our human nature is sin and when we “boot up again” in the morning, we can easily leave this in place and live life our way once more. If we operate on “automatic”, we will automatically do the wrong thing and we need to be filled with the Holy Spirit each day. There are many encouragements in the Bible to stay awake, watch and be alert so that we can do God’s will, for example **Matthew 25:1-13**, **Mark 13:35-37** and **Ephesians 5:14-16**, and these all refer to not allowing our old nature to reassert its control over us by failing to trust in Christ’s indwelling strength.

So first thing in the morning is a good time to spend with God as it focuses our mind on him, allowing him to speak to us as we read the Bible. It also gives us the opportunity to seek him for the strength to do his will in all the activities of the day ahead. If there are things that are worrying us, we can commit them into God’s care and leave them in his hands and we can ask him to fill our hearts with his presence all through the day so that we will be filled with his Spirit and have his words, wisdom and compassion in every situation we face.

Luke 6:12 *“One of those days Jesus went out to a mountainside to pray, and he spent the night praying to God.”* Here we see Jesus spending a whole night in prayer before the crucial decision of choosing the twelve apostles (including of course Judas who would betray him). As a man, his human mind could not hold all the information in the universe and he needed to ask God the Father his will for the twelve and for working

out God's plan in choosing Judas to be one of them. Again it would be good to spend even a whole night seeking God for his will for vital decisions in our lives so that we get them right. It is usually against our human nature to do what God wants and we need to pray for the will and the strength to obey. We also find Jesus praying through the night in the Garden of Gethsemane on his last night on earth when his disciples fell asleep even after he had asked them to pray with him more than once. Would we have been any different in their place? How often will we watch in prayer with Jesus?

If you are planning to spend a night or a day in prayer then it would be good to think ahead how you are going to divide the time. For some it will help to get out and about. Jesus often went to a hillside where you get a different perspective looking down on God's creation. Walking in country lanes and fields or even a city park has often helped me to remember that God keeps all of nature going and so he is surely able to help me with my problems. Others might want to stay in and listen to some Christian music or worship songs as a means of coming more into God's presence. It will certainly be a help and mutual encouragement to spend part or all of the time praying together in a group.

A whole day or night might seem like a very long time to spend praying but it can be divided into different sections. Firstly we can praise God and remember who he is and his promises from the Bible. Time can be given to praying for personal guidance, asking God to speak into our circumstances. We can pray for our own needs and for the needs of others and for situations that could worry us in the future. Sometimes we might pray whilst out walking or there may be times of silently waiting on God pouring out our hearts in cries without words.

The devil will put all kinds of troubles and distractions our way to try to stop us praying because he knows that it is prayer that releases the power of God in our lives and we need to be determined to make prayer a priority or we will be persuaded that we need to spend time dealing with “practical issues”. Countless times I have not felt like going to a prayer meeting but have returned home rejoicing in how God has met with us. We can expect that spending a day or night in prayer will drag but are constantly surprised at how the time seems to flash by so quickly.

Matthew 4:2 *“After fasting for forty days and forty nights, he was hungry.”* At the start of his ministry, Jesus goes into the desert to spend this extended period in prayer and fasting. He is severely tempted in this time and it is often as we set out to do something for God that we face fierce temptation and opposition right at the beginning. In this spiritual war, our enemy tries to knock us out of the fight before we can do any damage to his cause. If you have not noticed this yet, watch the next time you set out in faith to do something new in God’s service. Don’t be discouraged if trouble and temptation to give up come but battle through in prayer and the devil will go away. If the Master needed to do this can we, his servants, expect to do anything less? It is worth spending a lot of time in prayer, sometimes even over a period of preparatory years like Paul, **Galatians 1:15-18**, before venturing out to serve God in a new way. And what is the point of fasting?

Matthew 6:17-18 *“when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.”* Jesus assumes that his disciples will fast because he says “when” you fast, not if. He also says that it should be done secretly, not seen as a badge of “super-spirituality”, and that it has its own reward from God.

There are no rules to Christian fasting and some simply miss a meal whilst others fast for a day or several days. Do not fast if you have a medical condition that requires regular food and there is no need to feel bad about this as God of course understands and is looking on the heart not outward appearances. Christians usually drink liquids when we fast for an extended period as more than a few days without water can be dangerous. Some people fast from watching television or abstain from chocolate for a certain period and quite often the money saved by fasting is given to charity to help the poor and needy. Whatever way you choose to fast, it is the intention of the heart that is important and not the details of how you choose to do it.

Fasting does seem to “raise the spiritual stakes” in prayer, but why? In trying to understand the spiritual significance of fasting, imagine that someone you love was very ill in hospital and you go to their bedside to pray for them because you are so concerned. Meanwhile a friend phones to invite you out for a meal. Would you go? You would probably be so concerned for your sick loved one that you would not feel like eating at all and so would decline to go to the meal. Similarly, if we are so concerned about finding out God’s will for our lives and getting the strength to obey him and really love those in need around us, then we will often not want to eat and would rather pray and fast to see things change.

It is in extended times of prayer and fasting that God can direct us to his call on our lives and what he wants us to do for him, for example **Acts 13:1-3**, **Nehemiah 1 and 2**, or he can reveal mysteries and prophecies for the future, for example **Daniel 9**. It is also a duty of love to pray for the people around us and a sin to neglect this as we learn in **1 Samuel 12:23** *“far be it from me that I should sin against the LORD by failing to pray for you.”*

Finally read Paul's prayer for the believers at Ephesus in **Ephesians 3:16-21**. He is running out of words as he tries to describe the extent of God's love which is available in Christ to all believers. He says that such love is beyond human intellectual knowledge but just has to be experienced and that we can be filled with all the fullness of God! What a concept and how that would change each one of us! He goes on to say that God is able to do far more in us and in the wider church fellowship than anything we could ask or even imagine. Now I can imagine quite a lot and so I find this promise "mind-blowing". Whatever way you can think of God blessing is nothing compared to what he can do! Do you believe it? If you do then think again of Jesus' words, *"Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you."* If that does not get us excited to fast and pray to lay hold of these promises then I suspect nothing will.

Memory verse: Ephesians 3:20.

Questions for discussion

What has helped or hindered you in spending time with God each day?

What would you spend a day or night praying for?

What can you imagine God doing for you?

What priority should prayer be given in the Christian life?

