Sermons

Volume One

Genesis – John

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Sermons

Volume One

Genesis – John

Genesis 4. Cain and Abel

I thought we'd look today at some very early history. It's important we understand that this story of Cain and Abel was real history. A lot of people today suggest that the early chapters of Genesis are just myths. The events didn't really happen. They're just another fantasy Creation story, the kind every ancient civilisation had. We're far more enlightened now. We now know everything started from a big bang billions of years ago. I suggest that's far more of a fantasy Creation story than just taking the plain words of Scripture.

Another thing that puts a lot of people off taking these early passages of Genesis seriously, is the length of time people lived. In chapter 5, we see that Adam lived until he was 930, Seth, his son lived until he was 912, and so on. And people think that's silly, because we don't live that long today. We see people today living to 70 or 80 years old, and we assume it's always been like that. But we don't actually know.

Scientists are always speculating about things they can never possibly measure. They only measure what they can see now, and extrapolate backwards in time to produce their theories. In time, they observe white moths changing into black moths, and conclude that, given enough time, fish can change into men. But that just doesn't follow. They don't know. None of us knows. If we're going to know anything about times long ago, it has to be revealed to us by God Himself. And that's exactly what He's done in the Bible.

There've always been people who scoff at the Bible's account of things:

2 Peter 3:3,4
There shall come in the last days scoffers, walking after their own lusts, and saying, Where is the promise of his coming? for since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of the creation.

The first two humans, Adam and Eve, were created by God and given a commandment:

Genesis 2:17
But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.

They ate of the tree and broke the commandment. So why didn't God strike them dead immediately? Well, He did. They died spiritually, straight after eating the fruit. They suddenly no longer had the communion with God that they'd had before. But their physical death was delayed for many centuries. Why? Because God was being gracious to them. And He's gracious to every one of us as well.

Whether we realise it or not, we're in the same condition. We're all born dead spiritually. Naturally, we don't know any other way. We don't know God. We don't want to know God. We're born with no higher thought than to live for ourselves and our own desires. And, we're given 70 or 80 years of life in this world before we die physically too. Every second on this earth is a gift from God. And we ought to be thankful to Him for everything we have been given.

[1] And Adam knew Eve his wife; and she conceived, and bare Cain, and said, I have gotten a man from the LORD. [2] And she again bare his brother Abel….

So, Adam and Eve start to fulfil God's original commandment to "*be fruitful and multiply,*" and they had two sons, Cain, the firstborn, and Abel. They did have daughters as well, but the inheritance goes down the male line, so that's all that's recorded. We know that, because by v.17 Cain had a wife. Where did she come from? She could only have been Adam and Eve's daughter or possibly Abel's daughter (but that's unlikely). There was nobody else around.

It's not until the Law came in Moses' day, 2,500 years later, that we're now forbidden to marry our immediate relatives. Even Abraham married his half-sister, which would have been disallowed by Moses' law. In those early days, it was perfectly lawful to marry close relatives. That's another thing that maybe puts people off taking the early chapters of Genesis seriously.

….And Abel was a keeper of sheep, but Cain was a tiller of the ground.

Both Abel and Cain worked. They earned a living. They didn't just sit at home scrounging off their parents. They went out and worked. It's God's plan for us all to be busy, to do something useful with our lives, as much as we're able. And not waste it.

Neither Cain nor Abel's occupations were sinful. Both were quite legitimate things to do for a living. Cain followed his father's occupation, tilling the ground. And Abel kept sheep.

But what actually was the purpose of keeping sheep? Before the flood, which was 1500 years later, all men were vegans:

Genesis 1:29
And God said, Behold, I have given you every herb bearing seed, which is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree, in the which is the fruit of a tree yielding seed; to you it shall be for meat.

It was only after the flood that God allowed men to eat animal flesh:

Genesis 9:3
Every moving thing that liveth shall be meat for you; even as the green herb have I given you all things.

Abel couldn't have been keeping sheep for food. Not even milk. There's no mention of milk as food before the flood. And there was no need for wool either. Not so long ago, Adam and Eve had been running about naked. The outside temperature must have been warm enough to allow that. They didn't need woollen clothes for warmth. They were only covered after the fall, to hide their shame. Only after the flood did we begin to have extremes of temperature:

Genesis 8:22
While the earth remaineth, seedtime and harvest, and cold and heat, and summer and winter, and day and night shall not cease.

So, meat, milk and wool, before the flood, were pretty useless commodities. So, what was the point of keeping sheep? That's what

Cain must have been thinking to himself. Cain must have thought how practical and useful he was being, producing food, and continuing his father's family business. Abel, on the other hand, was rearing sheep, which, to Cain, were good for nothing. Why was Abel rearing sheep? Was he stupid? There's only one thing that sheep would have been useful for in that early society. Sacrifice.

Cain and Abel would both have learned from their parents the need for the shedding of blood to take away sin. It's hinted at when, after Adam and Eve had eaten the forbidden fruit, God covered them with skins. That presupposes the killing of animals:

Genesis 3:21
Unto Adam also and to his wife did the LORD God make coats of skins, and clothed them.

God could've made grass skirts to cover them. He could've accepted the aprons of fig leaves that they'd made themselves. But He didn't. He slew animals, to show them the need for sacrifice. And that's an important principle we need to understand:

Hebrews 9:22
Without the shedding of blood there is no remission [of sin.]

This is a very important principle.

[3] And in process of time it came to pass, that Cain brought of the fruit of the ground an offering unto the LORD. [4] And Abel, he also brought of the firstlings of his flock and of the fat thereof….

Cain knew that God required an offering. His parents had taught him that. But, rather than bringing a blood sacrifice, he offered some of the fruit of the ground he'd produced. He was proud of his crops. He wanted to boast to God (and to men) how he'd been far more useful than Abel. You can tell by this that he didn't take God seriously. He didn't even bother taking the first-fruits, or the best of his crops. He just grabbed any old handful of the fruit of the ground and offered it. But Abel brought the first and the best of his sheep for his offering to God. And we should put God first in our lives too:

Matthew 6:33
But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.

….And the LORD had respect unto Abel and to his offering: [5] But unto Cain and to his offering he had not respect….

To Cain's surprise, it was Abel's offering which God accepted, and not his own.

….And Cain was very wroth, and his countenance fell.

So Cain got angry. But he'd got no excuse. He'd been taught from his parents the need for a blood sacrifice to take away sin. What he should've done is sold the best of his crops to Abel in return for a sheep to offer to the Lord. That's what Abel was in the business of providing. But in his heart, Cain thought religion was a waste of time. He only acknowledged God's existence to please his parents. But then, remarkably, God came and actually spoke to him:

[6] And the LORD said unto Cain, Why art thou wroth? and why is thy countenance fallen? [7] If thou doest well, shalt thou not be accepted? and if thou doest not well, sin lieth at the door. And unto thee shall be his desire, and thou shalt rule over him.

The Lord didn't punish Cain at this point. He simply gave Cain a warning about sin. If he would flee from sin and do well, he would still be accepted. But if he gave in to sin, then it would end up having dominion over him. Just by God giving him a warning is an act of grace. There was still hope for him.

That's a warning to us today. We're all sinners by nature, spiritually dead. Sin is always lying at our door. It's so easy for us to give in to sin. It's pleasant to our senses. It's easy just to live our lives for our own sinful pleasures. We can't see God, so why bother with Him? Yet, even though we're in such a desperate state, God still offers hope. But it involves repentance and following Him.

Before Adam and Eve fell, they'd had a close relationship with God. But now, that intimacy had been lost. God had forgiven their sin, he'd provided a sacrifice, but their relationship would never be the same as before. Now, they no longer had such direct access to Him. Now, they could only come before God through the sacrifices. Cain had never known a relationship with God at all. The only time God did speak to him was here, to tell him off. So all he saw of his parent's religion, was an outward ritual. And he thought it a complete waste of time.

Cain was the next generation down from Adam. Today, we're now three or four generations removed from a generation that at least went to church, and had heard about the things of God. Today, when people think of "church," the only thing they think about is the outward ritual, and it means nothing to them. How many of the younger generation today know about anything about true religion? About God? About the Bible? About Jesus Christ? There's a tremendous need today to wake people up to spiritual things, to introduce the Bible to them, to tell them of Jesus Christ and how He can change them.

[8] And Cain talked with Abel his brother: and it came to pass, when they were in the field, that Cain rose up against Abel his brother, and slew him.

Cain didn't heed the Lord's warning. He gave in to his sinful nature. Sin had the final dominion over him, and he killed his brother.

[9] And the LORD said unto Cain, Where is Abel thy brother? And he said, I know not: Am I my brother's keeper?

Did Cain really think that killing his brother would solve all his problems, and that God wouldn't know what he'd done? Yet so many people in the world today behave in exactly the same way. They openly commit sin and carry on doing it, and think that by behaving that way, they've defeated God in some way. But one day, there's going to be judgment:

Matthew 12:36
….every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment.

2 Corinthians 5:10
For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that every one may receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad.

[10] And he said, What hast thou done? the voice of thy brother's blood crieth unto me from the ground.

God knew exactly what Cain had done. We can't hide anything from God. And this time Cain does get punished. After the flood, God brought in the death penalty for murder:

Genesis 9:6
Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed: for in the image of God made he man.

But God, still in His mercy, doesn't punish Cain by death here, but by something else:

[11] And now art thou cursed from the earth, which hath opened her mouth to receive thy brother's blood from thy hand; [12] When thou tillest the ground, it shall not henceforth yield unto thee her strength; a fugitive and a vagabond shalt thou be in the earth.

Cain was given a curse that stopped him from making his living. There was already a curse on the ground from Adam's sin, and now it was made even worse for Cain. Wherever and whenever Cain tried to plant anything in future, God made sure the ground wouldn't produce. He'd lost his livelihood and was destined to be a fugitive and a vagabond, a wanderer, for the rest of his life.

[13] And Cain said unto the LORD, My punishment is greater than I can bear.

The punishment was so merciful in that he hadn't been killed, yet Cain continued to complain at God. He'd been so attached to his work in this world, that when it was taken away from him, he couldn't cope any more. It's a God-given thing to earn a living, and we should do our work well. But if ever it becomes so important to us that we can't live without it, we've given it too high a priority.

We ought to have far more concern for our spiritual welfare than our earthly one. We're only here for a short time. Getting ready for eternity, making ourselves right with God, is far more important than a few years of prosperity here. But Cain doesn't recognise that, and carries on complaining:

[14] Behold, thou hast driven me out this day from the face of the earth; and from thy face shall I be hid; and I shall be a fugitive and a vagabond in the earth; and it shall come to pass, that every one that findeth me shall slay me.

He complains that he'll be killed. Well, he should have thought of that before he killed Abel. He did something to someone else, and then complains when he realises that same thing could happen to himself.

Matthew 7:12
Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets.

[15] And the LORD said unto him, Therefore whosoever slayeth Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold. And the LORD set a mark upon Cain, lest any finding him should kill him.

God put a mark on Cain to deter anyone from killing him. We don't quite know what this mark was exactly, but wherever he went, people would know that if they killed him, sevenfold vengeance would be taken out upon them.

[16] And Cain went out from the presence of the LORD, and dwelt in the land of Nod, on the east of Eden.

And what did Cain do? Did he cry for mercy? Did he ask for forgiveness? God would still have been merciful to him even then, if he'd done so. But no. He walked away. He **"*went out from the presence of the Lord.*"** Where was the presence of the Lord? It was where the sacrifices were, where the worship of God was practised by Adam and Eve. Cain made a conscious decision to leave his family, said goodbye to their religion, and went, with his wife, as far away as he could from any mention of God, to the land of Nod.

Cain was the firstborn son of Adam and Eve. He would have received the birthright, and all it's privileges. But he turned his back on everything and walked away, to live his own life, his own way, as far as possible from God. That was his own choice, but the saddest thing of all is that by moving so far away, not one of his future descendants would ever get to know about God. His children would be born many miles away from any mention of the Lord. None of Cain's descendants ever believed, and eventually they all perished in the flood, and Cain's line died out completely.

In verses 17-24 we've got a brief description of what happened to Cain and his family in Nod:

[17] And Cain knew his wife; and she conceived, and bare Enoch: and he builded a city, and called the name of the city, after the name of his son, Enoch.

Not being able to work on the land, Cain built a city instead. Without God, without religion, what do men do? Get together. Form communities. Support each other. Encourage each other everything's all right, there's no God, and they're all in control of their own destiny. Men are doing this today. Cofi Anan said, "When we all get together, we are the ultimate power." What arrogance!

And the city was named after Enoch, who was Cain's firstborn son. Men try to build a name for themselves. They name cities, buildings, businesses after themselves. Trying to make themselves remembered long after they're gone. That's not the Christian way. We shouldn't exalt self. The Christian way is the way of self-abasement. The only One who should be exalted in our lives is God.

[18] And unto Enoch was born Irad: and Irad begat Mehujael: and Mehujael begat Methusael: and Methusael begat Lamech.

Five generations pass. And see what happens when men walk away from God:

[19] And Lamech took unto him two wives: the name of the one was Adah, and the name of the other Zillah.

People end up making their own rules, their own morality. God had said:

Genesis 2:24
Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh.

But the men of the city of Enoch, after five generations of living there, decided to change the rules. They redefined marriage. The further generations get away from any godly influence in their lives, this sort of thing will happen.

[20] And Adah bare Jabal: he was the father of such as dwell in tents, and of such as have cattle.

According to v.12 the curse was only on Cain and not his descendants, otherwise no one could have survived. But that didn't stop them trying to diversify in their occupations.

Jabal's family, the sixth generation from Cain, became cattle ranchers. What's the point keeping cattle? In Cain's godless society, they wouldn't even have been used for sacrifice. Maybe leather would have been useful, but now they've shaken off God's prohibitions, I can't help thinking that they had started eating meat.

[21] And his brother's name was Jubal: he was the father of all such as handle the harp and organ.

Here we have fine art and culture

[22] And Zillah, she also bare Tubalcain, an instructer of every artificer in brass and iron: and the sister of Tubalcain was Naamah.

Here we have technology. Fine arts and technology. This is the beginning of a highly sophisticated society.

These were all reasonably legitimate occupations. It doesn't say they were opening betting shops. They probably were, but there was still something in their consciences that made them think it good to have a veneer of morality in their society. They learned practical skills and taught them to their children. They filled their lives with worldly knowledge. They kept themselves busy, to stop themselves thinking about eternal things, to forget God as best they could. But where are they now? What did it all achieve? All forgotten. All swept away in the flood.

[23] And Lamech said unto his wives, Adah and Zillah, Hear my voice; ye wives of Lamech, hearken unto my speech: for I have slain a man to my wounding, and a young man to my hurt. [24] If Cain shall be avenged sevenfold, truly Lamech seventy and sevenfold.

Not content with having two wives, Lamech also became a murderer. He killed someone, and boasted about it to his wives, mocking God's judgment on Cain. That's interesting. That society had all tried its best, for five generations, to get away from God, to block God out of their memories completely. But God still had a witness among them, in the mark that He'd put on Cain. It's impossible to get away from God altogether.

In contrast to Cain, in the last two verses we see what happened to the rest of his family:

[25] And Adam knew his wife again; and she bare a son, and called his name Seth: For God, said she, hath appointed me another seed instead of Abel, whom Cain slew.

Seth had been born to Eve to replace Cain as the firstborn. It's through this line that eventually Christ would be born many generations later.

[26] And to Seth, to him also there was born a son; and he called his name Enos: then began men to call upon the name of the LORD.

Seth's firstborn was Enos, and we've got a very interesting phrase here: **"*Then began men to call upon the name of the Lord.*"** That implies nobody had done that before. But they had the sacrifices. When Cain had left them, it was said he **"*went out from the presence of the Lord.*"** What does it mean that only in the days of Enos, **"*then began men to call upon the name of the LORD*"**? We're told in chapter 5, that Adam had Seth when he was 130 years old, and Seth had Enos when he was 105 years old. So for at least 235 years, we're told here that, although they had **"*the presence of the Lord*"** in the animal sacrifices and the outward worship of God, nobody had truly **"*called on the name of the Lord*"** in their hearts. Only in Enos's day did they start doing so.

God had shown to Adam and Eve something about true religion. He'd showed them the need for a blood sacrifice to take away sin. But they also knew that the animal sacrifices were only ever a picture:

Hebrews 10:4
it is not possible that the blood of bulls and of goats should take away sins.

The sacrifices were only pictures to teach that true religion is spiritual. It's invisible, we can't see it. The sacrifices were where **"*the presence of the Lord*"** was outwardly. But apart from Adam, Eve and Abel, for at least 235 years, nobody else had **"*called on the name of the Lord*"** for themselves.

Just going to church isn't enough. Church is where we can say **"*the presence of the Lord*"** is today. It's good to go to church, that's where God is worshipped, and that's where we learn about the Lord and His ways, week by week.

But each one of us needs to know God personally for ourselves. We need individually to call on His name. To repent of our sins. To

acknowledge our sinful nature before Him, and ask Him, cry to Him, to change us from what we are, and make us new creatures. We need to put our trust in the Lord Jesus Christ, whose blood sacrifice is the one that truly does atone for sin. Only then can we live lives pleasing to God, and in the end, be saved from our sins.

Romans 10:13
For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.

For 235 years, nobody had done that. After Abel's death, Adam had Eve and Eve had Adam, and they were the only true believers in the world, desperately trying to teach their children about true religion through the sacrifices, and failing. Only in the days of Enos, did some people finally understand, and begin to realise their need, and call on the Lord for themselves. We haven't got that long. We're not going to live that long. We know not what a day may bring forth. Let's all make sure that we **"*call on the name of the Lord*"** now, and not give Him rest until He's established His kingdom in our hearts.

Isaiah 55:6,7
Seek ye the LORD while he may be found, call ye upon him while he is near: let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him return unto the LORD, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.

Deuteronomy 20. Dealing with our Enemies

Christians should be very keen to encourage others to read the Bible. And that's right. The Bible is God's revelation to men. It's the only window we have on the things of God. Nowhere else tells us what we're to believe concerning God and what God requires of us.

But many are put off reading it by some of its contents. For example, in Exodus, the detail of the high priest's clothes and the tabernacle. In Leviticus, the complex system of animal sacrifices. And God telling the Israelites to wipe their enemies out completely, like here:

[16] But of the cities of these people, which the Lord thy God doth give thee for an inheritance, thou shalt save alive nothing that breatheth: [17] But thou shalt utterly destroy them....

Today, we call that "genocide" or "ethnic cleansing," and people, quite understandably, are completely put off the Bible when they read such things in it. We've got to have an answer for all this. Why did God give people such intricate details? Why did He tell the Israelites to ethnically cleanse the land they went into? Do these things still apply today?

We firstly need to understand that although, yes, God told the Israelites to do these things, none of these things are true religion. From the first day Adam was created, true religion was always spiritual and of the heart, not of the letter or in outward actions:

1 Samuel 15:22
And Samuel said, Hath the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams.

Hosea 6:6
For I desired mercy, and not sacrifice; and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings.

2 Corinthians 3:6
The letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life.

So why did God give all these instructions to the Israelites if none of it is true religion? The answer is that they were physical pictures of spiritual realities. And that's how we're to apply the Old Testament today. I'm not allegorising away the Bible like modern scholars. These were real events. God gave these instructions about real physical things to the Israelites. It's true history. But we who read them now, are not to take them as instructions for us in physical things. We must interpret them as pictures pointing to spiritual realities.

For example, the Protestant Reformation was good. A great Europe-wide movement to get people back to the Bible and away from idolatrous, superstitious practices. That was nothing but a good thing. But some saw such passages about God telling the Israelites to utterly destroy everything, and they decided they should do the same. So they trashed Roman Catholic Churches, burned monasteries and so on. No! They've missed the point. These physical practices are not for us today. They were only for the Israelites at the time.

Why did God use physical pictures at all? Why didn't He just tell us true religion is spiritual, and not bother with physical pictures? Because we'd never have understood it. We only understand what we see, hear and touch. It's impossible to grasp spiritual truths without physical pictures to help us. So with this in mind, let's look at this passage.

[1] When thou goest out to battle against thine enemies....

Who are the enemies of the Christian? Does this mean we should go into battle physically against other religions and forcibly convert them at the point of a sword? That's what they tried to do in the Crusades. They really thought that was the way to convert the world. What a terrible witness that was to the truth. Even today, people hate Christianity because of those events. But it's in the Bible, isn't it? No, the Christian's enemies are spiritual:

Ephesians 6:12
For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.

There is a real battle the Christian must get involved with. When someone begins the Christian life, he becomes a soldier, he's involved in a lifelong war, only relieved for him by death. But it's not a physical battle. We shouldn't be bothered with this world any more.

2 Timothy 2:4
No man that warreth entangleth himself with the affairs of this life; that he may please him who hath chosen him to be a soldier.

Fighting physically is never the Christian way. Don't get me wrong. Nations need armies to defend themselves against invaders. But that's an issue for nations. It's not wrong for a Christian to be a soldier to defend his country. We need the armed forces just as much as the police to keep order. But it's not how a Christian defends his faith.

The Christian's true battle is spiritual. And our spiritual battles can be both external and internal. Externally, false teachers can bring false doctrines into the church. We don't physically fight them, but we must defend the truths of Scripture.

Jude 1:3,4
It was needful for me to write unto you, and exhort you that ye should earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints. For there are certain men crept in unawares, who were before of old ordained to this condemnation, ungodly men, turning the grace of our God into lasciviousness, and denying the only Lord God, and our Lord Jesus Christ.

That's the external battle. Our internal battle is within ourselves:

Galatians 5:16-18
This I say then, Walk in the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfil the lust of the flesh. For the flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh: and these are contrary the one to the other: so that ye cannot do the things that ye would. But if ye be led of the Spirit, ye are not under the law.

The way we should live is to bring into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ:

2 Corinthians 10:3-5
For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war after the flesh: (For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strong holds;) Casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ....

And our opposition, both externally and internally, is going to seem to be overwhelming:

....and seest horses, and chariots, and a people more than thou, be not afraid of them: for the Lord thy God is with thee, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt.

But we have the Lord with us. We should remember how the Lord was with His people in times past, like when He parted the Red Sea and brought the Israelites out of Egypt.

Elisha's servant had a problem of fear when the king of Israel's armies surrounded them:

2 Kings 6:15-17
And when the servant of the man of God was risen early, and gone forth, behold, an host compassed the city both with horses and chariots. And his servant said unto him, Alas, my master! how shall we do? And he answered, Fear not: for they that be with us are more than they that be with them. And Elisha prayed, and said, Lord, I pray thee, open his eyes, that he may see. And the Lord opened the eyes of the young man; and he saw: and, behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire round about Elisha.

Keep in mind the Lord is with us. How can we do that? We must encourage one another:

Hebrews 10:24,25
And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works: Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching.

Encouragement was the particular job of the priests, and is the job of pastors today, although we shouldn't put all the burden on the pastor, we all have this responsibility:

[2] And it shall be, when ye are come nigh unto the battle, that the priest shall approach and speak unto the people, [3] And shall say unto them, Hear, O Israel, ye approach this day unto battle against your enemies: let not your hearts faint, fear not, and do not tremble, neither be ye terrified because of them; [4] For the Lord your God is he that goeth with you, to fight for you against your enemies, to save you.

King Hezekiah encouraged His people:

2 Chronicles 32:7,8
Be strong and courageous, be not afraid nor dismayed for the king of Assyria, nor for all the multitude that is with him: for there be more with us than with him: With him is an arm of flesh; but with us is the Lord our God to help us, and to fight our battles. And the people rested themselves upon the words of Hezekiah king of Judah.

Our enemies appear so great, but we tend to look at them without trusting in the Lord. Why do we do that? Our greatest hindrances are the cares of this world:

[5] And the officers shall speak unto the people, saying, What man is there that hath built a new house, and hath not dedicated it? let him go and return to his house, lest he die in the battle, and another man dedicate it. [6] And what man is he that hath planted a vineyard, and hath not yet eaten of it? let him also go and return unto his house, lest he die in the battle, and another man eat of it. [7] And what man is there that hath betrothed a wife, and hath not taken her? let him go and return unto his house, lest he die in the battle, and another man take her.

There's nothing wrong with buying a house, planting a vineyard or getting married. They're not unlawful, like robbing a bank. But filling our lives with these things, making them so important they choke the

word and put the things of the Lord in second place, that's the problem. In the parable of the sower, we're too much like the thorny ground:

Mark 4:18,19
And these are they which are sown among thorns; such as hear the word, And the cares of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the lusts of other things entering in, choke the word, and it becometh unfruitful.

Our worldliness not only makes us unfruitful, it renders us unprepared for Christ's return:

Luke 21:34,35
And take heed to yourselves, lest at any time your hearts be overcharged with surfeiting, and drunkenness, and cares of this life, and so that day come upon you unawares. For as a snare shall it come on all them that dwell on the face of the whole earth.

And on top of all this, these worldly cares make us fear man too much:

[8] And the officers shall speak further unto the people, and they shall say, What man is there that is fearful and fainthearted? let him go and return unto his house, lest his brethren's heart faint as well as his heart.

Proverbs 29:25
The fear of man bringeth a snare: but whoso putteth his trust in the Lord shall be safe.

We're not to fear man, but only fear the Lord, which is, after all, the beginning of wisdom:

Luke 12:4,5
And I say unto you my friends, Be not afraid of them that kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do. But I will forewarn you whom ye shall fear: Fear him, which after he hath killed hath power to cast into hell; yea, I say unto you, Fear him.

So, we're in a spiritual battle. How do we fight?

[9] And it shall be, when the officers have made an end of speaking unto the people, that they shall make captains of the armies to lead the people. [10] When thou comest nigh unto a city to fight against it, then proclaim peace unto it.

We're a peaceable people. We don't argue, we don't raise our voices, we don't debate aggressively to make our point, we speak peaceably. And we'll get one of two responses:

[11] And it shall be, if it make thee answer of peace, and open unto thee, then it shall be, that all the people that is found therein shall be tributaries unto thee, and they shall serve thee. [12] And if it will make no peace with thee, but will make war against thee, then thou shalt besiege it:

We may win our brother over to the truth. That's the ideal scenario, in which case all is at peace. But if they start being aggressive towards us, we're told to "*besiege*" the city. What's that all about?

As for external enemies, we don't fight them. We don't become aggressive back. We don't set ourselves up as great debaters trying to win the argument. That's just using their worldly techniques. We end up becoming just like them. What we should do is simply disagree with them and carry on living our lives in the light of what we know to be true. Many think it's a terrible witness when Christians don't agree with one another, but it's not. ***True*** believers will always have a fundamental unity of heart. This unity between true believers is the witness, not any kind of forced unity between all who call themselves Christian, because some won't be:

Psalm 133
Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity! It is like the precious ointment upon the head, that ran down upon the beard, even Aaron's beard: that went down to the skirts of his garments; As the dew of Hermon, and as the dew that descended upon the mountains of Zion: for there the Lord commanded the blessing, even life for evermore.

Christ prayed for His people to be one, so they will be. This is not something for us to strive for, it just is, amongst all those who truly know the Lord that is:

John 17:20,21
Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on me through their word; That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that thou hast sent me.

Now, how does this apply to internal enemies?

This may sound strange, but we ***don't*** fight against our internal enemies either. We sin and have worldly desires all the time in our hearts. The Christian knows full well this battle within him, and he hates it. We want more than anything else to get rid of all our internal enemies and become holy people. We want to please the Lord more than anything else. Paul tells us of this battle within:

Romans 7:19-25
For the good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do. Now if I do that I would not, it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me. I find then a law, that, when I would do good, evil is present with me. For I delight in the law of God after the inward man: But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members. O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death? I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord. So then with the mind I myself serve the law of God; but with the flesh the law of sin.

Paul talks about the Christian life here. Unbelievers don't have a battle going on inside them. As Christians we long to get rid of sin and be holy. But we can't do it ourselves. So we shouldn't fight, because we'll never win. If we keep saying to ourselves, "I must get rid of that sin. I must try to be more kind, gentle, loving" etc., that's trying to do things ourselves. It's not going to work.

Instead of thinking how we can be better all the time, we "*besiege*" the city, as it were. We need to develop our relationship with Christ. Prayer is continuous communication with Him. Keep that relationship right, and He'll conquer our sin and produce fruit without us even realising it.

Matthew 25:37-40
Then shall the righteous answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee an hungred, and fed thee? or thirsty, and gave thee drink? When saw we thee a stranger, and took thee in? or naked, and clothed thee? Or when saw we thee sick, or in prison, and came unto thee? And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.

We've then got two types of instruction how to deal with our enemies, first in vv.13-15 to those cities which are "*very far off*," and secondly in vv.16-18 to those cities in the land "*which the Lord thy God doth give thee for an inheritance*." How do we understand this?

I hope I'm not spiritualising this too much, but there are two types of church. There are the big edifices, whether Anglican, Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, the sort of church nations tend to adopt as their "national" church. And then there are the thousands upon thousands of tinpot little churches with no, or not much connection with any other church.

On the rare occasion when the world wants to know what Christians think on various issues, where would they go? To the big edifices every time. They are the visible witness of Christianity to the world. Tinpot little churches that anyone can set up are no witness at all. They'd be totally ignored. Why should anyone want my tinpot little church's opinion?

Don't get me wrong. I'm talking about external witnesses here. The true witness we have to the world is the internal life of the real Christian as an individual. One who has been changed in his heart by God and is now doing the good works that God has ordained for him to do, whatever church he outwardly attends:

Ephesians 2:10
For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them.

Matthew 5:16
Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.

But when we look at these great edifices – these major external, visible witnesses – we see that they have all strayed far from the Bible. They either exalt tradition far above it or embrace totally liberal views. This is why the true Christian should sigh and cry over the state of the visible church, because the external witness to the truth is destroyed:

Ezekiel 9:4
And the Lord said unto him, Go through the midst of the city, through the midst of Jerusalem, and set a mark upon the foreheads of the men that sigh and that cry for all the abominations that be done in the midst thereof.

So, many true Bible-believing Christians understandably walk away from such organisations to set up their own churches which have more Biblical teaching.

Although the fact of a myriad of tinpot churches is a terrible witness, most true believers will be found in them, because the large edifices are so far from Biblical truth.

Now, with this in mind, first let's look at these separatists, those "*very far off*" from being a witness to the world:

[13] And when the Lord thy God hath delivered it into thine hands, thou shalt smite every male thereof with the edge of the sword: [14] But the women, and the little ones, and the cattle, and all that is in the city, even all the spoil thereof, shalt thou take unto thyself; and thou shalt eat the spoil of thine enemies, which the Lord thy God hath given thee. [15] Thus shalt thou do unto all the cities which are very far off from thee, which are not of the cities of these nations.

In this case we're to besiege the city, kill all the men, but keep the women, children and animals alive. How do we understand this?

I once spent some time in a Brethren church, or assembly as they prefer to call them. The numbers dwindled and it eventually closed

down. But those who were left would rather travel 16 miles each way to the next nearest Brethren assembly rather than go to other more local Bible-believing churches in the area, which weren't quite the same as them.

I also spent some time in another church in which some members travelled 80 miles each way just to get to a church they believed had everything right, probably passing hundreds of other churches on the way, whereas in reality nobody has got a monopoly on the truth.

Most of the members of such churches are good, real, genuine born-again Christian people, and it is a delight to be amongst them. They are in such churches for the Bible teaching they get, which they just cannot find in the mainstream churches. Go to their churches. Join them. Learn from their sermons. I've met good Christians in both these churches. But because they are encouraged to such extreme separatism – "come to our church, nowhere else will do" – they will probably never meet each other, even though they live in the same town. This is very sad.

So, when we're told here to "*smite every male thereof with the edge of the sword*," we are to destroy every attitude that separates true Christian fellowship. The "women, children and cattle" who are to be kept alive, or encouraged, are the people themselves, because they are all my brothers and sisters in Christ. We love them.

Now, compare this type of separatist church with the next, those who are in the cities "*which the Lord thy God doth give thee for an inheritance*":

[16] But of the cities of these people, which the Lord thy God doth give thee for an inheritance, thou shalt save alive nothing that breatheth: [17] But thou shalt utterly destroy them; namely , the Hittites, and the Amorites, the Canaanites, and the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites; as the Lord thy God hath commanded thee: [18] That they teach you not to do after all their abominations, which they have done unto their gods; so should ye sin against the Lord your God.

The Israelites were told not to make peace with the people of the land God told them to inherit. They were to utterly destroy them, saving alive "*nothing that breatheth*," not even the women and children. How can we apply this to us spiritually today?

The great edifices – the mainstream churches – are the great witness to Christianity in the world. This is the land the Lord our God has given us. But they have been totally overrun by tradition, idolatry and/or liberalism. Destroy it all. Save nothing alive that breatheth! Get the Bible back into these places to be the true, real witness to the world around us.

2 Corinthians 6:14-16
Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness? And what concord hath Christ with Belial? or what part hath he that believeth with an infidel? And what agreement hath the temple of God with idols? for ye are the temple of the living God; as God hath said, I will dwell in them, and walk in them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

"*I will dwell in them, and walk in them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people*." That's Christianity. Those who disbelieve the Bible know nothing of this living relationship with Christ. So, externally, we shouldn't have anything to do with them, and, internally, we shouldn't entertain for a moment their anti-Christian ideas in our minds.

Then we've got these strange couple of verses about trees:

[19] When thou shalt besiege a city a long time, in making war against it to take it, thou shalt not destroy the trees thereof by forcing an axe against them: for thou mayest eat of them, and thou shalt not cut them down (for the tree of the field is man's life) to employ them in the siege: [20] Only the trees which thou knowest that they be not trees for meat, thou shalt destroy and cut them down; and thou shalt build bulwarks against the city that maketh war with thee, until it be subdued.

This talks about besieging a city for a long time. And the Christian is in a spiritual battle for a long time. It's not going to end until we go to be with Christ which is far better.

There are two types of trees mentioned here. Those that produce fruit, and those that don't. We're told not to cut down the trees producing fruit. The Lord indeed wants us to produce fruit. In fact, fruit production is evidence of Christ being in us, the hope of glory:

John 15:5
I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing.

So, externally, don't offend fellow believers, especially new Christians, by trying to chop them down. Don't offend them, especially if they're not quite like us. Encourage them:

Romans 14:21
It is good neither to eat flesh, nor to drink wine, nor any thing whereby thy brother stumbleth, or is offended, or is made weak.

Mark 9:42
And whosoever shall offend one of these little ones that believe in me, it is better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and he were cast into the sea.

Internally, if we're Christ's we're producing fruit. This is our life. Concentrate on letting Christ produce fruit in us, and letting Him cut down everything that isn't producing fruit:

John 15:2
Every branch in me that beareth not fruit he taketh away: and every branch that beareth fruit, he purgeth it, that it may bring forth more fruit.

But what about these useless trees, being used as bulwarks against the city? How can spiritually useless things ever become useful? Well, they can. All of us, before we became a Christian, wasted our lives. But nothing a Christian experiences is ever useless.

For example, let's suppose that before we became a Christian we were an alcoholic. But the Lord redeemed us. He took us away from that

useless way of life, and put a new heart within us, a heart of flesh not a heart of stone. We have been altogether changed from the inside now, to follow Christ. And we no longer have a problem with drink. Praise the Lord.

But although that old way of life is now finished for us, we could meet others who are still in bondage to it. And because of our experience in the past, we can relate to them. We can use our past experience to maybe help them and bring them to Christ. We use the trees of our past life that never produced fruit, to become bulwarks, something useful.

I hope you don't think I've allegorised the Old Testament away. I don't want to be lumped with those who allegorise everything and don't believe anything any more. Paul writes:

1 Corinthians 10:6-11
Now these things were our examples, to the intent we should not lust after evil things, as they also lusted. Neither be ye idolaters, as were some of them; as it is written, The people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play. Neither let us commit fornication, as some of them committed, and fell in one day three and twenty thousand. Neither let us tempt Christ, as some of them also tempted, and were destroyed of serpents. Neither murmur ye, as some of them also murmured, and were destroyed of the destroyer. Now all these things happened unto them for examples: and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come.

2 Kings 20. Hezekiah's Extra Fifteen Years

Hezekiah was the son of king Ahaz. Ahaz was the worst king Judah had ever had up to this point. He was the first king to introduce idols into the Temple. But Hezekiah didn't follow his father. On becoming king, he cleansed the Temple, after years of neglect. Also:

2 Kings 18:4
He removed the high places, and brake the images, and cut down the groves, and brake in pieces the brasen serpent that Moses had made: for unto those days the children of Israel did burn incense to it: and he called it Nehushtan.

That brazen serpent must have been worshipped as an idol for centuries. None of the previous kings, good or bad, had removed it. Hezekiah was the first one bold enough to get rid of it. And after everything was restored, he held a large Passover feast:

2 Chronicles 30:26
So there was great joy in Jerusalem: for since the time of Solomon the son of David king of Israel there was not the like in Jerusalem.

Most of all, Hezekiah's reign is remembered for one thing: a remarkable deliverance the Lord wrought after the Assyrian army had besieged Jerusalem. As we see in chapter 19, Hezekiah sought Isaiah's help, they both prayed to the Lord, and remarkably:

2 Kings 19:35
And it came to pass that night, that the angel of the Lord went out, and smote in the camp of the Assyrians an hundred fourscore and five thousand: and when they arose early in the morning, behold, they were all dead corpses.

That was the turning point for the Assyrian army. The Assyrians never took Jerusalem. The king retreated back to his capital, and they were never the same force again:

2 Kings 19:36,37
So Sennacherib king of Assyria departed, and went and returned, and dwelt at Nineveh. And it came to pass, as he was worshipping in the house of Nisroch his god, that Adrammelech and Sharezer his sons smote him with the sword: and they escaped into the land of Armenia. And Esar-haddon his son reigned in his stead.

Apart from David, Hezekiah was the best king Judah ever had, with the possible exception of Josiah who came later. But just like David, he's still a sinner. We're going to look at some events in his life where even King Hezekiah made mistakes.

[1] In those days was Hezekiah sick unto death. And the prophet Isaiah the son of Amoz came to him, and said unto him, Thus saith the Lord, Set thine house in order; for thou shalt die, and not live.

Hezekiah was struck down with an illness. And it wasn't an ordinary illness, but a sickness **"*unto death*."** Sickness isn't a curse from Satan for some sin. Hezekiah had done everything right. He'd obeyed the Lord. Sickness comes in the Lord's providence. It's how we deal with such providences that matters. It was Isaiah the prophet, not a doctor, who came with the message from the Lord: **"*thou shalt die, and not live*."**

It must be quite a shock to be told we haven't got long to live. Some people are told that in this life. But even if not, we're all going to die one day. Seventy or if by strength eighty years isn't long, even if we're in good health. Or maybe our time will be up tomorrow.

Proverbs 27:1
Boast not thyself of to morrow; for thou knowest not what a day may bring forth.

So the instruction the Lord gives to Hezekiah is for all of us: **"*set thine house in order*."** It's so easy to neglect preparation for our own death. But it is going to happen sometime.

For Hezekiah, that meant sorting out who gets what after he's gone. That was important, because up to now he hadn't got any children. But there's something far, far more important to sort out before we die than just distributing a few trinkets. We all need to sort out our relationship with God. And Hezekiah had done that already. We know that:

2 Kings 18:5,6
He trusted in the Lord God of Israel; so that after him was none like him among all the kings of Judah, nor any that were before him. For he clave to the Lord, and

departed not from following him, but kept his commandments, which the Lord commanded Moses.

There are some of the marks of being a true believer, of trusting in the Lord, not himself. And we need to make peace with God too, because without Him, there's no hope,

Hebrews 10:27
….But a certain fearful looking for of judgment and fiery indignation, which shall devour the adversaries.

The only way to make peace with God is through the Lord Jesus Christ. Repent of sin and put our trust in Him, believe in Him. Only He can take away sin by His death on the cross:

Romans 5:1
Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Hezekiah had sorted his relationship with God out in his youth. He was 25 years old when he became king. He'd already made his peace with God by then. As soon as his father died, he got rid of the idols he'd put in the Temple. He followed the Lord, not his father.

2 Chronicles 29:3
He in the first year of his reign, in the first month, opened the doors of the house of the Lord, and repaired them.

He died at the age of 52. After this sickness, he was given an extra 15 years, so this sickness came at the age of 37. He was still young. Maybe that's why he hadn't got his house in order. He'd never thought about it. He thought most of his life was still to come.

Ecclesiastes 12:1
Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth, while the evil days come not, nor the years draw nigh, when thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them.

To hear he was going to die at such an early age was a shock. But he did the right thing:

[2] Then he turned his face to the wall, and prayed unto the Lord, saying,

When it comes to death, nobody can help us. In the end, it's just between us and the Lord. So he turns away from people and faces the wall to pour out his heart to the Lord.

Psalm 62:8
Trust in him at all times; ye people, pour out your heart before him: God is a refuge for us.

[3] I beseech thee, O Lord, remember now how I have walked before thee in truth and with a perfect heart, and have done that which is good in thy sight. And Hezekiah wept sore.

That was Hezekiah's prayer. What's wrong with it? Up to a point, it's good. It's true that he'd obeyed the Lord. He'd walked before Him **"*in truth and with a perfect heart.*"** He'd genuinely done good in the Lord's sight. He wasn't boasting or lying. So up to a point, His prayer is good. It was a real outpouring of his heart to the Lord. That's what prayer is. It wasn't a recitation. He wept. His prayer was real. So what's wrong with it?

First of all, he didn't ***want*** to die at such an early age. He wasn't ready to leave this world yet. He'd never thought about death before. It's natural for us to think death is the end, and he wanted to have done so much more. But death isn't the end, it's the beginning.

And then secondly, more to the point, this prayer is all about him. There's an awful lot missing in this prayer. And what's missing is what we usually miss out in our prayers too.

1. There's no adoration of God. God is so much bigger than us. We must adore Him, and acknowledge His attributes, His power, His sovereignty and control over all things:

Romans 11:33-36
O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! how unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out! For who hath known the mind of the Lord? or who hath been his counsellor? Or who hath first given to him, and it shall be recompensed unto him again? For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things: to whom be glory for ever. Amen.

2. Then there's no thankfulness. We've got so much to be thankful for. God gives us life, breath, health, strength, food, clothing. Our lives should be one of continual thankfulness:

Psalm 75:1
Unto thee, O God, do we give thanks, unto thee do we give thanks: for that thy name is near thy wondrous works declare.

3. Then there's no confession of sin. Even though we love the Lord, and try to please Him, we still fall far, far short of what we ought to be:

Isaiah 64:6
But we are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags; and we all do fade as a leaf; and our iniquities, like the wind, have taken us away.

Yes, Hezekiah had done well, he'd been faithful to the Lord in everything he'd been given to do. Far better than most of us. We're too comfortable and lazy. But even when we've been faithful to the Lord and done our best for Him, we're still unprofitable servants:

Luke 17:10
So likewise ye, when ye shall have done all those things which are commanded you, say, We are unprofitable servants: we have done that which was our duty to do.

And there should never be any boasting about what we've done for the Lord, because whatever we've done for Him is all from Him anyway:

Philippians 2:13
For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure.

If everything we do for the Lord comes from Him, what do we have that comes from us? Sin. Confession of sin is so important in prayer, to give us a true view of ourselves.

But, even though his prayer was so centred on himself, the Lord was still gracious to him:

[4] And it came to pass, afore Isaiah was gone out into the middle court, that the word of the Lord came to him, saying, [5] Turn again, and tell Hezekiah the captain of my people, Thus saith the Lord, the God of David thy father, I have heard thy prayer, I have seen thy tears: behold, I will heal thee: on the third day thou shalt go up unto the house of the Lord.

Before Isaiah had left the building, God answered Hezekiah's prayer. He hadn't prayed for healing. He just told the Lord what he'd done. But God knows exactly what we want before we ask it. He knew Hezekiah wanted to live longer, even though he never said it. And God knows what we want, even though we can't articulate it properly:

Romans 8:26
Likewise, the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities: for we know not what we should pray for as we ought: but the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered.

God hears our prayers and sees our tears before we even call on Him:

Psalm 56:8,9
Thou tellest my wanderings: put thou my tears into thy bottle: are they not in thy book? When I cry unto thee, then shall mine enemies turn back: this I know; for God is for me.

And the Lord told him that after three days, he'd be going up to the house of the Lord again, just like before, fully fit. And there's more to the Lord's answer too:

[6] And I will add unto thy days fifteen years; and I will deliver thee and this city out of the hand of the king of Assyria; and I will defend this city for mine own sake, and for my servant David's sake.

Here's a prophecy that he'd be given fifteen more years. None of us know the time of our death. But Hezekiah was given the number of years precisely. Why did God do that?

To test him, to show him what was really in his heart. God does that. He tested Abraham by telling him to sacrifice his son Isaac. He tested Solomon by giving him riches. And God here gives Hezekiah time. A precise amount of time. To see what he would do with it. And He sometimes tests us too. Maybe we think we've pleased the Lord, just like Hezekiah. But then the Lord brings upon us something uncomfortable, unhappy, difficult, a frowning providence. It's to see how we cope with it. To show us our own hearts. The Lord deals with all His people like this. Hezekiah knew the Lord, but he, and all of us, sometimes need to be tested, to show us ourselves. And I'm afraid Hezekiah failed the test miserably.

I'm sure he was very grateful to the Lord for adding fifteen years. But what did he do in that time? We don't read of any great achievement. What did he do? Well, we'll see.

[7] And Isaiah said, Take a lump of figs. And they took and laid it on the boil, and he recovered.

The healing was miraculous. Hezekiah was healed from a prognosis of death to full recovery in three days. That's a miracle. But it involved medication. It wasn't instant. God normally uses means. So we should listen to our doctor, not quacks like Benny Hinn.

[8] And Hezekiah said unto Isaiah, What shall be the sign that the Lord will heal me, and that I shall go up into the house of the Lord the third day?

Why did Hezekiah ask for a sign? Didn't he have faith in Isaiah's prophecy? Where's his faith in the Lord? The Lord was gracious in giving him a sign, but He didn't have to.

The Lord did the same to Moses. He didn't want to lead the people, and started making excuses. The Lord gave him two signs. His rod became a serpent, and his hand became leprous. And when after these Moses could give no more excuses, he told the Lord the real reason in his heart, at which the Lord was angry, and insisted he obey:

Exodus 4:10-12
And Moses said unto the Lord, O my Lord, I am not eloquent, neither heretofore, nor since thou hast spoken unto thy servant: but I am slow of speech, and of a slow tongue. And the Lord said unto him, Who hath made man's mouth? or who maketh the dumb, or deaf, or the seeing, or the blind? have not I the Lord? Now therefore go, and I will be with thy mouth, and teach thee what thou shalt say.

Gideon wanted a sign, because he was unsure of his calling too. The Lord gave him one by consuming his offering by fire. That should've been enough. But he wanted a sign of his own choosing. He put a fleece on the ground. If it was wet with dew in the morning and the ground dry, he'd accept the Lord's call. It was, but still trying to get out of it, he asked for another sign, this time for the fleece to be dry and the ground wet. It was. He too couldn't get away from the Lord's call. Are we trying to escape the Lord's call too?

[9] And Isaiah said, This sign shalt thou have of the Lord , that the Lord will do the thing that he hath spoken: shall the shadow go forward ten degrees, or go back ten degrees?

And the Lord is so gracious to Hezekiah too that He gives him a sign. Does he want the shadow on the sundial to go forwards or backwards ten degrees?

[10] And Hezekiah answered, It is a light thing for the shadow to go down ten degrees: nay, but let the shadow return backward ten degrees.

Hezekiah asks himself, which is the more difficult? How stupid! Both are equally easy to God. But, to his little mind, for the dial to go backwards was harder, so he asked for that. We're just told that the shadow went back. Does this mean the sun did as well? Either way, it's a miracle. In Scripture, there's one example of the Lord moving the sun out of it's usual course, when Gibeon was attacked and Joshua helped the Gibeonites to victory:

Joshua 10:12-14
Then spake Joshua to the Lord in the day when the Lord delivered up the Amorites before the children of Israel, and he said in the sight of Israel, Sun, stand thou still upon Gibeon; and thou, Moon, in the valley of Ajalon. And the sun stood still, and the moon stayed, until the people had avenged themselves upon their enemies. Is not this written in the book of Jasher? So the sun stood still in the midst of heaven, and hasted not to go down about a whole day. And there was no day like that before it or after it, that the Lord hearkened unto the voice of a man: for the Lord fought for Israel.

The shadow was going to move, Hezekiah only decided which way the shadow would go.

[11] And Isaiah the prophet cried unto the Lord: and he brought the shadow ten degrees backward, by which it had gone down in the dial of Ahaz.

And again, Isaiah isn't asking for the sun to move, he's just telling the Lord that Hezekiah wanted the shadow to go backwards. The ***"dial of Ahaz"*** is interesting. I don't know if Ahaz was a sun worshipper, but he must have constructed a notable sundial somewhere.

So, Hezekiah recovers. Then he gets a visit from some envoys from Babylon:

[12] At that time Berodach-baladan, the son of Baladan, king of Babylon, sent letters and a present unto Hezekiah: for he had heard that Hezekiah had been sick.

Babylon, at this time was a small country far to the east, similar in size to Judah. It had already been conquered by Assyria. Nobody could possibly have known that just over a hundred years later, Babylon would become an even bigger superpower than Assyria. It would defeat Assyria, capture Judah, exile it's inhabitants, and even conquer Egypt too.

[13] And Hezekiah hearkened unto them, and shewed them all the house of his precious things, the silver, and the gold, and the spices, and the precious ointment, and all the house of his armour, and all that was found in his treasures: there was nothing in his house, nor in all his dominion, that Hezekiah shewed them not.

Hezekiah had no idea of the threat Babylon would become, so he happily accepted their present and letters and showed them around. But it was a pretty dumb thing to do. If I told you I've got two million pounds of gold bars in my garage, and I even showed you them (I haven't), just knowing they're there would be a temptation for you to take them.

But Hezekiah was proud. In his heart, he wanted to show off what he had. He didn't want to hide his wealth, but flaunt it. This was a good opportunity. We're told in 2 Chronicles:

2 Chronicles 32:31
Howbeit in the business of the ambassadors of the princes of Babylon, who sent unto him to enquire of the wonder that was done in the land, God left him, to try him, that he might know all that was in his heart.

God knew what was in Hezekiah's heart already, but He gave him the extra fifteen years, and this visit from the Babylonians, amongst other things, so he'd know himself. We all need to know what we're really like. Only then can we truly repent and obey the Lord.

[14] Then came Isaiah the prophet unto king Hezekiah, and said unto him, What said these men? and from whence came they unto thee? And Hezekiah said, They are come from a far country, even from Babylon.

Isaiah is used as God's instrument to rebuke him. He asks what the men said, and where did they come from? Hezekiah only answered the last question, probably because these envoys didn't actually say anything, he showed them his wealth without being prompted.

[15] And he said, What have they seen in thine house? And Hezekiah answered, All the things that are in mine house have they seen: there is nothing among my treasures that I have not shewed them.

So Isaiah asks him another question. **"*What have they seen in thy house?*"** To which Hezekiah answered truthfully, he'd shown them all his treasures. He didn't seem to think that was a foolish thing to do, he thought it was good to shew off his possessions.

[16] And Isaiah said unto Hezekiah, Hear the word of the Lord . [17] Behold, the days come, that all that is in thine house, and that which thy fathers have laid up in store unto this day, shall be carried into Babylon: nothing shall be left, saith the Lord .

Isaiah prophesied, surprise, surprise, that all the treasures he'd shown them would one day be taken away by the same people, the Babylonians. It wouldn't happen until a hundred or so years later, it would be the descendants of those whom Hezekiah had actually shown all his treasures to that would take them away, but it was going to happen.

[18] And of thy sons that shall issue from thee, which thou shalt beget, shall they take away; and they shall be eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon.

And not only that, but Isaiah prophesies that Hezekiah's descendants would be taken away to Babylon too, and made eunuchs, so they would have no more descendants. The monarchy would end. What a disaster for Judah! And what was Hezekiah's response?

[19] Then said Hezekiah unto Isaiah, Good is the word of the Lord which thou hast spoken. And he said, Is it not good, if peace and truth be in my days?

What a selfish attitude! That's good, it's not going to happen to me. It doesn't matter if the nation gets wiped off the map later, that's not my problem. Hezekiah's attitude here is so much different from his youth, when he was so keen on loving the Lord and doing His will.

And this wasn't the only incident the Lord used to try him. In 2 Chronicles, we're also told:

2 Chronicles 32:25
But Hezekiah rendered not again according to the benefit done unto him [that is his recovery from sickness]*; for his heart was lifted up: therefore there was wrath upon him, and upon Judah and Jerusalem.*

The whole nation of Judah was affected by Hezekiah's selfishness. Leaders have responsibilities. This happens in every walk of life. The acts of heads of households affect the rest of the family. Our sins affect other people, not just ourselves. But we're also told:

2 Chronicles 32:26
Notwithstanding Hezekiah humbled himself for the pride of his heart, both he and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, so that the wrath of the Lord came not upon them in the days of Hezekiah.

Although his heart was lifted up, which affected the nation for a time, we're told he **"*humbled himself for the pride of his heart*."** And that's what we should do. And notice it was **"*both he and the inhabitants of Jerusalem*."** So he must have publicly acknowledged his sin before the people, otherwise they wouldn't have humbled themselves as well. Public sin requires public repentance. If our sin has affected anyone else, they need to know of our repentance, so they can be corrected too, in case we've led them astray.

[20] And the rest of the acts of Hezekiah, and all his might, and how he made a pool, and a conduit, and brought water into the city,

are they not written in the book of the chronicles of the kings of Judah?

Hezekiah making a conduit and bringing water into the city wasn't during this last fifteen years. If you read 1 Chronicles 32, it was before the siege by the Assyrians. Jerusalem's only water supply was the Gihon spring, which was outside the city walls. Hezekiah realised the Assyrian armies were marching towards him, so he blocked off the spring and dug a tunnel, so the water could be accessed from the pool of Siloam, inside the city walls. If you go to Jerusalem today you can walk through it. It's knee deep in water and about 1 km long. So this exploit was before the siege, not in this last useless fifteen years.

[21] And Hezekiah slept with his fathers: and Manasseh his son reigned in his stead.

And there's another thing Hezekiah did in this fifteen added years. He got married. Nothing wrong with marriage. But he had a son, Manasseh, who succeeded him as king at the age of 12. Manasseh turned out to be even more evil than Ahaz:

2 Kings 21:1-3
Manasseh was twelve years old when he began to reign, and reigned fifty and five years in Jerusalem. And his mother's name was Hephzibah. And he did that which was evil in the sight of the Lord, after the abominations of the heathen, whom the Lord cast out before the children of Israel. For he built up again the high places which Hezekiah his father had destroyed; and he reared up altars for Baal, and made a grove, as did Ahab king of Israel; and worshipped all the host of heaven, and served them.

Manasseh was the most evil king Judah ever had, and it was his long 55-year reign and influence which spelt the end of the kingdom altogether, as Jeremiah prophesied:

Jeremiah 15:4
And I will cause them to be removed into all kingdoms of the earth, because of Manasseh the son of Hezekiah king of Judah, for that which he did in Jerusalem.

The evil the Lord brought on Judah was the exile into Babylon. This time there would be no miraculous escape, as happened after the Assyrian siege in Hezekiah's day.

If we read the 2 Chronicles version of Manasseh's life, we find that, towards the end of his life, he turned to the Lord, which shows us that even the greatest of sinners can be saved, if he truly repents and turns to the Lord. In the last five years of his life he tried desperately to reverse all the damage he'd done in the previous fifty years, but he couldn't. The people were so hardened by all he'd done they would never repent.

Manasseh's grandson Josiah was a good king, and just like Hezekiah, he cleansed the Temple, restored the worship and held a huge Passover feast. But the people didn't follow. Manasseh's fifty years of wicked rule so seared the hearts of the people of Judah, they could no longer repent, and the Lord had no alternative but to sent them into exile.

So what can we learn from Hezekiah, especially his last fifteen useless years?

1. We must prepare for our death, no matter what age we are. Get right with God, that's the most important thing for us to do, and happily, despite his sins, Hezekiah had done it.

2. If ever God tells us, **"*thou shalt die, and not live*,"** we ought to be ready, and acquiesce to God's plan. He's got plenty of work for His people to do here, but one day we must lay it all down, and if God says that now is the time, He always knows best.

3. Hezekiah did so much good work for the Lord in his youth, but the last fifteen years were useless. ***"His heart was lifted up."*** Here's a warning to us oldies. Make sure this doesn't happen to us. Make sure we love the Lord and do His work to the end. Hezekiah was only 52 when he died, but we should never think avoiding sin gets easier, because it doesn't. We might have different sins. It might be possessions that become a snare, or our comfortable life. Sin will be with us to the end. But we know that in the next world:

Revelation 22:3-5
There shall be no more curse: but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it; and his servants shall serve him: And they shall see his face; and his name shall be in their foreheads. And there shall be no night there; and they need no candle, neither light of the sun; for the Lord God giveth them light: and they shall reign for ever and ever.

That's what we've got to look forward to.

2 Kings 22. Good King Josiah

King Josiah was the last good king of Judah. He lived at a very difficult time, not unlike the times we're in today. After he died, three of his sons and a grandson ruled in turn, but didn't last very long and all of them were evil. After their reign, the unthinkable happened. Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians, the Temple destroyed, and the monarchy ended.

But wasn't Jerusalem the place God had chosen to put His name for ever?

Deuteronomy 12:10,11
But when ye go over Jordan, and dwell in the land which the Lord your God giveth you to inherit, and when he giveth you rest from all your enemies round about, so that ye dwell in safety; Then there shall be a place which the Lord your God shall choose to cause his name to dwell there....

Psalm 132:13,14
For the Lord hath chosen Zion; he hath desired it for his habitation. This is my rest for ever: here will I dwell; for I have desired it.

What was God doing? Why did He allow Jerusalem to be destroyed like this?

[1] Josiah was eight years old when he began to reign, and he reigned thirty and one years in Jerusalem. And his mother's name was Jedidah, the daughter of Adaiah of Boscath.

Josiah became king at the age of 8. He reigned 31 years. He died at 39, in a battle he foolishly got involved in. His father was the previous king, the wicked king Amon:

2 Kings 21:19-24
Amon was twenty and two years old when he began to reign, and he reigned two years in Jerusalem. And his mother's name was Meshullemeth, the daughter of Haruz of Jotbah. And he did that which was evil in the sight of the Lord, as his father Manasseh did. And he walked in all the way that his father walked in, and served the idols that his father served, and worshipped them: And he forsook the Lord God of his fathers, and walked not in the way of the Lord. And the servants

of Amon conspired against him, and slew the king in his own house. And the people of the land slew all them that had conspired against king Amon; and the people of the land made Josiah his son king in his stead.

Thankfully the Lord took king Amon away quickly. After only two years, his servants killed him, and the 8 year old Josiah was set on the throne instead. This all goes to show:

Daniel 2:21
....*he* [God] *removeth kings, and setteth up kings....*

Psalm 75:6,7
For promotion cometh neither from the east, nor from the west, nor from the south. But God is the judge: he putteth down one, and setteth up another.

The Lord is in control. Whether evil kings or good kings are in power, the Lord sets the limits of their reigns. And He ordains everything for one overarching purpose:

Acts 17:26,27
And hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth, and hath determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation; [why?] *That they should seek the Lord....*

And we're told that most of our leaders will be evil. Most of them will hate the Lord:

Psalm 2:2,3
The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord, and against his anointed, saying, Let us break their bands asunder, and cast away their cords from us.

But that doesn't mean they're not set up by God. Cyrus king of Persia was an unbeliever:

Isaiah 44:28
That saith of Cyrus, He is my shepherd, and shall perform all my pleasure: even saying to Jerusalem, Thou shalt be built; and to the temple, Thy foundation shall be laid.

God calls Cyrus "*my shepherd*" not because he was one of the Lord's people, but because through him, the Lord would arrange the decree for the Jews to return.

And we're to obey our rulers, and never rebel. Rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft:

Romans 13:1,2
Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God. Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation.

Paul probably wrote that in the time of Nero. We're to obey our rulers in all things except when they try to force us to sin. Like when Nebuchadnezzar tried to force Daniel and his friends to worship idols. In that case we disobey and take the unjust consequences.

And we're called to pray for our leaders. But not in everything. We're not to pray about their policies. The Lord will do what the Lord will do in them. We only pray for two things: their salvation, and that we Christians can live our Christian lives unhindered by them:

1 Timothy 2:1,2
I exhort therefore, that, first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men; For kings, and for all that are in authority; that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty.

We leave the rising and falling of empires to the Lord as he ordains everything for one purpose: "*that* [men] *should seek the Lord.*" And in fact, that's just what king Josiah did:

[2] And he did that which was right in the sight of the Lord, and walked in all the way of David his father, and turned not aside to the right hand or to the left.

In the parallel passage in 2 Chronicles, we're given a few more details about this:

2 Chronicles 34:3
For in the eighth year of his reign, while he was yet young, he began to seek after the God of David his father....

So he would have been 16. At the age when most teenagers go their own way and reject God, he instead rejected the wickedness of his father, and began to seek after the Lord. That's commented on: "*while he was yet young."* So, never give up on stroppy teenagers.

Josiah as a very small child would have known his grandfather, Manasseh. Manasseh reigned for 55 years. He was Judah's longest reigning king and by far its most wicked. He built altars for Baal, he brought idols into the Temple, he made his son pass through the fire: he used enchantments, and dealt with familiar spirits and wizards. You name it, he did it. We might be thankful that the Lord took king Amon away after only two years, but how would we feel if we lived under such a wicked king for such a long time? However dark the times, we've just got to trust the Lord knows what He's doing. And He must have answered so many prayers because Manasseh became one of the Lord's people:

2 Chronicles 33:10-13
And the Lord spake to Manasseh, and to his people: but they would not hearken. Wherefore the Lord brought upon them the captains of the host of the king of Assyria, which took Manasseh among the thorns, and bound him with fetters, and carried him to Babylon. And when he was in affliction, he besought the Lord his God, and humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers, And prayed unto him: and he was intreated of him, and heard his supplication, and brought him again to Jerusalem into his kingdom. Then Manasseh knew that the Lord he was God.

Manasseh is one of the greatest examples in the Bible of the fact that even the worst of sinners can find grace in the eyes of the Lord. Another one is the apostle Paul:

1 Timothy 1:15
This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptation, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief.

Both Manasseh and the apostle Paul saw the depth of their own sin. They saw it for what it really was before God. And that's what we need to do. The more we see the depth of our own sin, the more we'll see our need of Jesus Christ to save us from our sins.

For 50 years Manasseh led Judah astray. After he knew the Lord, he spent the last 5 years of his life desperately trying to undo everything he'd done, but he couldn't. The people under his long reign had become so hardened, they were no longer able to repent.

But, these last five years were the formative years of his grandson, Josiah, who would've been between 1 and 6. 10 years after his grandfather's death, maybe he remembered him when he "*began to seek after the God of David his father.*" We may think our witness to others is ineffective. But who knows what effect we can have, even long after our death.

Four years after he'd begun to seek the Lord, Josiah was ready to do something:

2 Chronicles 34:3
....and in the twelfth year [age 20] *he began to purge Judah and Jerusalem from the high places, and the groves, and the carved images, and the molten images.*

Josiah began to purge Judah of all the places of false worship. After all, that was the king's duty. But I can't help wonder what the hardened people really thought about this. Cleansing the land probably made Josiah very unpopular.

[3] And it came to pass in the eighteenth year of king Josiah [*of his reign* (2 Chronicles 34:8), So he's now 26]***, that the king sent Shaphan the son of Azaliah, the son of Meshullam, the scribe, to the house of the Lord, saying, [4] Go up to Hilkiah the high priest, that he may sum the silver which is brought into the house of the Lord, which the keepers of the door have gathered of the people:***

One of the things Josiah did was organise a collection for repair work on the Temple.

[5] And let them deliver it into the hand of the doers of the work, that have the oversight of the house of the Lord : and let them give it to the doers of the work which is in the house of the Lord, to repair the breaches of the house, [6] Unto carpenters, and builders, and masons, and to buy timber and hewn stone to repair the house.

We're told the Temple had breaches in it. How had the Temple got into such a state of disrepair? We read of Manasseh's father Hezekiah repairing the doors, but before that, the previous time we read about major repairs on the Temple was way back in the days of good king Joash, over 200 years before. Was this simply 200 years of wear and tear?

2 Chronicles 34:11
Even to the artificers and builders gave they it, to buy hewn stone, and timber for couplings, and to floor the houses ***which the kings of Judah had destroyed****.*

An enemy hadn't destroyed it. Previous kings had neglected it for 200 years. The thing about essential repairs is that you spend all that money, but don't see much in return, the work's all hidden. So the money would've been spent on far more exciting things.

And repairs will always be needed, because this world is subject to decay. Bread goes mouldy. Leaves fall off trees. We're all getting older. These things should all point us to the fact we're living in a fallen world. And that in turn should point us to the Lord:

Psalm 39:11
When thou with rebukes dost correct man for iniquity, thou makest his beauty to consume away like a moth: surely every man is vanity.

[7] Howbeit there was no reckoning made with them of the money that was delivered into their hand, because they dealt faithfully.

The workmen could be given all the money and they didn't need to give an account, because they'd built up a reputation for being honest and having integrity.

There are many unbelievers, who are totally trustworthy. And when we come across them, we're tempted to doubt what the Bible says about the human heart:

Jeremiah 17:9
The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?

And then we can also come across professed Christians who aren't trustworthy. I used to be involved selling Christian books. Christian booksellers just don't pay their bills. It's so much easier to deal with secular bookshops, they're far more professional and trustworthy. It shouldn't be like that. We should be the ones with the reputation for integrity and honesty. Now, maybe these workmen were believers, we don't know.

And then, just as work on the Temple is progressing, the High Priest finds something:

[8] And Hilkiah the high priest said unto Shaphan the scribe, I have found the book of the law in the house of the Lord. And Hilkiah gave the book to Shaphan, and he read it.

As he's clearing out, he finds the book of the Law. We read about Hezekiah, Manasseh's father, setting up the Temple worship "*according to the law of Moses*," so it seems to have been there then. So it must have got lost during Manasseh's reign.

Hilkiah immediately realises it's importance and gives it to Shaphan the scribe **"*and he read it*."** It's no good having a Bible, unless we read it. Just sitting on the shelf is no good. The Jews thought they were God's chosen people because God had given them the Scriptures. That was a great privilege, but they didn't read it and do what it says:

Matthew 7:21
Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven.

[9] And Shaphan the scribe came to the king, and brought the king word again, and said, Thy servants have gathered the money that was found in the house, and have delivered it into the hand of them that do the work, that have the oversight of the house of the Lord.

Shaphan did his duty to report back to the king. Normally, when you're in the presence of the king, you say what there is to say then leave. Otherwise you could get into trouble. But Shaphan was so concerned about the contents of this book, he had to tell the king:

[10] And Shaphan the scribe shewed the king, saying, Hilkiah the priest hath delivered me a book. And Shaphan read it before the king.

He read the book aloud to the king. And look at the king's reaction:

[11] And it came to pass, when the king had heard the words of the book of the law, that he rent his clothes.

What made Shaphan so concerned he had to tell the king? And what had made the king rend his clothes? Because they realised that both they and the whole nation had failed to keep the words in the book. This book convicts us of sin. It's no ordinary book. It's alive:

Hebrews 4:12
For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.

So the king immediately got together his best counsellors:

[12] And the king commanded Hilkiah the priest, and Ahikam the son of Shaphan, and Achbor the son of Michaiah, and Shaphan the scribe, and Asahiah a servant of the king's, saying, [13] Go ye, enquire of the Lord for me, and for the people, and for all Judah, concerning the words of this book that is found: for great is the wrath of the Lord that is kindled against us, because our fathers have not

hearkened unto the words of this book, to do according unto all that which is written concerning us.

Temple worship continued as normal, and nobody had noticed the book had got lost. It's a terrible thing when the outward form of worship, the church traditions, still carry on, but the Scriptures have gone missing. That's the state of so many places of worship today.

"*great is the wrath of the Lord that is kindled against us, because our fathers have not hearkened unto the words of this book*." We don't talk about the wrath of the Lord today. It's conveniently forgotten. Why? Because the Scriptures have been forgotten. God is not just a God of love and mercy. He is that, and we should be thankful. But He's also a God of holiness and justice. Not hearkening to the words of this book incurs God's wrath.

And Josiah commands his men to **"*Go ye, enquire of the Lord*"** about this. How were they to do that? In those days, to know the Lord's will, one had to visit a prophet:

[14] So Hilkiah the priest, and Ahikam, and Achbor, and Shaphan, and Asahiah, went unto Huldah the prophetess, the wife of Shallum the son of Tikvah, the son of Harhas, keeper of the wardrobe; (now she dwelt in Jerusalem in the college;) and they communed with her.

They went straight to Huldah the prophetess. Why did they go to her? Jeremiah and Zephaniah were around, although Jeremiah had only just started his ministry, maybe he wasn't well known. Maybe Huldah was easily accessible, and had a good reputation.

[15] And she said unto them, Thus saith the Lord God of Israel, Tell the man that sent you to me,

Prophets always began by saying **"*Thus saith the Lord.*"** In their time, they were the mouthpiece of God. But we don't need prophets any more now Christ has come:

Hebrews 1:1,2
God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, Hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son....

We've now got the complete canon of Scripture, and the Holy Spirit in us to interpret it:

[16] Thus saith the Lord, Behold, I will bring evil upon this place, and upon the inhabitants thereof, even all the words of the book which the king of Judah hath read: [17] Because they have forsaken me, and have burned incense unto other gods, that they might provoke me to anger with all the works of their hands; therefore my wrath shall be kindled against this place, and shall not be quenched.

"*my wrath shall be kindled against this place, and shall not be quenched*." There was no way of avoiding the judgment on the land. The Lord revealed this later to Jeremiah too:

Jeremiah 15:4
And I will cause them to be removed into all kingdoms of the earth, because of Manasseh the son of Hezekiah king of Judah, for that which he did in Jerusalem.

It was Manasseh's fault. He's always going to be known as the king who hardened the people of Judah so much, they became incapable as a nation of repentance. And yet, Manasseh himself repented. How he must have regretted everything he'd done in the 50 years before he knew the Lord. And what about us? Just think of the consequences of all the terrible things we've done to others in our past. How ashamed we should be.

That's why the call to repent and believe in Christ for salvation is urgent. The sooner we repent, the better. What a terrible life we lead if we're living for self. And we don't even notice the damage we do to others while we're like that. Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners. He saved Manasseh. He saved the apostle Paul. And He can save us and change us forever, if we only repent of our sin and put our trust in Him for our salvation.

The good news is that everything is under the Lord's control. All that mess we've made in the past, He can turn around to His glory. So let's not get too depressed about our past. Rather, realise it's been forgiven in Jesus Christ. And be eternally thankful:

Philippians 3:13,14
....this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.

It was too late for the nation of Judah to avoid the judgment. But despite that, Josiah still carried on cleansing the nation of idols, and we read he held a great Passover festival:

2 Kings 23:22
Surely there was not holden such a passover from the days of the judges that judged Israel, nor in all the days of the kings of Israel, nor of the kings of Judah....

Outward religion in the nation had never been better. Josiah organised the biggest, best Passover celebration ever held. But, although the people outwardly went along with it, their hearts weren't in it. Otherwise the judgment would've been averted. So, do we long to be in a more lively church elsewhere? Maybe we hanker for revivals of the past. Wouldn't it be great if we lived in the time of the Puritans, or whatever. No. The fact is that the Lord has put us here, now. Be thankful for what we've got. In any case, whatever might seem so good outwardly, we don't know the reality. We can't see people's hearts.

But Huldah had a prophecy for Josiah, which was altogether different from the nation:

[18] But to the king of Judah which sent you to enquire of the Lord, thus shall ye say to him, Thus saith the Lord God of Israel, As touching the words which thou hast heard; [19] Because thine heart was tender, and thou hast humbled thyself before the Lord, when thou heardest what I spake against this place, and against the inhabitants thereof, that they should become a desolation and a curse, and hast rent thy clothes, and wept before me; I also have heard thee, saith the Lord. [20] Behold therefore, I will gather thee unto thy

fathers, and thou shalt be gathered into thy grave in peace; and thine eyes shall not see all the evil which I will bring upon this place. And they brought the king word again.

Huldah's prophecy for the nation was one of doom. But her personal prophecy for Josiah gives all of us hope. God deals with us as individuals. He dealt with Manasseh. He deals here with Josiah. We can't say we're Christian because we're born in a Christian country, or because we go to a Christian church. A nation can't save us. Not even a church can save us. Nations and churches come and go as the Lord sees fit. But no matter how bad our own personal situation, we can be saved by God out of it, but only as individuals.

Ezekiel 14:13,14
Son of man, when the land sinneth against me by trespassing grievously, then will I stretch out mine hand upon it, and will break the staff of the bread thereof, and will send famine upon it, and will cut off man and beast from it: Though these three men, Noah, Daniel, and Job, were in it, they should deliver but their own souls by their righteousness, saith the Lord God.

So, what do we need to do to escape the coming judgment? Take Josiah as our example:
– his heart was tender.
– he humbled himself before the Lord.
– he rent his clothes. A sign of mourning for his sins.
– he wept before the Lord.

In the next chapter, we're told:

2 Kings 23:25,26
And like unto him was there no king before him, that turned to the Lord with all his heart, and with all his soul, and with all his might, according to all the law of Moses; neither after him arose there any like him. Notwithstanding the Lord turned not from the fierceness of his great wrath, wherewith his anger was kindled against Judah, because of all the provocations that Manasseh had provoked him withal.

Jerusalem was going to be destroyed. But Josiah's hope wasn't in physical Jerusalem. He had a sure hope in a heavenly Jerusalem to look forward to:

Revelation 21:2-4
And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God. And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away.

And we too can receive that sure hope Josiah had. Seek the Lord while He may be found:

Jeremiah 29:13
And ye shall seek me, and find me, when ye shall search for me with all your heart.

Job 33:27-28. He Looketh Upon Men

Read Psalm 139 and Job 33

I just want to look at two verses today. And they are Job 33:27-28:

[27] He looketh upon men, and if any say, I have sinned, and perverted that which was right, and it profited me not; [28] He will deliver his soul from going into the pit, and his life shall see the light.

So let's go through each phrase in turn to see what we can learn.

He….

Who is the **"*He*"**? In context, it must be speaking about God. I know some translations disagree and think it's one man speaking to others. But in the previous verse it says:

Job 33:26
....for he will render unto man his righteousness.

So, who else can that be but God? And the following verses are even more clear:

Job 33:29,30
Lo, all these things worketh God oftentimes with man, to bring back his soul from the pit, to be enlightened with the light of the living.

So this is speaking about the work of God. And it's important to understand that the Bible assumes God's existence. The very first verse of the Bible is:

Genesis 1:1
In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.

The Bible doesn't waste time trying to "prove" the existence of God. Neither should we. In any case, it's impossible. And, I hasten to add, it's also impossible to disprove it. It depends what we mean by "proof".

What do people want as "proof"? Can we detect God with our senses? No. Can we detect Him with scientific instruments? No. So, the atheist swiftly concludes He's not there, He can't exist. But that's a logical fallacy, in other words, the conclusion doesn't follow. It may seem to follow. People will try to persuade us it follows. But it doesn't follow. God is there, and we can "know" Him. But only those to whom God shews Himself can know that. The unbeliever is in total spiritual darkness:

John 3:19
And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil.

In the past, men have put forward philosophical arguments to try to "prove" God exists, but they too all contain logical fallacies. Logic isn't taught in schools any more. It used to be. It should be. Knowing some simple logic is all we need to see how conclusions can so easily be wrong. Don't bother trying to prove God exists. We can't, and it's not necessary.

Atheists never attempt to disprove the existence of God. They think they don't need to. They've already made their mind up that the existence of God is ridiculous, like little green men on the moon. So they say the onus must be on us to prove it. But that's a false conclusion too. It's not ridiculous at all. Belief in God is completely rational and sensible.

Never let an atheist try to force us into thinking we have to prove God's existence. It isn't possible, and we don't need to. Just concentrate on living our lives in the light of His presence. That's our witness. Leave it to their conscience to convict them of the truth:

Romans 1:20
For the invisible things of him [God] *from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse....*

Creation shews us God's "*eternal power and Godhead,*" so everybody is without excuse. And we all have a conscience to convict us of that. We don't need to argue anything.

So what is God doing? **"*He….*"**:

….looketh upon men,….

The almighty all-powerful Creator God is looking upon all of us. And He's not merely looking, just to see what we're doing down here. It's not as though He's just wound the world up like a watch, set it going, looking occasionally to see how we're getting on, but otherwise leaving us alone. Far from it. **"*He looketh upon men*."** We're under His scrutiny.

God is all-knowing. He knows exactly everything that's going on. We can't hide anything from Him. Hagar gave God a name (Genesis 16:13): *Thou God seest me*.

And He doesn't just see outward actions, but He sees into the very depths of our hearts. We can think nothing that He doesn't know already what we're thinking. That frightens us, because we don't want anybody else to go there. Anyone who can see down there into the depths of our being, we can't hide anything from, we can't lie to or cheat on:

Psalm 7:9
The righteous God trieth the hearts and reins.

Hebrews 4:13
Neither is there any creature that is not manifest in his sight: but all things are naked and opened unto the eyes of him with whom we have to do.

People laugh at the very idea of this. I was in a group of unbelievers once, and one of them, mocking, said, "The sweet baby Jesus sees everything you do." And everybody burst out laughing. When we're in such company, again, don't argue. Just walk away. Let the dead bury their dead. That's the best witness. Don't say anything. Leave them to it.

Revelation 22:11
He that is unjust, let him be unjust still: and he which is filthy, let him be filthy still.

Not only does God see all we say and do and think, but we can never get away from Him:

Psalm 139:7-10
Whither shall I go from thy spirit? or whither shall I flee from thy presence? If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there: if I make my bed in hell, behold, thou art there. If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea; Even there shall thy hand lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me.

People try to avoid the thought there's an almighty God watching over them. Especially one who sees their every move, and knows every last thing they're thinking in their hearts. A God they can never get away from. They don't want that. They want the freedom to lie, and to deceive others, so they can get what they want. But **"*God looketh upon men*."**

And He's not looking for His own entertainment. If He's looking, it must be for a purpose. Why would He bother otherwise? What is He looking for? **"*God looketh upon men….*"**:

….and if any say,….

He's looking for us to say something. He is waiting for any one of us to communicate with Him. It is possible for us to communicate with the one true living Creator God at any time if we really want to. But most people don't want to. And what is He looking for us to say?

Does it say here: "God looketh upon men, and if any say, 'I've lived a good life' "? No.

Does it say: "And if any say, 'I've done more good than bad' "? No.

It says **"*and if any say*,"** these golden words:

….I have sinned….

That ought to surprise us. Surely God is looking for righteous people, those who do what pleases Him. He can't possibly be looking for

sinners. Surely the devil is the one looking for sinners, so they can carry on sinning with him. Surely God is looking for those who keep the Ten Commandments. Well, actually, that's right, He is. Christ Himself said:

Luke 10:25-28
And, behold, a certain lawyer stood up, and tempted him, saying, Master, what shall I do to inherit eternal life? He said unto him, ['believe in Me and you'll be saved by grace'. No He didn't. He said:] *What is written in the law? how readest thou? And he answering said, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbour as thyself. And he said unto him, Thou hast answered right: this do, and thou shalt live.*

That's straightforward. "*Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbour as thyself."* That's a summary of the Ten Commandments. O.K. Do it. Live a perfect life. We've got a promise here, "*This do, and thou shalt live*." Remember, God sees the heart. So, outward actions aren't enough. We've got to do it genuinely, in thought and word and deed, all the time.

Who can do that? None of us, even for a second. And what about the sins we've already committed? We're undone, we can't attain to this. That's what Christ wanted this lawyer to understand. If we could keep the law, we'd live, but we can't, so we're all guilty.

Romans 3:19
Now we know that what things soever the law saith, it saith to them who are under the law: that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God.

That's the role of the Law. It shews us God's perfect standard, but also how far short we fall of it. So, God simply wants us to acknowledge we've fallen short. **"*I have sinned.*"**

The Christian faith is far more than that, but acknowledging **"*I have sinned,*"** is always the first step. When Jesus Christ started His public ministry, He didn't start teaching in a vacuum. Before He began His work, He sent a forerunner ahead of Him, John the Baptist. John preached a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins. He

instituted a ceremony using water, baptism, to symbolise the fact that whoever underwent it recognised **"*I have sinned*,"** and wanted to repent, or change. It was a baptism unto repentance. John would then point them to Jesus Christ as the One to trust in to be saved from their sins. He must increase, I must decrease. Hear Him.

Acknowledging **"*I have sinned*"** is the starting point of the Christian life. But it's hardly ever taught anywhere in the Christian church today. Go to any church, watch any online service, or any so-called "Christian" TV channel, even the most conservative ones, and sin is never mentioned. They'll talk about lots of other things, but persuading people to say **"*I have sinned*"** is not one of them.

And I think it's partly to do with a modern teaching that's crept into the church, which goes like this: Christ died for our sins on the cross, once and for all. Sounds good. That's true. So, they say, He's dealt with sin. So now we don't need to think about sin any more. In fact it's a sin to think about sin any more. Just realise the freedom that Christ has given us all. Just come to Jesus. No need to bother about sin. No need to repent. No need to change in any way. Just come. Now sin has been taken away, realise what a wonderful human being you really are underneath. No. The gospel is not "come to Jesus." It's "***Repent*** and come to Jesus." Each one of us as individuals has got to first acknowledge personally **"*I have sinned*."** ***Then*** we can come to Him to cleanse us from our sin.

And it's not just about mouthing the words **"*I have sinned*"** either. Pharaoh, Balaam, Achan, Saul, Shimei and Judas all said these words. But none of them had any intention of changing in any way. They just said it to get out of a temporary mess they found themselves in. Pharaoh said to Moses, **"*I have sinned,*"** but only because a plague was ravaging his land. He promised to let the people go, but as soon as the plague was over he didn't. He knew very well as he was saying those words, he wasn't going to.

So it's not simply about mouthing words. Neither is it simply about sins against others, although if we have sinned against someone it's better to acknowledge it than ignore it. Nor simply about admitting, "I'm not perfect," although that's better than thinking I am.

It's about sinning against God. Now, there are some people who do recognise they've sinned against a higher being. My wife was once in a taxi going to Manchester airport. The driver said to her "I'm going to Mecca next week." Not getting much of a response, he then asked, "Do you know why I'm going to Mecca next week?" To which my wife replied was it something to do with making the pilgrimage once in your life. He said, "No, it's not that. I go every year. Why do you think I go every year?" He was going to tell her anyway. "To cleanse myself of my sins." Now, I don't know what they do. Shave their heads and throw stones at the devil, I don't know. But at least there was a man who went to great pains to try to cleanse himself from his sins. We don't often meet people like that these days. Most people aren't in the slightest bit interested in getting rid of their sins. He was going the wrong way about doing it, but at least he realised **"*I have sinned*."**

Sadly, most people who do at least acknowledge their sins before God, think that if they perform some ritual that they've been taught, they can atone for their sins themselves. So they go to Mecca, like this man. Or maybe they confess their sins to a priest in a confessional box, who tells them to say a couple of Hail Marys and that's it, job done. Or maybe they walk round and round a temple with their prayer wheel. Whatever they do, they're all rituals invented by men. God didn't tell anyone to do any of that. None of it is ever enough to atone for sins. And they have to keep on doing it. There's never any end.

To realise that no ritual can cleanse us from our sins, we really need to see the depth of our sin. God has got something more He wants us to acknowledge: ***"I have sinned...."***

….and perverted that which was right,….

We have perverted that which was right. There is a right and wrong in this world. There is an absolute morality, given to us by God, for all time. God has told us how we should live.

Micah 6:8
He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the LORD require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?

And He gave the nation of Israel a particular privilege by giving them a summary of how He wants us to live in the form of Ten Commandments. We must acknowledge we've not only broken them, but perverted them, twisted them and call good, evil and evil, good.

Malachi 2:17
Ye have wearied the LORD with your words. Yet ye say, Wherein have we wearied him? When ye say, Every one that doeth evil is good in the sight of the LORD, and he delighteth in them; or, Where is the God of judgment?

Isaiah 5:20
Woe unto them that call evil good, and good evil; that put darkness for light, and light for darkness; that put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter!

Let's quickly go through some of the Commandments to see how we've perverted them:

Thou shalt not kill. We might say "I've never killed anybody." But we've probably wanted to. And, in our society we think it nothing to abort babies. We call it a woman's right to choose. But does a serial killer have a right to choose to terminate life? Of course not.

Thou shalt not commit adultery. We should be faithful to our partners. But given the opportunity, and a belief they'll never find out, everybody does it. It's the new normal.

Thou shalt not steal. But we're quite happy to steal from work, the government, or NHS, or any big organisation if we think there's money to be had out of them.

Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour. We all know we shouldn't lie, but we do all the time. We put on a shew to make us appear better than we really are.

Thou shalt not covet. We think it's all right to desire our neighbour's property, because we're not actually stealing it. We think nobody can see our inner desires. But God can.

Honour thy father and thy mother. If the truth be known, most people are not in the idyllic happy families we dream of. Most are in dysfunctional

families. In any case, in our society, we don't live in multi-generational households. The children leave home as soon as they can to be free from any parental control. And if our parents become too much bother, we just dump them in a care home.

That's six of the Commandments. The other four deal with God Himself. If we're not even going to believe He exists, we're certainly not going to keep any of these:

Thou shalt have no other gods before me. Most today believe all religions lead to God. But one look at the so-called "holy" books of each religion, and we find they all teach their faith to be exclusive. So they might all be wrong, but they certainly can't all be right.

Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image. Go to Jerusalem. 2% of the population is Christian, the rest are Muslims and Jews. I found it quite remarkable that Muslims and Jews don't seem to have a problem keeping idols out of their mosques and synagogues. Yet every "Christian" church is full of statues and icons. Why do we have such a problem?

Thou shalt not take the name of the LORD thy God in vain. Taking God's name in vain is considered to be the mildest form of swearing.

Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. God has set apart one day in seven for us to specifically worship Him. Yet even Christians disagree as to which day this is. Some say Saturday, some Sunday and some both. We can't even agree amongst ourselves.

So, every one of us has **"*perverted that which is right*"** and we must acknowledge it. But why do we behave like this? There must be a reason, otherwise we wouldn't do it.

Well, God wants us to say something else. ***"I have sinned, and perverted that which is right,...."***

….and it profited me not;….

We do it for our own profit. We live our lives for our own benefit. Me, me, me. We must acknowledge that the way of life we've led right up to this point has been utterly selfish. Completely for ourselves. We need to realise how self-centred we all are. And we should want to change. Want to be finished with living this way. That's what God is looking for. A realisation that, "I thought the way I led my life would profit me, but it never did."

And we're not talking just financial profit here. It's the pursuit of anything for self. Happiness, pleasure, worldly comforts. There may be nothing wrong with some of these things in themselves, but the pursuit of them, to the exclusion of everything else, is the problem. It's the love of money, the love of these things, that's the root of all evil.

In Ecclesiastes chapter 2, we read of King Solomon. He had everything anyone could ever want. He had almost limitless finances, limitless resources, power and the opportunity to do anything he wanted. And, more to the point, God gave him wisdom. He was the second wisest man that ever lived, apart from Christ Himself. With this wisdom, he could understand what having all these things could do. So he tried everything out:

Ecclesiastes 2:1-11
I said in mine heart, Go to now, I will prove thee with mirth, therefore enjoy pleasure: and, behold, this also is vanity. I said of laughter, It is mad: and of mirth, What doeth it? I sought in mine heart to give myself unto wine, yet acquainting mine heart with wisdom; and to lay hold on folly, till I might see what was that good for the sons of men, which they should do under the heaven all the days of their life. I made me great works; I builded me houses; I planted me vineyards: I made me gardens and orchards, and I planted trees in them of all kind of fruits: I made me pools of water, to water therewith the wood that bringeth forth trees: I got me servants and maidens, and had servants born in my house; also I had great possessions of great and small cattle above all that were in Jerusalem before me: I gathered me also silver and gold, and the peculiar treasure of kings and of the provinces: I gat me men singers and women singers, and the delights of the sons of men, as musical instruments, and that of all sorts. So I was great, and increased more than all that were before me in Jerusalem: also my wisdom remained with me. And whatsoever mine eyes desired I kept not from them, I withheld not my heart from any joy; for my heart rejoiced in all my labour: and this was my portion of all my labour. Then I looked on all the works that my hands had wrought, and on the

labour that I had laboured to do: and, behold, all was vanity and vexation of spirit, and there was no profit under the sun.

Solomon, the second wisest man that ever lived, found out the hard way that the pursuit of pleasure and stuff in this world, for self, was vanity, vexation of spirit, pointless, and **without profit.** Jesus Christ, the wisest man that ever lived, went further than this:

Mark 8:36
For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?

Not only is the pursuit of self, without profit in this world, it also has eternal consequences. To do with the soul after death. And this is what we come on to now.

Once we admit before God these three things: ***"I have sinned, and perverted that which is right, and it profited me not,"*** God can then begin to work in us. And He does two things:

….He will deliver his soul from going into the pit,….

This is about the soul, so it's about what happens after death, after the soul has left the body. We're told ***"He will deliver his soul from going down to the pit."*** In other words, if we carry on ignoring God, living our own lives for our own gratification, we're going to end up in this pit. This pit is the default position if we never acknowledge to God ***"I have sinned, and perverted that which is right, and it profited me not."*** That's why this is so important.

What's the pit? Christ Himself tells us most of what little we know about it. Firstly, it's everlasting. It's permanent, unlike this world which is only temporary. We're not here for very long, but we'll be there for ever. It's described variously, by Jesus Christ Himself, as fire, torment, outer darkness, a place of weeping and gnashing of teeth, where the worm dieth not and the fire is not quenched. Put it this way, we don't want to go there.

The medieval church has given us a distorted view of this. They depicted it as a place of flames with the devil in charge, poking people back in with his pitchfork if they ever tried to escape. The devil isn't in charge of hell, God is. The devil is it's most notorious inmate.

Matthew 25:41
Then shall he say also unto them on the left hand, Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels....

Many think that in hell they'll see all their mates again and carry on sinning for ever. No they won't. Do we really think God has created a place where people can sin forever? That's just what they want. He's created this world, where He allows people to sin for a time, but it's only temporary. And He only allows sin in a limited way. There's a lot of evil in this world. But God only allows to happen what He purposes to turn to His own glory in the end. Nobody will be able to sin in hell. They'll all be bowing the knee to Jesus Christ:

Philippians 2:9-11
Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name: That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, ***and things under the earth****; And that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*

Those who have been delivered from the pit also, in the next world, won't be able to sin any more, and also will be bowing the knee to Christ. The difference is that those in hell will be hating every minute of it. That's their torment. They'll know it's right that they're there. They won't be shaking their fist in God's face saying, "I hate you God. It's your fault I'm here." No. They'll know exactly whose fault it is. They only have themselves to blame.

But those who've been delivered from the pit will love being in a place without sin, worshipping Jesus Christ for ever. They live in this world longing to be free from sin, and to see Him. And, one day, their longings will be realised.

Only God can deliver us from the pit. To avoid it, we must call upon Him while we're still in this world, It'll be too late once we're in the pit. The Lord won't be available then:

2 Thessalonians 1:9
Who shall be punished with everlasting destruction ***from the presence of the Lord****, and from the glory of his power;*

That doesn't mean God won't be there. God is in control of hell, God is everywhere. But He won't be accessible any more. He'll be silent. We won't be able to call on Him, to pray to Him any more. Just as Christ was silent before Herod, and later Pontius Pilate. We must call on God now, while we're still in this world, before it's too late and He's silent:
Isaiah 55:6,7
Seek ye the LORD while he may be found, call ye upon him while he is near: Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him return unto the LORD, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.

And we must come in this way: ***"I have sinned, and perverted that which is right, and it profited me not."***

And we don't just receive deliverance from the pit. We also see the light:

….and his life shall see the light….

We'll see the light. And notice, ***our life*** shall see the light. We can see it in this world now, even before death, and it will continue to be with us in the next life to all eternity.

Psalm 36:9
For with thee is the fountain of life: in thy light shall we see light.

There's a world of difference between these two groups of people. One hates sin and loves Christ. The other loves sin and hates Christ. Total opposites. It's the difference between darkness and light. We're born in darkness. How can any of us come to this light? It's altogether opposite from what we see here and now. None of us can attain it by ourselves. We need God to reveal it to us. There's only one source of spiritual light:

John 8:12
Then spake Jesus again unto them, saying, I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life.

If we come to God in this manner: ***"I have sinned, and perverted that which is right, and it profited me not,"*** and call on Him, He will reveal the light, Jesus Christ to us. And then we'll see. And we will be transformed. Like the man born blind healed by Christ:

John 9:25
....one thing I know, that, whereas I was blind, now I see.

Jesus Christ is the only way to the Father. Christ said:

John 14:6
Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me.

Jesus Christ died on the cross to atone for the sins of all who call upon Him. He knows who they are. And if we call, God will open our eyes to see Him as He really is. He'll transform our lives. Our eyes will be opened and we'll become altogether new:

2 Corinthians 5:17
Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.

This new birth is the most fundamental principle of the Christian faith. We must be transformed by God in this way. Because we can't do it ourselves. And we must come to the light, or else we'll end up in the pit. We must be born again by the Spirit of God.

These who come to Christ are the only ones who will escape going down to the pit. And they'll do that, not because they're better than anybody else, not by anything they've done, but by the sheer grace of God changing them. This is the position we all need to come to. And we must call on God to bring us there. But the only way is to come to God in this manner. Come to and end of ourselves and trust in God alone. May all of us do so:

He [God] ***looketh upon men, and if any say, I have sinned, and perverted that which was right, and it profited me not; He will deliver his soul from going into the pit, and his life shall see the light.***

Psalm 73. The Prosperity of the Wicked

A psalm of Asaph.

This psalm is one of twelve psalms that were written by Asaph. He was one of the chief singers appointed by King David for the worship in the Temple in Jerusalem. David's son Solomon actually built the Temple, but David made all the arrangements for it before he died, even down to the details of who the chief singers should be.

Asaph was a true believer. He knew the Lord for himself. And we find that out in v.1:

[1] Truly God is good to Israel, even to such as are of a clean heart.

He knew God was good, and God would bless Israel. And he knew that the true Israel, the true people of God, weren't necessarily all those who were physically descended from Abraham. The Old Testament shows us that most of them rebelled against God. They weren't God's chosen people. But rather the true people of God are all **"*such as are of a clean heart*,"** those spiritually descended from Abraham as the "father of the faithful."

Galatians 3:7
Know ye therefore that they which are of faith, the same are the children of Abraham.

In other words, the ones who will inherit all the eternal promises of God are not the Jews as a race, but rather all those, both Jew and Gentile, who are of a clean heart. Christ said:

Matthew 5:8
Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

These are true believers. These are the only ones on their way to heaven, who'll escape the judgment to come. The first thing we all have to admit is that none of us have a clean heart. By nature, we're all born in a sinful condition. We need to have our hearts completely renewed if

we're to live clean and pure lives. So, first of all, we must cry to God for Him to give us a new heart. Only then, can we have a heart that seeks after purity.

But Asaph had a problem.

[2] But as for me, my feet were almost gone; my steps had well nigh slipped.

He was a true believer, but there was one big question he just couldn't understand. He knew that God was good to His people. He knew that God would keep His people, and look after them. He knew that God was kind and generous to His people. These things weren't the problem. He knew all that from his own experience of God. His problem came when he saw the wicked seemingly having such a better time of things than he was.

[3] For I was envious at the foolish, when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. [4] For there are no bands in their death: but their strength is firm. [5] They are not in trouble as other men; neither are they plagued like other men.

He envied the wicked. They were so much more prosperous than he was. They didn't seem to have any difficulties in their lives and they were healthy and strong. Now, how much of that was actually true, we don't know. Wicked people tend to put on an outward show. Maybe many of them were really miserable in their hearts. They'd never show it if they were. But at least to Asaph, life seemed to be so much easier for them. God seemed to bless them more than those who loved righteousness and at least wanted to do what was right. He thought it was so unfair of God to allow such wicked people to prosper.

Do we envy anybody? Maybe our unbelieving neighbour seems to be getting along so much better than we are. They seem to have so much prosperity and pleasure, and here we are struggling away. We've got the Lord to help us, but we still find life difficult. They just drift through a life of relative ease.

But this easy life begins to bring out their real self. And Asaph can see this:

[6] Therefore pride compasseth them about as a chain; violence covereth them as a garment. [7] Their eyes stand out with fatness: they have more than heart could wish.

As a result of their being comfortable in this world, their wicked hearts become more and more manifest. They become proud and arrogant. They have pride in their achievements. "Look what I've achieved." "Aren't I wonderful." They're full of pride. And they become so self-centred, that they'd get violent if anybody opposed them. They end up living openly sinful lives, and whatever their evil imaginations come up with, they feel free to indulge in.

[8] They are corrupt, and speak wickedly concerning oppression: they speak loftily. [9] They set their mouth against the heavens, and their tongue walketh through the earth.

And they can use their mouths to get anything they want out of life. Do we know anybody with the uncanny ability to be able to control others to always get what they want? There are a lot of people in the world like that, who have this "power of persuasion." It's a real power, and it's a very dangerous thing.

They can manipulate others to do anything they say. Think of the dictators of the world. How did Adolf Hitler come to power? The people voted for him. They wanted him. People blindly follow such personalities, wherever they lead them. That's why it's so dangerous.

[10] Therefore his people return hither: and waters of a full cup are wrung out to them.

"*His people return hither*." This is quite difficult to understand, but I think "*His people*" refers to God's people, or at least those who profess to be God's people. Even we in the church can be so persuaded by silver-tongued speakers that we'll follow them rather than God. And

this can so easily lead to us returning back to our old way of life, our old ideas.

Those who've truly received a new heart from God, while they can backslide grievously, and be affected by such people, they can never fall away completely. So, when it says **"*waters of a full cup are wrung out to them*,"** this must refer to those who just profess God outwardly, but don't really know Him, because they return completely to their old life.

2 Peter 2:22
But it is happened unto them according to the true proverb, The dog is turned to his own vomit again; and the sow that was washed to her wallowing in the mire.

And unbelievers can see this happening. They see people who once professed Christianity going back and following their old way of life again, and it gives them boldness to to go even further and challenge God Himself.

[11] And they say, 'How doth God know?' And 'Is there knowledge in the Most High?'

We're warned in the Scriptures to particularly look out for this phenomenon as we come nearer to the end of time:

2 Thessalonians 2:3,4
Let no man deceive you by any means: for that day [i.e. the Day of Judgment] shall not come, except there come a falling away first, and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition; who opposeth and exalteth himself above all that is called God, or that is worshipped; so that he as God sitteth in the temple of God, shewing himself that he is God.

[12] Behold, these are the ungodly, who prosper in the world; they increase in riches.

So prosperity and riches in this world will lead to all sorts of wickedness: pride, violence, corruption, oppression, evil speaking, an uncanny power of persuasion to control others, and in the end it leads people to set themselves up in the place of God Himself.

Asaph, a man who loved God, had a serious problem when he saw all these things happening around him. How could God allow this to happen? Wickedness wasn't being punished. People seemed to be getting away with it. In fact they were becoming more prosperous, and more brazen in their wickedness. And God didn't seem to stop any of it.

Asaph was really beginning to think that following the Lord wasn't worth it:

[13] Verily I have cleansed my heart in vain, and washed my hands in innocency. [14] For all the day long have I been plagued, and chastened every morning.

Asaph thought, what's the point of keeping ourselves from evil, of fleeing from sin, of trying to keep ourselves holy, of trying to please the Lord? Because sin seems to bring so much prosperity and advantage in this world. But at least he also had the sense to realise that if he'd said this to anyone, his witness for the truth would have been destroyed.

[15] If I say, I will speak thus; behold, I should offend against the generation of thy children.

Do we have doubts in our mind about God? About what He's doing in the world? "Why does God allow this or that?" Or even about whether we're truly one of His children? It's at this point we should be careful what we say. If we truly love the Lord, and if we diligently stay close to Him, He'll keep us from completely destroying our witness for Him by saying unwise things about Him to others. If we have a problem with the things of God, there should be some people we can speak to about it, close friends, but generally we ought to keep quiet about it until God sheds more light on the situation for us.

But Asaph isn't the only one in the Bible who had a hard time thinking on these issues.

Jeremiah 12:1,2
Righteous art thou, O LORD, when I plead with thee: yet let me talk with thee of thy judgments: Wherefore doth the way of the wicked prosper? wherefore are all they happy that deal very treacherously? Thou hast planted them, yea, they have taken root: they grow, yea, they bring forth fruit: thou art near in their mouth, and far from their reins.

Jeremiah had the same problem. Notice, v.2, he acknowledged that the Lord had allowed the wicked to get into that position, and he realised that although they professed the true religion outwardly, they were far from God in their hearts. But he still found it so unfair these people prospered. The Lord replied to him, but it wasn't the answer he expected:

Jeremiah 12:5,6
If thou hast run with the footmen, and they have wearied thee, then how canst thou contend with horses? and if in the land of peace, wherein thou trustedst, they wearied thee, then how wilt thou do in the swelling of Jordan? For even thy brethren, and the house of thy father, even they have dealt treacherously with thee; yea, they have called a multitude after thee: believe them not, though they speak fair words unto thee.

The Lord told Jeremiah that if he couldn't understand what was happening now, then how was he going to understand in a far more difficult situation? And God revealed to him that he was in just such a situation, namely, his own family had betrayed him. All that the Lord brings upon us is under His overall control. It would have to be Jeremiah's faith that kept him faithful to the Lord, not what he saw in external circumstances.

Habakkuk was another prophet who also had the same problem:

Habakkuk 1:2-4
O LORD, how long shall I cry, and thou wilt not hear! even cry out unto thee of violence, and thou wilt not save! Why dost thou shew me iniquity, and cause me to behold grievance? for spoiling and violence are before me: and there are that raise up strife and contention. Therefore the law is slacked, and judgment doth never go forth: for the wicked doth compass about the righteous; therefore wrong judgment proceedeth.

Habakkuk saw so much injustice and violence everywhere. He cried to the Lord asking Him why He doesn't do anything about it? To which the Lord replied:

Habakkuk 1:5,6
Behold ye among the heathen, and regard, and wonder marvellously: for I will work a work in your days, which ye will not believe, though it be told you. For, lo, I raise up the Chaldeans, that bitter and hasty nation, which shall march through the breadth of the land, to possess the dwelling-places that are not theirs.

Just like Jeremiah, God gave Habakkuk a reply he could never have expected. God was going to bring a far worse nation, the Chaldeans, to be the instruments of His justice on Judah. They would do what was unthinkable to the Jews, and take away their land and destroy the Temple. How could God do that? Allow an even more evil nation to prosper? Well, if it's any consolation, Babylon itself was also going to be judged seventy years later.

Habakkuk finally came to terms with God's response, and, like Jeremiah, concluded:

Habakkuk 2:4
The just shall live by his faith.

This is quite an important verse in the Bible. It's quoted three times in different parts of the New Testament, Romans 1:17, Galatians 3:11 and Hebrews 10:38. This was the call of the Protestant Reformation. In the Reformation, the main issue was the question of how God can declare sinners righteous, and accept them into His presence. Does God look at our works? No. We're not saved by works. We can't work our way to heaven ourselves, we're not good enough. We're not even saved by faith with a little bit of works. We can't by nature do any works pleasing to God at all. If we're going to be accepted by Him, we must be saved by the grace of God through faith alone. It has to be this way.

The just have to live by their faith. If they looked to their works, all they'd see is sin. We have to live by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ that He's paid the price for our sin, and that He now declares us righteous in God's sight, so we'll escape the punishment we deserve.

But we also have to live by our faith in practical everyday circumstances as well. We have to live by faith that the Lord is in control of all things, despite what we see around us.

2 Corinthians 5:7
We walk by faith, not by sight.

We only have to go out of our front doors, or turn on our television sets, to see wickedness everywhere. Many people just can't believe in a God of love when they see the world so full of sin and evil. "How can God allow this or that to happen?" they'd say.

And true believers too, like Asaph, Jeremiah and Habakkuk, also found this difficult to understand. What's the point of striving for righteousness, of keeping oneself from sin, if everybody else around, who isn't bothered by these things, is having a far better time of it than we are? Well, I suggest we do what Asaph did, and enter the sanctuary of God.

[16] When I thought to know this, it was too painful for me; [17] until I went into the sanctuary of God; then understood I their end. [18] Surely thou didst set them in slippery places; thou castest them down into destruction. [19] How are they brought into desolation, as in a moment! They are utterly consumed with terrors! [20] As a dream when one awaketh; so O Lord, when thou awakest, thou shalt despise their image.

If we ever have a problem with the prosperity of the wicked, injustice in society or the extent of wickedness we see all around us, then we really need to change our perspective. We need to keep our eyes fixed on eternal things, not on things on this earth:

2 Corinthians 4:17,18
For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory; while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal.

On this earth justice is clearly not done. People get away with all sorts of evil things here. So if we're to believe in a holy, righteous, living Creator God, we've got to conclude that perfect justice will be dealt by Him in the next world, after death.

Genesis 18:25
Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?

So we've got to get away with just looking at what we can see around us. We must set our sight on invisible, eternal things, not just things on this earth. Only then can we get rid of any envy we have because of the prosperity of the wicked. If we could only see their upcoming punishment, we'd never want to be in their shoes on Judgment Day.

Asaph came to realise this, and he saw how foolish he had been at envying the wicked:

[21] Thus my heart was grieved, and I was pricked in my reins. [22] So foolish was I, and ignorant; I was as a beast before thee.

And he came to realise that it's always the right thing to do to put our trust in the Lord, despite outward circumstances seeming to tell us otherwise. Only in Him, following Him, trusting in Him, can we begin to see reality. Reality is seeing things in the light of eternity.

Habakkuk finally concluded:

Habakkuk 3:17,18
Although the fig tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vines; the labour of the olive shall fail, and the fields shall yield no meat; the flock shall be cut off from the fold, and there shall be no herd in the stalls: yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will joy in the God of my salvation.

In fact, we're told in the Bible that things'll get worse and worse before the end of time, so we should be ready for that, not be surprised by it. Christ said about the end of time:

Matthew 24:21
For then shall be great tribulation, such as was not since the beginning of the world to this time, no, nor ever shall be.

Matthew 10:22
And ye shall be hated of all men for my name's sake: but he that endureth to the end shall be saved.

Asaph continued:

[23] Nevertheless, I am continually with thee: thou hast holden me by my right hand. [24] Thou shalt guide me with thy counsel, and afterwards receive me to glory.

There's nowhere else for any of us to go for protection and help but to the one true living God. He is continually with His people, holding and guiding them until they reach glory.

Peter saw this when Christ's followers began to leave Him.

John 6:68,69
Simon Peter answered him, Lord, to whom shall we go? thou hast the words of eternal life. And we believe and are sure that thou art that Christ, the Son of the living God.

Asaph saw this too. He lived a thousand years before Christ, but true believers in Old Testament times put their trust in a Saviour to come. We today have exactly the same hope Asaph had, except we now know who that Saviour is, Jesus Christ.

Asaph concluded:

[25] Whom have I in heaven but thee? And there is none upon earth that I desire beside thee. [26] My flesh and my heart faileth: but God is the strength of my heart, and my portion for ever.

Can we say this about the Lord? Is He all we desire, not just for a hope in the next world, but here, now, on this earth too? Is He our strength,

even when we go through the valley of the shadow of death? When our bodies start to decay, and death comes near, who have we got to help us through it? Only the Lord can help us in life and death. Nobody else can do that. All other religions tell us there's something we can supposedly do to get the blessing in the next world. No, there's nothing we can do, except put our trust in the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

[27] For, lo, they that are far from thee shall perish: thou hast destroyed all them that go a whoring from thee. [28] But it is good for me to draw near to God: I have put my trust in the LORD God….

So, are we quite happy with ourselves, our status, our comfortable life? Not really bothered about sin or injustice (as long as it doesn't affect us)? As long as we can prosper in this world, it doesn't matter about anybody else – is that our philosophy of life? Do we think Christians are a bit simple? Do we think that they can't cope with the realities of this world, so they invent an invisible God to help them when they're in trouble? Is that what we think? If this describes us, then watch out. There's going to be a judgment.

Hebrews 9:27
it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment.

The one thing we all need to do right now is to repent.

Acts 17:30,31
[God] *now commandeth all men every where to repent: because he hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead.*

And what did this whole lesson encourage Asaph, the believer, to do?

….that I may declare all thy works.

We have got a marvellous message to give to the world. It is possible for us to be saved from our own sinful nature. There is a Saviour, Jesus

Christ of Nazareth, and we must put our trust in Him. If people laugh at us because of this message, so be it. But we know that here is the most wonderful message of all. Let's never let the world out there get us down ever again. Let's not follow the world and its wicked ways, despite the pressure we get on us every day to do so. But rather let's flee from sin and live our lives in the light of eternity.

Colossians 3:1-6

If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God. Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth. For ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God. When Christ, who is our life, shall appear, then shall ye also appear with him in glory. Mortify therefore your members which are upon the earth; fornication, uncleanness, inordinate affection, evil concupiscence, and covetousness, which is idolatry: for which things' sake the wrath of God cometh on the children of disobedience.

Psalm 90. Numbering Our Days

A Prayer of Moses the man of God.

This is **"*A prayer of Moses, the man of God.*"** The psalm titles are inspired Scripture. In a Hebrew Bible the title is v. 1. The verse numbers aren't inspired, but the titles are.

This psalm is attributed to Moses, it's the only psalm by him. It's not in the first five books of the Bible, which we usually ascribe to Moses. I don't know when the book of Psalms was compiled. Most of the psalms were written by King David and his contemporaries. If it was compiled then, that was about 500 years after Moses. So this Psalm of Moses, which is inspired Scripture, must have been around on its own for a long time.

And this psalm is called **"*a prayer.*"** There's a "*Song of Moses*" in Deuteronomy 32. That tells the story of how the Lord had helped Israel, and how they rebelled against Him. And in Revelation, we find out that we'll only be singing two songs in heaven:

Revelation 15:3
And they sing the song of Moses the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb.

I don't know what that song of Moses refers to. Is it the one in Deuteronomy 32, or this Psalm, or something else completely? We're not going to know until we get to heaven.

And we see that this is **"*A prayer of Moses the man of God.*"** And that's useful. When we find it difficult to pray, or simply want to know how to pray more effectively, it's no bad thing to go to Scripture and find the prayers of men of God to help us.

Christ gave us a template how to pray in the Lord's Prayer. We don't recite it blindly in a superstitious way, but we use it as a template for our own prayers in our own words. And we can do the same with many other prayers of men of God throughout Scripture. Abraham, Moses, David, Hezekiah, Daniel. There are many prayers in Scripture for our

learning and benefit. So let's look at this **"*Prayer of Moses the man of God.*"**

[1] Lord, thou hast been our dwelling place in all generations.

A **"*dwelling place*"** is far more than a bed for the night. It's a home. A place of comfort and security, where we can relax, away from the burdens of the world. But Moses' dwelling place isn't a home on this earth. It's the Lord Himself. The one true God, Lord of heaven and earth is Moses' dwelling place. But what does that mean?

Moses understood that any home we have on this earth is only ever temporary. He was brought up in Pharoah's palace for 40 years, then he was a shepherd in the back side of the desert for another 40 years, followed by 40 years wandering in the wilderness. And then he died, without ever entering the land the Lord had promised the Israelites.

But he did enter the true promised land. The true land promised by God was never meant to be a piece of real estate at the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea. For a short time that was given as a temporary home for the Jews. But Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, all these people of faith, weren't looking for anywhere on this earth to be a home:

Hebrews 11:13-16
These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. For they that say such things declare plainly that they seek a country. And truly, if they had been mindful of that country from whence they came out, they might have had opportunity to have returned. But now they desire a better country, that is, an heavenly: wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God: for he hath prepared for them a city.

And the Lord has made Himself a dwelling place, not just for Moses, but **"*in all generations*,"** for all His children in all ages, and that includes us. So, the true believer, the man of faith, doesn't have a home here, and we shouldn't try looking for one.

Hebrews 13:14
For here have we no continuing city, but we seek one to come.

But if the Lord is our dwelling place, we ought to know more about Him. Who is this God, that past men of faith had as their dwelling place, their real home? And we need to look at two things: His greatness and His holiness. Firstly, His greatness, how big He is.

[2] Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, thou art God.

God is **"*from everlasting to everlasting*."** He is eternal. He was not only there before the earth was formed, but He created it in the first place. We're dealing with an eternal, all-powerful Creator God. Many people don't want to believe such a God even exists. It makes them feel uncomfortable, because it would mean they're responsible to that God and can't get away from Him. So they'd rather invent their own smaller gods.

Or maybe they wouldn't invent gods at all, but fancy theories about the origin of the universe. If everything started at random by a big bang, without God being involved, then there'd be no responsibility, they can live how they please. Very convenient. But to believe in the concept of a big bang happening at random takes far more faith than simply believing in an all-powerful Creator God who created all things in the first place.

And I don't think we realise how big God actually is. If we've ever flown in an aeroplane over London, it is possible to see the whole city out of the window. God is in control of everybody and everything that's going on down there. He knows every sparrow, and every hair on everybody's head is numbered. And He's ordaining all things to His greatest glory. And that's just a small city. He's in control of all things, at all times, everywhere. Too often we think of God as just a little bit bigger than ourselves:

Psalm 50:21
….*thou thoughtest that I was altogether such an one as thyself.*

But, we may say, if this all-powerful Creator God exists, why is there death in the world? If He's created us, why do we die? That's a bit of a waste, to say the least, isn't it?

[3] Thou turnest man to destruction; and sayest, Return, ye children of men.

All of us die. If God is a God of love, why doesn't He give us good things in this world, all the time, for ever? That's a common question. And to answer it, we really need to start looking at things from an eternal perspective. All we can see at the moment is our own, comfortable, cosy little lives. That's all we bother about. We can't see beyond our own death. We need to see things from God's perspective. Death is not the end.

[4] For a thousand years in thy sight are but as yesterday when it is past, and as a watch in the night.

To God, and compared to eternity, our lives are so very short.

2 Peter 3:8
But, beloved, be not ignorant of this one thing, that one day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day.

And that's actually quite a comfort to the Christian. To us, nothing seems to change very much from day to day. Whatever difficult situation we're in, we seem to be in it for far too long. It's as though the Lord isn't answering our prayers. Everything seems to be going by so slowly. We want answers now. But the Lord is at work, and speedily:

2 Peter 3:9
The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.

The Lord's not slack. He's gathering His elect. He's shortening the days, for their sake:

Matthew 24:21,22
For then shall be great tribulation, such as was not since the beginning of the world to this time, no, nor ever shall be. And except those days should be shortened, there should no flesh be saved: but for the elect's sake those days shall be shortened.

[5] Thou carriest them away as with a flood; they are as a sleep: in the morning they are like grass which groweth up. [6] In the morning it flourisheth, and groweth up; in the evening it is cut down, and withereth.

We need to see the brevity of our life, in the light of eternity. Our lives are so short. We're like grass. It grows quickly, but it's either cut down or withers just as quickly.

1 Peter 1:24,25
For all flesh is as grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of grass. The grass withereth, and the flower thereof falleth away: but the word of the Lord endureth for ever.

So then we've got another question to ask: Why has God ordained our life in this world to be so brief? We've looked at God's greatness, compared to our smallness. Now we need to look at the second thing, His holiness, compared to our sinfulness. Let's suppose we did have everything we want in this world, for ever. What kind of people would we become? Selfish, conceited, proud, and without doubt we'd forget God altogether.

[7] For we are consumed by thine anger, and by thy wrath are we troubled.

We're told in 1 John 4:8,16 that "*God is love*." So many people think that means that God will never be angry with us, He just loves everybody the way they are, and He just wants everyone to acknowledge Him. But that's not true. Here we find out death and decay are in the world because God's angry with us. We're sinners in the hands of an angry God:

Romans 6:23
For the wages of sin is death.

We ought to be troubled by this. There's a very popular teaching going around in the church today which teaches something like this: God loves everybody. All we need to do is realise God's love for us. The love's been there all along, we just don't realise it. We just need to recognise our "freedom in Christ" as they say. Now, what's the problem with that?

Repentance is completely missing. And then we wonder why we're still in the mess we're in. With this illness, this family situation, this body of decay and death. It's because the wages of sin is death. It's not a question of realising God's love for us. It's a question of realising God wants us to repent. And these situations God puts us in, are Him telling us that. We can't simply carry on regardless, we need to do something about it.

[8] Thou hast set our iniquities before thee, our secret sins in the light of thy countenance.

We need to recognise we fall short of God's standards, and that we must repent, to change our ways. If we repent and put our trust in the Saviour God has provided, Jesus Christ, we'll be saved. Everything will be fine. We'll be saved to a new life, saved from the consequences of our sins. And we'll know we've been saved. That's what's necessary. Moses recognised that. He put his trust in the Saviour that, to him, was still to come:

Deuteronomy 18:15
The LORD thy God will raise up unto thee a Prophet from the midst of thee, of thy brethren, like unto me; unto him ye shall hearken….

We must put our trust in the same Saviour, but, unlike Moses, we know He's Jesus Christ.

Many people would accept that they fall short of what they ought to be. "Nobody's perfect," they'd say. But here God delves deeper into

our lives than we could ever do. He looks at our secret sins in the light of His countenance, His face. Oh dear!

Now, I just want to mention the doctrine of hell-fire, a place of everlasting torment for the wicked after death. We can't avoid it because Christ spoke about it:

Mark 9:43
And if thy hand offend thee, cut it off: it is better for thee to enter into life maimed, than having two hands to go into hell, into the fire that never shall be quenched

Matthew 25:41
Then shall he say also unto them on the left hand, Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels

You've heard in the past of hell-fire preachers, who whip their audiences up with such a graphic description of hell-fire to make them so scared of it, that they then easily seem to turn to Christ. Is that how we should be preaching? Is that where we're going wrong? Well, it would be the truth. There is a place of eternal torment for the wicked after death, and coming to the Saviour is the only way to escape the wrath to come. And wherever truth is preached, God can work. Christ said:

John 8:32
….*the truth shall make you free.*

But I don't think it's necessary, or wise, to shout at people they're going to hell. Even most Christians, have a problem with the doctrine of hell fire. They find it difficult to believe a loving God can send anybody there. And I can understand that. None of us can see the depth of our own sin straight away. It's only as we grow in the faith, the closer we get to God, to **"*the light of His countenance*,"** the more sin we see in ourselves, and the more we'll come to accept that a place of eternal torment is just where I deserve to be.

Isaiah 64:6
But we are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags; and we all do fade as a leaf; and our iniquities, like the wind, have taken us away.

God sees everything we do, and think. We can't get away from the **"*light of His countenance*."** As Christ said to the man at the pool of Bethesda, we need to:

John 5:14
….sin no more, lest a worse thing come unto thee.

[9] For all our days are passed away in thy wrath: we spend our years as a tale that is told.

We live our pathetic little lives, and it's just like a story that's told. Once we've read a story, it might have been exciting at the time, but after the story's over, who remembers it? Who's interested in it any more? It's boring. I've read that. Let's read something new, something more exciting. What empty lives we lead if we're just looking for the next thrill. If we're living purely for ourselves, we actually haven't achieved anything at all.

[10] The days of our years are threescore years and ten; and if by reason of strength they be fourscore years, yet is their strength labour and sorrow; for it is soon cut off, and we fly away.

In the early days of our world, people lived a lot longer than they do now. Adam lived until he was 930, Noah lived until he was 950. But after the flood, our lifespan shortened considerably. Abraham died at 175, and Moses himself died at 120. But even in Moses day, we're told here, the average lifespan was as low as it is now, 70 or 80 years.
Contrary to popular opinion, we're not living longer at all. We should realise the brevity of life, and that even the strength of this life is only **"*labour and sorrow*."** Those two words sum up life in this world. Why would anyone want to stay here for ever? We're **"*soon cut off, and we fly away*."** There's nothing here about not existing after death.

Many people today think there's nothing after death, so if their lives turn out to be a mess, that's all right, in the last resort they can just kill themselves and they think that'll be the end. No! When we die, we **"*fly away*"** to the next place, wherever that is.

And there are so many Christians too who've got a wrong view of this. Many believe that if we die knowing Christ we'll get eternal life, but if we die without Christ, we just cease to exist. But that's a terrible thought! Where's the incentive for anyone to give up their sin? Not coming to Christ isn't too great a deal, if there's nothing after death anyway.

1 Corinthians 15:32
Let us eat and drink for to morrow we die.

And just think of all the crimes that people commit in this world. If they don't get caught here – and many of them don't – they've got away with it if there's nothing after death. No! Even if we find it difficult to believe in a place of everlasting torment, we must at least agree that there is going to be a judgment after death. Otherwise God can't be just.

Hebrews 9:27
….it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment

[11] Who knoweth the power of thine anger? even according to thy fear, so is thy wrath.

None of us can really understand the power and depth of God's anger against sin. He is so holy. So we should fear the Lord. **"*Even according to thy fear, so is thy wrath*."** The depth of God's anger against sin is as great as the fear we should have for Him.

Psalm 111:10, Proverbs 9:10
The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

[12] So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom.

And now, finally, we come to the petitions in this prayer. When we pray, too often our prayers are just asking for things and that's it. We've got our needs, and we need to tell the Lord about them, even though He

knows everything we need anyway. There's nothing wrong with that. God encourages us to come to Him with our needs:

1 Peter 5:7
Casting all your care upon him; for he careth for you.

Philippians 4:6
Be careful for nothing; but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God.

But when we pray, we need to get into a right frame of mind first. Christ said:

John 16:23
Whatsoever ye shall ask the Father in my name, he will give it you.

From this verse, many people think we can ask for whatever we want and we'll get it. So we can ask for a million pounds and God will just give it to us. Of course that's not true. We need to pray "*in Christ's name*." That doesn't mean superstitiously adding "in Jesus name, Amen" to the end of our prayer. If we just pray, saying, "God, please give me this, and that, in Jesus name, Amen," I can assure you, it's not going to work. James said:

James 4:3
Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it upon your lusts.

It means the prayer has to be in the will of God. It has to be what Christ wills for us:

1 John 5:14,15
And this is the confidence that we have in him, that, if we ask any thing according to his will, he heareth us: and if we know that he hear us, whatsoever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we desired of him.

But how do we know Christ's will? We need to get into the right frame of mind in prayer, before we ask our petitions. That's exactly what Moses has done here. Once we're in the right frame of mind, we can then begin to offer our petitions. And we'll find we no longer want to

pray for stupid things to spend on our lusts. We'll be more in the right frame of mind to pray for useful things, things the Lord wants us to pray for.

And the first petition here is **"*to number our days*."** We only have to look back on our lives to see how much time we've actually wasted. Certainly all the time we spent before we became a Christian was wasted. And even after becoming a Christian, we have to acknowledge that we've not spent all our time as we ought to have done. So we need to pray that every day we may spend our time usefully in the Lord's service.

And we should **"*apply our hearts unto wisdom*."**

Proverbs 8:1,11
Doth not wisdom cry? and understanding put forth her voice? …. For wisdom is better than rubies; and all the things that may be desired are not to be compared to it."

King Solomon asked for wisdom, and the Lord not only made him the wisest man that ever lived, apart from Christ, but also gave him long life and riches, he never asked for.

[13] Return, O LORD, how long? and let it repent thee concerning thy servants.

The next request is for the Lord to return. This implies that the people of God, His servants, have gone away from the Lord, and Moses is calling on the Lord to return and repent of the just punishment He put on them for their sins. Now, God doesn't repent:

Numbers 23:19
God is not a man, that he should lie; neither the son of man, that he should repent

But God sometimes changes what He was going to do depending on the action of his subjects. But I don't think this is necessarily referring to a particular incident in the life of the Israelites. It's more of a request for the presence and closeness of the Lord to be felt again. Whatever has happened, Moses is having difficulty discerning the

Lord's presence. Maybe He's sinned and the Lord's withdrawn His presence for a time. And he's crying for that closeness, that knowledge of the presence of the Lord, once more.

This happens to all of us at various times in the Christian life. And when it does happen, we first of all need to examine ourselves, to see if we've done something to warrant this. But we also need to ask the Lord to get our mind refocused on Him as Moses does here.

[14] O satisfy us early with thy mercy; that we may rejoice and be glad all our days.

And then Moses cries for the Lord's mercy – and that's all any of us can ever do. Whoever we are, we need the Lord's mercy. We can't do anything without it.

Christians have already experienced His mercy, and we should be praying for a continued knowledge of His mercy in our lives, reflecting constantly on what He's done for us. Unbelievers haven't experienced His mercy at all yet. They're still under His wrath. They need to repent, and the way to do that is to cry to the Lord for His mercy. And God will be gracious to them. All of us, believer and unbeliever, need God's mercy.

"*that we may rejoice and be glad all our days*." Do we want a happy life? We can't have one unless we're in a right standing with God. We need to continually make sure we're in a right relationship with God. That'll guarantee a joyful, fulfilled and happy life.

[15] Make us glad according to the days wherein thou hast afflicted us, and the years wherein we have seen evil.

We look to our past, and we recognise the Lord has afflicted us, and we've seen much evil. We see nothing but trouble, and it has to be said, mainly of our own making. We're not to dwell on our past. We need to look forward:

Philippians 3:13,14
Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended: but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.

[16] Let thy work appear unto thy servants, and thy glory unto their children.

If we do look back on our lives at all, we need to forget our foolish behaviour, and see how the Lord has dealt with us. See His work in our lives, and how He's displayed His glory in us. And that's the legacy we have for our children.

[17] And let the beauty of the LORD our God be upon us: and establish thou the work of our hands upon us; yea, the work of our hands establish thou it.

Only if we're working for the Lord can our works be established. Living for ourselves is a complete waste of time.

1 Corinthians 15:58
Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye stedfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord.

These are the things that Moses prays for. Maybe he intended to pray for other things as well. But after realising God's greatness compared to our smallness, and God's holiness compared to our sinfulness, his mind became conformed to God's will, not his own will.
If we understand this prayer of Moses properly, we'll no longer have any desire to pray for stupid things any more, but our desire will also be conformed to the Lord's.

Psalm 136. Harvest Thanksgiving

Harvest thanksgiving is one of the most important festivals of the church year, because it teaches us thankfulness. We primarily give thanks to God for this year's harvest. And that's important, because sometimes harvests fail. Why does God allow that? There are many reasons. Maybe because of the sins of the people. Maybe it's God trying to wake us up to return to Him:

Amos 4:6
And I also have given you cleanness of teeth in all your cities, and want of bread in all your places: yet have ye not returned unto me, saith the LORD.

Or maybe it's God teaching us to be dependent on one another. In 2 Corinthians 8 and 9, the church at Jerusalem was in great need. The church in Macedonia heard about it and responded generously. The point being:

2 Corinthians 8:14
….that now at this time your abundance may be a supply for their want, that their abundance also may be a supply for your want: that there may be equality.

So we should never take a good harvest for granted. We've had a good harvest every year for so long now, that people today don't even think there's a God to be thankful to. They think everything just makes itself. The world was made suddenly from a big bang. We all evolved from a blob that one day crawled out of some slime. Dirt just becomes food. We've conditioned ourselves to think that things just happen. We never consider that all we see around us is proof there must be a God who created it all and provides for us. We wilfully choose to believe anything rather than be accountable to Him.

Romans 1:20,21
For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse: because that, when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, ***neither were thankful****; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened.*

Men will be condemned, amongst other things, for their unthankfulness. So we should be thankful. I want to examine this in more detail by looking at Psalm 136. There's so much more to be thankful for than just the harvest.

[1] O give thanks unto the LORD; for he is good: for his mercy endureth for ever.

This psalm is the easiest passage in the Bible to know what the main subject is, because it tells us in every verse: **"*For His mercy endureth for ever.*"** That's the greatest thing we have to be thankful for, God's mercy. But, before we can understand how God is merciful to us, we need to understand more of who God is. And the first thing to note is that He is good. Aren't we so glad about tha?

Throughout history, societies have invented their own gods: The Greek gods, the Roman gods, the Hindu gods. They're all beings more powerful than us, but at the same time they're all too much like us. They fight, they get jealous, they have emotions. And many people think that God is like that as well:

Psalm 50:18-21
When thou sawest a thief, then thou consentedst with him, and hast been partaker with adulterers. Thou givest thy mouth to evil, and thy tongue frameth deceit. Thou sittest and speakest against thy brother; thou slanderest thine own mother's son. These things hast thou done, and I kept silence; thou thoughtest that I was altogether such an one as thyself.

But the true God is good. Isn't that a great relief to know? He's not capricious, doing what He fancies at the time, sometimes this, sometimes that, so you never know what He's going to do next. He's good. He's consistently good. He's always good, and never evil. Which means He's perfectly just. What a wonderful thought that is. So we give thanks firstly because the Lord is good.

[2] O give thanks unto the God of gods: for his mercy endureth for ever. [3] O give thanks to the Lord of lords: for his mercy endureth for ever.

And we're to give thanks to the God of gods and Lord of lords. That doesn't mean He's the greatest of many. He's the only true God and Lord of all. Other gods don't really exist, they're figments of men's imagination. Whoever we can call "lord" in this world is nothing compared to the one true living God.

We really don't understand how big God is. By definition, a multiplicity of gods can't be gods at all. If God is all-powerful, all-knowing and in control of all things, there must only be One. If there's just one thing controlled by some other being, He can't be God.

But we don't want a God like that, we'd rather invent our own false gods instead, gods more like us. The Old Testament is the history of the Israelites, whom God made an example of what we're all like. If God had chosen the British, we'd have done exactly the same. Time and again, they rebelled against the true God and went after idols.

We may say we don't bow down to an idol. No, we don't do that in the West, but nearly every house in India, China and south east Asia has a little shrine somewhere, with a little wood or tin god, and incense burning and rotting fruit placed beside it. To them it's real. They worship their little gods.

We don't do that here, but we make idols in other ways. We make idols of celebrities. And we make an idol out of science. We think science can tell us everything. Science is good if used properly. We can use science to tell us how a plane crashed. That's a good use of science. But people use it in a wrong way. They think it can tell them the origin of the universe. But it can't.

These things aren't gods, they're idols. The second Commandment tells us not to idolise anything. There's only one God, He's good, and He's in control of everything. Isn't that wonderful? That's something to be thankful for.

[4] To him who alone doeth great wonders: for his mercy endureth for ever.

God alone doeth great wonders. In the Bible there are "*signs and*

wonders," real miracles, things beyond and above the natural order of things. Many churches today see miracles around every corner, but actually, there aren't all that many miracles of this kind in the Bible at all. The Exodus from Egypt. Elijah and Elisha. And our Lord Jesus Christ and the apostles performed real miracles. But miracles are noticeable because most of the time they don't happen. When Christ came, people were surprised at His miracles:

John 9:32
Since the world began was it not heard that any man opened the eyes of one that was born blind.

But we see here that God "***alone*** *doeth great wonders*." So when we become a Christian, we shouldn't think we've now got magic powers to heal people and do miracles like Jesus did, because we haven't. Only God can ordinarily do these things. So, if, for example, we want to see someone healed, we don't just say: "Be healed in the name of Jesus!" and suddenly it happens. We **pray** to God for healing.

James 5:16
The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much.

But there are two great "wonders," different from these "miracles," that ***are*** part of our everyday experience. The wonders of creation and providence. God created all things out of nothing. And in His providence, He upholds and controls everything that comes to pass, to His greatest glory.

Matthew 10:29,30
Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? and one of them shall not fall on the ground without your Father. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered.

[5] To him that by wisdom made the heavens: for his mercy endureth for ever.

He made the heavens by His ***wisdom***. This world isn't just randomly assembled, wound up and let to run down, like a watch. Every little thing has been created and is controlled by God's wisdom. God is all-wise. He knows exactly what He's doing. It might not seem like it at the

time, but He does.

In Genesis 1, God created the heavens and the earth in six days. Heaven was created on the second day. Now we don't know much about these things, but we know there are at least three heavens, because the apostle Paul said once that he was caught up to the third heaven, whatever that is.

On the third day, God gathered the waters together, so the land appeared:

[6] To him that stretched out the earth above the waters: for his mercy endureth for ever.

And on the fourth day He made the sun moon and stars:

[7] To him that made great lights: for his mercy endureth for ever: [8] The sun to rule by day: for his mercy endureth for ever: [9] The moon and stars to rule by night: for his mercy endureth for ever.

We're told in Genesis 1 that the sun, moon and stars were "*for signs, and for seasons, and for days, and years*." Not only are they to give light, but they give us seasons, chronology, and we can even navigate by them. All this is God's mercy to help us, because He cares about us. So we must be thankful.

Why is it important that we believe God created the world in the way He did? Why, for example, did God create light on the first day, but didn't create the sun and moon until the fourth day? It's a physical pattern of a spiritual reality. God does this all the time. We can't see spiritual things, so God gives us physical patterns that we can see, to explain what we can't see.

To understand the spiritual reality that Creation points to, we need to understand what it is to become a Christian. If we read a bit further on in Genesis, by the time we get to chapter three, it's all gone wrong. Adam ate of a fruit that God told him not to eat of, and, to quote the Shorter Catechism:

"All mankind by their fall lost communion with God, are under his wrath and curse, and so made liable to all miseries in this life, to death itself, and to the pains of hell for ever."

That's the situation we're in today. We're all born with a sinful, selfish nature. But God didn't leave us like that. In His mercy He provided a Saviour. He sent Jesus Christ into this world, to live a sinless life, and die a death He didn't deserve, whose death would be in place of His people. We deserve to die for our sins, but if we put our trust in Him, we can be freed from the punishment we deserve. That's Christianity, and it's mirrored here in the creation account:

Genesis 1:2,3
And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. And God said, Let there be light: and there was light.

We're born "*without form and void*." Darkness is upon the face of our hearts. We're born living for ourselves, living empty, formless, void lives. But when the Spirit of God moves, God says, "*Let there be light, and there is light*."

When we become a Christian, that's the first thing God does within us. He says "let there be spiritual light" in our hearts, and there is. It's like a light being switched on inside us. Suddenly the Bible, which was a dead book to us before, comes alive. We now see what we couldn't before. We become altogether different from what we were. That's the most wonderful thing that could ever happen. God coming into a soul, and saying, "*Let there be light*."

Once we have light, God can then start to order our lives. Bringing order out of chaos, just as in days 2 to 6 of creation. The rest of our lives, God changes us to make something useful. And then, just as in the 7th day when God "rested," so when we die, we receive the heavenly rest, the heavenly Sabbath, and we go to be with Christ in eternal sinless glory for evermore. Creation is a pattern of the spiritual reality. That's why it's important we understand the pattern.

So, not only should we be thankful that God is good, He created the universe, and that He's in control of everything. But we should also be

thankful for His plan to redeem a people for Himself. A plan successfully carried out by our Lord Jesus Christ. How thankful we should be for what He's done for us.

And then we've got, on the face of it, a rather strange verse:

[10] To him that smote Egypt in their firstborn: for his mercy endureth for ever:

How is it possible for God to kill all the firstborn in Egypt and then to say, **"*For His mercy endureth for ever*"**? What's merciful about killing people? Well, we need to understand the story of the Exodus of the Israelites from Egypt. Again, it's another physical pattern of a spiritual reality.

The Israelites were in slavery in Egypt for 430 years. God raised up Moses to set them free. By a series of plagues, God ruined Egypt, the final plague being the destruction of the firstborn. From the firstborn of Pharaoh to the firstborn of cattle, they all died. But God gave the Israelites advanced warning, and told them if they killed a lamb and smeared the blood on the doorposts, He'd pass over them. So the firstborn of the Israelites were saved, the Egyptians weren't.

That's the pattern. All who put themselves under the blood of the Lamb of God, the Lord Jesus Christ, will be saved from the punishment they deserve for their sins. But those who don't, will be destroyed for their own sins. Israel is an example of the believer being freed from the slavery of sin in his heart.

[11] And brought out Israel from among them: for his mercy endureth for ever: [12] With a strong hand, and with a stretched out arm: for his mercy endureth for ever.

The killing of the Egyptian firstborn is mercy, not to the Egyptians, but to the Israelites, in bondage for 430 years but now set free, by God, with a strong hand and a stretched out arm. So, on one hand, there's a sense in which God is merciful to all. We've no excuse. We've all got plenty to be thankful for:

Psalm 145:9
The LORD is good to all: and his tender mercies are over all his works.

But His mercy to the unrepentant isn't going to be forever. If we carry on in unthankfulness, not even acknowledging God for anything, one day there'll be a judgment. We've got to realise that, and repent while there's still time. We must turn from our sin to Jesus Christ, to escape the wrath to come.

And this also shows us that in this world Christians will have enemies:

John 16:33
In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world.

We have three enemies: the world, the flesh and the devil. That's not a phrase in the Bible, but it's a very good description of our enemies. We've got the world that doesn't understand us, and so persecutes us. We've got the devil:

1 Peter 5:8
Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour.

But our greatest enemy of all is ourselves, the flesh. We're our own worst enemy. The apostle Paul expressed this spiritual battle within him. He said:

Romans 7:22-25
For I delight in the law of God after the inward man: But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members. O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death? I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord.

After the Israelites had escaped from Egypt, they wandered for forty years in the wilderness. This, again, is a physical picture of a spiritual reality. As soon as they left, the Egyptians followed them. With the Egyptians behind them and the Red Sea in front of them, they had no way of escape. What could they do? What can we do, when we face a

situation in life where there seems to be no way out? They cried to the Lord. And the Lord delivered them:

[13] To him which divided the Red sea into parts: for his mercy endureth for ever: [14] And made Israel to pass through the midst of it: for his mercy endureth for ever: [15] But overthrew Pharaoh and his host in the Red sea: for his mercy endureth for ever.

God parted the Red Sea. With a wall of water on their left and right, The Israelites escaped to the opposite bank, but the Egyptians were drowned. The Egyptians received the just punishment they deserved. But the Israelites received mercy. God is good. He is perfectly just. He saves His people from their enemies, and judges everybody else with His perfect justice.

There's another phrase in the Bible that says, "*God is love*," which He is. But that doesn't mean He's got a fuzzy feeling about us all, and is going to forgive everybody everything unconditionally all the time, because He loves us all so much. That's a wrong idea about God altogether, because it doesn't take into account that God is good, He's just. The love of a good God is shown in saving them from evil, wherever it's found, in the world, the flesh or the devil. That's the true love of a good God. And He's saving His people from evil every day.

God cares about His people all the time. He keeps us and He protects us. After we've come to Him, the rest of our lives are spent under His care:

[16] To him which led his people through the wilderness: for his mercy endureth for ever.

God led His people through the wilderness. They became pilgrims, passing through wilderness on their way to the Promised Land. And we're pilgrims travelling through this world, until, at the end of our days, we reach the true Promised Land of heaven. That's always been the lot of true believers:

Hebrews 11:13-16
These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. For they that say such things declare plainly that they seek a country. And truly, if they had been mindful of that country from whence they came out, they might have had opportunity to have returned. But now they desire a better country, that is, an heavenly: wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God: for he hath prepared for them a city.

This world is not our home. We're just passing through. We should set our affection on things above, not on things on the earth:

Matthew 6:19-21
Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal: For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.

And then we read about two kings, Sihon and Og:

[17] To him which smote great kings: for his mercy endureth for ever: [18] And slew famous kings: for his mercy endureth for ever: [19] Sihon king of the Amorites: for his mercy endureth for ever: [20] And Og the king of Bashan: for his mercy endureth for ever: [21] And gave their land for an heritage: for his mercy endureth for ever: [22] Even an heritage unto Israel his servant: for his mercy endureth for ever.

Towards the end of the forty years in the wilderness, the Israelites passed peaceably by the nations of Edom, Moab and Ammon, and they tried to use the same diplomatic means to pass by the land of the Amorites as well:

Deuteronomy 2:30-33
But Sihon king of Heshbon would not let us pass by him: for the LORD thy God hardened his spirit, and made his heart obstinate, that he might deliver him into thy hand, as appeareth this day. And the LORD said unto me, Behold, I have begun to give Sihon and his land before thee: begin to possess, that thou mayest inherit his land. Then Sihon came out against us, he and all his people, to fight at Jahaz. And

the LORD our God delivered him before us; and we smote him, and his sons, and all his people.

Sihon and Og, rather than being peaceable, both came out to fight. The Lord defeated them both, and the Israelites acquired their land. It wasn't yet the Promised Land, it was still east of the Jordan river, but it was land. And the Lord has given us some land in this world. It's not the real Promised Land in the next world, but it's a foretaste. He's given us the church. A place where true believers can be refreshed, find help, encouragement and support from fellow pilgrims, on our way to the real Promised Land in the next world.

Now, I know the church can be a depressing place at times, especially when people who fancy themselves too much have taken over. True believers can get very frustrated with things. I know quite a few people who know the Lord, but they've given up going to church altogether, and that's very sad. No matter how bad the situation, nothing should ever stop us meeting together:

Hebrews 10:24,25
And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works: Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching.

But there's also the opposite extreme. Of the tribes of Israel: Reuben, Gad and half of the tribe of Manasseh liked the land they'd acquired from Sihon and Og so much, they decided to settle there and not go into the promised land on the other side of Jordan at all. They helped the others go in, but they wouldn't go in themselves. And there are so many people who love their church in this world so much, they don't want to leave it. They'd be lost without it. They're not making themselves ready for the next world. The church is not the Promised Land. We shouldn't put our trust in it, but keep our eyes on Christ.

[23] Who remembered us in our low estate: for his mercy endureth for ever:

From their bondage in Egypt, in all their wilderness journeying, and even after entering the promised land, Israel was in a low estate. In fact,

Deuteronomy 7:7,8
The Lord did not set his love upon you, nor choose you, because ye were more in number than any people; for ye were the fewest of all people: But because the Lord loved you, and because he would keep the oath which he had sworn unto your fathers, hath the Lord brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you out of the house of bondmen, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt.

And it's the same with us. We might be quite comfortable here. We might have status in this world, and many possessions, but every one of us is in a low estate. Do we feel that? Mary, the mother of our Lord, had a tremendous privilege. She was to carry the Son of God in human flesh. But she didn't puff herself up with pride about it. She saw herself for what she really was:

Luke 1:46-48
And Mary said, My soul doth magnify the Lord, And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour. For he hath regarded the low estate of his handmaiden: for, behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed.

We should always keep this attitude of Mary. We're nothing. We're simple people. But that's exactly who the Lord looks for to do His work:

1 Corinthians 1:26-29
Not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called: But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty; And base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are: That no flesh should glory in his presence.

We can't do anything. Everything we do and are is of the Lord's mercy. As we grow in the faith, we come to realise this. We need the Lord for everything.

[24] And hath redeemed us from our enemies: for his mercy endureth for ever.

We can't defeat the world, the flesh and the devil. They're far too

powerful for us. We need the Lord to do everything for us. And in His mercy, He helps His people. Everything we have and are is of the Lord's mercy. Consequently, the only thing that should fill our hearts is thankfulness, nothing else. And finally:

[25] Who giveth food to all flesh: for his mercy endureth for ever.

That's what we're thinking of tonight, as we give thanks for the harvest. He feeds all flesh. All His creatures are dependent on Him. None of us deserves anything in this world. The harvest is mercy. We should be thankful.

But the believer has something far greater to be thankful for. The forgiveness of sins. We could just sit here and continue year after year the way we are, living our own sinful, self-centred lives, not being thankful for anything. But one day we'll find God's mercy will no longer be there. But all those who come to The Lord Jesus Christ can have their sins freely forgiven. It's a wonderful thing to know we won't be condemned with the world. That's true mercy. Only when we know our sins forgiven, can we know what thankfulness really is.

[26] O give thanks unto the God of heaven: for his mercy endureth for ever.

Ecclesiastes 2. The Meaning of Life

I want to talk today about the meaning of life. I've heard sermons which start something like this: "Everybody's looking for the meaning of life. Well, I can tell you the answer, it's Jesus Christ." Now, I agree that's the correct answer, but I'm not too sure about the first bit. I don't know anybody who's looking for the meaning of life. They want to know the football results, or what's on telly tonight, who's having an affair with who in their favourite soap. Nobody's searching for the meaning of life. Nobody thinks about it.

But King Solomon looked for it, and found it. The book of Ecclesiastes tells us about it all.

King Solomon was in a unique position to do this search. After his father David died, God said he could ask for any one thing and it would be given him. What would you ask for?

2 Chronicles 1:7-12
In that night did God appear unto Solomon, and said unto him, Ask what I shall give thee. And Solomon said unto God, Thou hast shewed great mercy unto David my father, and hast made me to reign in his stead. Now, O Lord God, let thy promise unto David my father be established: for thou hast made me king over a people like the dust of the earth in multitude. Give me now wisdom and knowledge, that I may go out and come in before this people: for who can judge this thy people, that is so great? And God said to Solomon, Because this was in thine heart, and thou hast not asked riches, wealth, or honour, nor the life of thine enemies, neither yet hast asked long life; but hast asked wisdom and knowledge for thyself, that thou mayest judge my people, over whom I have made thee king: Wisdom and knowledge is granted unto thee; and I will give thee riches, and wealth, and honour, such as none of the kings have had that have been before thee, neither shall there any after thee have the like.

Solomon didn't ask for riches, wealth or honour or anything else that we would probably have asked for. He asked for wisdom. And so God made him the wisest man of his day. And as a bonus, God gave him all these other things as well. So if anyone could find out the meaning of life, he had all the resources to do so. So he's worth listening to.

We're told that we can ask God for wisdom as well:

James 1:5
If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him.

But what is wisdom? Where can we find it? Well, we're told something about it:

Proverbs 8:11
For wisdom is better than rubies; and all the things that may be desired are not to be compared to it.

If wisdom is so precious, it can't be very easy to find. So the first thing we can say is that the world in general hasn't got it, otherwise it wouldn't be said to be better than rubies. So, let's see what the wisest man in the world found in his search for the meaning of life.

What do most people naturally assume the meaning of life is all about? A two letter word. Me. My own happiness. My own pleasure. They just naturally think that's what we should all be doing, enjoying ourselves. So, Solomon, in his search, started there:

[1] I said in mine heart, Go to now, I will prove thee with mirth, therefore enjoy pleasure: and, behold, this also is vanity.

He tried mirth and pleasure. And found out it was all vanity. He didn't get very far, did he? But that's what so many people do. They laugh and joke their way through life, living for the next unit of pleasure they can find. Travelling the world looking for new experiences. They don't want to do anything else. They don't think there's anything else to do.

[2] I said of laughter, It is mad: and of mirth, What doeth it?

Solomon found out it's madness to seek after these things. The NIV says here, "*what does pleasure accomplish?*" That's a good way of putting it. It doesn't do anything useful. There's no point to it at all. Yet, to millions, that's all life's about.

So when someone with a bit of wisdom comes along and says, "I'm bored with laughing, joking and pleasure-seeking all the time," they really think we're stupid. They're in the vast majority, so they think they must be right. But one thing's for sure, they can't be wise, because wisdom is more precious than rubies. Wisdom can't be what the majority thinks.

But there are quite a few people who can see through all this pleasure-seeking. They've come to realise it can't satisfy. So, what do people do when they can't stand any more daytime television? And they get fed up with one holiday resort looking pretty much like another? And they're bored with what this world has to offer? They try to escape from it all. They get drunk. So that's what Solomon did.

[3] I sought in mine heart to give myself unto wine, yet acquainting mine heart with wisdom; and to lay hold on folly, till I might see what was that good for the sons of men, which they should do under the heaven all the days of their life.

People turn to drink and drugs to try to alleviate the dissatisfaction they have with everything else. They're right that pleasure can't satisfy, but they think drink and drugs can provide a means of escape from this empty life. So Solomon tried it. But he kept his wisdom, to try to understand it all. Don't try this at home. Don't say, "I can get drunk and use drugs, but still keep my wisdom, to see what it's like." Because we'll get stuck in a never-ending spiral. Just take Solomon's word for it. All it does is blot out reality.

So Solomon found out that pleasure-seeking doesn't satisfy, and neither does getting drunk. So, what does he try next? He set about following his heart, doing whatever his heart desired. Solomon had the wealth to do whatever he wanted:

[4] I made me great works; I builded me houses; I planted me vineyards: [5] I made me gardens and orchards, and I planted trees in them of all kind of fruits: [6] I made me pools of water, to water therewith the wood that bringeth forth trees: [7] I got me servants and maidens, and had servants born in my house; also I had great

possessions of great and small cattle above all that were in Jerusalem before me: [8] I gathered me also silver and gold, and the peculiar treasure of kings and of the provinces: I gat me men singers and women singers, and the delights of the sons of men, as musical instruments, and that of all sorts. [9] So I was great, and increased more than all that were before me in Jerusalem: also my wisdom remained with me. [10] And whatsoever mine eyes desired I kept not from them, I withheld not my heart from any joy; for my heart rejoiced in all my labour: and this was my portion of all my labour.

This is the sort of thing people would do if they won the lottery. They'd spend their new found wealth on **"*whatsoever* their *eyes desired*."** So Solomon built up His huge empire.

But haven't we read stories about people who win the lottery, and it doesn't satisfy them at all, in fact, they end up being really miserable.

[11] Then I looked on all the works that my hands had wrought, and on the labour that I had laboured to do: and, behold, all was vanity and vexation of spirit, and there was no profit under the sun.

So, by now, he's tried everything this world could offer. Pleasure-seeking, getting drunk, doing whatsoever his heart desired. None of it satisfies. What would we do after trying all that? We're running out of things to do here. A lot of people would think of killing themselves at this point. But there is one more option left. Philosophy. Spirituality. Seeking intangible things in our minds that we can't sense with our senses.

[12] And I turned myself to behold wisdom, and madness, and folly: for what can the man do that cometh after the king? even that which hath been already done.

So, he exercises his mind to search out wisdom, and seek out the difference between wisdom, madness and folly. He's seeking learning for its own sake. He'd already been given wisdom by the Lord to do all this. He could do this a lot better than any of us could. He uses his own mental capacity to try to seek some kind of enlightenment, to see

if he could search for the meaning of life by his own logical thought processes.

He does come to one good conclusion:

[13] Then I saw that wisdom excelleth folly, as far as light excelleth darkness.

He finds out wisdom is better than folly, or foolishness. So it's better to be wise than to be foolish. So, he's worked that one out. But it doesn't solve his problem.

[14] The wise man's eyes are in his head; but the fool walketh in darkness: and I myself perceived also that one event happeneth to them all.

He's found out it's much better to be wise than stupid. But it's obvious that both the wise man and the fool die. So what's the point pursuing either?

[15] Then said I in my heart, As it happeneth to the fool, so it happeneth even to me; and why was I then more wise? Then I said in my heart, that this also is vanity.

We can spend our lives being wise, but what's the point when the wise man and the fool both die anyway? Why have I spent all that effort trying to be wise? It's all pointless.

[16] For there is no remembrance of the wise more than of the fool for ever; seeing that which now is in the days to come shall all be forgotten. And how dieth the wise man? as the fool.

Nobody remembers us after we die. Go to a graveyard. Dead people may have been very wise in their lifetime, but where's their wisdom now? The wisdom they accumulated has all gone. All forgotten. And that's us. We can think we're so important now, but once we're gone,

everything we're doing here, everything we've learnt, has been a waste of time.

So, Solomon concludes, it's all pointless. He's tried it all. Pleasure-seeking, getting drunk, doing everything his heart desired, seeking out wisdom for himself. All pointless, because we're going to die anyway. There's no point in anything, and there's nothing left to try.

[17] Therefore I hated life; because the work that is wrought under the sun is grievous unto me: for all is vanity and vexation of spirit.

So we must conclude that life is hateful. There's no other option. If there's no point in anything, everything becomes hateful. Solomon was right. We fill our little lives with our busy activities, and many people are too busy even to come to church for an hour a week. What are they doing? They must think that their little lives are so important. But the wisest man in the world is here telling us that it's all vanity and vexation of spirit.

[18] Yea, I hated all my labour which I had taken under the sun: because I should leave it unto the man that shall be after me. [19] And who knoweth whether he shall be a wise man or a fool? yet shall he have rule over all my labour wherein I have laboured, and wherein I have shewed myself wise under the sun. This is also vanity.

Most people leave all they have to their children, but after we're gone they might decide to have altogether different ideas from us, and we can't stop them. So our ideas will all be forgotten. So however wise we've been, all we've worked for has been a waste of time.

[20] Therefore I went about to cause my heart to despair of all the labour which I took under the sun.

"Despair." That's the only conclusion we can possibly come to, if we look at our miserable lives here. We're only here temporarily. And when we're gone, we'll be forgotten.

James said:

James 4:14
For what is your life? It is even a vapour, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away.

[21] For there is a man whose labour is in wisdom, and in knowledge, and in equity; yet to a man that hath not laboured therein shall he leave it for his portion. This also is vanity and a great evil.

We can spend all our lives working hard on something useful, but it all goes to someone who hadn't worked for it. Our lives here are not only short, but full of labour and sorrow.

Moses said:

Psalm 90:10
The days of our years are threescore years and ten; and if by reason of strength they be fourscore years, yet is their strength labour and sorrow; for it is soon cut off, and we fly away.

[22] For what hath man of all his labour, and of the vexation of his heart, wherein he hath laboured under the sun? [23] For all his days are sorrows, and his travail grief; yea, his heart taketh not rest in the night. This is also vanity.

This life is hard labour, full of sorrow, and sometimes our heart doesn't even rest properly at night because of our various concerns. And in the end it's all pointless anyway. This is reality. It's not a wonderful life. Nobody has a perfect family. Everybody's life is dysfunctional. If this is all there is, there really is nothing to live for. That's the truth. The sooner we all come to this conclusion, the better. We all need to face up to reality.

And there are many more things about this world that Solomon talks about later on in the book, which we don't have time to look at now. Like the injustices we see in society:

Ecclesiastes 3:16
And moreover I saw under the sun the place of judgment, that wickedness was there; and the place of righteousness, that iniquity was there.

Or the oppression we see:

Ecclesiastes 4:1
So I returned, and considered all the oppressions that are done under the sun: and behold the tears of such as were oppressed, and they had no comforter; and on the side of their oppressors there was power; but they had no comforter.

Or loneliness:

Ecclesiastes 4:8
There is one alone, and there is not a second; yea, he hath neither child nor brother: yet is there no end of all his labour; neither is his eye satisfied with riches; neither saith he, For whom do I labour, and bereave my soul of good? This is also vanity, yea, it is a sore travail.

All of these things show the vanity of absolutely everything in this world. The BBC will never tell you about this. They want you to get excited about this, that and the other thing in this world. They try to tell you how wonderful everything is. But the wisest man who ever lived, apart from Christ, is here telling us the truth.

So, what did Solomon do? Because he didn't kill himself. He saw all this, that life in this world is vanity, vexation of spirit, and all so temporary. But he came to this conclusion:

[24] There is nothing better for a man, than that he should eat and drink, and that he should make his soul enjoy good in his labour….

So, does that mean, just don't think about it. Whatever our lot in life, just accept it. Just eat, drink and work at whatever we have to do, and don't think about whether it satisfies, or makes us happy, or enlightens us in any way? Well, I suppose living like that, makes things a lot easier. But the difference here is that Solomon, for the first time in this whole chapter, brings God into the situation:

….This also I saw, that it was from the hand of God.

Whatever life we have, whatever situation we are in, however difficult it is or unhappy we are or unsatisfying our lives are, there is a God in heaven, and He's given this to us.

So you say, "Well, I hate God then, because my life's a mess. How can this have come from a loving God? I don't want to believe in God." Hang on a minute.

So far, in all of Solomon's thinking, God has been left out of the equation. He's thinking life is all about me, my happiness, my satisfaction, my achievements, my searching out the truth. And it's not about me at all. Who am I? I'm only here for a short time, and soon enough I'll be completely forgotten. But God remains forever. He is eternal.

Lamentations 5:19
Thou, O Lord, remainest for ever; thy throne from generation to generation.

So, if we're going to find any kind of meaning to our lives, it must be something eternal, something for God, not for ourselves. To live for this world only is always a waste of time.

1 Corinthians 15:19
If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable.

The only alternative to following and worshipping the one true living God, is a meaningless, pointless life which we may as well end now. The reason so many people haven't ended their lives yet is because they still think there's something to live for here.

In fact, more and more people are wanting to end their lives today, especially if they've got a debilitating, unrecoverable illness. They want to "die with dignity," thinking that'll give them relief. But if there's an eternal God in heaven who has ordained everything we see and do, we shouldn't think like that, because that means death isn't the end. There's an eternity beyond death. Don't take my word for any of this, take Solomon's:

[25] For who can eat, or who else can hasten hereunto, more than I?

Solomon was perfectly qualified to come to this conclusion, because he'd been given the wisdom to see it clearly. We don't have that. So we still fumble around in the dark. To save us all a lot of bother, we've got this book. Just take Solomon's word for it. Don't ever think this world is all there is, because if we do, not only will we realise everything's pointless, but we might decide to end our life, only to find it's not ended, but it continues after death.

Those who try to "die with dignity" haven't understood this. They still think life is all about this world, me, my happiness, my satisfaction. So when they can't go parachuting any more, or travelling the world any more, they think there's nothing more to live for. But that's not true. It's such selfish thinking. There's plenty more to live for in eternity.

There's a very popular book around, written by an atheist, which also talks about life, the universe and everything. I've forgotten the title, but someone at work left it lying around, so I had a quick look at it. It talked about the Big Bang, the universe being billions of years old and we all evolved from monkeys and so on, the usual stuff. So I went straight to the last page, and do you know what the conclusion this intelligent atheist came to? He wasn't wise, otherwise he would have come to the conclusion Solomon came to – everything's vanity without God. But, no. His conclusion was: we're all stardust. That's it. Doesn't that make you feel good? We're just all specks of dust. That's all atheists can offer. The truth is far more wonderful than that. Only because there is a God in heaven.

[26] For God giveth to a man that is good in his sight wisdom, and knowledge, and joy: but to the sinner he giveth travail, to gather and to heap up, that he may give to him that is good before God. This also is vanity and vexation of spirit.

The world is split into two types of people, the **"*man that is good in His sight*,"** and **"*the sinner*."** Because there is a God in heaven, we've got morality. Atheists don't have this. They don't have a greater being to whom they're responsible. That's why they've invented a belief system for themselves. They don't want to be accountable.

But we've just discovered that there must be a God, otherwise everything is pointless. And if there must be a God, there must be morality. Whether we like it or not.

1 John 3:4
Sin is the transgression of the law.

And Solomon tells us that to the sinner, God **"*giveth travail, to gather and to heap up.*"** So is our life one of travail, one of hard bondage? Welcome to the world. Everybody's life is like that. If we think our life is a mess, welcome to the club. That's God telling us we're all sinners:

Romans 3:23
For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God.

Romans 3:10-12
As it is written, There is none righteous, no, not one: There is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God. They are all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no, not one.

We don't even seek after God, we don't even think He exists, let alone try to find out what He requires of us. But if we carry on like that, we're told our lives will be travail, hard bondage. So, we shouldn't shake our fist in God's face and complain, "I hate you God, for making my life like this." It's like this because we don't acknowledge Him and seek Him.

Solomon also tells us that to **"*a man that is good in his sight,*"** God gives **"*wisdom, and knowledge, and joy*."** So there is a way out of this mess. It doesn't have to be like this.

In chapter 3 of Ecclesiastes, Solomon goes on to say:

Ecclesiastes 3:10-14
I have seen the travail, which God hath given to the sons of men to be exercised in it. He hath made every thing beautiful in his time: also he hath set the world in their heart, so that no man can find out the work that God maketh from the beginning to the end. I know that there is no good in them, but for a man to rejoice, and to do good in his life. And also that every man should eat and drink, and enjoy

the good of all his labour, it is the gift of God. I know that, whatsoever God doeth, it shall be for ever: nothing can be put to it, nor any thing taken from it: and God doeth it, that men should fear before him.

The fear of God, That's the key. Not that we should be afraid of Him, but that we should acknowledge His presence and no longer want to live for ourselves, but rather serve Him instead. That's **"*the man that is good in His sight,*"** to whom God gives **"*wisdom, knowledge and joy*."** And the beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord:

Psalm 111:9,10
*He sent **redemption** unto his people: he hath commanded his covenant for ever: holy and reverend is his name. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom: a good understanding have all they that do his commandments: his praise endureth for ever.*

If we fear the Lord, we will want to "*do His Commandments*." But we'll soon find out we can't do them. We fall short of His requirements. As we said before, we've all sinned. Which is where redemption comes in. And that's the work of the Lord Jesus Christ:

1 Corinthians 1:30,31
But of him are ye in Christ Jesus, who of God is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption: That, according as it is written, He that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord.

Jesus Christ is our wisdom. He's the one to follow. He's also our redemption. He died on the cross to redeem all His people from their sins, so they would no longer be justly punished for them. That's redemption. If we're going to become **"*the man that is good in*"** God's **"*sight*,"** we need to apply this redemption to ourselves. How do we do that?

Acts 2:21
Whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved.

Call on Him. Speak to Him. Start a relationship with the one true living God, Lord of heaven and earth. If we're genuine about no longer wanting to live for ourselves but wanting to live for God instead, speak to Him, tell Him. Ask for forgiveness for our sins, and call upon Him.

He will answer. I guarantee it. It's the only way out of the mess we're all born into. Notice what Solomon says about the sinner who carries on in his sin:

"to the sinner he giveth travail, to gather and to heap up, that he may give to him that is good before God. This also is vanity and vexation of spirit."

If we do nothing and carry on in our sin, everything we work for will be taken away from us and given to **"*him that is good before God.*"** We're not going to be able to take any of it into the next world. Christ said something similar too:

Luke 19:26
For I say unto you, That unto every one which hath shall be given; and from him that hath not, even that he hath shall be taken away from him.

If we insist on continuing to live for ourselves, not only will our lives be sore bondage, but it will all be taken away from us in the end. It's not worth it. Solomon's final conclusion at the end of the book of Ecclesiastes is:

Ecclesiastes 12:13,14
Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man. For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil.

Every other way won't work. It's vanity and can only lead to despair. Let's make sure we have a real meaning to life, by coming to the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave His own life for us, and is the only one who can bring us to God.

1 Peter 3:18
For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God.

Jeremiah 31:31-34. The New Covenant

The Bible is split into two parts. The first two-thirds of it is known as the Old Testament, and the remaining third is known as the New Testament. Now, we might say we know that already. But the fact is that young people today know absolutely nothing about the Bible. This is all new to them. And it's not because they're not intelligent. They know how to use smartphones and make TikTok videos, which is more than I do. It's because they're never taught about it. The Bible isn't in the National Curriculum. And you won't find it on the BBC either. The BBC have got a Religion department, but we'd be hard pushed to realise it if it wasn't for the credits at the end of the programmes. The Bible is totally missing from everyday life.

So with people today, we have to start from scratch. Now that can be a good thing. They don't have any baggage, any false teaching imbibed from any kind of church background. They don't have to "undo" anything before embracing the truth.

Anyway, I want to look today at this difference between the Old Testament and the New Testament. And the best place we've got to do that, is here, in Jeremiah's prophecy.

[31] Behold, the days come, saith the Lord , that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah: [32] Not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt; which my covenant they brake, although I was an husband unto them, saith the Lord : [33] But this shall be the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel; After those days, saith the Lord , I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people. [34] And they shall teach no more every man his neighbour, and every man his brother, saying, Know the Lord : for they shall all know me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them, saith the Lord : for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.

This passage talks about two "*covenants*": a new covenant which it is said will shortly be made (v.31), ***"Behold, the days come, saith the Lord ,***

that I will make a new covenant....*"**, and (v.32) an old covenant, a ***"covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt." So we have a New and an Old Testament.

A testament is another name for a covenant, although we only usually use the word "Testament" when it involves the death of the person making it. When we make a "Last Will and Testament," it's a legally binding contract explaining what we want to happen to our stuff after we die. In the case of the "New Testament," we do have a death:

1 Corinthians 5:7
Christ our passover is sacrificed for us.

The whole concept of a covenant, or testament, is fundamental to Christianity.

A covenant is a contract. We make contracts all the time. If we go to the shop for a packet of crisps, the shopkeeper enters into a contract with us: "I'll give you a packet of crisps if you give me 60p" or 90p or £3.25 or however much it is. And we agree to that. That's a ***conditional*** covenant. There are terms on both sides. If we fail to hand over the cash, or the shopkeeper doesn't give us the goods, the contract has been broken.

But a covenant can also be ***unconditional***. We usually call that a promise. If I simply say, "I'm going to give you £100 next week." (I'm not, by the way). You don't have to do anything to receive it. There are no terms to fulfil on your part, you simply accept it. It's a promise, it's ***unconditional***. It's important to understand that an ***unconditional promise*** is also a ***covenant***, because we'll see that this "New Testament" is just such a covenant.

God makes covenants with men. Several of them are mentioned in the Bible. Some are ***conditional***, some are ***unconditional***. For example, the covenant He made with Noah after the flood was ***unconditional***. He promised never again to flood the earth with water:

Genesis 9:9,11
And I, behold, I establish my covenant with you, and with your seed after you; .... neither shall all flesh be cut off any more by the waters of a flood; neither shall there any more be a flood to destroy the earth.

There's no terms for Noah, or us, to keep in this covenant. God didn't say, "If you keep my law I'll never flood the earth again." He just said He wouldn't, full stop. So He won't.

Other covenants God makes are ***conditional***, and we'll see this in a minute. Let's go through the text. I think it's going to be easier to look at verse 32 first, because that talks about the old covenant, or Old Testament. We need first of all to see what this was, and then what was so wrong with it that God says He's going to make a new covenant.

[32] Not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt; which my covenant they brake, although I was an husband unto them, saith the Lord:

So, first of all, what was the covenant God made with their fathers?

Not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt;….

Jeremiah is talking to Jews. The Jews have had such tremendous privileges throughout history. This old covenant was made with them. So, understanding the history of the Jews is fundamental to our Christian faith.

To the Jews were given the Scriptures:

Romans 3:2
Unto them were committed the oracles of God.

And they were given so many other privileges too. Look at this list that Scripture gives us:

Romans 9:4,5
Who are Israelites; to whom pertaineth the adoption, and the glory, and the covenants, and the giving of the law, and the service of God , and the promises; Whose are the fathers, and of whom as concerning the flesh Christ came , who is over all, God blessed for ever. Amen.

So their history is important when it comes to understanding our faith. None of the history that's in the Old Testament is unimportant. It's all been put in Scripture for our learning.

1 Corinthians 10:11
Now all these things happened unto them for examples: and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come.

Romans 15:4
For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope.

And to find out about this old covenant given to their fathers, we have to go back to their exodus from Egypt.

Ask any Jew what the greatest event in their history was, and they'll probably tell you about this. The Israelites were 430 years in slavery, in sore bondage in Egypt. But the Lord raised up Moses, and through a series of miracles, culminating in the parting of the Red Sea, Moses led them through to safety, at the same time drowning the Egyptians.

Now, we may say, that's all very well, but where's the making of a covenant in that? I've not finished the story yet. God then led them to Mount Horeb, or Mount Sinai. Just as an aside, most people place Mount Sinai in what is today known as the Sinai Peninsula in Egypt, but Muslims don't. They place it to the east of the gulf of Aqaba on the Arabian peninsula, and I have to say I tend to agree with them, because Scripture places it there:

Galatians 4:25
*For this Agar is mount Sinai **in Arabia**, and answereth to Jerusalem which now is, and is in bondage with her children.*

That's an interesting passage actually, because it gives us several Biblical pictures of our subject: comparisons between the Old Testament and the New Testament:

– Hagar, Abraham's servant, compared with Sarah, his wife.
– Mount Sinai, where the old covenant was made, compared with Mount Calvary where the new one was made.
– "*Jerusalem which now is*" compared with the heavenly "*Jerusalem which is above*."

But what's so special about Mount Sinai? This is where God led Moses up the mountain to receive two tables of stone, on which was written what we know today as the Ten Commandments. And God called this a covenant:

Exodus 19:5,6
Now therefore, if ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep ***my covenant****, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people: for all the earth is mine: And ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation. These are the words which thou shalt speak unto the children of Israel.*

This was a ***conditional covenant***. There are terms on both sides. It begins with "*If*." "*if ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people."* Do this and live. A ***conditional covenant***. And that's what most people think God is like. We must do something to please God and He'll reward us.

Luke 10:25-28
And, behold, a certain lawyer stood up, and tempted him, saying, Master, what shall I do to inherit eternal life? He said unto him, What is written in the law? how readest thou? And he answering said, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbour as thyself. And he said unto him, Thou hast answered right: this do, and thou shalt live.

This lawyer gives a Scriptural summary of the Ten Commandments: "*Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbour as thyself."* And Christ said, "*This do, and thou shalt live*."

So if the Jews, in fact if anybody, keeps this law, they will live. It's a genuine offer of salvation if we keep it. So there's nothing wrong with this ***conditional covenant***:

Romans 7:12
Wherefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy, and just, and good.

But the Jews broke the covenant:

….which my covenant they brake, although I was an husband unto them, saith the Lord.

The contract was broken on the Jew's side, not God's. After a time of unrepentant sin, like a husband, God eventually had to act and put them away after the manner of a divorce:

Isaiah 50:1
Thus saith the Lord, Where is the bill of your mother's divorcement, whom I have put away? or which of my creditors is it to whom I have sold you? Behold, for your iniquities have ye sold yourselves, and for your transgressions is your mother put away.

God was so patient. The whole of the Old Testament gives the sad history of the Jews. Eventually God had to act and sent them away out of their land into exile in Babylon. Even then after seventy years He allowed a remnant to come back to build a second Temple. But after they then, as a nation, had rejected the Messiah He had sent, the Temple was finally destroyed by the Romans, and has never been rebuilt to this day.

So, what do we think of the Jews? Do we become anti-Semitic and hate them because they hated God, and killed our Messiah? Of course we don't. We ought to have nothing but pity for them, because the way they acted in history is exactly the way we would have acted. God set up the Jews as an example of us all. If God had chosen the British, we'd have done the same thing. There's one thing we ought to learn from their example:

Romans 3:9-12
What then? are we better than they? No, in no wise: for we have before proved both Jews and Gentiles, that they are all under sin; As it is written, There is none righteous, no, not one: There is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God. They are all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no, not one.

The Jews broke the law, the conditional covenant God gave them on Mount Sinai, and we do exactly the same thing. "*There is none that doeth good, no, not one."* The problem is with us. None of us can live the way the law tells us. We're all sinners. God knew this all along. He didn't make a mistake in giving the law. He gave it to show us we're all sinners:

Galatians 3:21,22
Is the law then against the promises of God? God forbid: for if there had been a law given which could have given life, verily righteousness should have been by the law. But the scripture hath concluded all under sin, that the promise by faith of Jesus Christ might be given to them that believe.

The law was given to show us we can't keep it, "*that the promise by faith of Jesus Christ might be given to them that believe.*" And this brings us to the new covenant.

[31] Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah:

There's a day coming, future to this prophecy of Jeremiah, that God will make a new covenant. And in Galatians 3:22 it's called "*the promise by faith of Jesus Christ,*" it's a ***promise***, in other words, an ***unconditional covenant***. We won't have to do a thing, God will do what He says, just like the covenant He made with Noah. This one will be through Jesus Christ.

But some see these words, **"*Behold, the days come*"** and make a mistake. They realise this applies to Christ, but they think that in Old Testament times, people had to keep the law, but in New Testament times we only now need to believe in Christ.

But the words, **"*Behold, the days come*"** is referring only to the time of the making of the covenant, "*Behold, the days come, saith the Lord , that I will* ***make*** *a new covenant*." It's effect is for all time, so it can be retrospective. This has to be the case, because we've already seen nobody can keep the law, it was only ever there to show us our sin.

How were Old Testament people saved to eternal life? By trusting in Christ, just like us. To them, He was still to come. To us, He's already been, but they had the same faith as us:

1 Peter 4:6
For for this cause was the gospel preached also to them that are dead, that they might be judged according to men in the flesh, but live according to God in the spirit.

Galatians 3:8
And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the heathen through faith, preached before the gospel unto Abraham, saying, In thee shall all nations be blessed.

Hebrews 4:2
For unto us was the gospel preached, as well as unto them: but the word preached did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in them that heard it.

1 Corinthians 10:1-4
Moreover, brethren, I would not that ye should be ignorant, how that all our fathers were under the cloud, and all passed through the sea; And were all baptized unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea; And did all eat the same spiritual meat; And did all drink the same spiritual drink: for they drank of that spiritual Rock *that followed them: and that* Rock *was Christ.*

And we're told this new covenant will be **"*with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah.*"** And that is repeated in v.33:

[33] But this shall be the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel; After those days, saith the Lord, I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people.

But this shall be the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel; After those days, saith the Lord….

So does the new covenant completely exclude Gentiles? Is it still only for Jews? No. Just as the Ten Commandments were for everybody, in that they tell everybody they're sinners, not just Jews, so the new covenant is for everybody too.

Romans 3:28-30
Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law. Is he the God of the Jews only? is he not also of the Gentiles? Yes, of the Gentiles also: Seeing it is one God, which shall justify the circumcision by faith, and uncircumcision through faith.

So, what does it mean that the new covenant will be made ***"with the house of Israel"***? Well, the Saviour of the world came as a Jew, to fulfil the Jewish Scriptures, if only the Jews would have believed that. But also, there's a world of difference between being a physical Jew descended from Abraham, and a spiritual Jew:

Romans 2:28,29
For he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision, which is outward in the flesh: But he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God.

Galatians 6:16
And as many as walk according to this rule, peace be on them, and mercy, and upon the Israel of God.

And this is the new covenant. Remember, it's an ***unconditional promise***:

….I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people.

Christians should straight away recognise that this describes them. A Christian is someone who has had a change from the inside. The Bible variously describes this as being born-again, having a new heart put

within us, becoming a new creature, having the Holy Spirit dwelling in us. All those are Biblical descriptions of the change that has happened to the Christian, if he's truly one of the Lord's people. And here's another one.

We've had God's law put in our inward parts, written on our hearts. We can't keep the law with our natural hearts, so we must have this change. It's imperative we're changed from the inside. Then we'd delight to keep God's law, it would no longer be a burden to us.

Psalm 40:8
I delight to do thy will, O my God: yea, thy law is within my heart.

We still fall into sin, but now we hate it. The apostle Paul said:

Romans 7:22-25
For I delight in the law of God after the inward man: But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members. O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death? I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord. So then with the mind I myself serve the law of God; but with the flesh the law of sin.

And notice, ***"and will be their God, and they shall be my people."*** Christians are the true people of God. To be physically descended from Abraham counts for nothing. All those who've had this heart change, who've had the law written on their hearts, these inherit all the promises God's given to His people, including all the Old Testament promises. So, for example, when the Bible speaks of the "Promised Land," we shouldn't think of a physical piece of land on the east of the Mediterranean, but a spiritual inheritance in heaven to be with Christ for ever.

[34] And they shall teach no more every man his neighbour, and every man his brother, saying, Know the Lord : for they shall all know me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them, saith the Lord : for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.

And they shall teach no more every man his neighbour, and every man his brother, saying, Know the Lord…

That's how most people use the law. They try to keep the Ten Commandments outwardly, without having a new heart. They think the law is for teaching externally to an unregenerate heart. But if that's the case, we'll always fail. The only way for us to keep the law is to have it written in our hearts. And with new hearts, other benefits follow too:

….for they shall all know me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them, saith the Lord….

We get to know God. We get to know Him personally. We don't just hear about Him in church, we have a real, living relationship with Him, the one true God Lord of Heaven and earth. And that will help us see ourselves in an altogether different light. Job said:

Job 42:5,6
I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear: but now mine eye seeth thee. Wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes.

We can talk to Him, He can take over our lives, teach us how we should live, what we should do in every circumstance. We're no longer dependent upon ourselves any more.

And a second benefit:

….for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.

Don't we want every sin we've ever committed, and every sin we will commit, forgiven by God, never to be remembered any more? This is by far the greatest advantage of coming to know the Lord. We can be relieved of every burden. Christ said:

Matthew 11:28-30
Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.

These are some of the benefits of the new covenant. It was always the way God dealt with people even back in Job's day. And it's still the way. The call to all men everywhere is to embrace the new covenant. Recognise we can't keep the old one. Stop trying to please God, and come to Jesus Christ. He alone can puts the law in our inward parts, so we can begin to please Him and live usefully in this world rather than living for ourselves.

Hebrews 9:15
And for this cause he is the mediator of the new testament, that by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions that were under the first testament, they which are called might receive the promise of eternal inheritance.

Jeremiah 36 and 45. Baruch

I want to look today at Baruch the son of Neriah. He was Jeremiah's scribe. He appears three times in the book of Jeremiah. The book of Jeremiah isn't written in chronological order. We have to get the chronology from which king was reigning in Judah at the time.

(1.) The first and earliest occasion is what we're going to look at today. Chapters 36 and 45 belong together. Both chapters begin in the fourth year of king Jehoiakim:

[36:1] And it came to pass in the fourth year of Jehoiakim the son of Josiah king of Judah, that this word came unto Jeremiah from the Lord, saying,

[45:1] The word that Jeremiah the prophet spake unto Baruch the son of Neriah, when he had written these words in a book at the mouth of Jeremiah, in the fourth year of Jehoiakim the son of Josiah king of Judah, saying,

But in chapter 36 at v.9, we jump to his fifth year, and the rest of that chapter occurs then. Chapter 45 must occur between verses 8 and 9, because it occurs in Jehoiakim's fourth year, but after Baruch had written Jeremiah's words in the book.

(2.) Baruch appears again in chapter 32. This is in the tenth year of Zedekiah, eighteen years later, just before Jerusalem was besieged and destroyed by the Babylonians:

Jeremiah 32:9-15
And I bought the field of Hanameel my uncle's son, that was in Anathoth, and weighed him the money, even seventeen shekels of silver. And I subscribed the evidence, and sealed it, and took witnesses, and weighed him the money in the balances. So I took the evidence of the purchase, both that which was sealed according to the law and custom, and that which was open: And I gave the evidence of the purchase unto Baruch the son of Neriah, the son of Maaseiah, in the sight of Hanameel mine uncle's son, and in the presence of the witnesses that subscribed the book of the purchase, before all the Jews that sat in the court of the prison.

And I charged Baruch before them, saying, Thus saith the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel; Take these evidences, this evidence of the purchase, both which is sealed, and this evidence which is open; and put them in an earthen vessel, that they may continue many days. For thus saith the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel; Houses and fields and vineyards shall be possessed again in this land.

Jeremiah is told by God to buy some land. For forty years he'd been prophesying the fall of Jerusalem, and it's just about to happen. What's the point buying property, when it's going to be taken away? But he obeyed God and bought it anyway. That took faith. He prophesied the exile would last seventy years. So he'd be long dead before then. And he was told by God not to have a wife or children. So he'd have no descendants either:

Jeremiah 16:1,2
The word of the Lord came also unto me, saying, Thou shalt not take thee a wife, neither shalt thou have sons or daughters in this place.

Baruch is drawing up a legal document. He's not just a copyist. He's a lawyer, a solicitor, arranging the paperwork, getting the witnesses together and so on. He's a very intelligent, professional man. We'd have thought he'd have his own business, make his own decisions. But instead he humbles himself and subjects himself to the Lord's prophet.

(3.) Baruch is also mentioned in chapter 43, after the fall of Jerusalem. God told Jeremiah to tell the people not to go into Egypt, but they didn't accept the word of the Lord:

Jeremiah 43:2,3
Then spake Azariah the son of Hoshaiah, and Johanan the son of Kareah, and all the proud men, saying unto Jeremiah, Thou speakest falsely: the Lord our God hath not sent thee to say, Go not into Egypt to sojourn there: But Baruch the son of Neriah setteth thee on against us, for to deliver us into the hand of the Chaldeans, that they might put us to death, and carry us away captives into Babylon.

The people thought Baruch had influenced Jeremiah. To all outward appearances, Baruch seemed to them as the leader. But Jeremiah was

God's prophet. Baruch knew that, and subjected himself to Jeremiah, sitting under his guidance, not the other way around.

So, let's start to look at chapter 36:

[36:2] Take thee a roll of a book, and write therein all the words that I have spoken unto thee against Israel, and against Judah, and against all the nations, from the day I spake unto thee, from the days of Josiah, even unto this day. [3] It may be that the house of Judah will hear all the evil which I purpose to do unto them; that they may return every man from his evil way; that I may forgive their iniquity and their sin.

Jeremiah is told by the Lord to write in a book all the words the Lord had spoken through him so far. He first started prophesying in the thirteenth year of king Josiah. Here, we're in the fourth year of king Jehoiachim, so that's the first 22 years of his ministry.

The prophesies were originally (v.2) given **"*against Israel, and against Judah, and against all the nations*."** But Jeremiah was asked to write them down and proclaim them all to Judah (v.3), to try to get them to repent. So, old prophecies still have a use long after they were originally given. Which is why we have so many of them collected in the Bible.

[4] Then Jeremiah called Baruch the son of Neriah: and Baruch wrote from the mouth of Jeremiah all the words of the Lord, which he had spoken unto him, upon a roll of a book.

The Holy Spirit must have brought to Jeremiah's mind all the prophesies for the last 22 years. He couldn't have written them down and kept them in a file or something, because he then wouldn't have needed to dictate them to Baruch, he'd just tell him to copy it out.

And we're told not to worry when we're in trouble:

Mark 13:11
But when they shall lead you, and deliver you up, take no thought beforehand what ye shall speak, neither do ye premeditate: but whatsoever shall be given you in that hour, that speak ye: for it is not ye that speak, but the Holy Ghost.

[5] And Jeremiah commanded Baruch, saying, I am shut up; I cannot go into the house of the Lord: [6] Therefore go thou, and read in the roll, which thou hast written from my mouth, the words of the Lord in the ears of the people in the Lord's house upon the fasting day: and also thou shalt read them in the ears of all Judah that come out of their cities. [7] It may be they will present their supplication before the Lord, and will return every one from his evil way: for great is the anger and the fury that the Lord hath pronounced against this people.

Jeremiah was going to deliver these messages in the Lord's house in the Temple on the fast day. But Jeremiah was unclean, so he asked Baruch to do it for him. The fast day was chosen because there'd be people from all over Judah there that day. He particularly asked him also (v.6) to **"*read them in the ears of all Judah that come out of their cities*."** So any message wasn't to be confined to the Temple faithful. And we too have got a message, and it's to go far beyond the four walls of the church. We're called to:

Luke 14:23
Go out into the highways and hedges, and compel them to come in, that my house may be filled.

And the message we have for the world is exactly the same message Jeremiah had (v.7): **"*return every one from his evil way: for great is the anger and the fury that the Lord hath pronounced against this people*."**

Matthew 4:17
Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.

There was going to be a judgment coming on Jerusalem, which came eighteen years later when the Babylonians flattened the city. And we've got a message of a judgment too. It's coming on the whole earth. God is justly angry with every one of us because we've gone our own way.

We don't acknowledge Him. We're self-centred. We all need to repent personally to God for our sins. Or we'll be destroyed.

But we've also got a message of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, and of a Saviour who can save us from our sins. That's what we need:

John 3:16
For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

Romans 5:8
But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.

2 Corinthians 5:21
For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him.

1 Peter 3:18
For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God.

There is a judgment to come. But God has provided a way out in Jesus Christ. All we have to do is come to Him. But we've got to repent, to give up our sins. He'll help us to do that. But so many people don't want to give them up, they like their sins too much. And if we carry on like that, we'll end up the way Jerusalem ended up, forsaken of God.

After Jeremiah's day, in the Lord's mercy, the Jews returned to the land seventy years later. But after Christ came to them and they rejected Him, He said these solemn words:

Matthew 23:38
Behold, your house is left unto you desolate.

Let's all make sure that our house, our souls, are not left desolate, by embracing Christ, coming to Him in repentance and faith. Then we'll escape the judgment we deserve.

[8] And Baruch the son of Neriah did according to all that Jeremiah the prophet commanded him, reading in the book the words of the Lord in the Lord's house.

Baruch was obedient. This well-educated lawyer, submitted himself to God's prophet.

Now, we've got a break in the narrative. Verse 9 is about a year later. And it's here that chapter 45 occurs, which we'll look at later. After Baruch had read Jeremiah's words, we read nothing of a response from the people.

Nothing has changed. Nobody listens to Christians today. We just get laughed at, sidelined, don't we? But we have the word of the Lord. And the Lord told Isaiah:

Isaiah 55:11
So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it.

[9] And it came to pass in the fifth year of Jehoiakim the son of Josiah king of Judah, in the ninth month, that they proclaimed a fast before the Lord to all the people in Jerusalem, and to all the people that came from the cities of Judah unto Jerusalem. [10] Then read Baruch in the book the words of Jeremiah in the house of the Lord, in the chamber of Gemariah the son of Shaphan the scribe, in the higher court, at the entry of the new gate of the Lord's house, in the ears of all the people.

Baruch decides to read Jeremiah's words again on another fast day in the Temple. Maybe this is the equivalent fast day a year later. We're not told that either God or Jeremiah had told him to do this. Maybe he did, maybe he didn't. If he did, it's a bit odd that Jeremiah didn't go himself, because he would surely not have been ceremonially unclean for a second year running. Maybe Baruch was so frustrated at the lack of response the previous year, he took it upon himself to read it again. We don't really know.

This time he doesn't read it in the Lord's house as before, but **"*in the chamber of Gemariah the son of Shaphan*."** From v.12, we see Gemariah was one of the princes. This seems to be a convenient location because it's at the entry of the new gate, so he can reach the ears of more people. And look what happens:

[11] When Michaiah the son of Gemariah, the son of Shaphan, had heard out of the book all the words of the Lord, [12] Then he went down into the king's house, into the scribe's chamber: and, lo, all the princes sat there.... [including his father, Gemariah] ***[13] Then Michaiah declared unto them all the words that he had heard, when Baruch read the book in the ears of the people.***

The second time Baruch read Jeremiah's prophesies, someone in high places got to hear it. This is actually the third time these prophesies had been proclaimed, including the original occasions. But before, nobody had taken any notice. Let's keep going. Nobody seems to be listening to us today, as we preach the gospel. But we shouldn't give in. We never know when someone, somewhere is going to respond. This man Michaiah went to the king's house, and told the princes what Baruch had said:

[14] Therefore all the princes sent Jehudi the son of Nethaniah, the son of Shelemiah, the son of Cushi, unto Baruch, saying, Take in thine hand the roll wherein thou hast read in the ears of the people, and come. So Baruch the son of Neriah took the roll in his hand, and came unto them. [15] And they said unto him, Sit down now, and read it in our ears. So Baruch read it in their ears.

Now we're getting somewhere. Baruch is called to appear before the princes to read the roll to them. This was now the fourth time it had been read out.

[16] Now it came to pass, when they had heard all the words, they were afraid both one and other, and said unto Baruch, We will surely tell the king of all these words. [17] And they asked Baruch, saying, Tell us now, How didst thou write all these words at his mouth?

[18] Then Baruch answered them, He pronounced all these words unto me with his mouth, and I wrote them with ink in the book. [19] Then said the princes unto Baruch, Go, hide thee, thou and Jeremiah; and let no man know where ye be.

The princes became afraid. God's Word was finally having an effect on people. This wasn't the first time the princes had defended Jeremiah. Three years earlier, at the beginning of Jehoiakim's reign in chapter 26, they'd saved his life:

Jeremiah 26:16
Then said the princes and all the people unto the priests and to the prophets; This man is not worthy to die: for he hath spoken to us in the name of the Lord our God.

The princes had no power. They had to tell the king. If the king heard these words, and feared the Lord, maybe there was still time for Judah to repent and avoid the judgment.

The princes make sure they've got accurate information. They ascertain the words were Jeremiah's and Baruch was only the scribe. They just wanted to make doubly sure that the words had come from God himself before going to the king about it. Then they advised them both to hide. They were fully aware what the king's reaction might be.

[20] And they went in to the king into the court, but they laid up the roll in the chamber of Elishama the scribe, and told all the words in the ears of the king.

They were quite wise the first time they went into the king, because they kept the roll in a safe place, and didn't take it in with them, just telling him the contents verbally at first. But the king asks them to fetch it, so they couldn't really refuse:

[21] So the king sent Jehudi to fetch the roll: and he took it out of Elishama the scribe's chamber. And Jehudi read it in the ears of the king, and in the ears of all the princes which stood beside the king. [22] Now the king sat in the winterhouse in the ninth month: and

there was a fire on the hearth burning before him. [23] And it came to pass, that when Jehudi had read three or four leaves, he cut it with the penknife, and cast it into the fire that was on the hearth, until all the roll was consumed in the fire that was on the hearth. [24] Yet they were not afraid, nor rent their garments, neither the king, nor any of his servants that heard all these words.

An altogether different reaction from that of the princes. The king and his servants were laughing at the word of God. The princes had been afraid. The king and his servants were not afraid, they mocked. That's what we're going to get. Some will be affected by the gospel, and fear God and respond to it. Others will be completely unaffected by it.

[25] Nevertheless Elnathan and Delaiah and Gemariah had made intercession to the king that he would not burn the roll: but he would not hear them.

The princes begged him not to burn the roll. They realised that the message was from God, and saw the seriousness of the situation Judah was in. But it was all to no avail.

[26] But the king commanded Jerahmeel the son of Hammelech, and Seraiah the son of Azriel, and Shelemiah the son of Abdeel, to take Baruch the scribe and Jeremiah the prophet: but the Lord hid them.

Jeremiah and Baruch became marked men. So they took the advice of the princes, and the Lord hid them. But not before Jeremiah manages to get a final word to the king:

[29] And thou shalt say to Jehoiakim king of Judah, Thus saith the Lord; Thou hast burned this roll, saying, Why hast thou written therein, saying, The king of Babylon shall certainly come and destroy this land, and shall cause to cease from thence man and beast? [30] Therefore thus saith the Lord of Jehoiakim king of Judah; He shall have none to sit upon the throne of David: and his dead body shall be cast out in the day to the heat, and in the night to the frost. [31] And I will punish him and his seed and his servants for

their iniquity; and I will bring upon them, and upon the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and upon the men of Judah, all the evil that I have pronounced against them; but they hearkened not.

Jeremiah never prophesied again in the rest of Jehoiachim's reign, which lasted another seven years. Jehoiachim was eventually carried into exile by Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon. The very king he didn't believe would come. The whole nation of Judah followed eleven years later. After King Jehoiakim was gone, Jeremiah then came out of hiding:

Jeremiah 22:18,19
Therefore thus saith the Lord concerning Jehoiakim the son of Josiah king of Judah; They shall not lament for him, saying, Ah my brother! or, Ah sister! they shall not lament for him, saying, Ah lord! or, Ah his glory! He shall be buried with the burial of an ass, drawn and cast forth beyond the gates of Jerusalem.

But what about the roll? All those prophesies had been painstakingly gathered together by Jeremiah and Baruch. All that effort, and the roll had been burnt up.

[27] Then the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah, after that the king had burned the roll, and the words which Baruch wrote at the mouth of Jeremiah, saying, [28] Take thee again another roll, and write in it all the former words that were in the first roll, which Jehoiakim the king of Judah hath burned.

Jeremiah was told by the Lord to compile the prophesies again on another roll. They were to trust in the Holy Spirit to give them the exact words again.

[32] Then took Jeremiah another roll, and gave it to Baruch the scribe, the son of Neriah; who wrote therein from the mouth of Jeremiah all the words of the book which Jehoiakim king of Judah had burned in the fire: and there were added besides unto them many like words.

And that's the book of Jeremiah we've got in our Bibles today. King Jehoiachim thought he could completely eradicate the word of God by burning it. But that's impossible.

Isaiah 40:8
The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: but the word of our God shall stand for ever.

Now let's go to chapter 45. And Jeremiah's got a word for Baruch here:

[45:2] Thus saith the Lord, the God of Israel, unto thee, O Baruch; [3] Thou didst say, Woe is me now! for the Lord hath added grief to my sorrow; I fainted in my sighing, and I find no rest.

He's troubled. Remember, after the first reading of the roll, nobody had reacted to God's Word at all. And Baruch was troubled by that, and needed words of comfort. Little did he know that a year later the king would get to hear those words and he and Jeremiah would have to go into hiding for seven years. But God brings a message to Baruch via Jeremiah. And it's a message to us today, when we get disillusioned that nobody is listening to us:

[4] Thus shalt thou say unto him, The Lord saith thus; Behold, that which I have built will I break down, and that which I have planted I will pluck up, even this whole land.

The message was that the Lord was going to destroy Jerusalem. It would be another eighteen years away yet, but the judgment would come. It's going to happen. Hardly a word of comfort for Baruch. What's the Lord doing telling him such bad news?

Comfort involves telling the truth, hard though it may be. Truth was that the Babylonians were going to destroy Jerusalem, just as Jeremiah prophesied. But the message goes on:

[5] And seekest thou great things for thyself? seek them not: for, behold, I will bring evil upon all flesh, saith the Lord: but thy life will I give unto thee for a prey in all places whither thou goest.

And this is a message exactly for us today. We've got three things in this verse:

(1.) **"*I will bring evil upon all flesh*."** Not only was Jerusalem going to be destroyed, but the whole world is one day going to be destroyed:

That's the message we've got for people today. It's not a very palatable message, they're not going to like it. But truth is that one day this world will end, and be destroyed by fire:

2 Peter 3:10
But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night; in the which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up.

(2.) So, what should Baruch do? Still put his trust in this world? Follow the world and it's ways, even though they lead to destruction? No. **"*seekest thou great things for thyself? seek them not*."**

Baruch could have become a very successful professional. Men of the world would have looked up to him. But he chose another path. He associated himself with the prophet of the Lord. He had no time at all for status in this world. Just like Moses:

Hebrews 11:24-26
By faith Moses, when he was come to years, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter; Choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season; Esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt: for he had respect unto the recompence of the reward.

(3.) And thirdly, if we don't chase after great things in this world, and put trust in things here, how are we going to survive? The Lord said: **"*thy life will I give unto thee for a prey in all places whither thou goest*."** The Lord will look after us, and keep us from the evil.

If we follow the Lord, we needn't worry about the judgment to come. We might have to go through many unpleasant and difficult circumstances while we're here, but the Lord will save us through them all, and we'll be saved eternally from the judgment altogether.

That's the message to Baruch, and it's a message to us too. Don't put our trust in the world, it's not worth it.

Proverbs 3:5,6
Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths.

Psalm 23:4
Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

Matthew 1:1-17. The Genealogy of Christ

The book of Matthew, indeed the New Testament, starts with a genealogy. And you might think, why do we need a genealogy? What can we learn from a genealogy? It's just a boring list of names, isn't it? What can a genealogy teach us? And I say, quite a lot.

First of all, the Holy Spirit inspired every word of Scripture. The fact that we have genealogies occurring at various places in the Bible, means they must be important. Everything in the Bible is important. And one reason why they're important is that they prove the reality of it all. This is real history. These are all real people. As far as I'm aware, there aren't any genealogies in the Quran. I think there might be in the Book of Mormon, I'm not sure, but the whole idea that true religion has moved from the Middle East to America is so ridiculous, that it's not worth bothering about.

Most genealogies are in the Bible for one specific purpose. To shew the lineage of the Lord Jesus Christ. He is the one Person central to the whole Bible, and central to the whole world, whether we realise it or not. At the beginning of his gospel, John tells us:

John 1:1-4
In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life; and the life was the light of men.

And even more remarkably, this Word, who was God, became man:

John 1:14
And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us....

This is unique to Christianity. The one true living God who created all things, who upholds all things in His providence, who counts every hair of our head, and by whom a sparrow doesn't fall to the ground without it being directly ordained of Him, this God isn't far away. He is intimately connected with everything that happens here. He sees what a mess we make. He sees how we sin against Him in thought and word and deed, in the things we've done and in the things we've not done.

And because we're all like that by nature, He didn't just leave us to ourselves, He did something about it. He came into this world as one of us, to save us from our sinful condition. To save us from being the fools we are by nature. This is the God worthy of worship. All other concepts of God are far too small. The real God cares about us. He cares so much He came into this world in human form. And He came here for a specific purpose. To save His people from their sins.

John 3:16,17
For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved.

So, Jesus Christ is the most important person we could ever know. And we have this Bible to show us that He was God Himself, and in the genealogies, that He was born a real man on this earth. God and man, two natures in one Person for ever.

[1] The book of the generation of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.

Two important characters from Old Testament history are mentioned here. And they're important because both of them were promised by God that a Saviour, whom we now know to be Jesus Christ, would come into this world directly descended from them.

God made a covenant with Abraham:

Genesis 17:7
And I will establish my covenant between me and thee and thy seed after thee in their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee.

If you read this whole passage, it seems to refer to all Abraham's physical descendants. He did after all have his name changed to Abraham, meaning "*father of many nations*."

Genesis 17:5
Neither shall thy name any more be called Abram, but thy name shall be Abraham; for a father of many nations have I made thee.

So from a cursory reading of this passage, we may think that everybody descending from him was going to be the special, chosen people of God. And that they would all inherit a piece of real estate at the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea. But that's not the case. We find, as we read on, that the line of Ishmael, Abraham's firstborn, was blessed with things on this earth, but only the line of Isaac was chosen to carry on the promise:

Genesis 17:19-21
And God said, Sarah thy wife shall bear thee a son indeed; and thou shalt call his name Isaac: and I will establish my covenant with him for an everlasting covenant, and with his seed after him. And as for Ishmael, I have heard thee: Behold, I have blessed him, and will make him fruitful, and will multiply him exceedingly; twelve princes shall he beget, and I will make him a great nation. But my covenant will I establish with Isaac, which Sarah shall bear unto thee at this set time in the next year.

And then we find further that of Isaac's descendants, only one, Jacob, was chosen to carry on the promise. Even his twin brother Esau was rejected:

Malachi 1:2,3
I have loved you, saith the LORD. Yet ye say, Wherein hast thou loved us? Was not Esau Jacob's brother? saith the LORD: yet I loved Jacob, And I hated Esau, and laid his mountains and his heritage waste for the dragons of the wilderness.

So, what's going on here? God promised he would be the father of many nations, but only one of his children, then only one of Isaac's children, ended up carrying the blessing. And as we look at this genealogy, we realise that the promise doesn't go to everybody born in Abraham's line at all, but when God said to Abraham:

Genesis 22:18
And in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed....

He wasn't referring to everybody physically descended from him, but only to one Person, who would come many generations later, the Lord Jesus Christ, through whom the blessing would truly come. Isaac, Jacob, and all the others in this list here, some of whom were never the Lord's people, were simply the line through which that one Person of promise would come. We're told this in Galatians:

Galatians 3:16
Now to Abraham and his seed were the promises made. He saith not, And to seeds, as of many; but as of one, And to thy seed, which is Christ.

So, the most important thing to take away from this is that the true people of God are not a group, tribe, nation or family of people physically connected to each other. True religion is spiritual, not physical. The Pharisees were so proud of being descended from Abraham:

John 8:39-42
They answered and said unto him, Abraham is our father. Jesus saith unto them, If ye were Abraham's children, ye would do the works of Abraham. But now ye seek to kill me, a man that hath told you the truth, which I have heard of God: this did not Abraham. Ye do the deeds of your father. Then said they to him, We be not born of fornication; we have one Father, even God. Jesus said unto them, If God were your Father, ye would love me: for I proceeded forth and came from God; neither came I of myself, but he sent me.

These Pharisees claimed they were descended from Abraham. Whether they could prove that or not is another matter. And Orthodox Jews today claim the same thing. But I challenge any of them to prove they personally really did descend from Abraham. I suggest none of them would be able to. But Jesus Christ can prove His descent from Abraham. And here it is. No other man can do that. Rather than us thinking God's chosen people would be all Abraham's physical descendants who would populate the Middle East and be different from the nations, His real chosen people are all those who by faith put their trust in Jesus Christ. It's a spiritual seed, that fulfils the promise to Abraham, through Jesus Christ, not a physical seed. Abraham is the father if all those who believe:

Romans 4:11
And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had yet being uncircumcised: that he might be the father of all them that believe, though they be not circumcised; that righteousness might be imputed unto them also....

Hebrews 11:12
Therefore sprang there even of one, and him as good as dead, so many as the stars of the sky in multitude, and as the sand which is by the sea shore innumerable.

People are so proud of their heritage, just like the Pharisees. But just because we were born into a Methodist family, or an Anglican, or a Roman Catholic, or a Muslim, that doesn't mean anything. So many people blindly follow the religion of their fathers, and assume their ancestors were right and everybody else wrong. They do it without thinking. Not everybody descended from Abraham were true believers in the promise. Only all those who put their trust in the Messiah for themselves personally were the recipients of the promise given to Abraham. In the Old Testament, that meant trusting in the covenantal promise given to Abraham of a Messiah that was to come. To us, we now know who that Messiah was, the Lord Jesus Christ. We must put all our trust in Him. Cry to Him, call upon Him. Realise we need Him to be saved by Him from the judgment to come.

And the promised land that God promised to Abraham, is a spiritual land in heaven, not a physical place on this earth. Abraham knew that all along:

Hebrews 11:13,16
These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. .... But now they desire a better country, that is, an heavenly: wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God: for he hath prepared for them a city.

And then the other character mentioned here is King David. He was also promised a seed through whom a kingdom would come:

2 Samuel 7:12-16
And when thy days be fulfilled, and thou shalt sleep with thy fathers, I will set up thy seed after thee, which shall proceed out of thy bowels, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build an house for my name, and I will stablish the throne of his kingdom for ever. I will be his father, and he shall be my son. If he commit iniquity, I will chasten him with the rod of men, and with the stripes of the children of men: But my mercy shall not depart away from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away before thee. And thine house and thy kingdom shall be established for ever before thee: thy throne shall be established for ever.

Now, we look at this passage, and just like the Abraham passage in Genesis, it seems on first glance to be speaking of a physical descendant, a physical house, and a physical kingdom. And we immediately think of King Solomon, who succeeded David, built the Temple in Jerusalem and had a particularly peaceful reign. And we especially see the phrase "*If he commit iniquity, I will chasten him with the rod of men, and with the stripes of the children of men*," and we think, that can't mean Christ because He was sinless.

And He was. So this phrase wouldn't apply to Him. But, hang on a minute. He ***was*** chastened with the stripes of the children of men. But He endured it, not for His own sin, but for the sins of all those who would put their trust in Him, so they could go free.

Isaiah 53:5
But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed.

That's why we need Christ, so the penalty for our sin goes on His shoulders, not ours.
The prophets too spoke of a greater David who would come:

Isaiah 55:3
Incline your ear, and come unto me: hear, and your soul shall live; and I will make an everlasting covenant with you, even the sure mercies of David.

Jeremiah 23:5,6
Behold, the days come, saith the LORD, that I will raise unto David a righteous Branch, and a King shall reign and prosper, and shall execute judgment and justice in the earth. In his days Judah shall be saved, and Israel shall dwell safely: and this

is his name whereby he shall be called, THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS.

Ezekiel 34:23
And I will set up one shepherd over them, and he shall feed them, even my servant David; he shall feed them, and he shall be their shepherd.

Hosea 3:5
Afterward shall the children of Israel return, and seek the LORD their God, and David their king; and shall fear the LORD and his goodness in the latter days.

Amos 9:11
In that day will I raise up the tabernacle of David that is fallen, and close up the breaches thereof; and I will raise up his ruins, and I will build it as in the days of old:

This is quoted by Peter in Acts 15 as a prophecy of the Gentiles coming into the church.

Zechariah 13:1
In that day there shall be a fountain opened to the house of David and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem for sin and for uncleanness.

So, to fulfil God's promises and prophecies, the Saviour that God was to send into the world, had to come through the line of both Abraham and David. And here's the genealogy. Let's look at it. We don't look to this list and think they're all believers, because they're not. The history of the kings of Judah tells us that. Some of these men were godly, others were wicked and unbelieving. We also see in this list that some were Jews, some Gentiles. And some came out of very dysfunctional relationships:

[2] Abraham begat Isaac; and Isaac begat Jacob; and Jacob begat Judas* [Judah] *and his brethren; [3] And Judas* [Judah] *begat Phares* [Pharez] *and Zara* [Zarah] *of Thamar* [Tamar]*;….

And here's the first dysfunctional relationship. Tamar was Judah's daughter-in-law. If you really want to know more, read Genesis 38, and you'll get a dose of real life in this world.

….and Phares* [Pharez] *begat Esrom; and Esrom begat Aram; [4] And Aram begat Aminadab; and Aminadab begat Naasson; and Naasson begat Salmon; [5] And Salmon begat Booz* [Boaz] *of Rachab* [Rahab]*;….

Now was this the Rahab in Jericho, who let the spies into the city? We don't know for sure, but the fact she's named sort of implies it might be. If it is the same woman, she was a harlot, a lady of ill repute, and a Gentile.

….and Booz* [Boaz] *begat Obed of Ruth;….

Ruth was also a Gentile, a Moabitess. Moabites were banned from the congregations:

Deuteronomy 23:3
An Ammonite or Moabite shall not enter into the congregation of the LORD; even to their tenth generation shall they not enter into the congregation of the LORD for ever....

So Ruth would not normally have been allowed into the outward congregation of the Lord's people. But we read in the book of Ruth that she was a true believer in her heart.

….and Obed begat Jesse; [6] And Jesse begat David the king; and David the king begat Solomon of her that had been the wife of Urias* [Uriah]*;

David committed adultery with Bathsheba and had her husband killed. The child of that union died in infancy, but what a start to a relationship. David, who had at least six wives already, then married Bathsheba and they had Solomon. Then we've got the royal line of the kings of Judah. Some of whom were good, others total unbelievers. You can find all about these people in the books of Kings and Chronicles in the Old Testament:

[7] And Solomon begat Roboam **[Rehoboam]*****; and Roboam*** **[Rehoboam]** ***begat Abia*** **[Abijah]*****; and Abia*** **[Abijah]** ***begat Asa; [8] And Asa begat Josaphat*** **[Jehoshaphat]*****; and Josaphat*** **[Jehoshaphat]** ***begat Joram*** **[Jehoram]*****; and Joram*** **[Jehoram]** ***begat Ozias*** **[Uzziah]*****; [9] And Ozias*** **[Uzziah]** ***begat Joatham; and Joatham begat Achaz*** **[Ahaz]** ***and Achaz*** **[Ahaz]** ***begat Ezekias*** **[Hezekiah]*****; [10] And Ezekias*** **[Hezekiah]** ***begat Manasses*** **[Manasseh]*****; and Manasses*** **[Manasseh]** ***begat Amon; and Amon begat Josias*** **[Josiah]****; *[11] And Josias*** **[Josiah]** ***begat Jechonias*** **[Jeconiah]** ***and his brethren, about the time they were carried away to Babylon:***

The exile into Babylon was an important point in the history of Judah because it was God's judgment for their sins over many generations, and marked the end of the monarchy. But the line of Christ continued:

[12] And after they were brought to Babylon, Jechonias **[Jeconiah]** ***begat Salathiel; and Salathiel begat Zorobabel;***

Zerubbabel, together with Ezra and later Nehemiah, led the exiles back to Jerusalem. And at that point, the Old Testament record ends. And Zerubbabel didn't call himself the king. He preferred to be called "*governor*." So the monarchy effectively ceased at the exile.

The rest of this list is of people we know nothing about. The Biblical record is silent for four hundred years, up to this point we're at now, at the beginning of the New Testament.

[13] And Zorobabel begat Abiud; and Abiud begat Eliakim; and Eliakim begat Azor; [14] And Azor begat Sadoc; and Sadoc begat Achim; and Achim begat Eliud; [15] And Eliud begat Eleazar; and Eleazar begat Matthan; and Matthan begat Jacob; [16] And Jacob begat Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus, who is called Christ.

We've got to address the fact that these last two sections, from David to Joseph, are different from the genealogy of Christ in Luke 3. There, the line is traced through David's son Nathan, born to an unknown wife in Jerusalem. The genealogies seem to come together again for

Salathiel and Zerubbabel (although these could be different people altogether), then they part again, only coming back together with Joseph.

To reconcile this difference, many think that Luke is tracing the line of Mary, but that's not true, for two reasons. Firstly, Luke states specifically that his was the line of Joseph:

Luke 3:23
And Jesus himself began to be about thirty years of age, being (as was supposed) the son of Joseph, which was the son of Heli....

Secondly, Mary was not from the line of Judah at all, but from the line of Levi because we're told she was "*cousin to Elizabeth"* (Luke 1:36), who we are told was descended from the High Priestly line (Luke 1:5 "*of the daughters of Aaron"*).

Mary went to Bethlehem to be registered in the taxation, not because she herself was of the house and lineage of David, but because she was espoused to Joseph, who was:

Luke 2:4,5
And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David:) To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child.

Christ was legally of the tribe of Judah, because Joseph was (as was supposed) His father. Mary had married into the line of Judah, so lost any inheritance in the tribe of Levi.

So, how do we reconcile the two lines? One says Joseph's father was *Jacob*, the other *Heli*. Which one is right? There are several possible explanations for this, but I suggest the easiest explanation, is that when there was no male heir, the line went through the women. To reconcile Luke's genealogy with that of Matthew, all we need is for *Heli* (Luke 3:23) to be female. In Luke's genealogy, the words "*the son"* is in italics in the Authorised Version, which means it is not in the original Greek. So I suggest that Luke gives the genealogy of Joseph through his mother *Heli*, whose father had no male heirs. Matthew traces his line through his father, *Jacob*.

[17] So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; and from David until the carrying away into Babylon are fourteen generations; and from the carrying away into Babylon unto Christ are fourteen generations.

This verse should not be getting us all excited about Biblical numerology. Forget all that. The Bible is not a book of magic, with a secret code within it, if only we interpret the numbers properly. That's rubbish. It's a rational text book, containing rational history, theology, poetry, wisdom and prophecy. So, what does this verse teach us?

Everything in history is ordered. Nothing is random. There is a mighty, all-powerful God in control of all things. He knows what He is doing, ordering every event in history. That's the lesson we must take from this. We should become familiar with this Biblical history. We should be able to see God at work in all of it, even in the places where His name isn't even mentioned, like the book of Esther. This is God's book, teaching us God's history. He's in charge of it all. And at exactly the right time, He send His Christ into the world:

Galatians 4:4,5
But when the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law, To redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons.

According to this genealogy, Joseph was a direct descendant of the kings of Judah. The monarchy ceased at the exile into Babylon, but if it had continued, Joseph would have been king. But it didn't continue, it went into obscurity. We know nothing about anyone after Zerubbabel. There's someone in this world today walking around, who is the rightful king of Greece. If the monarchy had continued, he would have been king. There's someone in this world today walking around, who is the rightful heir of Genghis Khan's empire, or the emperor of China. But we don't know where they are.

The monarchy of Judah also went into obscurity. Fourteen generations after it was abolished, we find the rightful heir in a carpenter's shop in Nazareth, of which it was said:

John 1:46
Can there any good thing come out of Nazareth?

Jesus was Joseph's legal firstborn. On Joseph's death, Jesus would have become the king of Judah. I suggest Joseph's death started Christ on His public ministry. There's no record of Joseph after this, which makes us think he'd probably died. So, when a superscription was written and placed above His cross at His crucifixion, saying, "*The King of the Jews,*" it was a true statement. If the monarchy had continued, Jesus Christ would have been the rightful king of Judah. But nobody would have been aware of that at the time.

Not only was He the rightful king, but through His mother, He was also of the High Priestly line. So, John the Baptist baptised Him, to set Him apart as a priest. Hence Christ was a King and a Priest in one Person. He wasn't officially, outwardly set up to these offices. The monarchy had long since finished, and He never got ordained a priest by outward ritual in the Temple. But His kingship and priesthood were genuine nonetheless.

And this teaches us that the real Christian life is not to be seen in outward ordinances – going to church, getting baptised, taking communion – but it's inward, invisible, but nonetheless absolutely genuine. All of us need to come secretly, in the quiet and privacy of our own hearts, to Jesus Christ. He is the Saviour that God from the foundation of the world chose. God chose to become a man, a man who can trace His genealogy back through the promises given to David, and Abraham, right back to Adam himself. God the Father sent Christ the Son into the world for a specific purpose – to put right the mess Adam made by bringing the whole human race into a state of sinfulness and selfishness.

Romans 5:12,18,19
Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned....Therefore as by the offence of one judgment came upon all men to condemnation; even so by the righteousness of one the free gift came upon all men unto justification of life. For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by the obedience of one shall many be made righteous.

Thanks to Adam, we're all born with sinful natures. We're naturally selfish to the core. That's just what we're like. But from the foundation of the world, God also ordained a way out. A Saviour would come. He would lay down His life for all those who put their trust in Him, so that they wouldn't be justly punished for their sin, but the punishment would be placed on Him instead, But we must come to Him. We can't just sit here and think He's been, so everything's all right, because it isn't. The most important Person in the world is Jesus Christ. He died to save wretches like us. And He freely offers us salvation. But we must come to Him individually. May we all put our trust in Him, the Saviour of the world.

John 3:35,36
The Father loveth the Son, and hath given all things into his hand. He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him.

Matthew 1:18-25. The Birth of Christ

[18] Now the birth of Jesus Christ was on this wise:….

In the first seventeen verses of this chapter we have a genealogy. A genealogy of one man, Jesus Christ. It traces his ancestry all the way back to Abraham, the father of all those who believe. Jesus Christ is the most important man in history. And we find out why here. In these verses we've got a brief outline of the circumstances of His birth.

There's also an outline in Luke's gospel. That account is more from the point of view of Mary, His mother. This account we've got here is more from the point of view of His adopted father, Joseph, whose genealogy we have here. And I say "adopted" father, because His birth was very unusual. In fact it was unique, because it was a virgin birth:

….When as his mother Mary was espoused to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Ghost.

"*Mary was espoused to Joseph*." In our culture, when two people decide to get married, they usually, as we say, "get engaged" first, which is a promise and public declaration to each other they intend to marry at a future date. The marriage takes place later, which in theory would be when they start living together as one flesh, although most people don't bother to wait these days. Engagement, to us, is a commitment, but it's not marriage, and it can fairly easily be broken, with no real problem, other than a bit of embarrassment.

In Christ's day, betrothal was a far more serious commitment. In v.19, it says **"*Then Joseph her husband…*"** Not "her husband-to-be." He's called her husband, even though they're only betrothed and not actually married yet. It was more of a legal commitment.

The standard practice in many cultures is for arranged marriages. Arranged, with the full agreement of both families concerned. For believers, that's generally a good practice. But as we live in a fallen world, it may not be possible. If we've got unbelieving parents, for

example, we wouldn't want to get married to any spouse they arranged for us.

Think of Isaac and Rebekah. Abraham didn't want his son Isaac to marry a Canaanite, so he sent his servant far away to Mesopotamia, when he'd come from, to find a wife for him. He didn't send Isaac, in case he never came back. But the point is, through the guidance of the Lord's providence, when he met Rebekah at the well, praying that the one who, when he asked for water, offered to water his camels as well would be the one, he knew the Lord had provided for Isaac. And Isaac knew that Rebekah was the one he was to marry even before they'd met. Compare that with trying to find a spouse for ourselves:

Genesis 6:2
The sons of God saw the daughters of men that they were fair; and they took them wives of all which they chose.

Almost from the beginning of time, believers started to choose unbelievers as wives. And they chose them for themselves, as they fancied. We are not to be unequally yoked:

2 Corinthians 6:14
Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness?

And what about Samson?

Judges 14:1,2
And Samson went down to Timnath, and saw a woman in Timnath of the daughters of the Philistines. And he came up, and told his father and his mother, and said, I have seen a woman in Timnath of the daughters of the Philistines: now therefore get her for me to wife.

At least he went to his parents to try to get their permission. They tried to object but he was bigger and stronger than them, so they couldn't do much about it:

Judges 14:3
Then his father and his mother said unto him, Is there never a woman among the daughters of thy brethren, or among all my people, that thou goest to take a wife of

the uncircumcised Philistines? And Samson said unto his father, Get her for me; for she pleaseth me well.

They didn't realise it, but the Lord was working through this to defeat the Philistines. But the point is, this is normally not the way to go about things.

And then, later on in the book of Judges, there was a time when the tribe of Benjamin had nearly been wiped out, and they needed to get wives for the remnant. But they'd sworn not to give their daughters to them, so what did they do?

Judges 21:21
And see, and, behold, if the daughters of Shiloh come out to dance in dances, then come ye out of the vineyards, and catch you every man his wife of the daughters of Shiloh, and go to the land of Benjamin.

Catching women at dances is not the way to get a wife. Yet that's what the world does. The right Christian way is, only marry in the Lord, get both sets of parent's consent if at all possible, and, above all, use the means of guidance the Lord has given. His providence. We don't go looking, we don't go hunting, we trust the Lord knows what is best for us.

Joseph and Mary must have used these means, because in Scripture we find they're both godly, upright people, and a good example to young people today. They became betrothed, but didn't move in together until they were properly married.

We see their godliness in their reaction to a very trying situation. **"*before they came together, she was found with child.*"** We're told here that it was **"*of the Holy Ghost.*"** But Joseph didn't know that. The angel Gabriel came to Mary when she was on her own:

Luke 1:30-35
And the angel said unto her, Fear not, Mary: for thou hast found favour with God. And, behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name JESUS. He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest: and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David: And he shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end.

Then said Mary unto the angel, How shall this be, seeing I know not a man? And the angel answered and said unto her, The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God.

Mary understood from the angel exactly what had happened to her. She knew she hadn't been with a man. She knew it was going to be a virgin birth. She knew throughout her life, this child was the son of God. So, because she knew this was of the Lord, she trusted the Lord when she had to break the news to Joseph. That shewed faith and godliness.

And we find out Joseph was also a godly man:

[19] Then Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not willing to make her a public example, was minded to put her away privily.

What would an ungodly man do at this point, if he thought his wife had cheated on him? "Domestic violence" is very common these days. People take it upon themselves to try to deal with the situation themselves – either beat up his wife, or beat up who he thinks is her fancy man, or both. That's the way the world deals with these things. But such a reaction would be far from a godly man. A godly man would try to sort things out properly.

So, what would a godly, just man do? Could he simply forgive her and carry on the relationship as though nothing had happened? We'll, he could, but that's not what God would do. God never forgives everybody everything unconditionally. Otherwise we'd all get into heaven. That's not how God works. He forgives. Praise Him He forgives. But a price has to be paid for that sin. That's a very important concept, we'll come back to later.

A godly man, or a just man, would hate sin. It's right to hate sin. God hates sin:

Habakkuk 1:13
Thou art of purer eyes than to behold evil, and canst not look on iniquity....

So, what options does a just man have? And I suggest there are three. Firstly, he could forgive her, but that would only be possible if she repented, or at least gave a credible profession of repentance. That's what the Lord Himself taught us:

Luke 17:3,4
Take heed to yourselves: If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him; and ***if he repent****, forgive him. And if he trespass against thee seven times in a day, and seven times in a day turn again to thee, saying,* ***I repent****; thou shalt forgive him.*

The Lord only forgives sin, if we repent. The call of the gospel is not just to believe in Jesus to be saved from our sins, but to repent and believe. Both are necessary. With God, however, He knows we can't do either, so He gives them both as a gift to all who ask:

Acts 11:18
When they heard these things, they held their peace, and glorified God, saying, Then hath God also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life.

Ephesians 2:8,9
For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast.

But in Joseph's case, he couldn't forgive because Mary couldn't repent, because she hadn't done anything wrong. Joseph thought she had, but she hadn't, so to forgive Mary wasn't an option for Joseph, because there was nothing to forgive.

The second option a just man could have, is that he could **"*make her a public example*."** We're told here that Joseph didn't want to do that, so he chose the third option, but the fact remains that making her a public example would be a legitimate route for a just man to go down. That would mean having her put to death by the civil magistrate:

Leviticus 20:10
And the man that committeth adultery with another man's wife, even he that committeth adultery with his neighbour's wife, the adulterer and the adulteress shall surely be put to death.

And this applies not just to married people, but to betrothed parties as well:

Deuteronomy 22:23,24
If a damsel that is a virgin be betrothed unto an husband, and a man find her in the city, and lie with her; Then ye shall bring them both out unto the gate of that city, and ye shall stone them with stones that they die....

It then says, if it was in the city both should die, but if in the field only the man, because she may have called and nobody heard. Either way, it involved a public stoning to death.

But Joseph didn't want this option. He just wanted the whole sorry thing over with quickly. So he **"*was minded to put her away privily,*"** or quietly, with the minimum of fuss. Instead of stoning to death, Moses' law also gave the option of divorce. A betrothal still had to obtain an official divorce, and this was the simplest way forward for Joseph.

[20] But while he thought on these things, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a dream,….

Note, when the angel Gabriel came to Mary, Joseph wasn't with her, and here, when this angel came to Joseph by night in a dream, Mary wasn't with him. They were betrothed, promised to be married, needing a legal divorce to separate, but not living together yet.

….saying, Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife: for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost.

The angel tells Joseph of his ancestry, **"*Thou son of David*."** To remind him, the promised Messiah was going to come through his line. This is what was happening right now.
And then the angel comforts Joseph, and tells him not to divorce Mary, which he'd been minded to do. Because what she'd been saying all along was the truth. That which was conceived in her really ***was*** of the Holy Ghost, and no other man was involved. So Joseph was happy, and

accepted this. And then the angel gave a prophecy about this holy child:

[21] And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins.

Joseph is told the child's sex, unusually a male, when no male was involved in the conception. And he was also told what name he was to give Him. Mary was told the same name, separately, when the angel Gabriel visited her.

Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, was also visited by the angel Gabriel and told that a son was to be born to his wife in old age, and he was specifically told to name him John. His family thought that very odd, because nobody in the family line had that name. And here we've got the same thing. Nobody in the whole of the family line of Joseph, either here in Matthew or in Luke, is called "Jesus," or "Joshua" as it would be in Hebrew. It was a common enough name in Hebrew, but it never occurred in Joseph's family line.

And we've got a reason that this name was to be used. It means, "*He saves*." Throughout the Old Testament period, a Messiah, an Anointed One, a Saviour was prophesied who would come from the line of David. And here He is. But what does He save from? Most of those looking for a Saviour in Israel, thought He'd be a political or military leader. And after the Romans occupied their land, they were particularly looking for one who could save them from Roman oppression. But He was never going to be anything like that.

Joseph is told exactly what the Saviour was going to come for. **"*He shall save His people*"** not from earthly oppression, but **"*from their sins*."** And we need to know what this means.

Remember, earlier I said that God forgives, but He doesn't forgive everybody everything unconditionally all the time, because that would mean everybody gets into heaven, there's no justice, and God wouldn't be holy, clean, or just to do that. God forgives sin, but only if a price is paid for that sin. In the Old Testament, animal sacrifices pictured the idea that:

Hebrews 9:22
...without shedding of blood is no remission...[of sin].

The blood of animals can't take away sin, they were only ever a picture. So, how can the price for our sins be paid to God, so that we could be set free? There's two possibilities: Either we pay for it ourselves, by shedding our own blood, sending us to an eternal death:

Romans 6:23
For the wages of sin is death....

Or we get someone else to pay it for us. And that's where this holy child comes in:

....but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Jesus Christ lived a perfect life. He didn't need to shed blood to get into heaven Himself. He had no sin in Himself to atone for. He could just walk in. But He did shed His blood on the cross. And that wasn't for Himself but for us. All those who put their trust in that shed blood, shall not perish but have everlasting life. His blood can be put to our account. All we must do is come to Him and trust in Him to save us. That's the good news. But if He means nothing to us, if we ignore or hate Him, we'll have to pay for our own sins for ever:

Matthew 25:41
Then shall he say also unto them on the left hand, Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels....

But if we come to Him in humility and faith, truly repenting of our sins and believing on Him to save us from our sins – indeed asking God for those gifts of repentance and faith:

Matthew 25:34
Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world....

If we come to Him in this way, He will change us on the inside, and we'll become new people altogether. We'll have our sins forgiven, and we'll know it. And we'll become **"*His people,*"** the ones He has saved

from their sins. These are the true people of God. Not a nation, like Israel, or a race, like the Jews, but everybody who comes to this Saviour genuinely, humbly, trusting in His shed blood to save them from the judgment to come:

1 John 3:14
We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren.

We've got a potential objection to all of this. How can one man, albeit a perfect man, shedding His blood, save a large number of people from their sins? Surely the price paid, one perfect life, could only save one other person. How can we overcome that objection? If Jesus Christ was only a man, this may well be true. However, we read:

[22] Now all this was done, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying, [23] Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us.

Jesus Christ was more than a man. He was also God. Which is why the virgin birth is important. The Holy Ghost overshadowed Mary and conceived the child in her womb. So Jesus was both God and man, two natures, without confusion, in one Person for ever. Isaiah prophesied this seven hundred years beforehand. And the name Isaiah was given for this child that was to be born is **"*Emmanuel*,"** meaning " *God with us.*" This is God Himself coming into this world as a man, to save us, because we can't save ourselves:

1 Timothy 3:16
And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifest in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen of angels, preached unto the Gentiles, believed on in the world, received up into glory.

John 1:14
And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth.

No other religion has this. The gods of other religions aren't that interested in us. They just give us rules as to how we can placate them.

We must do something for them. They exist to be placated by us. That's every other religion. But with Christianity, it's exactly the opposite way around. We can't do anything to please God. We're sinners, and we'll never be good enough for Him. We can't placate Him. It's impossible:

Romans 8:7,8
Because the carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be. So then they that are in the flesh cannot please God.

That's why we need a Saviour. God could have just left us in this mess and not bothered with us. He wouldn't have done anything wrong in doing that. But He didn't leave us. He came into this world Himself as a man to save us from our sins, so we can have a real, living relationship with our Heavenly Father. He didn't need to. He doesn't need us. But He condescended to come into this world as one of us for our sakes. He didn't come to save angels. One sin and they're out. He came to save men from a multitude of sins:

Hebrews 2:14-17
Forasmuch then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, he also himself likewise took part of the same; that through death he might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil; And deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage. For verily he took not on him the nature of angels; but he took on him the seed of Abraham. Wherefore in all things it behoved him to be made like unto his brethren, that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make reconciliation for the sins of the people.

God had to become a man, live a perfect life on this earth, and lay His life down to pay the price of the sins of men. He had to be God, to solve the objection we had earlier. Because He is God, His death can save more than one man, it can save a thousand worlds, if God had intended it to. And because He is God, all the sins of all His people can be put on Him, and He could take the whole weight of them. Don't get me wrong. It wasn't easy for Him. Our sins made Him suffer on the cross more than we can possibly imagine. But He got the victory. We know that, because Christ was raised from the dead, proving His atonement for our sins was accepted by God the Father.

But this doesn't mean we can just sit back and do nothing, thinking everything's all right now. To apply what He did on the cross to ourselves, we must come to Him, call on Him, ask Him for the repentance and faith we need, forsake our sin and desire to live the new life that He alone can give, no longer living for ourselves, but for Him. So we can now say:

Galatians 2:20
I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me.

[24] Then Joseph being raised from sleep did as the angel of the Lord had bidden him, and took unto him his wife:

Notice that Joseph woke from his sleep and believed the angel straight away. He didn't think, "That was a strange dream, I wonder if it was God speaking to me?" If we have a particularly vivid dream and we wake up wondering if the Lord has spoken to us or not, then He hasn't. In the Bible, every time the Lord speaks in a dream, the recipient knows straight away it was the Lord who had been speaking to them, there's no doubt about it.

[25] And knew her not till she had brought forth her firstborn son: and he called his name JESUS.

So Joseph **"*took unto him his wife,*"** they got married, but **"*he knew her not*"** until after Christ was born. After that we know they had at least six children. And we also know Joseph was a carpenter by trade. The people of Nazareth tell us these things in Scripture:

Matthew 13:55
Is not this the carpenter's son? is not his mother called Mary? and his brethren, James, and Joses, and Simon, and Judas?

Mark 6:3
Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary, the brother of James, and Joses, and of Juda, and Simon? and are not his sisters here with us? And they were offended at him.

Here, Christ Himself is called the carpenter, so it seems Joseph had died by the time Christ started teaching, and that He'd previously been taught by Joseph the family trade. He didn't find secular work beneath Him. There are plenty today who think that going into "full time Christian work" is somehow holier than secular work. But Christ learned a trade. Only after Joseph died, did He leave carpentry and start His public ministry.

And Joseph **"*called His name Jesus*."** And here's another mark of a godly man. Obedience. He didn't argue with God. He didn't insist, "No, I'm calling Him Jacob. That's my father's name, and it's tradition to carry on the name." No. He didn't follow the vain conversation received by tradition from his forefathers. He obeyed God. And that's what we all should do. And obeying God isn't complicated. It's a simple life. Jesus Christ said:

Matthew 11:28-30
Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.

Who wouldn't want to live a life like this? The opportunity is there for the asking in Jesus Christ. But we must forsake our sin, our traditions, and all the complications we burden ourselves with in this life. But isn't it worth it? This man, this God-man, came to **"*save His people from their sins*,"** and that's exactly what we need, whether we realise it or not.

1 Peter 3:18
For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God....

May we all come to Him, the Saviour of the world.

Matthew 2. The Wise Men

For a lot of people, Christmas is a very sad time. I used to work investigating suicides, and my workload would increase five-fold every December. I really think we ought to take this problem more seriously than we do. Churches are so busy at this time of year, with meeting schedules and carol services and so on, and I think we tend to ignore what's really going on. People become so stressed at this time of year, that, for whatever reason, they seriously attempt to end their lives. That can't be what Christianity is all about. Jesus Christ didn't come into the world to put pressure on people like that. Christ said:

Matthew 11:30
My yoke is easy, and my burden is light.

John 8:36
If the Son shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed.

So, at this time of year, it's good we should rejoice at the birth of the Saviour, but we shouldn't forget our concern for anyone under pressure at this time. The true message of Christ, underneath this Christmas glitter, is that He came to lift all this off our shoulders.

Another problem I've got with this time of year is with regards the historical events surrounding Christ's birth. So many traditions have been introduced over the years, that have either changed, or at least embellished the real account of what actually happened. As a result, the true message of Jesus Christ has been obscured.

We need to get all our knowledge of what actually happened from the Bible. That's the only completely infallible source of information we have:

2 Timothy 3:16
All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: that the man of God may be perfect, throughly furnished unto all good works.

So, we need to get rid of all our preconceived ideas. Don't think about three kings, on camels, coming to a stable. None of it is in the Bible. I want to look today at the real story of the wise men.

[1] Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem

Who were these ***"wise men"***? The NIV uses the word "Magi," but I don't like that word, because it's not a real word in English at all. It's a transliteration from the Greek "*magos*," and it's where we get our word "magician" from. It could mean one who practices magic, but it may also mean doctor or wise man. Christians should by all means be wise men:

Proverbs 4:7
Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom: and with all thy getting get understanding.

Proverbs 9:10
The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom: and the knowledge of the holy is understanding.

But Christians should never have anything to do with magic. We're told that, with others:

Revelation 21:8
…sorcerers…. shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone: which is the second death.

Some people suggest that the wise men were astrologers, and they get that from the fact that they saw a star. They saw one star and it's assumed they were experts in these matters. But that can't be true. Anyone who gets involved with witchcraft, sorcery, astrology, fortune-telling and the like, will never come to the truth by practising those things. In fact, the more they practise their evil arts, the darker their minds will become.

However, unbelievers won't be able to tell the difference between a truly wise man and an evil magician. So, when a king would choose his closest advisers, it would be a mixture of magicians, astrologers, fortune-tellers and other people whom Christians should have nothing to do with, together with truly wise men, such as, for example, Daniel. In Daniel's day, the king had a dream and needed help in understanding it.

Daniel 2:2
Then the king commanded to call the magicians, and the astrologers, and the sorcerers, and the Chaldeans, for to shew the king his dreams.

These were all the king's closest advisers. Not just evil men, such as magicians and astrologers, but also truly wise men, of whom Daniel himself was one. In Daniel 5:11 he's actually called the "*master of the magicians.*" Think of these wise men as a bit like Daniel. They were probably close advisers to the king of the land they came from, but weren't kings themselves. They would've probably had access to libraries and colleges there.

And they came from the East. We're not told exactly which country. Neither are we told how many there were. So they weren't kings, and there weren't necessarily three of them. We know of three gifts, but that doesn't necessarily mean three people. Tradition says they were from Persia. They could be Persian, but they could also have been Babylonian. They could've been Indian or Chinese, we don't know. All we know is they came from somewhere east of Jerusalem. So they weren't European or African.

[2] Saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him.

They come to Jerusalem with a question. **"*Where is He that is born king of the Jews*?"** They knew a child had recently been born who was ***"King of the Jews."*** How did they know that? And why did they find a Jewish King so important, that they travelled a long distance across desert just to see Him for a few hours and give Him such expensive gifts?

Like all of us, they would've been born and brought up in the religion of their country. But in their search for wisdom, having access to the libraries of the land, they must've come across something that changed their lives completely. The Bible says about itself:

Hebrews 4:12
For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.

They must have come across some part of Holy Scripture. Only the Word of God can change lives like that. Ordinary literature can't change hearts. It might move people emotionally, but it can't change hearts. Only Holy Scripture has the power to change hearts, because it's living and powerful. When they came across a part of Scripture, they realised it wasn't like any other literature they'd read. It stopped them in their tracks and changed their lives forever. They realised it was the truth, renounced the religion of their fathers, and came to trust in the one true living God, Lord of heaven and earth instead.

And that can happen to us too. Read the Bible. We too can get out of this miserable life we're in, and become new people altogether. We too can be saved from the selfish nature we're born with. Do we really want to carry on living this life, living for self all the time? What's the point? Let's be finished with it. If we truly repent of our sins, all the things we've done wrong in our lives, and cry to God for mercy, He will hear every genuine heart that cries to Him, and change us permanently in our hearts, like with these wise men.

Now, what had they discovered? They found out that a Jew was going to be born who was going to be a Saviour, one which had been prophesied throughout the ages. They also knew the time of the birth was imminent. And they also knew that this Holy Person would be a Saviour not just for Jews but for Gentiles (i.e. themselves) also.

There's one book in the Old Testament that contains all that information. And that's the book of Daniel. That's the book they probably came across in one of their libraries. Daniel spent his life in exile in Babylon. Babylon was subsequently taken over by the Persian Empire. So it wouldn't have been unusual for a copy of the book of

Daniel to have found its way into a library in that part of the world, where the wise men would've found it.

They couldn't have had access to all the Scriptures though, because they didn't have the book of Micah. Micah would've told them the exact place of Christ's birth, Bethlehem. But they didn't have that information when they set out on their journey. They just headed for the land of Judah, and it's main city, Jerusalem. Micah was a prophet in Israel, so there wouldn't necessarily have been copies of his book available in the East.

The Scripture had shewed them that the time for the birth of the Saviour was near. So when a peculiar star appeared, they knew it was a sign from God that this had happened.

So they set off towards Jerusalem. It was going to be a long journey, only to see a baby for a few hours, but their lives had been changed. Living for the things of God was now their only love. Is it our only love? Or are we still keen on having our own lives and status in this world? May our love for the Saviour be like the love of these wise men for Him.

They assumed Jerusalem would be full of people who were just as excited as they were at the coming of the Saviour. So they start asking everybody around, **"*Where is he that is born King of the Jews?*"** But they were wrong. They thought there'd be no problem finding Him, just by asking. But nobody knew anything at all about a Saviour. But word got to Herod that some foreigners were asking about another king instead of himself.

[3] When Herod the king had heard these things, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.

Herod got annoyed. He thought he was king of the Jews. Some foreigners coming, saying another king had just been born, disturbed him. And if Herod was disturbed, the rest of Jerusalem would be too, because he was crazy and nobody knew what he'd do next.

[4] And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he demanded of them where Christ should be born.

Herod tried to find out more information about this other king. So he ***"demanded"*** an answer from his religious advisers, the **"*chief priests and scribes*."** He particularly wanted to know **"*where Christ should be born*."** So he must have sort of vaguely known about a ***"Christ"*** who was going to come sometime, but he didn't know when or where, and wasn't really interested. But the wise men arriving in the city prompted him to do something about it. He asked his religious advisers ***"where"*** His birth was prophesied to be, so he could quickly get rid of Him. Herod's advisers knew exactly:

[5] And they said unto him, In Bethlehem of Judaea: for thus it is written by the prophet, [6] And thou Bethlehem, in the land of Juda, art not the least among the princes of Juda: for out of thee shall come a Governor, that shall rule my people Israel.

That's a quote from Micah 5:2, the book the wise men didn't have. It's amazing that the wise men only had the book of Daniel, and their lives were completely changed by it. The chief priests and teachers of the law had the whole of the Old Testament freely available to them. And they knew it very well. They knew exactly where to find the prophecy about the Saviour's birthplace. They also had the book of Daniel, so they ought to have known that the time for the Saviour's coming was near. But it didn't bother them. They didn't want to know. They'd got no heart to go looking for Christ. No interest in spiritual things. They were quite happy to be church leaders, with people looking up to them. But they had no time for God. It's amazing that Scripture can change some people's hearts forever, like the wise men. But others can read it, know it backwards, but be totally unmoved.

[7] Then Herod, when he had privily called the wise men, enquired of them diligently what time the star appeared.

So, Herod called these foreigners to see him secretly. He didn't want anyone to know he needed anything, like information or advice. He asked them of the precise time the star had appeared, They'd obviously

told him about the star, and he'd reasonably assumed the star's appearance marked the time of Christ's birth. The wise men innocently gave him all this information. They'd no reason not to.

[8] And he sent them to Bethlehem, and said, Go and search diligently for the young child; and when ye have found him, bring me word again,that I may come and worship him also.

So Herod has got his missing information, the ***time*** of the birth, from the wise men, and the wise men got their missing information, the ***place*** of the birth, from the most unlikely source – King Herod himself. Herod told them to go to Bethlehem, and come back afterwards to tell him the address where the baby could be found, so he could worship him too. But that was a lie. He'd got no intention of worshipping. He wanted to kill Him. He wanted to be the only "king of the Jews." The wise men had no idea how evil he was.

Herod had lied to them, and only told them what he wanted to. That's what the people of this world are like all the time. They think nothing of lying to people and cheating them for their own ends. But Christians shouldn't be like that. The wise men were genuine with Herod, even though Herod wasn't genuine with them. Being genuine is the Christian way to deal with everybody. Of course, we should also be fully aware that as a result of our behaving like this, people will think we're simple, or a bit stupid, and try to use us.

Matthew 10:16
Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves: be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves.

[9] When they had heard the king, they departed; and, lo, the star, which they saw in the east, went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was.

Now, the star reappeared. Why didn't God just keep the star in the sky all the time, for them to follow from their homeland all the way to the house where the child was? If He'd done that, the wise men would never have gone to Jerusalem. And they'd never have met Herod. God

chose to do it the way He did. Our job is to simply follow the Lord every step of the way. God wanted them to go to Jerusalem first. Otherwise nobody in Jerusalem would have even been aware of the birth of a Saviour. Their own church leaders weren't telling them. And God wanted them to encounter Herod, as a testimony against him.

[10] When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy.

They were overjoyed at seeing the star again. Which implies they must've missed it, they can't have seen it on their long journey. During their journey, do you think doubts may have come into their minds? Were they thinking perhaps, "We've not seen the star now for weeks. Maybe what we read about a Saviour wasn't true after all." We don't know what they were thinking, but they carried on nevertheless, until they reached Jerusalem. When God doesn't seem to be there any more, do we still remain faithful? We should, because He is always there in the Christian, whether we feel it or not:

Hebrews 13:5
....for he hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee.

This time the star moved. It went ahead of them from Jerusalem, the six miles south to Bethlehem, and stopped over where Christ was. The wise men knew that the star was the same one they saw in the east, yet somehow now, it was more local. It moved, and led them to the very place, the very house, where the Saviour was.

[11] And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense, and myrrh.

Mary and Joseph are now living in a house. So the wise men must've come later than the shepherds mentioned in Luke's gospel. An angel had said to the shepherds:

Luke 2:11
*For unto you is born **this day** in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.*

The shepherds saw Christ on the day He was born. They were local, they didn't have to travel far. They were given a sign that they'd find a baby lying in a manger. That could've been in a stable, but there's no mention of one. It could've been in a cave, or out in the open, although we assume Mary and Joseph would've tried to find some sort of shelter for the birth, after finding all the guest houses were full. The wise men, on the other hand, arrived a bit later on, by which time, Joseph and Mary had found a house to live in.

When the wise men saw the child, they knew to fall down and worship Him. But we're never to worship another human being or angel. It's against the First Commandment:

Exodus 20:3
Thou shalt have no other gods before me.

Whenever men have tried to worship creatures, they've always been rebuked. Like John:

Revelation 19:10
And I fell at his feet to worship him. And he said unto me, See thou do it not: I am thy fellowservant, and of thy brethren that have the testimony of Jesus: worship God.

But when people tried to worship Jesus Christ, He never stopped them. He allowed them to worship Him and never rebuked them. That's because He is God. He alone is worthy of worship, which no man or angel ever could be. Mary knew that and didn't stop them here.

And the wise men left their gifts. Gold, frankincense and myrrh. If you read commentaries, you can read about how gold represents a king, frankincense represents a priest and myrrh, for some reason, represents a prophet, so Christ is prophet, priest and king in one Person. And that's all very interesting. But we really only need to understand these gifts for their costliness. Christ is worthy of worship, and He is worthy

of the most lavish of gifts. He meant so much to these wise men, they gave such costly gifts to Him.

This encourages us to ask ourselves, what does Christ mean to us? Is He so precious that we'd willingly give Him everything we have?

[12] And being warned of God in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed into their own country another way.

God gave them a warning in a dream not to go back to Herod but to go home another way. They obeyed God. They weren't scared of Herod, or afraid of any consequences.

[13] And when they were departed, behold, the angel of the Lord appeareth to Joseph in a dream, saying, Arise, and take the young child and his mother, and flee into Egypt, and be thou there until I bring thee word: for Herod will seek the young child to destroy him.

And at the same time, Joseph had a dream too. God told him to flee to Egypt because Herod was wanting to find and kill the child. The dreams we naturally have when we sleep, aren't visions from God. These "dreams" the wise men and Joseph had, were particular special revelations to them. Direct communication from God to tell them what they should do. Joseph, Mary and the wise men were all godly people. They lived their lives close to the Lord, and were continually guided by Him. And if we stay close to the Lord, we too can know the Lord's guidance in every circumstance of our lives. We don't need fuss or excitement, or dreams or miracles. Just a simple trust in the Lord.

[14] When he arose, he took the young child and his mother by night, and departed into Egypt: [15] And was there until the death of Herod: that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying, Out of Egypt have I called my son.

Joseph and Mary fled with the child to Egypt, as God had directed them. That fulfilled another prophecy. Christ was to come, just like the Israelites, out of Egypt:

Hosea 11:1
When Israel was a child, then I loved him, and called my son out of Egypt.

So the wise men go home to their land in the East, and Joseph and Mary flee with the child into Egypt in the West. All at God's direction. They will never meet physically in this world again. All knew the Lord. And when we have to part, maybe for good, from some of our Christian friends, we know we'll see them again in heaven, in the next life, and wherever the Lord sends us, we will always have Him with us, and meet His people. But:

Isaiah 57:20,21
But the wicked are like the troubled sea, when it cannot rest, whose waters cast up mire and dirt. There is no peace, saith my God, to the wicked.

[16] Then Herod, when he saw that he was mocked of the wise men, was exceeding wroth, and sent forth, and slew all the children that were in Bethlehem, and in all the coasts thereof, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had diligently enquired of the wise men. [17] Then was fulfilled that which was spoken by Jeremy the prophet, saying, [18] In Rama was there a voice heard, lamentation, and weeping, and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children, and would not be comforted, because they are not.

Whose fault was this slaughter? Was it the wise men's? They didn't go back to tell Herod where Christ was. But God had told them not to. So, was it God's fault? We're all too keen to blame God for everything that doesn't go the way we want. Neither of these were to blame. Herod did it. He's the only one who should be blamed for such a wicked act.

The wise men couldn't possibly have known that their telling Herod the time the star appeared, and their not going back, would lead directly to the killing of all those children. Sometimes we're too sensitive about what we say or what we do or don't do. We can so easily blame ourselves for all sorts of things, which aren't our fault. Our job is to be genuine, to tell the truth, to do what the Lord tells us, and leave everything else for the Lord to sort out.

Herod's slaughter did actually fulfil another prophecy, one of Jeremiah:

Jeremiah 31:15
Thus saith the Lord ; A voice was heard in Ramah, lamentation, and bitter weeping; Rahel weeping for her children refused to be comforted for her children, because they were not.

Herod hadn't a clue his evil work actually fulfilled a prophecy given by the Lord centuries earlier. The fulfilment of prophecy is sure proof of God's control over all things. Prophecy can only be fulfilled if God is ordering everything. Nothing is outside of His control. Satan and evil men can do nothing unless the Lord ordains it to come to pass in the first place. And God will only ever work things for our good in the end:

Romans 8:28
And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.

So, was it God's fault then, for allowing Herod to do this? The most important thing we need to understand is that death is not the end. God knows what He's doing allowing these children to have their lives in this world cut short. Things weren't out of control.

We often call this event "The Slaughter of the Innocents." So, does that mean all children are born innocent and go to heaven when they die? We can't say that, because that would deny the concept of original sin. We're all conceived in sin:

Psalm 51:5
Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me.

That sweet little child in your arms, as it grows up, is going to need a lot of correction to teach it right from wrong. We're all conceived with a selfish nature, which is why we all need a Saviour, to save us from the condition we're born in. And here He is. That's why the wise men worshipped Him. Only this glorious Holy Child can save us from ourselves.

Those children Herod killed, didn't live long in this evil world, but they were still sinners in need of a Saviour. The usual way the Lord works to save sinners is through the gospel. Anyone who repents and believes in

the Lord Jesus Christ, shall be saved from the consequences of their sins. But, infants don't have the capacity to understand that. So does that mean they all go to hell then? No, we can't say that either. God is a merciful God. God can always operate over and above His usual means. The fact is, we don't know what happens to every infant dying in infancy. So we shouldn't speculate.

We think it sad that those poor children didn't have the chance to live a full life like we think we've got. And as long as we see death as the end, we'll always have a problem with the question of why God does things the way He does. Death is not the end. It's only the beginning of eternity. Far from those poor children being in a worse position than us, they're actually in a far better position. They were only in this world for a short time. Their tally of sins is far less than ours, who sin more and more every day we're still alive here.

But then, after a while in Egypt, Joseph has another dream:

[19] But when Herod was dead, behold, an angel of the Lord appeareth in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, [20] Saying, Arise, and take the young child and his mother, and go into the land of Israel: for they are dead which sought the young child's life.

This probably wasn't too long after, a few weeks or months. From secular history, it's thought Herod the Great died around this time anyway. Joseph was told **"*they*** [plural] ***are dead which sought the young child's life."*** So, it was more than Herod after them, maybe his whole family. But, God reassured him it was safe to go back to Israel. So Joseph obeyed:

[21] And he arose, and took the young child and his mother, and came into the land of Israel.

But he was concerned, because one of Herod's sons now reigned in Judea:

[22] But when he heard that Archelaus did reign in Judaea in the room of his father Herod, he was afraid to go thither: notwithstanding, being warned of God in a dream, he turned aside into the parts of Galilee:

He had planned to stay in Judea, until he realised who was in charge. God had specifically told him that ***all*** those who sought the child's life were now dead, so Archelaus can't have been one of them who wanted to kill him. But God used this situation to fulfil another prophecy. Because Joseph wasn't comfortable going back to live in Judea as he'd planned, God gave him another dream, telling him to go to Galilee:

[23] And he came and dwelt in a city called Nazareth: that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophets, He shall be called a Nazarene.

If we just read Matthew's gospel, we'd think Nazareth was a place they'd never been to before, but Luke tells us that's where they came from. In Luke 2:39, it's called "*their own city*." Gabriel visited Mary there, and they only went to Judea in the first place for the census. They settled in Nazareth for the rest of their lives. Joseph became the carpenter.

We're told here **"*the prophets*"** had said: **"*He shall be called a Nazarene*."** Where is that in Scripture? It isn't. So how can we understand this? Several ways are suggested:

(1.) It was an extra-scriptural prophecy. Well, there were such, but for a God not to put such an important prophecy in the canon of Scripture would be very unlikely.

(2.) When Isaiah speaks of "*the Branch,*" the Hebrew word is "*Netzer*":

Isaiah 11:1
And there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots....

Just because a word has an N a Z and a T in it, doesn't mean it refers to Nazareth. Isaiah wasn't prophesying the Saviour would come from Nazareth, but from the line of David.

(3.) It means "*Nazarite*," a person who makes a special vow to the Lord, as in Numbers 6:

Numbers 6:2
Speak unto the children of Israel, and say unto them, When either man or woman shall separate themselves to vow a vow of a Nazarite, to separate themselves unto the LORD....

But Christ wasn't a Nazarite. Otherwise He'd have long hair, like Samson, which we've got no evidence for, despite old European paintings. And He wouldn't be allowed to drink alcohol, which we know He did, because His critics called Him a "*winebibber*," which He wasn't, but this derogatory remark wouldn't make sense if He never drink wine at all:

Luke 7:34
The Son of man is come eating and drinking; and ye say, Behold a gluttonous man, and a winebibber, a friend of publicans and sinners.

(4.) This only leaves one other option, which I suggest is the correct one. Nazareth was known as a particularly despised, contemptible place. A common saying was:

John 1:46
Can there any good thing come out of Nazareth?

And Christ was prophesied by several prophets in this way:

Isaiah 53:2,3
....he hath no form nor comeliness; and when we shall see him, there is no beauty that we should desire him. He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not.

Psalm 69:8,9
I am become a stranger unto my brethren, and an alien unto my mother's children. For the zeal of thine house hath eaten me up; and the reproaches of them that reproached thee are fallen upon me.

Psalm 22:6
But I am a worm, and no man; a reproach of men, and despised of the people.

This holy child, who changed the wise men permanently, after they came to understand Him and what He came into the world for. This glorious Saviour, was despised by the world. The world hated Him. They put Him to death. And men hate Him today. But His death fully atones for all the sins of all those who put their trust in Him.

Let's be finished with sin. It's not worth it. And let's come to Him who is the only one who can save us from our sins, our selfish nature. Oh yes, we may be despised, laughed at, by our contemporaries, and that's going to be difficult. But isn't it worth it?

Matthew 3. John the Baptist

We're going to look today at the ministry of this man known as John the Baptist.

[1] In those days came John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judaea,

"*In those days*." There's a thirty year gap since the end of the last chapter. We can say, **"*in those days*,"** because thirty years compared to the 2000 since, is comparatively nothing. But to Matthew who wrote this soon after the events, it would have been odd. But God inspired Matthew to write for all generations, because Scripture is for all time.

Luke's gospel gives us the detail of John's birth. His father was Zechariah and his mother Elizabeth. Both descended from Aaron the High Priest. His birth was announced by the angel Gabriel to Zechariah, and Elizabeth conceived after she was past child-bearing age.

That's the background. John's ministry was unique. He didn't follow his father into the priesthood in the Temple, as would normally have been the case. Instead, as the Lord guided both him and his parents, we find him **"*preaching in the wilderness of Judaea*."**

What an odd place to have a ministry. When we think about church planting, we usually think of going to the centres of population. We'd try to go to where the people are. We wouldn't dream of setting up a ministry in the middle of a desert and expect people to come to us. But that's what John did. And it exactly fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah:

[3] For this is he that was spoken of by the prophet Esaias, saying, The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.

Isaiah prophesied 700 years before, that when the promised Messiah came, there'd be a forerunner to proclaim His arrival. And he'd appear in the wilderness. That was John. God didn't call him to serve in the

Temple as was usual. And we should be led by God's call, not tradition. And although he was of the priestly line, he appeared more like a prophet:

[4] And the same John had his raiment of camel's hair, and a leathern girdle about his loins; and his meat was locusts and wild honey.

Prophets didn't wear soft raiment and live in kings palaces. Prophets were ordinary people with no status. Elijah the prophet was recognised by his wearing a leather girdle:

2 Kings 1:8
And they answered him, He was an hairy man, and girt with a girdle of leather about his loins. And he said, It is Elijah the Tishbite.

Malachi, the last prophet in the Old Testament, also prophesied that someone would come as a forerunner of the Messiah, and he would come in the spirit and power of Elijah:

Malachi 4:5,6
Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD: And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse.

And Christ told the people later, that John was going to be the last of the prophets:

Matthew 11:13,14
For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John. And if ye will receive it, this is Elias, which was for to come.

So John was a priest, descended from the high priestly line, and he was also a prophet. He was the prophet sent to prepare the way of the Lord. So, what was his message?

Isaiah says his job was to **"*make His paths straight.*"** That implies the Lord's ways had become crooked and needed straightening out. How do we understand that?

Throughout history, those who were outwardly the Lord's people kept going astray. Think of the Israelites in the wilderness, or later the nation of Israel, or later still the nation of Judah. Time and again they disobeyed the Lord. And time and again He sent prophets to them, who, sometimes they'd listen to and return to the right way, but most times, they wouldn't. The whole history of the Old Testament is there to shew us this.

And after Old Testament history ended with the prophet Malachi, for over four hundred years, God had been silent to them. The people of God had been effectively left to their own devices. That was the world John, and indeed Jesus Christ, came into.

And the problem didn't stop then. That has also been the history of the church throughout the ages. Right up to this present day, the church has gone far from what it ought to be, and is continually in need of being straightened out. And that was John's task. To straighten the people of God out, to bring them back to what they were supposed to be. To prepare the way for the Lord Jesus Christ. His ministry was always to point to Him:

Mark 1:7
There cometh one mightier than I after me, the latchet of whose shoes I am not worthy to stoop down and unloose.

John 3:30
He must increase, but I must decrease.

So, to make the Lord's path straight, his job was to particularly emphasise the first step of true religion. That would start them off. Then they could turn to Christ for everything else.

What is that first step of true religion? What message straightens the path out for Christ?

[2] And saying, Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.

God doesn't need us. It wasn't necessary for John to be sent at all. Christ started His preaching with exactly the same message:

Matthew 4:17
From that time Jesus began to preach, and to say, Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.

But God in His kindness to us sent John as a forerunner of Christ, solely for our help. To emphasise where we should begin our thinking. Not on the fancy ideas people had dreamed up to try to attract men to their particular faction in the church. No. Begin here. This is the message. This is what we're here for. This is what it's all about. Repent.

"*Repent*." What does it mean to repent? It means to stop going the way we're going, and to go in the right way instead. Which implies of course that we're going wrong. And the call is to everybody, whoever we are. We're all going the wrong way and need to be corrected and start going the right way. We all need to repent, then come to Jesus Christ:

Isaiah 53:6
All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all.

But what is the right way? Well, first of all, God gave His people Ten Commandments, which are a summary of how He wants us to live. That's the right way.

But we naturally fail to keep them. That needs addressing. That's the first thing that needs changing in us. But it goes a lot deeper than that. Our whole attitude needs changing. In chapter five of Matthew, we come across such statements as this:

Matthew 5:3-10
Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled. Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy. Blessed are the

pure in heart: for they shall see God. Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God. Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

That ought to surprise us. We grow up in a world that thinks: Blessed are the strong, "get out there and be somebody"; not the poor in spirit, no, they're weak people. Blessed are the happy, "enjoy life, don't be miserable, have fun"; not those who mourn, who take life, and especially their sins, seriously. Blessed are the confident, "I am somebody"; not the meek, religion is just a crutch for such weak people to lean on. That's our attitude, that's the attitude we see on TV, and in our education system, and we drink it all in. And all that needs changing too. We must repent not only of our breaking God's law, but also of our whole outlook on life. And only Jesus Christ can change us.

Why should we repent? ***"for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."*** What is the kingdom of heaven? Whatever it is, it's found only in Jesus Christ. He said:

John 18:36
Jesus answered, My kingdom is not of this world: if my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight, that I should not be delivered to the Jews: but now is my kingdom not from hence.

If His kingdom was of this world, He would fight. But we don't fight, that's the way of the world. We're meek, we're peacemakers. So, it's not an earthly kingdom. He also said:

Luke 17:20,21
The kingdom of God cometh not with observation: Neither shall they say, Lo here! or, lo there! for, behold, the kingdom of God is within you.

It's an internal kingdom, within ourselves. We need to change, not merely our outward actions, but from the inside. Only then can our outward actions be genuine.

So, John's message of repentance is the first step of coming into the kingdom of God.

For the rest of the chapter, we come across three types of visitor, who make the journey into the desert to see John: The ordinary people, the religious leaders, and Jesus Christ.

[5] Then went out to him Jerusalem, and all Judaea, and all the region round about Jordan, [6] And were baptized of him in Jordan, confessing their sins.

When it says **"*all*"** it doesn't mean absolutely everybody, but it does mean a significant number. The river Jordan, where John was baptising, at its nearest point is about 20 miles from Jerusalem. So that's the sort of distances people were travelling. In John's gospel, we're told it was a place called Bethabara. It was odd people knew what was going on. When we hold an evangelistic campaign or something, we advertise, we put posters up, send letters out, we give a time and a place. But here, the people seemed just to know John was there, in the middle of nowhere, and they flocked. Why do you think that was?

For four hundred years there'd been no word from the Lord. Scripture has been shut up, ending with Malachi's promise that someone in the spirit and power of Elijah would one day come to herald the Lord's coming. There must have been a great thirst for the Lord built up among the people. And when they heard John was preaching in the desert, they were ready to go so far to hear him. And when there's an awakening, a thirst for the things of God in our hearts, we'll travel, we'll make sacrifices to hear the word of the Lord.

And John **"*baptised*"** in the river Jordan. What's baptism? We're told in v.11 he baptised **"*with water unto repentance.*"** So, it was an outward ceremony, using water, symbolising the desire, in the hearts of all those who participated, to repent, to heed John's message. Notice it was "***unto*** *repentance*." Water baptism in itself didn't convey repentance in some kind of magical way, it was merely a symbol of the internal desire to change in the heart.

The baptism we have in the church today is similar. We're all called to repent and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ to be saved from our sins. If we respond to the call, God grants us repentance and faith, and the Holy Spirit comes and changes us permanently from the inside. That's

what we need. Water baptism is an outward symbol of that inward change. Paul came across some who'd only received John's baptism, but not the real thing:

Acts 19:2-5
He said unto them, Have ye received the Holy Ghost since ye believed? And they said unto him, We have not so much as heard whether there be any Holy Ghost. And he said unto them, Unto what then were ye baptized? And they said, Unto John's baptism. Then said Paul, John verily baptized with the baptism of repentance, saying unto the people, that they should believe on him which should come after him, that is, on Christ Jesus. When they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.

They'd received John's water baptism, which was the outward symbol of their desire to repent, but only after they heard about Christ and believed in Him, were they truly "baptised" internally, by the Holy Spirit, with no water involved. That was the real thing.

"Confessing their sins." Acknowledgement of sin, is vital to true repentance. If we don't think we've sinned, we can't repent. And we need to confess our sins to God to forgive us. We don't need to confess our sins to one another, that's not necessary or useful:

1 John 1:9
If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

Now, all these people came to John to submit to his baptism, because they were thirsty for the things of the Lord and desired to repent, to change, in their hearts. That's where we need to be. But a second group of people came, whose motives were altogether different. The religious leaders:

[7] But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees come to his baptism, he said unto them, O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come?

The Pharisees and Sadducees made up the religious leadership of the day. Some of them were true believers, like Joseph of Arimathea or

Nicodemus. But most attained their position so they'd receive glory from men. They loved being seen in the market places as some great religious leader to be looked up to. Christ tells us not to be like them:

Mark 12:38-40
And he said unto them in his doctrine, Beware of the scribes, which love to go in long clothing, and love salutations in the marketplaces, And the chief seats in the synagogues, and the uppermost rooms at feasts: Which devour widows' houses, and for a pretence make long prayers: these shall receive greater damnation.

John recognised straightaway that their hearts weren't right with God. They didn't come because they genuinely desired to repent. They came to see what the fuss was about. A lot of their flock had come, so they came to supposedly correct them and try to bring them back to their fold. John was a prophet, and could discern their hypocrisy. We can't see the heart, and men are very crafty. But we need to be aware the church is always a mixture of true believers and hypocrites. It was in Christ's day, and will be for us today.

John cries to them, **"*who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come?*"** This is a solemn warning. There is a judgment to come. If we don't repent, or even see any need to repent, we're in a terrible state. That's why repentance is so important. Most who came to John's baptism saw their need of repentance, and the Lord would have mercy on them. But the religious leaders saw no need to repent of anything. Christ said of such people:

Mark 2:17
They that are whole have no need of the physician, but they that are sick: I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.

But John didn't leave them in such a state. He told them what they needed to do to get out of their situation:

[8] Bring forth therefore fruits meet for repentance:

Any fool can say, "*I repent.*" Judas said that. We must also mean it in our hearts. And only God knows if we're genuine. Outward proof of true repentance will be in our actions:

Matthew 7:16-20
Ye shall know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles? Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit. A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit. Every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire. Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them.

And there's another criticism John has of them:

[9] And think not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham to our father: for I say unto you, that God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham.

The religious leaders were proud of their heritage. They thought they all descended from Abraham, and so must be God's chosen people, because God had promised Abraham:

Genesis 17:7
And I will establish my covenant between me and thee and thy seed after thee in their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee.

And Jews today think the same way, although I challenge them to prove their descent from Abraham. But the true people of God are those with the faith of Abraham:

Romans 2:28,29
For he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision, which is outward in the flesh: But he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God.

Then John expands on this idea of bringing forth fruits meet for repentance:

[10] And now also the axe is laid unto the root of the trees: therefore every tree which bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire.

It is essential that we repent. We have to change to bring forth fruit. The problem of staying as we are, doing nothing about any of this, is that we can't bring forth fruit meet for repentance, and we'll end up being cast into the fire at the final judgment. The only way to bring forth fruit is to reconcile ourselves to Christ and abide in Him:

John 15:1,2
I am the true vine, and my Father is the husbandman. Every branch in me that beareth not fruit he taketh away: and every branch that beareth fruit, he purgeth it, that it may bring forth more fruit.

[11] I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance: but he that cometh after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear: he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost, and with fire: [12] Whose fan is in his hand, and he will throughly purge his floor, and gather his wheat into the garner; but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.

John, as the forerunner of Christ, came with a simple outward ceremony symbolising repentance. A simple act, a simple concept, telling us we need to change. That was his message. But Christ, the Saviour of the world, is the One with whom we all have to do.

He doesn't baptise with water. He baptises with two things: the Holy Ghost and fire. Some people think this fire is to do with a second blessing giving us miraculous gifts such as speaking in tongues, but I don't think so. It's the fire of judgment, as verse 12 shews. The wheat, His people, will be gathered into the garner. These have repented, put their whole trust in Christ to save them from what their sins deserve, and produced fruit. But the chaff, those who haven't produced fruit because they didn't think they needed to repent, will be burned with unquenchable fire. Hell fire is unquenchable and for ever.

This is a very solemn thing. We could ignore John, he's just a man. We could ignore water baptism, it's only an outward symbol. But we can't avoid Jesus Christ. It's what we think of Him that our eternal destiny will be based on. Not how good we are, because we can't be good by nature. We need to be changed by the only One who can change us:

Matthew 22:42
What think ye of Christ? whose son is he?

1 John 5:11,12
And this is the record, that God hath given to us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He that hath the Son hath life; and he that hath not the Son of God hath not life.

John 3:36
He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him.

You might say that's narrow-minded. But Christ said Himself He was the only way to God:

John 14:6
….I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me.

John 11:25,26
….I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die.

John 8:12
….I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life.

John 5:22,23
For the Father judgeth no man, but hath committed all judgment unto the Son: That all men should honour the Son, even as they honour the Father. He that honoureth not the Son honoureth not the Father which hath sent him.

Jesus Christ is the most important Person who ever lived. Simply consider His teaching, and the way He lived His life. It's altogether different from what we're naturally used to. The poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, these are the ones who are blessed in His kingdom. Not the proud and arrogant. Don't we find that attractive? It's certainly unique.

Thirdly, we've had genuine people come to John's baptism of repentance. We've had hypocrites come, who've got no intention of repenting. Now, we've got a third category, but there's only one person in it. Here comes Jesus Christ Himself.

[13] Then cometh Jesus from Galilee to Jordan unto John, to be baptized of him.

That's odd. Jesus had no sin. He was perfect. Baptism symbolises repentance, which presupposes sin. But He's got nothing to repent of. So John refuses to baptise Him:

[14] But John forbad him, saying, I have need to be baptized of thee, and comest thou to me?

We can understand John's reaction, although to rebuke the sinless Son of God isn't really the right way to go about it. But Christ is understanding of his remark:

[15] And Jesus answering said unto him, Suffer it to be so now: for thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness. Then he suffered him.

Christ gives a reason for His wanting baptism. Not for the remission of sins, He didn't have any. But to **"*fulfil all righteousness*."** What's that mean? I don't know. But we can think along these lines: Christ had to fulfil the law to the letter throughout His whole life:

Matthew 5:17
Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil.

And He had to do this so that His righteousness could be imputed to us:

2 Corinthians 5:21
For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him.

But baptism wasn't any part of the law of God. There were some washing ceremonies in the law, but I'm not sure if any of them symbolised repentance. Maybe they did, I've not looked into it fully. John's baptism is a new development, newly introduced by John. And it would later become one of the two new ordinances of the church, along with the Lord's Supper. The old ordinances were being abolished now the Saviour had come. So, maybe Christ partook of baptism to show that the outward ordinances were changing.

Christ had no sin of His own, but later, on the cross, He took on the sins of all His people, so maybe it was a symbol for the remission of their sins He would later take upon Himself.

Or maybe John, being descended directly from the High Priest, was ordaining Christ into the priesthood. The priests started their work at thirty years of age, which Christ was. And they were consecrated by being sprinkled with water. This was, after all, the start of Christ's ministry. And His greatest work was to be that of the great High Priest, of whom all the others were only types and shadows:

Hebrews 7:24-27
But this man, because he continueth ever, hath an unchangeable priesthood. Wherefore he is able also to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by him, seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them. For such an high priest became us, who is holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners, and made higher than the heavens; Who needeth not daily, as those high priests, to offer up sacrifice, first for his own sins, and then for the people's: for this he did once, when he offered up himself.

And as if to confirm His ordination, the other Persons of the Trinity bless Him:

[16] And Jesus, when he was baptized, went up straightway out of the water: and, lo, the heavens were opened unto him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and lighting upon him: [17] And lo a voice from heaven, saying, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.

The Holy Spirit came upon Him "***like a dove***," and God the Father spoke from heaven, saying, **"*This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.*"** The whole Trinity of the Godhead was involved, shewing their acceptance of Christ beginning His ministry.

So, what do we think of the Son of God? Do we hate Him? What has He said to object to? His way of life is beautiful. But He's told us we're sinners in need of repentance. We need to change. Is that the only reason for objecting to Him? Our own pride? We all need to embrace the life He freely gives to all who come to Him. And that is a life worth living:

John 10:10
The thief cometh not, but for to steal, and to kill, and to destroy: I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly.

John 8:34,36
Whosoever committeth sin is the servant of sin..... If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed.

Matthew 4:1-11.
The Temptations in the Wilderness

Jesus, for thirty years, had up to this point led a quiet life as a carpenter in Nazareth. But, now, the Lord sets Him off on a public ministry that would last for about three years, before He was cruelly put to death. So, what was He going to do first? Start preaching? Go to cities to evangelise? There'd be time for that. But to start with, the Lord sent Him away from people:

[1] Then was Jesus led up of the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil.

Mark tells us He "*was with the wild beasts*," so it was a particularly remote area, away from all human contact. And we must go where the Holy Spirit tells us to. That may not necessarily be doing something exciting, or what we'd like to do. It may be somewhere we don't understand why we're there. But in every step we take, we must follow the Lord. It'd always be for a good purpose. And sometimes, the Lord wants us to be set apart for a while, away from others. Especially at the start of a ministry. The apostle Paul tells us:

Galatians 1:15-17
But when it pleased God, who separated me from my mother's womb, and called me by his grace to reveal his Son in me, that I might preach him among the heathen; immediately I conferred not with flesh and blood: Neither went I up to Jerusalem to them which were apostles before me; but I went into Arabia, and returned again unto Damascus.

Soon after his conversion, Paul was led to the deserts of Arabia. In his case, I suggest he needed to spend time with the Lord, to reinterpret the Scriptures, in the light of them pointing to Christ, because up to this point, he'd only been taught the Jewish teachers' interpretation.

And the Spirit set apart Jesus Christ for forty days and forty nights in the wilderness **"*to be tempted of the devil*."** So can the Holy Spirit send us directly into the devil's hands?

God never tempts us with evil, but quite often we are tempted with evil and the Lord allows it. So we must have to be put into the devil's path for that to happen. Yet nothing is outside of God's control. Otherwise He wouldn't be God. How can we understand this?

In 2005, four men strapped bombs to themselves and set them off on public transport in London in the rush hour, killing 54 people and injuring hundreds. Now, where is God in any of that? Two weeks later, four other men tried to do exactly the same thing. All four of their bombs failed to go off, and within 48 hours all four men had been captured. Why did God allow one set of bombs to go off, but not the other? I don't know, but I do know that there must've been a purpose, a good purpose, otherwise God wouldn't have allowed it.

Satan afflicted Job by destroying most of his family, then giving him a nasty skin disease. But all the time, he could only do what God allowed Him to do. The devil can't work independently of God. That doesn't mean God is the author of sin. Satan and men are fully responsible for their actions. But whenever God allows an evil act to occur, it means it must be in His plan to turn it around for good in the end. Joseph was sold into slavery by his wicked brothers. But many years later he saved them all from famine. And he said:

Genesis 50:20
But as for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive.

Romans 8:28
And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.

The Spirit sent Christ into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil. And if we're a Christian, we're in a lifelong battle. But it's not a physical battle, our warfare is spiritual:

Ephesians 6:12
For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.

[2] And when he had fasted forty days and forty nights, he was afterward an hungred.

Christ fasted for forty days and forty nights, and so deliberately made Himself hungry. He could have easily got food, even in the wilderness. John the Baptist ate locusts and wild honey, a very good, healthy diet. Surely, Christ could have done the same. But He didn't. So His fasting must've been voluntary. And fasting in the Bible, used correctly, always is.

Fasting is not in the Law of Moses. So it was never required nor compulsory for anyone. But sometimes, in the Bible, we come across men setting apart days of fasting for their own purposes. The first occurrence of fasting in the Bible occurs in Judges 20:

Judges 20:26
Then all the children of Israel, and all the people, went up, and came unto the house of God, and wept, and sat there before the Lord, and fasted that day until even, and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings before the Lord.

This was in the days everybody did what was right in their own eyes. Israel was in battle with one of it's own tribes, Benjamin. In desperation, the eleven tribes fasted. And many times special fast days are invented by men. But it doesn't necessarily impress God:

Isaiah 58:3
Wherefore have we fasted, say they, and thou seest not? wherefore have we afflicted our soul, and thou takest no knowledge? Behold, in the day of your fast ye find pleasure,
and exact all your labours.

Fasting in and of itself is NOT a piece of magic to try and twist God's arm in any way. That's the wrong use of fasting altogether. But there is a right use. It is very useful as a help to personal prayer. It humbles the body, which in turn helps to humble the soul:

Psalm 35:13
But as for me, when they were sick, my clothing was sackcloth: I humbled my soul with fasting; and my prayer returned into mine own bosom.

Psalm 69:10
When I wept, and chastened my soul with fasting, that was to my reproach.

Christ encourages a right use of fasting, as an accompaniment to humble prayer:

Matthew 17:21
Howbeit this kind goeth not out but by prayer and fasting.

Christ fasted here in the wilderness, so that means He was at the same time communing with His Father, preparing for the task ahead of Him. None of us can even imagine what it would have been like for Him. He often went aside to pray, sometimes all night in prayer.

[3] And when the tempter came to him, he said, If thou be the Son of God, command that these stones be made bread.

The devil always goes for our weakest points. The first thing Satan noticed was that Christ was physically hungry, so that was the first temptation he assaulted Him with.
And he says, **"*If Thou be the Son of God*."** Casting doubt on His identity as God manifest in the flesh. This reminds us of the devil with Eve in the garden of Eden:

Genesis 3:1
Now the serpent was more subtil than any beast of the field which the LORD God had made. And he said unto the woman, Yea, ***hath God said****, Ye shall not eat of every tree of the garden?*

"Hath God said...." Casting doubt on God's word. That's the way the devil operates, trying to get us to doubt what God had clearly told us. But surely, Christ wasn't going to doubt He was the Son of God? After all, the Father Himself said very recently, at His baptism:

Matthew 3:17
This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.

But, now was forty days later, He was hungry, humanly weaker, and tempted to compare what He had now with His life in glory as God. He'd left so much behind:

Philippians 2:6-8
Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.

He knew His whole life on earth would entail humbling Himself. Having been God in eternity past, then coming to earth and making Himself of no reputation, a servant, being obedient even unto death. Was that really the right way? How could that be the work of the Son of God? Surely He was made for grander things? How could the way of the cross possibly be the way of victory? Such thoughts being planted in Christ's mind, especially when He knew the way was so difficult, would have been a real temptation to Him.

And being the Son of God, He had power at any time to change stones into bread. So that was a real temptation too. But if He'd just performed one miracle for His own benefit, that would've been selfish and therefore sin, and the end of His ministry. All His miracles, which were only pointers to who He was, had to be done for others, otherwise it was sin.

Christ never pleased Himself. And we can learn from this. How many times do we please ourselves every day? The Christian life should be one of being a servant. We're told:

Mark 10:42-45
But Jesus called them to him, and saith unto them, Ye know that they which are accounted to rule over the Gentiles exercise lordship over them; and their great ones exercise authority upon them. But so shall it not be among you: but whosoever will be great among you, shall be your minister: And whosoever of you will be the chiefest, shall be servant of all. For even the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many.

Galatians 5:13
For, brethren, ye have been called unto liberty; only use not liberty for an occasion to the flesh, but by love serve one another.

But Christ would not be tempted. He would not turn stones into bread to satisfy Himself.

[4] But he answered and said, It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God.

How do we get out of a situation when we're tempted to sin? Quote Scripture. When we put on the whole armour of God, it's the only offensive weapon we've got:

Ephesians 6:17
And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God:

That's why knowing Scripture is so important. Not to impress our friends how much Scripture we know, but to remind ourselves of the truth. This is from Deuteronomy 8:3:

Deuteronomy 8:3
And he humbled thee, and suffered thee to hunger, and fed thee with manna, which thou knewest not, neither did thy fathers know; that he might make thee know that man doth not live by bread only, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of the LORD doth man live.

The manna in the wilderness was a miracle. And it was a symbol of spiritual truth. Given daily, directly from God. Our physical bodies need physical bread. And we make bread ourselves from what we have available. But our physical bodies are not all we are. So many live their lives today as though this body is all they are. To them, life is all about satisfying this body, and then when it dies, it's simply the end of it. But no. Our bodies are not all we are. We also have an immortal soul. And we also need spiritual food. We need God to feed our souls daily, just as the manna fed the Israelites daily. We need a living, personal relationship with God. We need His every word. Living without God

starves our souls, and we'll eventually die. Not cease to exist, but die eternally. Christ solemnly said:

Matthew 25:41
Then shall he say also unto them on the left hand, Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels:

But that needn't be our end. There is also an everlasting life to obtain. Christ also said:

John 5:24
He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life.

And this everlasting life is free to anyone who repents of his sin and calls on Jesus Christ to save him to eternal life. We need to respond to His call. Why don't we? Because we love our sins too much. We're not asked to get rid of our sins ourselves, that's impossible. But we're asked to ***want*** to get rid of them. Christ can do that if we sincerely ask Him to.

[5] Then the devil taketh him up into the holy city, and setteth him on a pinnacle of the temple,

Does the devil here really take Christ to the Temple? Or is this just a vision, similar to Paul being taken to the third heaven, or Ezekiel being taken from Babylon to the Temple? He's going to take Him to a mountain where He can see all the kingdoms of the world next, so I think this is just all in a vision. These temptations begin and end still in the wilderness.

[6] And saith unto him, If thou be the Son of God, cast thyself down: for it is written, He shall give his angels charge concerning thee: and in their hands they shall bear thee up, lest at any time thou dash thy foot against a stone.

The devil now tries to be clever, and quotes Scripture himself, a misquote from Psalm 91:

Psalm 91:10-12
There shall no evil befall thee, neither shall any plague come nigh thy dwelling. For he shall give his angels charge over thee, ***to keep thee in all thy ways****. They shall bear thee up in their hands, lest thou dash thy foot against a stone.*

Satan misses out the words *"to keep thee in all thy ways."* The whole point of God sending angels here, is to help us to be kept in all our ways. Which should be God's ways. This wasn't God's way. Many people interpret the Bible too literally, and they miss bits out. So many heresies have been built on misquotes of Scripture. That's why we need good translations of the Bible from the original languages. Every word is important:

Matthew 5:18
For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled.

If Christ had leaped from the Temple, and angels had flown in to stop Him, would people really believe? This reminds us of those calling on Christ on the cross:

Matthew 27:42
He saved others; himself he cannot save. If he be the King of Israel, let him now come down from the cross, and we will believe him.

Christ could have come down from the cross at any time. But He didn't, because He came to die there, otherwise He would have failed in His task, and couldn't have saved anyone. In any case, even if He had come down from the cross, they would never have believed. They'd have forgotten about it very quickly and moved on to something else.

[7] Jesus said unto him, It is written again, Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God.

This is a quote from Deuteronomy 6:16:

Deuteronomy 6:16
Ye shall not tempt the LORD your God, as ye tempted him in Massah.

What's the temptation? He'd impress the people, get a following for Himself, and it would be an easier way. But it wasn't God's way. Christ's way is the way of suffering:

Hebrews 5:8,9
Though he were a Son, yet learned he obedience by the things which he suffered; And being made perfect, he became the author of eternal salvation unto all them that obey him

To tempt God is selfish. "I'm going to jump. If God loves me, He'll stop me." Won't work.

[8] Again, the devil taketh him up into an exceeding high mountain, and sheweth him all the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them; [9] And saith unto him, All these things will I give thee, if thou wilt fall down and worship me.

Luke 4:6
All this power will I give thee, and the glory of them: for that is delivered unto me; and to whomsoever I will I give it.

Was all this power and glory truly given to the devil to do what he will with? Well, God is in control. We needn't worry about Him losing control. So, ultimately all the kingdoms are God's. He put them there in the first place, and removes them in His own good time:

Acts 17:24,26,27
God that made the world and all things therein, seeing that he is Lord of heaven and earth, ... hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth, and hath determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation; That they should seek the Lord ...

But there's also a sense in which the kingdoms of this world are Satan's too. He is called the prince of this world, and the powers that be in the world are largely given over to him:

John 14:30
....the prince of this world cometh, and hath nothing in me. ...

Ephesians 2:2
Wherein in time past ye walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience:

2 Corinthians 4:4
In whom the god of this world hath blinded the minds of them which believe not, lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine unto them.

In Revelation, it was the dragon that gave the beast of the sea his authority:

Revelation 13:2
And the beast which I saw was like unto a leopard, and his feet were as the feet of a bear, and his mouth as the mouth of a lion: and the dragon gave him his power, and his seat, and great authority.

In this sense, Satan has the leaders of the nations doing his bidding. Satan can say the nations have been, as Luke says, "*delivered unto me; and to whomsoever I will I give it.*"

And he offers all the kingdoms to Christ. That's the temptation. What more could Satan offer Him? If He had accepted, it would have been sin, because it would not be what He came to do. Christ did not come to be a king of a sinful world. He came to destroy sin, destroy the works of the devil altogether, and bring in a righteous kingdom:

1 John 3:8
He that committeth sin is of the devil; for the devil sinneth from the beginning. For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that he might destroy the works of the devil.

As God, He already is a king, and He's going to reign over the world eventually anyway:

Psalm 93:1,2
The LORD reigneth, he is clothed with majesty; the LORD is clothed with strength, wherewith he hath girded himself: the world also is stablished, that it cannot be moved. Thy throne is established of old: thou art from everlasting.

Matthew 28:18
And Jesus came and spake unto them, saying, All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth.

To receive these kingdoms, Christ would have to bow down and worship Satan. If He'd simply accepted rule over the kingdoms of this world, without the plan of salvation He came to achieve, then He would have handed the world over to Satan anyway.

[10] Then saith Jesus unto him, Get thee hence, Satan: for it is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve.

"*Get thee hence, Satan.*" The only other time Christ uses a similar phrase is with Peter, after he rebuked Christ for saying He was going to suffer and be killed:

Matthew 16:23
But he turned, and said unto Peter, Get thee behind me, Satan: thou art an offence unto me: for thou savourest not the things that be of God, but those that be of men.

Both Satan here, and Peter, were effectively telling Christ, He'd got it wrong. The way needn't be through suffering and death. He could be king without all of that. But sin wouldn't have been dealt with. The only way to deal with sin, to set men free from their sins, is for a righteous one to die in their place. So that all those who come to Him in repentance and faith, could have their sins placed on Him, the sin-bearer, instead of having to bear it themselves. But He had to die to do that. That's the only way.

Hebrews 9:22
....*without shedding of blood is no remission* [of sin].

We're all born as sinners, alienated from God. To be reconciled to Him we need to put our trust in Jesus Christ. Call on Him. Pray to Him. Seek mercy from Him. But in order to atone for our sins, He had to go through with His mission on earth, to live a perfect life, then die in our place. Satan tried his best to deviate Him from that task, but failed.

And again Christ answers Satan using Scripture. It could be one of several here:

Deuteronomy 6:13-15
Thou shalt fear the LORD thy God, and serve him, and shalt swear by his name. Ye shall not go after other gods, of the gods of the people which are round about you; (For the LORD thy God is a jealous God among you) lest the anger of the LORD thy God be kindled against thee, and destroy thee from off the face of the earth.

Deuteronomy 10:20
Thou shalt fear the LORD thy God; him shalt thou serve, and to him shalt thou cleave, and swear by his name.

There is a God in heaven. He is the one true and living Creator God with whom we will all have to do. He is the only one worthy of worship. To worship any other creature, or figment of men's imaginations instead, is folly, they are not worthy, but the true God is.

Revelation 4:11
Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honour and power: for thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created.

[11] Then the devil leaveth him, and, behold, angels came and ministered unto him.

Luke tells us the devil "*left Him for a season*." He'll be back soon enough. But Christ, quoting Scripture at the devil, kept his temptations at bay.

And we're told **"*angels came and ministered unto him*."** The only other place I can think of where an angel ministered to Christ was at the most difficult point in His ministry just before going to the cross in Gethsemane. We're told:

Luke 22:43,44
And there appeared an angel unto him from heaven, strengthening him. And being in an agony he prayed more earnestly: and his sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground.

It seems odd to think that the Son of God needed help. But He was in a frail frame. He had taken on human flesh. Even though He was sinless, His body was still weak. It got tired. It got hungry. The angels only attended to His physical human weakness. They didn't nudge Him forward in the great work He had to do. He had to do that Himself, fully unaided. He had to tread the winepress alone. Otherwise it wouldn't have been voluntary, and it wouldn't have been fully Him. But He wasn't a failure. He came to save a number that no man can number from their sins, to die in their place, to show us that the way to the Father is not through fighting in this world for a physical victory, but through suffering.

1 Peter 2:21-25
For even hereunto were ye called: because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow his steps: Who did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth: Who, when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not; but committed himself to him that judgeth righteously: Who his own self bare our sins in his own body on the tree, that we, being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness: by whose stripes ye were healed. For ye were as sheep going astray; but are now returned unto the Shepherd and Bishop of your souls.

This is the Christian way. Let's renounce the works of the devil and come to Christ.

Matthew 4:12-25.
The Beginning of Christ's Ministry

Christ had been baptised by John the Baptist at the river Jordan, then immediately led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil for forty days and forty nights.

[12] Now when Jesus had heard that John was cast into prison, he departed into Galilee;

It doesn't say He went to Galilee straight away. There seems to be some time between returning from the wilderness and going to Galilee. We can argue how long this gap was. I think John chapter 1 tells us. John is very specific. He mentions consecutive days:

Day 0: John gets a visit from the religious leaders, and has a dispute with them:

John 1:19
And this is the record of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, Who art thou?

Day 1: Christ comes to see John:

John 1:29
The next day *John seeth Jesus coming unto him....*

Day 2: Christ spends the day with some of John's disciples:

John 1:35
Again the next day *after John stood, and two of his disciples....*

These turn out to be Andrew, who fetches his brother Peter, and an unnamed disciple, probably John the writer.

Day 3: Jesus returns to Galilee:

John 1:43
The day following *Jesus would go forth into Galilee..*

So at this point, according to Matthew 4:12, He'd heard John had been put in prison.

Day 4: "*The third day*" since Christ came to see John, He's now at a wedding in Galilee.

John 2:1
And the third day *there was a marriage in Cana of Galilee....*

According to John's account, Christ was in the area where John was baptising for precisely two days. He arrived on Day 1 and left for Galilee on Day 3. John is very specific about this. The question here is, where do the forty days and forty nights in the wilderness fit in to this chronology?

We all too readily assume Day 1, when Christ came to visit John here, was His baptism. But baptism isn't mentioned. This is interesting, because I don't think John the writer writes about the Lord's Supper either. The supper in chapter 13, where He gives Judas the sop and washes His disciples' feet, I believe is the supper in Bethany mentioned in chapter 12. John doesn't speak of either of the two ordinances of the church at all. It's the other gospel writers who write about these things.

On Day 1, this isn't Jesus visiting John for the first time for baptism. He's returning from His forty days in the wilderness. Otherwise you can't fit those forty days into John's account. After Christ's return, John gets excited and points Him out to his hearers: That's the One I baptised six weeks ago. He's the One we should follow. And he explains how he knew Him by the Spirit coming on Him like a dove. I suggest the chronology is like this:

Day 0: John is visited by the authorities, and has a dispute with them.

Day 1: Christ returns from forty days in the wilderness to see John for a second time.
Day 2: Christ spends the day with the disciples Andrew, Peter and (probably) John.
Day 3: Three days after John had a visit from the authorities, he "disappears." He's put in jail. That prompts Jesus to return to Galilee, meeting Philip and Nathanael on the way.
Day 4: Three days after Christ's return from the wilderness, Christ is back in Galilee, in Cana at a wedding, where He performs His first miracle.

John the Baptist came as the forerunner of Christ, in the spirit and power of Elijah, bringing in a baptism for the remission of sins. Many flocked to his ministry, which caused a stir among the religious leaders. He baptised Christ, not that Christ needed to repent, but to fulfil all righteousness, to set Him apart for His public ministry. And finally, after Christ returned from the wilderness, he comes out with this glorious statement:

John 1:29
….*Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world.*

Then he disappears. And John's being jailed was the sign for Jesus to go back to Galilee. Does it surprise us Jesus just left? John hadn't done anything wrong. He'd just stuck his head above the parapet and rightly criticised the religious leaders for their hypocrisy. And they got him put in jail. His imprisonment was unjust. So why didn't Christ do anything about it? What would we have done? Got the best lawyer to defend him? Tried all possible means to secure his release? Start a campaign? Got the Christian Institute involved? We'd cry "human rights, human rights!" But Christ didn't do any of that. He left.

Now, that's not a criticism of anybody who feels they should defend injustice. We're called to be those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, and be peacemakers. If we can influence anything for good, we should do it. But Christ knew John's ministry would soon be coming to an end, to give way eventually to His own. John himself said:

John 3:30
He must increase, but I must decrease.

And, in any case, Christ would also have known John would be out of jail soon enough. In chapter 3, not being deterred in the slightest, we find he's soon out baptising again:

John 3:23
And John also was baptizing in Aenon near to Salim, because there was much water there: and they came, and were baptized.

He's now moved from Bethabara, where he was originally baptising, to Aenon near Salim. He's in a different place, but carrying on his ministry undeterred by his unjust treatment. He'd eventually go back to jail again, because it then says:

John 3:24
For John was not yet cast into prison.

But this would be for an unrelated incident:

Matthew 14:3
For Herod had laid hold on John, and bound him, and put him in prison for Herodias' sake, his brother Philip's wife.

At this second imprisonment, John's ministry would finally be over. Soon enough Herod would arrange for his head to be chopped off. That time in prison would have a purpose in itself for John, in the Lord's economy. But the authorities would seem to have won. And later, Christ Himself would be put to death unjustly by the same authorities. Does that mean God's lost control? Of course not. It's all in His plan. God knows what He is doing.

And one day, whatever ministry the Lord has for us, will be over too. He'll radically change our situation, maybe in a way we'd never expect. And we should be ready for the Lord to do this. Whatever we do in this world won't be for ever. We'll have to lay it aside one day. Many people find that difficult. They're so full of what they're doing here, they can't deal with it when it's all taken away. But we must put our trust in the Lord.

[13] And leaving Nazareth, he came and dwelt in Capernaum, which is upon the sea coast, in the borders of Zabulon and Nephthalim:

The first thing Christ did after returning to Galilee was go to that wedding in Cana. Cana is only two miles from Nazareth, so He did visit that area briefly on His return, before moving to Capernaum, where He would now base Himself for His public ministry. He'd return on occasion to Nazareth preaching, but it never produced much fruit. We're told:

Matthew 13:58
And he did not many mighty works there because of their unbelief.

The people of Nazareth were so very hard against Him. And Christ said:

Mark 6:4
A prophet is not without honour, but in his own country, and among his own kin, and in his own house.

The people of our own household tend to be the most difficult to reach. We'd think it would be easier to witness to those who knew us before we became Christians and have seen the change in us. After all, becoming a Christian involves a fundamental change on the inside. We've been changed from darkness to light. And that's what Christianity is all about. If we repent of our sins and come to Jesus Christ, calling on Him to save us from the dark sinful nature that we're all born with, then if we're genuine He'll change us. And it'll be a complete, real, internal change. No longer will we want to chase after selfish desires any more, but we'll want to love God, and follow His ways. Yes, we'll fail, many times, but our innermost being will have been changed.

So, we'd have thought anyone seeing such a remarkable change, would notice the difference and be astonished. And they probably are, but they'd never admit it. The pride in their hearts, just like ours used to be, would stop them from admitting seeing the change. And would become the most difficult, hardened people to convince of the truth.

And those who never knew us before we were changed, would think we've always been like this and we're just strange. If someone isn't like us, we think it's them that's wrong, never us. But nobody would've seen any change in Christ Himself. Because He never had any sin. He was always good. Always different from everyone around Him. When the other little boys in Nazareth were pulling legs off spiders, He wouldn't join in. That in itself ought to have been a witness to them. But even His perfect life wouldn't convince the Nazarenes He was the Son of God. So our life certainly won't in itself convince anyone.

Having said that about the people of Nazareth, those of Capernaum weren't much better:

Matthew 11:23,24
And thou, Capernaum, which art exalted unto heaven, shalt be brought down to hell: for if the mighty works, which have been done in thee, had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. But I say unto you, That it shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment, than for thee.

Capernaum was so privileged. Christ based Himself there. He was regularly in its streets. Many miracles were performed there. But the residents turned out to be just as hard. Wherever we go, the ground will be hard. In fact, without God, it'll be impossible:

Mark 10:24-27
But Jesus answereth again, and saith unto them, Children, how hard is it for them that trust in riches to enter into the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God. And they were astonished out of measure, saying among themselves, Who then can be saved? And Jesus looking upon them saith, With men it is impossible, but not with God: for with God all things are possible.

No matter how clear we are in the presentation of the gospel – and we should try to be clear – we can't convince a soul. Only God can change the heart. Only He can open the understanding. We must trust in Him for results. We may never know how many people have come to know the Lord as a result of our witness. And that's a good thing. We should be so glad about that. If we knew that we were instrumental in even one person coming to know the Lord, how proud we'd become! Pride would swell up in our hearts. It would be awful. It's best we don't know

what influence we have. And it's also best that it's the Lord's responsibility to change hearts, not ours. Then the pressure's off. Just think how terrible it would be if the ability to change hearts was in the hands of sinful men.

And then we're told where Capernaum is. It's on the Sea of Galilee, in the land of Zebulon and Napthali. These were two of the twelve tribes of Israel. After the Israelites had entered the Promised Land, the land was partitioned between them. The larger tribes got more territory, and the smaller tribes got less. Zebulon and Napthali were two of the seven smaller tribes, and got a lesser inheritance, way up north in the backwaters of Galilee. Christ basing Himself here was important because it would fulfil a prophecy of Isaiah:

[14] That it might be fulfilled which was spoken by Esaias the prophet, saying, [15] The land of Zabulon, and the land of Nephthalim, by the way of the sea, beyond Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles; [16] The people which sat in darkness saw great light; and to them which sat in the region and shadow of death light is sprung up.

Both Nazareth and Capernaum are in the land of Zebulon and Napthali, in Galilee. The prophecy applies equally to both, although Nazareth isn't **"*by the way of the sea*."** The fulfilment of this prophecy is the fact that such an obscure place, in some of the least known tribes, would be where a great light would be seen. Isaiah's prophecy continues:

Isaiah 9:6,7
For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom, to order it, and to establish it with judgment and with justice from henceforth even for ever. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will perform this.

The Old Testament tells us that God will send into the world a Saviour to save His people. He'll be of the tribe of David. He'll be born in Bethlehem, the city of David. Yet, at the same time, this Wonderful,

Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace, when He comes, will have His light shining mainly in Galilee. Who could that possibly be referring to? Jesus Christ. And Jews today still can't see this from their own Scriptures.
The centre of the whole Jewish world was then, and still is, Jerusalem. That's where the Temple was. That's where the High Priest, and the religious hierarchy were based.

Galatians 4:4,5
But when the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law, To redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons.

But this Son wasn't revealed to those religious leaders. He didn't grow up in Jerusalem. He didn't come out of the best Bible college, although later on, one of their best scholars would be converted, the apostle Paul. But the Son of God wasn't mixing with the great and good in Jerusalem. He grew up in obscurity in a carpenter's shop in Nazareth, and His ministry was mainly in Galilee, with unlearned fishermen as followers. In the most obscure part of the country we could possibly imagine. The least place we'd expect. And that's how God operates. Not through the religious establishment, but, if God had anything to say, He'd usually raise up prophets from elsewhere.

[17] From that time Jesus began to preach, and to say, Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.

From the time Christ moved to Capernaum, He began to preach. And His message was exactly the same as John the Baptist's: **"*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.*"** John's ministry ended by his imprisonment. But Christ continued it on with the very same message. And that was the right thing. Not waste time trying to fight a corrupt society for John's human rights, which he'd never get. The best way to respond to such injustice, was to continue to preach his message, not fearing the consequences. After all, it's God's message to a sinful world. We are expendable. God's message of repentance and remission of sins for all who call on Him, is far more important than any one of us.

And then Christ goes for a walk:

[18] And Jesus, walking by the sea of Galilee, saw two brethren, Simon called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea: for they were fishers. [19] And he saith unto them, Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men. [20] And they straightway left their nets, and followed him. [21] And going on from thence, he saw other two brethren, James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother, in a ship with Zebedee their father, mending their nets; and he called them. [22] And they immediately left the ship and their father, and followed him.

When we go for a walk along a seashore, it's usually for pleasure or exercise. But Christ wasn't walking for pleasure. He never pleased Himself. He was always doing God's work.

If we read this passage on its own, we think that these fishermen met this total stranger and immediately dropped everything they were doing to follow Him on a whim. And we get the idea that this is telling us that we should drop everything, leave boring secular work and go into full-time Christian ministry because that's far superior.

But that's a misunderstanding of the passage. Jesus had met at least three of these men before, on Day 2, the day after He returned from the wilderness. He'd spent the day with them, showing them where He was staying. This wasn't a surprise meeting. They're expecting Him. As Christians, we should never do anything rashly, on a whim. These fishermen were expecting Jesus to call them to follow Him, so they'd already put their house in order, and handed over the fishing business to the rest of their families. They're not dumping their families in it, leaving them in the lurch. And if we think the Lord is calling us to leave where we are to go somewhere else, we don't just go ahead and do it. We make sure it's the right thing first, and then do everything decently and in order.

The only other record we've got of Christ calling a disciple is Matthew, who also seemed to leave his tax collectors desk abruptly, but, just like here, it'd been arranged all along.

And I suggest Christ had met all twelve of His disciples before calling them to follow Him.

When the apostles were trying to find a replacement for Judas, the criteria was this:

Acts 1:21,22
Wherefore of these men which have companied with us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, Beginning from the baptism of John, unto that same day that he was taken up from us, must one be ordained to be a witness with us of his resurrection.

One of the qualifications for becoming an apostle was to have been with Christ "*from the baptism of John.*" So all twelve of them must've attended John's baptism at some point. And Christ would have met them there first, and arranged for them to be called later.

And the call to them was, **"*Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men*."** The call to them was not to catch fish any more, but men. Personally, I'm not too keen on that phrase, but I have to be, because the Lord used it. What Christ meant by it was, after He'd ascended back to the Father, His apostles, and by extension all of His followers in every age, are now the only visible witness of Christ's kingdom the world has got. Christ came to this world to save a number that no man can number from their sins and bring them to the Father, that they may escape judgment to come. And there's the promise:

John 6:37
All that the Father giveth me shall come to me; and him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out.

Similarly, our job now is to proclaim the same good news to all men, that if they repent of their sins and call on Jesus Christ, putting their trust in Him to save them, then He will. He'll change their hearts, and turn them into new creatures, fit for heaven. So, in that sense, I agree, we are all **"*fishers of men*,"** the instruments God uses to bring people to Himself. We proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ, and through our work, God calls His people. And there's another similarity: fish by nature are unwilling to be caught, so men by nature are unwilling to change. But that's as far as we can go with this metaphor though.

Upon the preaching of the gospel God draws His people to Himself by changing them from the inside so they respond. He makes His

people willing to respond. Nobody comes into God's kingdom kicking and screaming:

Psalm 110:3
Thy people shall be willing in the day of thy power....

But fishermen draw fish to themselves by using deceit. That's my problem. Fishermen don't dangle a bare hook and expect fish to willingly attach themselves to it. They put a titbit on the hook, disguising it, so it appears to be something pleasant. The fish grab hold of it, thinking they've grabbed a goodie, and are caught against their will, through deceit.

Christians should never deceive. There used to be a chain of Christian bookshops, and to get unbelievers to come into their stores, their sign deliberately didn't use the word "Christian," it would just say "Bookshop," and they'd put some secular books in the window display, to try and lure people to come in. Once inside, they'd soon realise 95% of the books were Christian, and quite understandably they'd become annoyed that they'd been lured into the shop under false pretences. And churches can do this too under the auspices of "outreach." Something secular, like a concert or barbecue would be arranged, preferably away from a church building (because that would intimidate people). The idea being to attract some who would otherwise never come to church. They'd come to the event, and have what to them would be a good time, then an evangelist would come on with his message. And if they didn't know it was a Christian event before, they'd feel deceived. We should never do that. We must always be up front and genuine.

[23] And Jesus went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, and preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing all manner of sickness and all manner of disease among the people.

Jesus, based in Capernaum, now spends His time travelling around Galilee. And apart from the three times a year when all men had to go to Jerusalem for the festivals, this is where He would be for the rest of His time on earth. And God has given us where we are as our sphere of influence. We may or may not like where we are, but until the Lord

changes it, this is where He wants us to be. And what was Christ doing? Three things:

"teaching in their synagogues." I've always wondered how synagogues allowed Him to teach at all. The answer I've heard is that He was a rabbi. But He wasn't. He'd no formal training in any rabbinical school at all. He was a carpenter. So, how on earth did He manage to get preaching engagements? It must've been God opening them up to Him.

"preaching the gospel of the kingdom." This would have been His work outside the synagogue, wherever He could get a hearing. These two things were His main ministry, teaching and preaching. But He also had a third ministry, which caused a lot of problems:

"healing all manner of sickness and all manner of disease among the people." That drew the crowds. Christ was often overwhelmed with crowds for one reason: the healings. We see here a contrast here between those people who flocked to hear John the Baptist, and those who flocked to hear Christ. Those who desired John's baptism of repentance for the remission of sins, were drawn of the Lord, there was an awakening in their hearts which drew them to desire repentance, something that by nature we wouldn't be particularly interested in. But most of these who flocked to Christ, wanted what we by nature are interested in, miracles, physical healing now. That's far more exciting:

[24] And his fame went throughout all Syria: and they brought unto him all sick people that were taken with divers diseases and torments, and those which were possessed with devils, and those which were lunatick, and those that had the palsy; and he healed them.

As soon as word got around someone in Galilee was miraculously healing the sick, that's what they wanted. They all came to Him. His fame for His healings went throughout all Syria. Not fame for His teaching or message. To be fair, maybe they hadn't heard His real message, because John had never preached in Syria, it was Gentile country. But the fact here was a man who miraculously healed, was what everybody for miles around came for.

And He healed them all. He had compassion on far more than would actually come to Him for the right reasons. And these were real, instant, miraculous healings. The amazing thing is, not that these real healings drew huge crowds, we'd expect that. But that the so-called faith healers of today can draw huge crowds. Their healings aren't anything like this. They're not real healings at all. They're charlatans. Yet people still flock to see them.

So, why did Christ go about healing the sick? If His real ministry was His teaching and preaching, why cause problems with crowds by healing as well? And of course, we must be clear. Christ didn't go about healing deliberately to draw crowds so He could then teach them. That would have been deceit, just like trying to organise a barbecue and not telling anyone an evangelist would be there out to get them.

The miracles were for an important purpose, of which the crowds were an inconvenient side-effect. Christ's main purpose was to teach. But He wasn't just any old teacher like John the Baptist. An ordinary man. He was the Son of God. He was the Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world. He is the Saviour who was to come into the world, who all men ought to worship as God Himself. This is the One all men must put their trust in if they are to be saved from their sins at all. John came solely to point to Him. All the prophets of the Old Testament came to point to Him. All the Scriptures point to Him. And that's our job too. Not to point to ourselves, like all these smartly dressed fancy healing preachers seem to do, but to point to Him. The Saviour of the World. That's why He had the power to miraculously heal people. To show the world He was the One we must all come to. The Word who became flesh and dwelt among us. God manifest in the flesh.

But most people came to Him, not because of that. Not because they wanted their sins forgiven, but because they wanted their bad backs healed. Their bunions cured. That's as high as they could see. That's all they thought they needed. Things here and now, not things for eternity. But there were some who recognised who He really was:

[25] And there followed him great multitudes of people from Galilee, and from Decapolis, and from Jerusalem, and from Judaea, and from beyond Jordan.

Those who came for healing, came, got healed and went away again. They'd got what they wanted. That satisfied them. We're told of one occasion when ten lepers came to Christ for healing, but only one came back to give thanks. The other nine went away, happy, carrying on their own little lives, living for themselves and their own pleasures, until next time they had a problem, then they might go to see Him again, if He was still around. That's not following anybody. That's coming to Christ for what we can get out of Him.

We read here about great multitudes who **"*followed Him*."** This was more that coming and going. They **"*followed*."** They became disciples, followers. Look where they came from. ***"Galilee,"*** where Jesus was operating, ***"Decapolis,"*** just east of the Jordan river opposite Galilee, and as far away as **"*Jerusalem, and from Judaea, and from beyond Jordan*."** That's where John the Baptist got his followers from.

Remember John the Baptist. He had his ministry by the Jordan river, in Judea, and people came from the whole area, **"*Jerusalem, and from Judaea, and from beyond Jordan"*** to be baptised by him. That meant travelling twenty miles or so through the desert to get there. They did it because they were seriously, internally, drawn by the Lord to seek repentance. After John was put in prison, we'd think they would then given up and go back home. But, look here, Jesus now had His **"*followers*"** from all those areas. And this was in Galilee, which meant they were now three times further away from their homes.

Why would people travel such distances? They were given by the Lord a thirst in their hearts for spiritual things. A need for repentance. A desire for Christ to change their hearts to follow Him. A longing for holiness. They're not interested in things in this world so much. Once God puts such a desire into our hearts, it never goes away, it's permanent.

We can backslide into the world terribly, but that desire for the things of God will always be there underneath. And it was with these people. When they heard of John in the wilderness, there was an awakening in their hearts, a desire to seek repentance, and they left home to seek him. After he was taken away from them by his imprisonment, the thirst was still there. John had pointed them to Jesus Christ, so they

made the long trip north to this obscure part of the world, just to be with Him, to follow Him wherever He went.

And when God changes our hearts, He plants in us a desire for spiritual things which cannot be taken away. That's what we need. That's what we should desire. This world can give us nothing. But God can change us for ever. Let's make sure He changes us:

Psalm 107:9
For he satisfieth the longing soul, and filleth the hungry soul with goodness.

Psalm 73:25,26
Whom have I in heaven but thee? and there is none upon earth that I desire beside thee. My flesh and my heart faileth: but God is the strength of my heart, and my portion for ever.

Matthew 5:1-12. The Beatitudes

I want to look at the first 12 verses of Matthew 5. I'm not from a church background. When I first came across this teaching, I was amazed. I'd never come across anything like this before. It tells us that the life God blesses is a way of life so opposite from the world around us. It was such a breath of fresh air. I've since come across others with a church background, and this didn't seem to be special to them at all. I've never understood that.

[1] And seeing the multitudes, he went up into a mountain: and when he was set, his disciples came unto him: [2] And he opened his mouth, and taught them, saying,

"*Seeing the multitudes, He went up into a mountain.*" He took one look at the multitudes, and climbed a mountain to get away from them. Why would He do that? I suggest two reasons. The first is the same reason He only spoke to the multitudes in parables. That wasn't to illustrate His teaching, but to see if they were really interested in what He actually had to say. Most of them weren't. They wanted miracles, but teaching, no, that's boring. But He'd always explain everything to His disciples. He had time for all who wanted to know more. He climbed a mountain to see who'd make an effort to follow.

He wants us to approach Him. He wants us to ask. He wants us to seek. He wants us to knock. He'll willingly explain everything to all who truly seek Him:

Matthew 7:7
Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you....

The second reason He went up a mountain, was because He was just about to give a long teaching about the Christian life. This whole sermon in chapters 5,6 and 7 is really just for believers. It teaches all who seek to follow Him what the Christian life is all about. So it is primarily for disciples, all those who would make the effort to follow Him up the mountain to find out more.

That means this teaching all hangs together as one unit. We can't pick and mix. We can't take bits we like and reject others. We either relate to all this teaching and are a Christian, or we don't relate to any of it, and aren't. The way of the Christian and the way of the world are polar opposites. There's no in between. We've got to ask ourselves: Do we find the way of life described here delightful? Or do we reject it? Christ said elsewhere:

Matthew 12:30
He that is not with me is against me....

Luke 9:50
....he that is not against us is for us.

We can't sit on the fence. We either delight in Christ and His teaching or reject Him. By doing nothing, by having no interest, that proves Christ isn't important to us. So, by definition, we're rejecting Him. So, the point is, what do we think of this way of life?

I just want to look at the beginning of this sermon. There are 9 statements. All begin with the words **"*blessed are....*"** followed by the corresponding reason why each are blessed.

[3] Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Notice it's **"*poor in spirit*,"** not poor financially. There's no virtue in poverty as such. Many good men in the Bible were very rich, Abraham and Solomon for example. It's not money that's the root of all evil, but the love of it. Our financial circumstances are irrelevant here.

What does **"*poor in spirit*"** mean? Well we're told, **"*theirs is the kingdom of heaven*."** So if we can find out who gets into the kingdom of heaven, then we'll know what it is to be **"*poor in spirit*."** I've got three verses here, there are plenty more I could've chosen:

Matthew 4:17
Repent: for ***the kingdom of heaven*** *is at hand.*

To enter the kingdom of heaven, we must repent. Which means we need to recognise we have to change. We're all heading the wrong way in our lives, and need to turn around. We naturally object to being told we need to change. We think we're all right, but we're not. God has given us Ten Commandments as a summary of the way He wants us to live. But we don't bother with them. We don't think about them. We've got our own ideas of what's right. If we think we can make up our own rules as we go along, that's not being **"*poor in spirit*."** Being **"*poor in spirit*"** involves a recognition that we need to change.

Matthew 18:4
Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in ***the kingdom of heaven****.*

To enter the kingdom of heaven, we must humble ourselves as little children. Children are naughty too, so they need to change as well. But we must humble ourselves in the same way they humbly trust. We adults tend to put all our trust in ourselves. We're so self-confident. And these children will grow up to be like that. But that's not a virtue. The Bible has another word for it. Pride. And God wants to totally destroy that in us, so the "*no man may glory in His presence*". He wants us to stop being proud, and humbly trust in Him:

1 Samuel 2:3
Talk no more so exceeding proudly; let not arrogancy come out of your mouth: for the LORD is a God of knowledge, and by him actions are weighed.

But there's even more. Not only must we repent to get our lives in line with God's law. Not only must we have our pride broken and humble ourselves. But, Christ also said:

John 3:3
Except a man be born again, he cannot see ***the kingdom of God.***

In other words, it's altogether impossible to enter the kingdom of heaven by ourselves. None of us are good enough. We need to recognise our utter inability to please God:

Romans 8:8
....they that are in the flesh cannot please God.

Hebrews 11:6
But without faith it is impossible to please him....

So, we must repent, humble ourselves and recognise our inability. That's the essence of what it is to be **"*poor in spirit*."** Only when this hard, proud self has been altogether broken in this way, can the kingdom of heaven be opened to us:

Isaiah 57:15
For thus saith the high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity, whose name is Holy; I dwell in the high and holy place, with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones.

Psalm 51:17
The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise.

[4] Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted.

But what should we be mourning over? Well, Christians take life seriously, and that's often confused for mourning. The world laughs and jokes its way through life. Living for the next party, the next unit of pleasure they can grab hold of. Because they think when you're dead, you're dead. There's no judgment, no responsibility. So they think Christians are rather strange taking life seriously. But that's not true. King Solomon said:

Ecclesiastes 7:1-5
A good name is better than precious ointment; and the day of death than the day of one's birth. It is better to go to the house of mourning, than to go to the house of feasting: for that is the end of all men; and the living will lay it to his heart. Sorrow is better than laughter: for by the sadness of the countenance the heart is made better. The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning; but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth. It is better to hear the rebuke of the wise, than for a man to hear the song of fools.

It's far better to be serious and get ourselves ready for the next world than to enjoy life here now. We must take things seriously here, not escape by partying all the time. That's not facing reality. But just because we're serious, doesn't mean we're mourning.

If you've seen the film "Jesus Christ Superstar," you might think we're mourning because Christ died. That's the end of the film. The hero dies. That's it. Finish. Totally missing from the film is His resurrection. He got victory over death. What's more, His death was an atoning sacrifice for our sins, and the resurrection proved it was accepted by God. We rejoice in His death and resurrection, not mourn because everything "went wrong."

So, that's not why Christians mourn either. So, why do we mourn? Well, even though we've become a Christian, genuinely love God in our hearts and want to please Him, and know our sins have been completely forgiven thanks to Christ's atoning sacrifice; no matter how much we try, while we're still on this earth we continue to sin against Him. Every day, we have to cry in the Lord's Prayer, "*Forgive us our trespasses.*" We don't want to be like this. We want to be sinless, and we're not. That's what causes us grief. We're mourning over ourselves, our sin. The apostle Paul said:

Romans 7:24,25
O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death? I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord. So then with the mind I myself serve the law of God; but with the flesh the law of sin.

And Paul also wrote of a godly sorrow. Not sorrow like the world has, just being unhappy about something. That doesn't change anybody. But godly sorrow has an effect:

2 Corinthians 7:10,11
For godly sorrow worketh repentance to salvation not to be repented of: but the sorrow of the world worketh death. For behold this selfsame thing, that ye sorrowed after a godly sort, what carefulness it wrought in you, yea, what clearing of yourselves, yea, what indignation, yea, what fear, yea, what vehement desire, yea, what zeal, yea, what revenge! In all things ye have approved yourselves to be clear in this matter.

So, we mourn in godly sorrow, which leads to repentance of life. And the comfort comes in the next world, when we receive new bodies that won't be able to sin any more.

[5] Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth.

What is meekness? The world tells us to be strong, be forceful, assert ourselves. Meekness is exactly the opposite. So the world is going to think of meekness as being pathetic, stupid, simple, weak. But Moses was said to be the meekest man in all the earth in his day, and he was a great leader. Christ Jesus was the perfect example of meekness:

Matthew 11:29
Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls.

Meekness isn't being simple or weak. But unbelievers think it is, and they're going to try to take full advantage of us. So, far from being simple and weak, we need to be wise:

Matthew 10:16
Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves: be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves.

If we're accosted by people and we know full well they're trying to take advantage of us, the Lord will give us wisdom how to deal with it, and not let us be defrauded by them.

Being meek, it's inevitable we're going to be laughed at, looked down on, despised. But it's not going to be for ever, because the meek are going to inherit the earth:

Psalm 37:10,11
For yet a little while, and the wicked shall not be: yea, thou shalt diligently consider his place, and it shall not be. But the meek shall inherit the earth; and shall delight themselves in the abundance of peace.

[6] Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled.

This is similar to **"*Blessed are they that mourn....",*** because if we're mourning over our sin, then we're **"*hungering and thirsting after righteousness*."** It doesn't say "blessed are the righteous," because none of us are. Those blessed are they who long in their hearts to be righteous.

This begs a question: If we continue to sin, even after becoming a Christian, how is it possible to stand before God on judgment day and be vindicated? To satisfy God's justice, we must be perfect. And clearly we're not. But Jesus Christ is. And the wonderful news is that's His righteousness can be put to our account, and our sin placed on Him:

2 Corinthians 5:21
For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him.

That's the righteousness we should all be hungering and thirsting after. A perfect righteousness freely given to us by Jesus Christ. And Christians have this, and they know they've got it. They are the happiest people in the world, knowing they're not going to be condemned. Without Christ we live empty lives. Living for self is the emptiest thing we can do. There's no purpose to it. But if we come to Jesus Christ, trusting in His righteousness and not our own, then we shall be filled, satisfied, perfectly content.

The world hungers and thirsts after so many things of no consequence. God is calling:

Isaiah 55:1,2
Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters, and he that hath no money; come ye, buy, and eat; yea, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Wherefore do ye spend money for that which is not bread? and your labour for that which satisfieth not? hearken diligently unto me, and eat ye that which is good, and let your soul delight itself in fatness.

[7] Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy.

We're called to be merciful. I think most people are agreed that it is a good thing to show mercy to others. But it's always an effort to be kind to people. Isn't that terrible? By nature we've got no inclination to be kind. We look after ourselves. But James warns us:

James 2:13
For he shall have judgment without mercy, that hath shewed no mercy; and mercy rejoiceth against judgment.

We're also told, by Christ, that if we are merciful, we'll obtain mercy ourselves in return:

Matthew 6:14,15
For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

Matthew 10:42
And whosoever shall give to drink unto one of these little ones a cup of cold water only in the name of a disciple, verily I say unto you, he shall in no wise lose his reward.

We ought to be kind to one another, and help others in their hour of need. But we must go far beyond that. What's the most loving thing we could ever do for anybody? The greatest act of mercy we could ever show to people? Tell them the truth they're sinners, and if they carry on the way they're going, they'll end up in hell fire. Because they don't realise it. If we knew a volcano was about to erupt, and we see people halfway up it totally oblivious to the fact, what's the best thing we could do for them? Tell them "Flee from the wrath to come." But if they just think we're crazy, we can't do anything about it. Now, at the same time, we also tell people the way of escape, which can only be found in Jesus Christ:

Jude 1:22,23
And of some have compassion, making a difference: And others save with fear, pulling them out of the fire; hating even the garment spotted by the flesh.

If we don't think telling people they're sinners on the way to hell is a loving thing to say, it's only because we don't really believe it ourselves. The most merciful thing we can do for anyone, is to tell them about Jesus. As God has been so merciful in saving us from our sins, so we should be merciful to others, both practically, and spiritually, for their souls.

[8] Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God.

The religious leaders of Christ's day thought that keeping God's law was simply about external observance. As long as they kept all God's rules and regulations externally, they thought they'd get to heaven. But God wants far, far more than that from us:

Matthew 5:20
For I say unto you, That except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven.

God doesn't just want us to keep His commandments externally. He wants us to love keeping them in our hearts. Naturally our hearts are impure. Sex and violence sells films.

Matthew 15:19,20
For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies: These are the things which defile a man: but to eat with unwashen hands defileth not a man.

Jeremiah 17:9
The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?

The religious leaders of Christ's day didn't see the heart as the problem. They thought the external shew was enough. But it's relatively easy to put on an external shew. We can do a good work but hate doing it in our hearts. As long as nobody finds out what we're really thinking, that's all right. But it's not all right. God looks at the heart. For our hearts to be pure, they must be changed by God. Only then will we be able to truly "see" Him.

Because of our sin, no man can naturally see God:

John 1:18
No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him.

But it is possible to "see" Him in the sense of detect Him, know for sure He's there and that He cares for us. We can have a living, real relationship with the One True Living God.
And He's the only One who can give us a "*pure heart.*" As I said earlier, that doesn't mean we won't sin. But with a pure heart, we'll hate it every time we do. The apostle Paul said:

Romans 7:16,17
If then I do that which I would not, I consent unto the law that it is good. Now then it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me.

We should never use that as an excuse for sin, but such an attitude at least shews our hearts are right with God, even if our external behaviour falls short. We cry with David:

Psalm 51:10
Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me.

[9] Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God.

We're told to:

Romans 12:18
If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men.

By nature we love asserting ourselves and having opinions. Which only ever causes arguments. We shouldn't be like that. We should be peaceable people. The message we've got, the gospel, by itself is going to be offensive. It tells men they're sinners, which they're not going to like. If they reject the message, we can't do anything about it. But let's make sure we don't cause extra offence, by a wrong, confrontational attitude.

2 Corinthians 5:19
To wit, that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them; and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation.

God has made peace between Himself and men through Jesus Christ on the cross atoning for the sins of all those who will come to Him. In the same way, we're called to be peaceable with each other. Some in the church love debating doctrine. It's a good thing to defend truth. But they're so aggressively abrasive, they're not doing the church a favour, even if their doctrine is right. We should be peacemakers, which involves gentleness. And if we don't have a peacemaking heart, we're told here we're not children of God at all.

James 3:18
And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace of them that make peace.

Everything that's been said so far, is the Christian life. What do we think about it? What's wrong with loving God's law, having a simple trust in God, having our pride broken, having our self-centredness destroyed, having godly sorrow, being meek, hungering and thirsting after righteousness, being merciful, being pure in heart and being peacemakers?

Nothing. It's a beautiful way of life. We ought to love it, hunger and thirst after it. It's a breath of fresh air, especially as we're surrounded by a world so completely the opposite.

Not only is the world opposite, but our every natural instinct is too. Our instincts are self-centred, they seek only for the preservation and pleasure of self. This new, beautiful life is altogether unattainable by us. But God can change us. He'll give it freely, to all who ask:

Isaiah 55:6,7
Seek ye the LORD while he may be found, call ye upon him while he is near: Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him return unto the LORD, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.

But, because this way of life is so opposite to everything we know, so many hate it and reject it. It's all dismissed as just a crutch for weak people to lean on. Invented by weak people, for weak people. If it makes them happy, that's fine, but it's not for me. But that's not true. This is not of man. It's the way God wants all of us to live. He wants us to be finished living for self and to live like this instead. This is the life that is "*blessed*" by Him.

So, it's inevitable that anyone who follows this way of life will get opposition. But we're told that too is blessed. The last two "*blessed are...*" statements here aren't about something within us. They're external things done to us, that affect us from the outside:

[10] Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Persecution is a problem every Christian will have to face. Christ told us:

John 16:33
These things I have spoken unto you, that in me ye might have peace. In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world.

Christ was persecuted, and eventually put to death. We should expect no different:

John 15:18,19
If the world hate you, ye know that it hated me before it hated you. If ye were of the world, the world would love his own: but because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you.

We'll be hated and persecuted, not because we do anything wrong, but simply because we're not like others. We used to be like them, but we're not any more. The Lord has changed us and shown us this new blessed way of life. That old life was selfish, empty, pointless, and it didn't satisfy. This new life does. We'll be persecuted for it, maybe even by old friends. But we love our new life too much to ever want to go back.

And it's all **"*for righteousness sake*."** In other words, either what we say, or by our simply not joining in with others any more, we're showing them they're sinners and they need to change too. They're not going to like that. They don't want to change and don't want anyone interfering with their life, especially a weak nobody, telling them what to do.

[11] Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you.

These persecutions **"*for righteousness sake*,"** are here said to be **"*for my sake,*"** Christ's sake. He's the One who's changed us. He's responsible for this new life in us. That's not a complaint. We love this new life, we don't want any other. But, no matter how genuine we try to be, we'll be persecuted, reviled, and spoken evil of falsely. All because of Christ, because naturally we wouldn't be like this or think this way. This is the way the prophets went. The way Christ had to go, even unto death. He is our example:

1 Peter 2:21-24
For even hereunto were ye called: because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow his steps: Who did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth: Who, when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not; but committed himself to him that judgeth righteously: Who his own self bare our sins in his own body on the tree, that we, being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness: by whose stripes ye were healed.

So, we've got a decision to make. Do we continue living like the world. Living for self, for our own pleasures? Asserting self, putting self on the throne? That'll be the easier way by far. Because that's what everybody else is doing. We'll certainly have lots of like-minded friends. But that's the broad way that leads to destruction in the end.

Or can we see that this here is the way we ought to follow. This is the beautiful life. The life we were created to live by God. But it's a narrow way. Comparatively few will be on it. And we'll be persecuted by the

majority all heading in the opposite direction. But this is the way God has chosen that leads to life. And to all those who embrace it, the Lord Himself will come and guide them from within. Let's make sure this is the way we go, because this is the way of blessing.

Matthew 10:34-39.
I Came not to Send Peace, but a Sword.

Read Matthew 10:1 - 11:1

I don't want to go through the whole of Matthew chapter 10, I just want to concentrate on a few verses towards the end. But before we do that we need to set the scene.

In this chapter, Christ chooses his twelve disciples and sends them out two by two around the local villages. Many people think these instructions to His disciples are for us today, but I don't think so. I think they were specifically for that particular evangelistic campaign. And I've got two reasons for saying that:

Firstly, they were specifically told NOT to go to Gentiles or Samaritans, but only to Jews:

Matthew 10:5,6
These twelve Jesus sent forth, and commanded them, saying, Go not into the way of the Gentiles, and into any city of the Samaritans enter ye not: But go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.

But we're commanded to take the gospel to the whole world:

Mark 16:15
Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature.

Now, we could argue that that instruction was only given to the disciples as well, but I think it's reasonable in that case to apply it to ourselves, because we're told that the gospel will go to the whole world before Christ comes again:

Matthew 24:14
And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations; and then shall the end come.

None of the disciples made it to China, or Australia, or England. So it's reasonable to assume that subsequent generations are to carry on that

work of going to the whole world. But the instruction here to go to Jews only, was surely just for the disciples then.

And the other reason I think these instructions were only for that particular campaign, is that the disciples were given power by Christ to do miraculous things:

Matthew 10:1
And when he had called unto him his twelve disciples, he gave them power against unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal all manner of sickness and all manner of disease.

Matthew 10:7,8
And as ye go, preach, saying, The kingdom of heaven is at hand. Heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, cast out devils: freely ye have received, freely give.

I don't know about you, but apart from preaching, *"The kingdom of heaven is at hand,"* I can't do any of that. Which again implies this was only for the disciples at the time.

But, having said that, some things in this chapter we can apply to ourselves.

Matthew 10:16,17
Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves: be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves. But beware of men: for they will deliver you up to the councils, and they will scourge you in their synagogues....

We're sheep in the midst of wolves. We ought to be wise about how evil men can be. We were wolves once, so we ought to know. We should now be peaceable and harmless as doves. The warning to "*beware of men*" is just as relevant today as ever.

And the warning they'll be delivered up to councils and synagogues isn't just for the disciples either, because the warning is repeated in Matthew 24, and Mark 13 which are about the end times. So these things we can apply to ourselves.

Then we come to these verses, which are more relevant to our subject today:

Matthew 10:21,22
And the brother shall deliver up the brother to death, and the father the child: and the children shall rise up against their parents, and cause them to be put to death. And ye shall be hated of all men for my name's sake: but he that endureth to the end shall be saved.

I particularly want to look at verses 34 to 39, but here's a kind of introduction. We need to understand that Christians will be hated of all men for Christ's name's sake. Why is that?

John 15:18,19
If the world hate you, ye know that it hated me before it hated you. If ye were of the world, the world would love his own: but because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you.

The world hated Christ, so the world is going to hate His followers too. In fact Christ was hated so much, He was put to death. But why did the world hate Christ so much?

John 7:7
The world cannot hate you [referring to Christians before conversion]*; but me it hateth, because I testify of it, that the works thereof are evil.*

Christ told the world its ways are evil. And He calls all men, even today, that they need to change and repent of their sins. But men love their sins too much to give them up:

John 3:19
And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil.

Men naturally hate Christ. And if we tell men today that their ways are evil, they'll hate us too. But the fact is, the ways of the world **are** evil. We can't pretend they're not. All men want to do is to please themselves. They couldn't really care less about anyone else, as long as they're happy, that's all that matters. What a waste of time. Do something useful. We're born with such self-centred natures. And we can't get out of it. That's why we need Jesus Christ, this man that they hate so much. He died on the cross to save all those who would come to Him from the consequences of their sin. We can try as much as we

like to get away from our sin, but not only can't we do it, but we don't want to do it either. But....

John 3:17,18
For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved. He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.

God sent a Saviour. If we believe on Him, we can be saved from the consequence of our sins. That's the simple Christian message. It's so easy, but the world generally doesn't want to know. And it's not just the message they don't like. They don't like the way Christians are different from them, and they'll hate anything they don't understand.

Those who truly believe in Jesus Christ will be changed from the inside. They become altogether different from what they were:

2 Corinthians 5:17
Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.

That really annoys people. We're not like them any more. Because we no longer want to live for ourselves. We want to live for God. They just won't be able to understand that.

Galatians 2:20
I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me.

So the world will hate us, because we're no longer like them. That's the introduction. Now let's come to the text I want to look at, beginning in v.34:

[34] Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword.

Most people are going to be surprised by that statement. Did Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace, really say that? What about those Christmas cards we get:

Luke 2:14
Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.

Surely, Jesus Christ came to bring peace. Well, He did. We can now have peace with God, thanks to Christ's coming and dying on a cross. Our sins, which separate us from God, can be forgiven. But to avail ourselves of that peace, we must give them up. We must come to Him, cast them upon Him, believe on Him, and trust in Him to change us. If we never do that, we're still bound to our sinful nature. And we'll be judged justly for that.

So Christ did come to bring peace. Peace between God and man, because without Him we're alienated from God. There are only two types of people in the world: Those who come to Christ and are saved from the consequences of their sins, and those who don't and aren't. That's what Christ meant when He said He came not to send peace, but a sword. Or, as the equivalent passage in Luke puts it, He brings division:

Luke 12:51
Suppose ye that I am come to give peace on earth? I tell you, Nay; but rather division:

Christ didn't deliberately come to bring division, He came to bring peace, peace between God and man. But because people reject Him, a division occurs. The division is a consequence of men rejecting Christ. Men are the actual cause of the division, not Christ.

[35] For I am come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter in law against her mother in law.

The equivalent passage in Luke continues:

Luke 12:52,53
For from henceforth there shall be five in one house divided, three against two, and two against three. The father shall be divided against the son, and the son against the father; the mother against the daughter, and the daughter against the mother; the mother in law against her daughter in law, and the daughter in law against her mother in law.

And this is actually a quote from the prophet Micah:

Micah 7:5-7
Trust ye not in a friend, put ye not confidence in a guide: keep the doors of thy mouth from her that lieth in thy bosom. For the son dishonoureth the father, the daughter riseth up against her mother, the daughter in law against her mother in law; a man's enemies are the men of his own house. Therefore I will look unto the Lord; I will wait for the God of my salvation: my God will hear me.

If we're going to be hated of all men for Christ's name's sake, that's sadly going to include our unconverted relatives. We can't get away from it.

We might say, my unconverted relatives don't hate me. They might think I'm strange because I go to church, but they don't actually hate me. Well, good. We don't go looking for trouble. We're peaceable people. But, there is a problem in that, if we get on too well with our own family, the temptation will be that we begin to grow cold towards the things of God. If we have truly been changed in our hearts by Jesus Christ, there will be a real difference between us and unconverted family members. Christ will **"*set a man at variance against his father,*"** and so on. There will be things in their lives which we may have once gone along with, but now we don't approve of.

We'll always want, more than anything, for our family members to know Jesus Christ for themselves. Because without Him, they're going to be judged on account of their own sin. But our own families will be the hardest people to convince of the truth. The usual reason given for that is that it's because they're the closest people to us, so they know what we're really like. And there's some truth in that. But even the sinless Christ, who never had any faults, had this problem. Firstly, with the people of His home town Nazareth:

Matthew 13:54-58
And when he was come into his own country, he taught them in their synagogue, insomuch that they were astonished, and said, Whence hath this man this wisdom, and these mighty works? Is not this the carpenter's son? is not his mother called Mary? and his brethren, James, and Joses, and Simon, and Judas? And his sisters, are they not all with us? Whence then hath this man all these things? And they were offended in him. But Jesus said unto them, A prophet is not without honour, save in his own country, and in his own house. And he did not many mighty works there because of their unbelief.

When Christ was growing up, He must have been so different from everybody else. The citizens of Nazareth must have noticed it, but still didn't understand who He really was.

Joseph and Mary themselves were a godly couple. After Christ was born, we're told they had at least six more children, four more brothers and a plurality of sisters. And we're also told that the brothers, while He was alive at least, didn't believe in Him.

John 7:5
For neither did his brethren believe in him.

Even Christ Himself came from a divided family. That couldn't have been because they saw what He was really like underneath. God forbid! He was sinless. So, this division is caused by more than just that our family knowing what we're really like.

[36] And a man's foes shall be they of his own household.

Every family on earth will be divided into those who believe and those who don't. That's inevitable. But we're told here they will be our **"*foes*."** And that's because Christ said:

Matthew 12:30
He that is not with me is against me; and he that gathereth not with me scattereth abroad.

Many times, our families will be good to us after we've become a Christian. They'll probably think it's just a phase we're going through.

But, no matter how kind they are to us, they're still on the other side. They're the ones who need to change. They need Christ.

But there are also many families who will absolutely hate the fact we've been converted. I met a murderer once. While he was in prison, in Strangeways, he was converted. After he got out of prison, he went back to his parents and told them the good news that he'd now become a Christian and that his old life of violence was over. And they threw him out of the house. They'd rather have a murderer living with them than a Christian.

Not so long ago, my wife and I visited a Muslim part of China. We were talking with the elder of the local church, and my wife asked if they had many Muslim converts in the congregation. He told us that they wouldn't be able to come and worship openly. There was a congregation of converted Muslims in the town, but they had to meet in secret. Most muslim converts would have to move to another city, because they'd be killed for dishonouring the family if they ever found out where they were. As long as they toe the line behind the family, the clan, they'd be well looked after. So it must take a lot of faith to renounce all that and challenge the family and tell them they're wrong.

And then we hear stories here of ex-Jehovah's Witnesses being disfellowshipped and shunned by their families. In all these cases, we remember:

Psalm 27:10
When my father and my mother forsake me, then the Lord will take me up.

Those who are thrown out of their families, tend to become the strongest Christians, because they've lost the most by becoming a Christian. They put most of us to shame.

So, whatever our situation, however antagonistic or otherwise our families are towards us, how should we deal with them? Should we be antagonistic back? No, of course not.

Romans 12:21
Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good.

We can start at the fifth Commandment:

Exodus 20:12
Honour thy father and thy mother: that thy days may be long upon the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee.

And Paul's letter to the Ephesians expands on this:

Ephesians 6:1-4
Children, obey your parents in the Lord: for this is right. Honour thy father and mother; (which is the first commandment with promise;) That it may be well with thee, and thou mayest live long on the earth. And, ye fathers, provoke not your children to wrath: but bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.

We should always honour our parents no matter what. But there's a difference between honouring and obeying. We should normally obey them as well. But if they try to force us to sin, like try to get us to deny our faith, we have to say, "No." That's the only case when we shouldn't obey them. And if that means we get thrown out of the house, so be it. We should still honour them, even if we can't physically be with them.

And then, as our parents grow old, we may have to look after them. Quite often, old people can be very difficult, especially if they've lived their whole lives in sin. We're called, if we can, to care about them, to provide for our families:

1 Timothy 5:8
But if any provide not for his own, and specially for those of his own house, he hath denied the faith, and is worse than an infidel.

And then, talking of split families, what about unequally yoked marriages? If we marry, we're called to marry only in the Lord. But many people either make terrible mistakes or are converted after marriage. So the Bible gives us instructions for these situations too:

1 Peter 3:1-4
Likewise, ye wives, be in subjection to your own husbands; that, if any obey not the word, they also may without the word be won by the conversation of the wives; While they behold your chaste conversation coupled with fear. Whose adorning let it

not be that outward adorning of plaiting the hair, and of wearing of gold, or of putting on of apparel; But let it be the hidden man of the heart, in that which is not corruptible, even the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit, which is in the sight of God of great price.

The believing partner must show their difference, not by arguing all the time, but by their lives. And we could extend this to our dealings with all family members. We show the difference by our life, our **"*meek and quiet spirit.*"** We're Christ's witness to them.

[37] He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me: and he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.

In the end, we'll have to choose between Christ or our family. If ever our family tries to force us to sin, we have to make a stand, we can't avoid it. Otherwise we're making them more important in our lives than Christ. And in that case, we won't be worthy of Him.

There's an interesting verse in Luke:

Luke 14:26
If any man come to me, and ***hate*** *not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple.*

Here's another surprising verse in the Bible. Is the God of love really telling us to hate our family members? Well, **"*hate*"** is the same as loving less. If a man says to his wife, "I love you, but I love you less than that other woman over there," he's not really loving his wife at all, he's hating her. Who'd put up with that? We've got a Biblical example to show this:

Genesis 29:30,31
And he went in also unto Rachel, and ***he loved also Rachel more than Leah****, and served with him yet seven other years. And when the Lord saw that* ***Leah was hated****, he opened her womb: but Rachel was barren.*

Matthew 6:24
No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other.

When we talk about hatred, we assume it means being nasty, but that's not what we mean at all. We're never to be nasty to anybody. But we must hate them in the sense of loving Christ more. We can love them in the sense of helping them whenever we can, but we can never approve of their sinful behaviour. We must love Christ more, because He was sinless. He's not like our unconverted family members. He is altogether lovely.

So, when the crunch comes, and it will, do we love our family members more than Christ, their sins and all, or do we forsake our families, always preferring to follow Christ? We've got a new family now. Our real family consists of all those who know Christ. Our blood family is no longer our real family, unless they repent and come to Him themselves.

Mark 10:29,30
There is no man that hath left house, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for my sake, and the gospel's, But he shall receive an hundredfold now in this time, houses, and brethren, and sisters, and mothers, and children, and lands, with persecutions; and in the world to come eternal life.

We've got a new family in this world, albeit with persecutions, and in the world to come we'll have eternal life. Now that doesn't mean we have to physically separate from our blood families, unless we're forced to. We can still care about them, but they're not our true family any more, because they won't understand us. The only people who'll really understand us are all those who've also experienced Christ as we have. These are the ones we can truly tell all our concerns to. Our unconverted blood family have no idea how to help us because they don't know Christ. So we should never take advice from them.

Let's go back to Luke 14:26 again:

Luke 14:26
If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, ***and his own life also****, he cannot be my disciple.*

Notice it says we must hate our "*own life also."* Anyone who comes to Christ, begins to see more and more his own sin. And we hate it. We've been changed from the inside, yet we still see sin within us. And it's far more hateful to us than any sin we see in anybody else. Because it's ours, and we should have forsaken it all, but we haven't.

[38] And he that taketh not his cross, and followeth after me, is not worthy of me.

We all have crosses to bear, whether it's an unbelieving partner, a dysfunctional family, or rebellious family member. But the greatest cross we have to bear is ourselves. We can't change anyone else. We can tell them to change. We can point them to Christ. But we can't actually change them, only Christ can, because He's the only one who can change hearts. But we can help ourselves, by allowing ourselves to be changed by Christ.

We need to start hating ourselves more, by mortifying the flesh, putting to death the deeds of the body, and producing fruit, which we can now do thanks to the Holy Spirit.

Psychologists today tell us we all need more self-esteem, we need to love ourselves more, but that's not true. The problem is, we love ourselves too much. Me, me, me, my problems, my problems, my life, my life. That's all we can talk about. The problem with us is that we don't hate ourselves enough. We're by nature such terribly selfish creatures. That's why we need to be changed from the inside, and only Christ can do that.

[39] He that findeth his life shall lose it: and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it.

Are we finding our life in this world, or losing it? Is all we think about here and now, in this world? What can I do now, where can I go on holiday next? What exciting thing can I watch on TV tonight? Me, me, me. Is all we think about, our own activities, our own desires? If it is, we're finding our life in this world, and if we carry on, we'll lose our lives in the end. Wasting the life God gave us in this world will be punished in the next.

So, how can we avoid that and find life in the next world? We must lose it here. And we must lose it for Christ's sake.

We can't do that ourselves, we're too self-centred for that. But if we call on Christ, He can change us. If we don't want to be changed because we like our selfish life too much, He's not going to listen. But, if we really do want to be changed, to get out of this mess, this selfish, sinful life, then He will hear our prayer and He will change us for ever.

That's what we all need. We will have opposition, not least from unconverted family members. We may even get thrown out of our families for good. We might lose everything in this world. But it'll be worth every bit of it. And we can say, with the apostle Paul:

Philippians 3:8-11
But what things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ. Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ, And be found in him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith: That I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable unto his death; If by any means I might attain unto the resurrection of the dead.

May every one of us come to know Jesus Christ for ourselves, and truly get victory over our sin.

Matthew 16:13-28. Losing our Life

The reading is from Matthew 16, but I really just want to concentrate on verse 24. But we need to look at the verses around it because we should never take a verse out of context.

[13] When Jesus came into the coasts of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, saying, Whom do men say that I the Son of man am?

Caesarea Philippi is right up in the north of Israel, in the foothills of Mount Hermon. Jesus took His disciples apart, and asked them who men think He is. He's become quite popular. He's been going around teaching and performing miracles. That in particular has attracted people. Many were asking themselves what kind of man is this? Who is He?

[14] And they said, Some say that thou art John the Baptist: some, Elias; and others, Jeremias, or one of the prophets.

Everybody had their own theories as to who He was. They just decided for themselves what they thought. But all along, He'd told His listeners exactly who He was, but they didn't listen. We need to have our ears opened to what He actually has to say. Not just make our own minds up about Him. What did He actually teach? It's all here in the Bible.

All the ideas they had have one thing in common – they're all dead men who they thought had come back to life. That's very strange. They didn't seem to have a problem with the resurrection from the dead, when it suited them. When somebody did come along and rise from the dead, they weren't too bothered by it. Christ said about many people:

Luke 16:31
If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead.

[15] He saith unto them, But whom say ye that I am?

Christ told them, it doesn't matter what others think, what do you think?

After Christ had risen from the dead, Peter asked him what would happen to John, to which He replied:

John 21:22
What is that to thee? follow thou me.

We need to think for ourselves, personally. We shouldn't be interested in what others think, or what's going to happen to them. What do we think? Where do we stand? Who do we think Christ is? We should never blindly follow men or movements. We must ask ourselves as individuals who we think Christ is. To do that, we must find out what He said about Himself. Our life depends on it. And Simon Peter gives Him the correct answer:

[16] And Simon Peter answered and said, Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God.

This is Peter's great confession of Christ. And it's this confession of Christ that is the rock upon which we as the church stands:

[18] And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church;….

1 John 4:15
Whosoever shall confess that Jesus is the Son of God, God dwelleth in him, and he in God.

1 John 5:12
He that hath the Son hath life; and he that hath not the Son of God hath not life.

And we're told:

….and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

Christ is going to build His church and nobody and nothing can stop that. I heard a pastor of a church once say, "If we don't evangelise, the church will die." But that's not true. I'm not saying we shouldn't evangelise, far from it. But it's the Lord who builds the church, not us. Christ said:

John 6:39
And this is the Father's will which hath sent me, that of all which he hath given me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up again at the last day.

Christ is going to build His church. Not one will be lost. It's in the light of those facts that we must read the next verse:

[19] And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.

This is a very misunderstood verse. Many people think this means that men, the church, the powers that be in the church, have the keys to the kingdom of heaven, the real power to let people into heaven, and keep people out. That's the view of the Roman Catholic Church amongst others. They really think they are the one true church and salvation can't be found outside of themselves. But whatever this verse is teaching, it can't be saying that, because the previous verse makes it clear that Christ is in charge of who gets into heaven and who doesn't. Christ is the One building the church, not men. This verse speaks of the importance of decision making in the church after Christ and the apostles have gone from this earth and we're left only with the two witnesses God has given us, the Bible and the Holy Spirit. It certainly doesn't give men power to shut heaven up to anyone they choose. If we're in a church like that, it's a sect, not a church. Get out!

Now back to v.17. After Peter's great confession, Christ commends Him:

[17] And Jesus answered and said unto him, Blessed art thou, Simon Barjona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven.

Only the Father could have revealed this to Peter. He wasn't blindly following anybody, or parroting what someone else had said, he'd come to this conclusion because the Father had revealed it to him personally. Nobody, without supernatural revelation from the Father, can come to this conclusion. This means Peter had a living relationship with the Father. The Father revealing things to him personally. That's what every one of us should desire. By nature we don't have it. We need to ask that the Father might reveal Himself to us.

[20] Then charged he his disciples that they should tell no man that he was Jesus the Christ.

This wasn't the right time for the disciples to reveal this information to the world yet. The miracles Jesus performed already proved He was from the Father. That was the witness. But before the disciples could go and tell people, there was some important information they needed to understand first. And they only fully understood this after the resurrection.

[21] From that time forth began Jesus to shew unto his disciples, how that he must go unto Jerusalem, and suffer many things of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised again the third day.

He ***must*** go to Jerusalem and have these things happen to Him. He ***had to*** suffer and die. Only by His death could the sins of all those who would come to Him be atoned for. But this was too much for the disciples to understand yet. Suffering and dying is against our natural idea of what a leader ought to be like.

[22] Then Peter took him, and began to rebuke him, saying, Be it far from thee, Lord: this shall not be unto thee.

Peter certainly couldn't deal with it. Suffering, giving in to the authorities and being killed – these are all things the world counts as weakness and defeat. So Peter objected. Peter didn't notice that Christ also mentioned He'd be raised the third day, which was where the

victory came. We only hear what we want to hear, what stands out for us, rather than taking in everything that's said. Peter's mind just got stuck on the suffering and being killed part of what Christ said. He spoke instinctively from his own natural heart, and started rebuking Christ for what He'd said. How can suffering and dying be a victory? How can that do any good at all? Suffering and being killed is just defeat. With his worldly heart, these are the lines along which he must have thought. Christ strongly rebukes him:

[23] But he turned, and said unto Peter, Get thee behind me, Satan: thou art an offence unto me: for thou savourest not the things that be of God, but those that be of men.

We've got two completely opposite philosophies here, the things of God, and the things of men. Men's ways are completely different from God's ways.

Isaiah 55:8
My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the LORD.

Humanly speaking, suffering and dying is defeat. Fighting and winning is victory. That's how men think. That's how Peter thought. But Christ was teaching Peter that in reality, exactly the opposite is the case. A few minutes before, Peter gave his confession of Christ being the Son of the living God, which could only have been given him as a direct revelation from God. So he was a genuine believer with a living relationship with the Lord. Yet at the same time, he was still so worldly in his thinking. And that's what we're like. We may have been given some great insights into the things of God, that can only have been revealed by the Father. But in many other ways, we're still so worldly in our understanding. And that's how it's going to be like until we die. That should humble us. We've still got so much to learn:

1 Corinthians 8:2
And if any man think that he knoweth any thing, he knoweth nothing yet as he ought to know.

All of us naturally would think the same way as Peter. Christ suffering and dying would be unjust for a start. Christ didn't sin, why should an innocent man be put to death? But then, if we know anything about Christianity, we realise that Christ had to die. He came into this world to die. The death of Christ was the only way to give life to His people:

1 Peter 3:18
For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God.

2 Corinthians 5:21
For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him.

Christ had to suffer and die for His people, because we can't save ourselves from our own sinful nature. That is the only way possible for any of us to be reconciled to God. Muslims talk so much about Allah being "all-forgiving," but what they mean is that Allah just lets people off. There's no basis for that forgiveness. And that idea is common in Christian circles too. But the idea of God just letting people off is totally against any concept of justice. God can't just "let people off." For anyone to be saved from the just punishment for their sin, their sin has still got to be punished somehow, either in themselves, or in somebody else. And that's why Christ came to die – so the punishment due to His people would be taken upon Himself instead. Christ had to go that way. There was no alternative, otherwise God would not be just.

Romans 3:26
To declare, I say, at this time his righteousness: that he might be just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus.

But then we've also got to ask the question: If that was the way Christ had to go, by suffering and defeat, how then should we, His followers, subsequently live our lives? We really need to look into this, because if we're Christians, we ought to be following God's ways, not man's ways any more. So after Christ's rebuke of Peter, He said this:

[24] Then said Jesus unto his disciples, If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me.

This is how we should now be living. Living for ourselves is now over. I ask this question to myself as much as anybody else: Have we even started on this self-sacrificial way of life yet? If we're to call ourselves followers of Christ, we should be continually doing these three things: Denying ourselves. Taking up our cross. Following Christ.

Deny self

In order to say we're followers of Christ, we should deny ourselves. That goes against every last natural instinct of our bodies. We naturally want comfort, to pamper ourselves, to please ourselves, or at least to live our lives for our own benefit. But we're now called to renounce all our own ideas and plans that we might have had. If we are truly following Christ, life is now no longer all about me. We should rather be living lives of continually denying ourselves for the sake of others and, more importantly, for the kingdom of God.

But men in history got this all wrong. Here are some things denying self does NOT mean:

It doesn't mean that there's any virtue in poverty. If God has blessed us with lots of material blessings in this world, then we should be thankful, not despise them and renounce them all. We should always be aware that riches in this world can, if we're not careful, lead us to forget God altogether. But there's no virtue in enforced poverty, in deliberately making ourselves poor. So when a monk makes a vow to poverty, chastity and obedience (by which he means obedience to the pope, not to God), then he's getting things completely wrong. There is no inherent virtue in any of these things by themselves.

Neither is their virtue in deliberate self-harm. Some thought they should be constantly beating themselves as a kind of atonement for their sins, but that's not the case either.

Neither is there any virtue in physically trying to get away from people by sitting on top of a pillar in silence, or living in the desert, or bricking yourself up in a little cell with no door. People have done all these

things in the past, but none of it is true religion. Even if we could get away from people, we still can't get away from our own sinful hearts.

Colossians 2:23
Which things have indeed a shew of wisdom in will worship, and humility, and neglecting of the body; not in any honour to the satisfying of the flesh.

None of this is what it means to deny self. Christ has fully paid for our sins. We should rather live lives of thankfulness to Him for all He's done for us. If He gives us plenty, we use that plenty to His glory. If He gives us little, we use that little to His glory. Either way we should be thankful, and not use what we have for ourselves, that's the point.

Christ denied Himself completely. That led Him even to death. Not all of us are necessarily called to die like He was, but that is the kind of sacrificial life that we're now called to:

Philippians 2:5-8
Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.

Christ isn't only a Saviour, He's also our example as to how we should live our lives:

1 Peter 2:21-23
Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow his steps: who did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth: who, when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not; but committed himself to him that judgeth righteously.

We need to recognise that by becoming a Christian, living for ourselves is at an end. We're told this here:

[25] For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it. [26] For what is a man profited,

if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?

Our treasure should now be in heaven, not in this world:

Matthew 6:19-21
Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal: For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.

That's what it means to deny self.

Romans 8:13
For if ye live after the flesh, ye shall die: but if ye through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live.

Take up our cross
Christ had a real cross to bear. His sufferings were unique. We must be so thankful we don't have to take up a cross like His. Not only did He physically die on a cross, but His whole life was one of suffering for righteousness sake. And on top of all that, He willingly took upon Himself the sins of His people, so they wouldn't have to take them upon themselves. We can't truly enter in to any of this. And praise God we don't have to. He did it all for us. Christ was the ultimate example of self-sacrifice.

But in our lives, we all have our own daily burdens to deal with. God has placed all of us in unique and different situations. Because of sin, all these situations will be burdensome.

John 16:33
In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world.

Maybe we've got an elderly relative to constantly look after, or a wayward alcoholic son, or a debilitating illness. Everybody's got their own unique "crosses" to bear, and that's what we're called to do – bear them, and as Luke says, "*take up your cross* ***daily***."

We may think our problems are overwhelming and we can't cope, but as Christians, we've got the living God to communicate with. We don't just have a dead religion like Buddhism or Islam or Roman Catholicism, where what they call "prayer" is just reciting words. We are in communion with the living God, Lord of heaven and earth, who is the hearer and answerer of all our prayers. He'll help us when things seem impossible:

Matthew 19:26
With men this is impossible; but with God all things are possible.

There are people around in churches today who think that being a Christian is about having overcome all our problems and living the victory life. No more problems, Jesus came to take them all away, so we can now live a victorious life to the full. So, don't think about sin any more. After all, Christ has taken it all away. Just think positive thoughts about yourself. That's not Christianity. That's humanistic philosophy creeping into the church. More to the point, it's not reality. Life in this fallen world is difficult. When we become a Christian, our situation doesn't change. But we now have the Lord with us to help, to comfort and to guide us through the difficulties of life. The difficulties don't go away now we've become a Christian. We do still have a cross. But we're called to take up our cross daily, taking one day at a time, and if we're in a close walk with Christ, our crosses then become bearable. The apostle Paul had a thorn in the flesh, which he asked three times for the Lord to remove, but the Lord didn't remove it, rather He told Paul:

2 Corinthians 12:9
My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness.

Follow me
Thirdly, we're called to follow Christ. At first glance, this might seem like a redundant phrase, the passage seems to be saying, "If any man will come after me, ... let him come after me." Well, yes, that's obvious!

But we need to be constantly reminded of this. Our own hearts easily lead us astray. Many people think they're following Christ, and they're not. They're following a false representation of Christ in their own little minds. That could have come directly from themselves, or it could

also have come from something they've read, someone they've heard or some peculiar teaching of a church. We must make sure the Christ we follow is the true one. And there's only one way we can do that. We must stick close to the Holy Scriptures. This is the only accurate record we've got of what Christ was really like, what He taught, how He fulfilled the prophecies and so on. This book is the inspired Word of God. Everything else, all other books, are the words of men. That doesn't necessarily make them wrong, but it does mean they at least ***may*** contain mistakes. This book, the Bible, contains no mistakes at all, because it is the Word of God and He's kept it free from error. Keep close to this book, and the Christ of this book, and we won't go wrong.

Impossibility

Now we've looked at the life that Christ wants us to live, we can only come to one conclusion: it's impossible to achieve. By nature, we not only sin, but we're born with selfish desires, which seek only for the preservation and pleasure of self. As long as we're enslaved to our natural instincts, we'll find it impossible to do any of these three things.

Hebrews 11:6
But without faith it is impossible to please him.

Before we even attempt to follow Christ, we've got to see our inability to do it. Only when we've seen our inability can we see that we desperately need a fundamental change of heart, within ourselves. We must be changed. We must become new creatures. We must have a new heart put within us. Otherwise it's impossible to live the Christian life.

John 3:3
Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.

There are many problems with living for ourselves:

Firstly, it's pointless. Solomon, the wisest man who ever lived apart from Christ, said about life under the sun:

Ecclesiastes 1:14
I have seen all the works that are done under the sun; and, behold, all is vanity and vexation of spirit.

Do we really want to live for something temporal, which will soon be gone forever? Or would we not rather live for eternal things, things that'll last? Go to a graveyard. All those people when they were alive probably thought that they and their own little lives were so important. But now they're all forgotten. If all we have is this world, life is meaningless.

Secondly, the world's ways are evil. Christ said:

John 7:7
The world cannot hate you; but me it hateth, because I testify of it, that the works thereof are evil.

Everything about the world and its ways are vanity and evil. There is nothing good at all:

Psalm 14:3
There is none that doeth good, no, not one.

As a result of all the evil in the world, there's going to be a judgment:

[27] For the Son of man shall come in the glory of his Father with his angels; and then he shall reward every man according to his works.

Jesus Christ, the Son of man, is going to judge us all according to our works. Who can stand? Who can escape the wrath to come? Nobody. We need a Saviour. We need to be changed from the inside, as individuals. We need a new nature. A nature that can at least begin to do good works, a new heart that can know God and communicate with Him.

And that's what God offers to every one of us. How do we receive this new heart, this fundamental change? Ask Him.

Matthew 7:7,8
Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you. For every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened.

God is a merciful God, He is a hearer of genuine prayer.

John 6:37
Him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out.

[28] Verily I say unto you, There be some standing here, which shall not taste of death, till they see the Son of man coming in his kingdom.

We must cry to Him until we're sure we've received this new heart. Not only will we be saved from the judgment to come, but we'll receive the ability to at least begin to follow Christ in this way of self-sacrifice, a way completely opposite from the way of the world. The world will persecute us, laugh at us and maybe even kill us. It'll certainly be a harder life than it would have been just drifting along with everybody else. But it's the only way that's right. It's the only way that'll keep us from our sin and the consequences of it. And our job as Christians is to live this life, and be a witness to others of it.

May we all come to know Him, whom to know is eternal life.

Matthew 25:14-30 & Luke 17:5-10.
The Unprofitable Servant

Jesus spoke two parables about an unprofitable servant. In the first, in Matthew 25, the servant ends up in a place where "*there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth*." So we don't want to be like that one. But the other servant, in Luke 17, is commended. That's the one we want to be like. So, what's the difference between the two? Lets see.

Matthew 25:14-30

[14] For the kingdom of heaven is as a man travelling into a far country, who called his own servants, and delivered unto them his goods.

This first parable is given to illustrate what the kingdom of heaven is like. In the story, a man travels to a far country after giving all his goods to his servants to look after while he's away. It's talking about us. God is the man who's "gone away" as it were (although He hasn't really), and we're the servants left to look after His goods.

Notice that even while the man was away, the goods are still his. We don't own anything in this world. It all belongs to the Lord. We're only looking after it for a time. We have discussions in the church as to whether we should tithe – give 10% of our income to the Lord, or not. But it's really the wrong discussion. 100% of what we have is His anyway.

Psalm 50:10,12
For every beast of the forest is mine, and the cattle upon a thousand hills. …. If I were hungry, I would not tell thee: for the world is mine, and the fulness thereof.

And also notice that one day the man's coming back. One day, God will return to this earth in the form of Jesus Christ, and there'll be a judgment, an accounting, a reckoning:

Matthew 12:36
Every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment.

[15] And unto one he gave five talents, to another two, and to another one; to every man according to his several ability; and straightway took his journey.

In the Old Testament, a talent was a unit of weight. In 2 Samuel 12:30 we read that the weight of King David's crown was a talent of gold. But in the New Testament, apart from in Revelation 16:21, when stones "*about the weight of a talent*" start falling on people, the word "*talent*" only occurs in Matthew's gospel, and we're not told what it's a weight of. So, it seems to no longer be a unit of weight but a unit of currency. It was still probably quite a large amount. Matthew had been a tax collector, so he may have occasionally dealt with talents, which is why we only read about them in his gospel.

What does the "*talent*" in the parable represent? All we know is that they are something given to us by God to look after while He's "away." And they're given **"*according to his several ability*."** All of us have been born with different abilities – different capacities to understand, and capacities to do things. Those that have been given more abilities will be expected to do more for the same reward:

Luke 12:48
….unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required.

There'll always be plenty of people who have far more knowledge or abilities that we have. We shouldn't worry about them. We're not competing with anybody. All we should be concerned about is doing our best for the Lord ourselves with what we've been given.

[16] Then he that had received the five talents went and traded with the same, and made them other five talents. [17] And likewise he that had received two, he also gained other two. [18] But he that had received one went and digged in the earth, and hid his lord's money.

We shouldn't get confused between this parable of the talents and a similar parable in Luke 19:11-27, the parable of the pounds. They're similar but different. In this parable, one man is given five talents, another two and another one. The man given five talents gains five talents more, the man given two talents gains two talents more. Both get the same reward. The man given two talents isn't expected to make five talents more, just 100% with what he'd been given. So this is about us starting with differing abilities, but making the same percentage profit.

But in the parable of the pounds, in Luke 19:11-27, there are ten men and they each receive a pound each. We're only told the results of three of them. One makes ten pounds and is given a reward of ten cities, another makes five pounds and is given a reward of five cities, and the other hides his pound in a napkin. They all have exactly the same to start with, but make differing amounts of profit. So that parable speaks of differing rewards in heaven depending on what we do here. That's a different lesson altogether.

But in both parables, the unprofitable servant (or "*wicked servant*" in Luke 19) teaches us the same lesson. Here, in Matthew 25, he buries his money in the ground, in Luke 19, he lays it up in a napkin, but otherwise the lesson is the same. Don't be like him.

[19] After a long time the lord of those servants cometh, and reckoneth with them.

Now, the reckoning. The lord comes back. And it's after a long time. The servants must have been tempted to think he's never coming back. So, even though the Lord seems to be delaying His return, we must always watch and pray and be ready:

Luke 21:34-36
And take heed to yourselves, lest at any time your hearts be overcharged with surfeiting, and drunkenness, and cares of this life, and so that day come upon you unawares. For as a snare shall it come on all them that dwell on the face of the whole earth. Watch ye therefore, and pray always, that ye may be accounted worthy to escape all these things that shall come to pass, and to stand before the Son of man.

[20] And so he that had received five talents came and brought other five talents, saying, Lord, thou deliveredst unto me five talents: behold, I have gained beside them five talents more. [21] His lord said unto him, Well done, thou good and faithful servant: thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy lord. [22] He also that had received two talents came and said, Lord, thou deliveredst unto me two talents: behold, I have gained two other talents beside them. [23] His lord said unto him, Well done, good and faithful servant; thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy lord.

When the lord returns, the servants must give an account of what they'd done. One day we'll have to do that to the one true living God, and we won't be able to hide anything:

Romans 14:12
So then every one of us shall give account of himself to God.

Hebrews 4:13
All things are naked and opened unto the eyes of him with whom we have to do.

And here, the lord calls these two **"*good and faithful servant*."** They've done everything the lord commanded them to do, even when he was far away and didn't seem to be looking. They haven't cheated him, but did their best with what he trusted them with. So the lord tells them, **"*thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things*."** This was all a test to see if the servant could be faithful. And after the lord returned, the servant is rewarded with much more than he had before.

Everything we own, everything we are, belongs to the Lord of glory. And He's given it to us to look after for a while. How are we using what we've been given?

Luke 16:11
If therefore ye have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, who will commit to your trust the true riches?

Are we diligently using everything we've got to the glory of God? Or are we using it for our own pleasure? That's what the unprofitable servant did. He despised his lord, he didn't recognise that everything he had was his lord's, and he did his best to convince himself that his lord was never going to come back.

[24] Then he which had received the one talent came and said, Lord, I knew thee that thou art an hard man, reaping where thou hast not sown, and gathering where thou hast not strawed: [25] And I was afraid, and went and hid thy talent in the earth: lo, there thou hast that is thine.

This servant thought his lord was a hard, unfair man. But that's not true. Maybe he thought it was unfair that he'd only been given one talent and others had been given a lot more than he had. And he claims he was afraid of his lord, but he wasn't really. While he was away, what was he doing? If he really had the fear of his lord in him, he would've done what his lord told him. So he didn't really fear him at all. He hid the talent in the earth, to try to forget his lord ever existed. And many people do exactly that:

Psalm 14:1
The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God.

[26] His lord answered and said unto him, Thou wicked and slothful servant, thou knewest that I reap where I sowed not, and gather where I have not strawed: [27] Thou oughtest therefore to have put my money to the exchangers, and then at my coming I should have received mine own with usury.

His lord calls him **"*wicked and slothful*."** He couldn't even be bothered to go to the bank and open a deposit account. He's done absolutely nothing useful with his life. And we look out there in the world, and it's full of people just like this unprofitable servant:

Ephesians 2:12
….having no hope, and without God in the world.

They're all living totally unprofitable lives. Living for self. What pleases self. Trying to get what they can out of life for themselves. And the wretched thing is that every one of us was like that once. We're all born into that condition. Were all slaves to our natural instincts to please self. And we like it. It doesn't bother us. We all desperately need to get away from this self-centred nature of ours and turn to the Lord. Otherwise we're going to end up just like this unprofitable servant. That's why God sent our Lord Jesus Christ into this world. He came to save us from our sins, from our selfish nature. And we all need to turn to Him, and put our trust in Him. He's the only One who can help us:

John 3:17,18
For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved. He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already.

[28] Take therefore the talent from him, and give it unto him which hath ten talents. [29] For unto every one that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance: but from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath.

The unprofitable servant didn't do anything with the talent he was given. He had his opportunity to use it, and he didn't take it. It was never his in the first place, so it was quite rightly taken away from him again, when his lord returned.

But the one who had made ten talents gets even more. On the face of it, that seems a bit unfair. Why should he get even more? But that's what's going to happen. We have such a reward and blessing awaiting us in the next world, far more than this world could ever give us. But to obtain that blessing, we have to stop living for ourselves now, and make sure that we're obedient to the Lord in this world with whatever He's given us:

Luke 16:10,12
He that is faithful in that which is least is faithful also in much: and he that is unjust in the least is unjust also in much…. And if ye have not been faithful in that which is another man's, who shall give you that which is your own?

[30] And cast ye the unprofitable servant into outer darkness: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

And the unprofitable servant ends up in hell fire. Just judgment for his disobedience. The lesson is: Don't be like this unprofitable servant.

Now let's look at the other unprofitable servant. He's altogether different.

Luke 17:5-10

[5] And the apostles said unto the Lord, Increase our faith.

The disciples ask a question: **"*Increase our faith.*"** Well, that's a good thing to want. Faith can vary in size. Many times the Lord rebukes the disciples, and others, by saying, "*O ye of little faith.*" And Christ once said about a Centurion, "*I have not found so great faith, no, not in Israel.*" So it's not wrong to ask for an increase in faith. That's good.

But the Lord replies:

[6] And the Lord said, If ye had faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye might say unto this sycamine tree, Be thou plucked up by the root, and be thou planted in the sea; and it should obey you.

There are also other passages which talk of faith as a grain of mustard seed being able to move mountains.

Now this statement of our Lord's is very much misunderstood. We're agreed a mustard seed is the smallest of the seeds. Christ tells us that in another parable:

Matthew 13:31,32
Another parable put he forth unto them, saying, The kingdom of heaven is like to a grain of mustard seed, which a man took, and sowed in his field: Which indeed is the least of all seeds: but when it is grown, it is the greatest among herbs, and becometh a tree, so that the birds of the air come and lodge in the branches thereof.

So we're told here that just a very small amount of faith, the size of a grain of mustard seed, can move a tree or a mountain. The problem is that people think that's possible.

Now, I've never seen anyone move a mountain. So maybe it's talking of a spiritual mountain, something big in your life that seems immoveable, but then if we just have enough faith to pray, it'll disappear and we can live the victory life, with all our problems in this world taken away. But I don't think that's what Christ meant either.

To answer their question to increase their faith, Christ told them, effectively, that nobody's got faith even the size of a mustard seed. And we should never think we have either.

We must believe in Christ for salvation, so we must have some faith to be saved. But the point is that we're not to boast in what great faith we have. We should always keep in mind that none of us can ever have even as much faith as a grain of mustard seed.

When the disciples asked the Lord to increase their faith, Christ replied in the way He did, because He knew that if they did have their faith increased, they'd start to boast about it. Later on they started to ask among themselves which one of them was the greatest.

This is a call by the Lord to humble us, to bring us down to reality. Yes, we need faith, yes, it's possible to have great faith, like the Centurion, but even he couldn't heal his servant by his faith, he still had to go to Christ to do it. We shouldn't go about boasting that we've got such great faith that we can move mountains, because we can't. Faith is a gift of God. He gives us just as much as we need at the time we need it.

Ephesians 2:8,9
For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast.

To further clarify Christ's answer, He tells them this parable of an unprofitable servant.

[7] But which of you, having a servant plowing or feeding cattle, will say unto him by and by, when he is come from the field, Go and sit down to meat? [8] And will not rather say unto him, Make ready wherewith I may sup, and gird thyself, and serve me, till I have eaten and drunken; and afterward thou shalt eat and drink?

If a man has a servant, after the servant has done his work in the field, is that the end of his duties? Does he tell his servant, "You go and eat first. Don't bother about me, you can get my supper later"? No! As long as the servant is in his master's time, it's his duty to serve his master. That's what he's paid to do. He's got to work in the field, then get his master's supper, and only when he's finished serving his master for the day, he can then go home and get his own supper. A servant's duty, in work time, is to serve his master.

[9] Doth he thank that servant because he did the things that were commanded him? I trow not.

And the master doesn't need to thank him either. If he did something over and above his duty, then thanks would be due. I mean, if we clock off from our day's work, and we find our boss in the car park and his car won't start, what do we do? It's out of work time, so we've got no obligation to help him at all. We could just walk off and leave him to it, if we wanted to. But if we did stay behind for half an hour in our own time to help him get his car fixed, then thanks would be due to us, because we didn't have to do that.

But as long as we're in work time, we've got to do what he says, and he's got no obligation to thank us for it. Doing what's commanded, warrants no thanks at all.

[10] So likewise ye, when ye shall have done all those things which are commanded you, say, We are unprofitable servants: we have done that which was our duty to do.

As long as we're in our master's time, we just do what's commanded of us. No thanks are due to us, we've just done our duty. We're just an unprofitable servant.

Once we've become a Christian, and been truly born again of the Spirit of God, we don't serve ourselves any more. We're now the Lord's servants:

1 Corinthians 7:22
For he that is called in the Lord, being a servant, is the Lord's freeman: likewise also he that is called, being free, is Christ's servant.

If we're now the Lord's servant, we should give our entire lives over to Him. There's no clocking off on this job. So we should do everything He commands of us, and never pretend we're so good, we deserve thanks or a reward in any way.

The first parable taught the idea of some kind of reward in the next world. But we shouldn't try to please God on this earth for what we're going to get out of it in the next. That's some kind of works religion. We should want to please Him here because we love Him, and are thankful for what He's done for us. It's not us that should be thanked for anything we do for God, it's God that should be thanked for everything He's done for us.

So, Christ is telling his disciples that everything they do in this world is only their duty anyway, so they should stop trying to boast how much faith they've got. This answers their demand: **"*Increase our faith*."**

On one occasion, Christ gave seventy men special powers to cast out devils. They were so excited about having these powers, but Christ had to rebuke them:

Luke 10:17,20
And the seventy returned again with joy, saying, Lord, even the devils are subject unto us through thy name. And He [Christ] said unto them…. Notwithstanding in this rejoice not, that the spirits are subject unto you; but rather rejoice, because your names are written in heaven.

All this is teaching humility. We should never boast in what the Lord's given us to do, or how successful we've been in what we've done for Him. I've met so many people who would say something like, "I led three people to the Lord last night," or "I've been doing this for the Lord," or "I've been doing that for the Lord," and it's just boasting.

Christ wants us to get rid of that attitude from our lives altogether. We're called to humility.

Matthew 5:5
Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth.

1 Peter 5:5,6
God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble. Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time.

This "*unprofitable servant*" in Luke 17 was altogether different from the one in Matthew 25. In Matthew 25, he was truly unprofitable. He was wicked and slothful. He did absolutely nothing with what he was given. He fully deserved a place **"*in outer darkness where there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.*"**

But this "*unprofitable servant*" in Luke 17 was exactly the opposite. He wasn't really unprofitable at all. In fact he **"*did all those things which were commanded him.*"** He was very profitable, just like the first two servants in Matthew 25, who received the reward. He didn't deserve **"*outer darkness*,"** he deserved to **"*enter into the joy of the Lord.*"** The parable is teaching us to have his attitude of heart. To do everything commanded of us, but never, never to boast about it. But rather to see ourselves as unprofitable servants.

Christians are called to a very privileged life. We're called to be witnesses of the one true God Lord of heaven and earth. If we're true believers, God has shown us the way of salvation, given us a new heart, and put the Holy Spirit inside us to guide and help us. We are God's chosen people. But we should never boast in our exalted status.

Our natural hearts make us so proud of ourselves. If we follow our natural heart, we'll be like the orthodox Jew, thinking he's one of God's chosen people, despising unbelievers and feeling himself far superior. That's not the attitude we should have. But if we follow the new heart the Lord gives us, we'll be humbled to the dust. We won't be boasting we're God's chosen people, even though we are. We'll rather be saying, "Why has God chosen me, and not my neighbour?" The new heart is a source of humility, not pride.

Whatever we have, it's been given us from the Lord:

1 Corinthians 4:7
For who maketh thee to differ from another? and what hast thou that thou didst not receive? now if thou didst receive it, why dost thou glory, as if thou hadst not received it?

And because we're so naturally proud in our hearts, God often has to come into our lives to bring us down, in case we get exalted above measure. Paul was given a thorn in the flesh, to keep him from feeling proud of himself for the revelations he'd been given:

2 Corinthians 12:7
And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure.

And the further he matured in the faith, the more he saw his own wretchedness, and the more this would keep him down, keep him from boasting in anything in himself:

Ephesians 3:8
Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints, is this grace given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ.

1 Timothy 1:15
This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptation, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief.

Romans 7:24,25
O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death? I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord.

The bottom line is that in ourselves we are nothing:

Galatians 6:3
For if a man think himself to be something, when he is nothing, he deceiveth himself.

That's the attitude we need. The world doesn't have it. The world boasts all day long about it's achievements. But we're different. We know we've got nothing to boast about except our sin. Any good we've got is from the Lord. So let's glorify Him in our lives.

Finally, here's a challenge to us. What about this verse. Christ said:

Matthew 5:16
Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.

How is it possible to let our light shine before men, in this way: that people may see the good works which the Lord does through us (we can't do any in and of ourselves), and never glorify us, but glorify our Father in heaven? Mother Teresa did a lot of good works, which the world saw, but look what's happened to her. She's recently been made a saint in the Roman Catholic church. All those supposed good works that she did have ended up pointing to herself, not God. And that's the problem with worshipping saints, as Roman Catholics do. They end up glorifying the saint, not God.

So, this is the challenge that I don't know the answer to: How can we live godly lives, doing good works and yet not pointing to ourselves but glorifying God alone? That's our challenge. That's true humility. But how we do it, I've no idea. We need the Lord.

Matthew 27:33-60. (Luke 23:34). Father Forgive Them

Read Matthew 27:33-60

I know we read from Matthew's account of the crucifixion of Christ, but I actually want to take as a text one verse from Luke's account:

Luke 23:34
Then said Jesus, Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.

Christ said this just as the Roman soldiers were casting lots for His clothing and nailing Him to the cross. While Christ was physically being put to death by wicked men, He still asked for forgiveness for them. And He said that they don't know what they're doing. In other words, they don't realise who they're killing. They're killing the Lord of glory, the Son of God, God manifest in the flesh. We're told:

1 Corinthians 2:7,8
But we [believers] *speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, even the hidden wisdom, which God ordained before the world unto our glory: Which none of the princes of this world knew: for had they known it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.*

If they'd have known exactly who they were putting to death, they would never had done this. But they did do it. Because they hated Christ so much. Christ said:

John 7:7
The world cannot hate you; but me it hateth, because I testify of it, that the works thereof are evil.

So we've got two questions to ask here. First of all, who are the ones Christ is asking forgiveness for? And secondly, did God the Father answer Christ's prayer?

The answer to the first question, who are the ones Christ was asking forgiveness for, are primarily the Roman soldiers who were physically nailing Him to a cross when He said those words. That's the context. But I also want to look at the others on the scene too.

[33] And when they were come unto a place called Golgotha, that is to say, a place of a skull, [34] They gave him vinegar to drink mingled with gall: and when he had tasted thereof, he would not drink.

This sets the scene. And the first thing that happened when Christ arrived at the site of crucifixion, was that He was given vinegar mixed with gall. They probably did this to everybody about to be crucified, to numb the pain. Christ deliberately didn't drink it, because it was important the pain wasn't lessened at all. Why? This death was unique.

Christ came into the world to die. That was His whole purpose. God sent Him into the world to be a sacrifice for sin. Not for His own sin, He didn't have any. But for ours. In His death, He took the full punishment upon Himself for the sins of all those who trust in Him.

There are two things we need to know. We all deserve to die for our sins. And there is going to be a judgment. That's God's justice. He sent Christ into the world to take away sin. If we don't trust in Him, we must endure the punishment for our own sin ourselves.

So we must take these things deadly seriously. We've got many people who want to lessen His pain, who want to find an easier way to have their sins forgiven. They just think forgiveness of sin is such a light thing. Just say sorry and move on. But it's not a light thing. There is no easier way to have our sons forgiven but by the death of Christ. He prayed in Gethsemane:

Matthew 26:39
O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt.

There is no other way. Christ alone had to pay the price for sin in exactly the way He did.

[35] And they crucified him, and parted his garments, casting lots: that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet, They parted my garments among them, and upon my vesture did they cast lots.

Here we've got the first group of people at the cross, the Roman soldiers. They've already, earlier in the passage, mocked Him and scourged Him and had a good laugh at His expense. They hated Him. They saw Him as weak and pathetic. Men laugh at people like that. It's dreadful really, isn't it. And they cast lots for his clothing. They couldn't possibly have known that by doing this they were fulfilling the prophecy of Psalm 22:18 written a thousand years before.

Then they nailed Him to the cross. It was at this point, according to Luke, that Christ said the words, **"*Father, forgive them for they know not what they do*."**

[36] And sitting down they watched him there;

After they'd done their duty, and set the cross upright, they sat down and watched. These were the executioners. They did this regularly. It was just a job. This was their lunch break. They had to wait until they were all dead, clear up the mess, then they could go home.

[37] And set up over his head his accusation written, this is Jesus the King of the Jews.

The first thing that's different about this crucifixion, compared to others, is the accusation written above Christ's head. It wasn't a crime. It wasn't even, "He said He was the king of the Jews," which I suppose could be thought of as treasonable. That's what the religious leaders wanted, but Pilate the Roman governor wouldn't let them.

[38] Then were there two thieves crucified with him, one on the right hand, and another on the left.

And here we're introduced to the second group of people at the cross, the two thieves who were crucified with Him. They had no love for Him either: go down to v.44:

[44] The thieves also, which were crucified with him, cast the same in his teeth.

Then we're introduced to a third group of people. They that passed by:

[39] And they that passed by reviled him, wagging their heads, [40] And saying, Thou that destroyest the temple, and buildest it in three days, save thyself. If thou be the Son of God, come down from the cross.

Most of these were passing by, so they didn't stay. So we can't really count these people in the wider number to whom Christ said, **"*Father forgive them*."** They were just passing by, reflecting public opinion. They weren't going to hang around to see what happened. And there were other more notable people who weren't there either. Annas and Caiaphas the high priests, or Pilate the governor. They all had far more important things to do with their lives than waste time watching a routine public execution. They'd passed the sentence, but they just let the authorities get on with it. The world just carried on.

But some of the chief priests, scribes and elders did stay around. And they didn't have much love for Him either, they mocked Him just as much:

[41] Likewise also the chief priests mocking him, with the scribes and elders, said, [42] He saved others; himself he cannot save. If he be the King of Israel, let him now come down from the cross, and we will believe him. [43] He trusted in God; let him deliver him now, if he will have him: for he said, I am the Son of God.

We've got all these groups around the cross, within earshot of Christ saying, **"*Father forgive them, for they know not what they do*."** And, up to now, all of them without exception mocked Him and hated Him.

They all want Him dead. So, up to this point, God the Father hasn't forgiven them at all. The prayer has not been answered at this point in time. And then we have this mysterious three hours of darkness:

[45] Now from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land unto the ninth hour.

What happened in that three hours, we cannot possibly enter into. Christ at least felt He had been forsaken of the Father. Had He been forsaken by the Father? Well, this was the work He came to do. The Father never loved Him more than during that time when He was making atonement for our sins. The sinless Son of God having the burden of our sins put on His shoulders, so we who believe could go free. We can't enter into that at all.

This was so different from an ordinary, routine crucifixion. And it affected everyone who was there. And we'll look at them all. But the light dawned on one person even before this three hours of darkness began. One of the thieves. We're told in Luke:

Luke 23:39-43
And one of the malefactors which were hanged railed on him, saying, If thou be Christ, save thyself and us. But the other answering rebuked him, saying, Dost not thou fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation? And we indeed justly; for we receive the due reward of our deeds: but this man hath done nothing amiss. And he said unto Jesus, Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom. And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, Today shalt thou be with me in paradise.

Here, in Matthew's account, both the thieves railed on Him. But, according to Luke, one of them suddenly changes, and turns on his companion, and rebukes him for what he himself had been doing minutes earlier. How can we explain this sudden change? The fear of God had been put into Him. Suddenly everything was now different. Before, he didn't know what he was saying, but now, everything makes sense. What did he see?

He saw exactly how different this man Jesus was. He saw his own, and the other thief's sin, and the fact that they both deserved to be there.

He saw that Christ didn't deserve to be there, because Christ had done nothing wrong. He saw that Christ was a king. But it couldn't be of a kingdom in this world, because they weren't going to be in this world much longer. So the kingdom must be in the next world. And he's bold enough to ask Christ the king for entrance into it. To which Christ replies positively. Where did he get all that theology from? Bible college? No! God the Father revealed it all to him personally.

That's the first spark of light we see in this situation. The Father has forgiven one of the thieves, and he has received entry into paradise, Christ's kingdom after death. And what's the first thing he does? He witnesses to the other thief. We all tend to call the other thief the "unrepentant thief," and assume he never repented. But we don't actually know if he saw the light as well or not, we're not told. So we can't say about him that the Father never forgave him. Because we don't know. But here's the first answer to Christ's prayer.

[46] And about the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying, Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani? that is to say, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? [47] Some of them that stood there, when they heard that, said, This man calleth for Elias.

At the end of the three hours of darkness, Christ gave out this great cry, **"*Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani*?"** which means, "*My God, my God, Why hast thou forsaken me*." Some there thought He was calling on Elijah. They got it wrong. He was actually quoting the first verse of Psalm 22. So the moral of the story is, be familiar with your Bible. But at least some had suddenly taken an interest in the situation. This is no ordinary crucifixion.

[48] And straightway one of them ran, and took a spunge, and filled it with vinegar, and put it on a reed, and gave him to drink.

One of them tried to help Him by giving Him a sponge filled with vinegar. This drink had no gall in it to numb the pain, and in any case, Christ had finished His work on the cross. He'd paid the price for our sin. John tells us He shouted, "*It is finished*." The work has been completed. So He took this drink. It was an act of kindness from one

of the crowd. Well, that's strange. Nobody had showed Him kindness before. They'd just mocked Him. But some anonymous person in the crowd had changed from railing on Him, to showing Him an act of kindness. Another answer to Christ's prayer, **"*Father forgive them*."**

[49] The rest said, Let be, let us see whether Elias will come to save him.

They're all taking an interest now. Just three hours beforehand they were shouting in His face. Whatever happened in those three hours, it kept their attention, and changed them. They're no longer railing on Him but are now taking an interest in what'll happen next.

[50] Jesus, when he had cried again with a loud voice, yielded up the ghost.

They didn't have to wait long. Elijah never came to save Him. He died. Was that it? Could they go home now? Well, a sequence of very strange events took place after this:

[51] And, behold, the veil of the temple was rent in twain from the top to the bottom; and the earth did quake, and the rocks rent;

First of all, the veil in the Temple was torn in two from the top to the bottom. This signified that the way into the holy of holies was now open. The Temple has this great curtain. Only the High Priest once a year was allowed to go in behind it to sprinkle blood, signifying the taking away of sin. There was also a year round ritual of animal sacrifices, all of which was a picture of the one true sacrifice which would one day really come and take away sin. That's what Jesus had just accomplished in that three hours on the cross. Now there's no need for the pictures any more. In fact within one generation, God would destroy the Temple altogether, never again to be rebuilt. The veil being torn in two, was God showing that access into the real tabernacle in heaven is now open to all. Jesus Christ has come.

Then there was an earthquake. I heard someone once say Satan causes earthquakes. That's not true. He's a very powerful enemy, but he's a spiritual enemy. He's the accuser of the brethren. He can't produce earthquakes. Only God Himself can do that.

[52] And the graves were opened; and many bodies of the saints which slept arose, [53] And came out of the graves after his resurrection, and went into the holy city, and appeared unto many.

This was a unique occurrence, which is a bit out of sequence because we're told it took place after the resurrection. And Matthew is the only one who records it. So we can't speculate too much. Notice it was the bodies of the ***saints*** that arose and appeared to many. That must have frightened the authorities in Jerusalem. Because they'd been putting the saints to death, over many generations.

Matthew 23:34-36
Wherefore, behold, I send unto you prophets, and wise men, and scribes: and some of them ye shall kill and crucify; and some of them shall ye scourge in your synagogues, and persecute them from city to city: That upon you may come all the righteous blood shed upon the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel unto the blood of Zacharias son of Barachias, whom ye slew between the temple and the altar. Verily I say unto you, All these things shall come upon this generation.

And after all this, something remarkable happened to the Roman soldiers:

[54] Now when the centurion, and they that were with him, watching Jesus, saw the earthquake, and those things that were done, they feared greatly, saying, Truly this was the Son of God.

When Christ said, **"*Father forgive them, for they know not what they do*,"** the primary context was the Roman soldiers. Their crucifying Christ hadn't bothered them before, they were just doing their job. But, in Luke's account, we read that now the Centurion said, "*Certainly this was a righteous man*." And here we read that both *"the Centurion* ***and they that were with him***" "*feared greatly*" and said, "*Truly this was the Son of God*."

So, did God the Father answer Christ's prayer, **"*Father forgive them, for they know not what they do*"**? Of course He did. Every one of the Roman soldiers there was converted. What a change. What a lunch break. From mocking Him and nailing Him to a cross, not knowing what they were doing, to fearing God and suddenly realising who He really was.

Now, just before Christ raised Lazarus from the dead we're told:

John 11:41,42
Then they took away the stone from the place where the dead was laid. And Jesus lifted up his eyes, and said, Father, I thank thee that thou hast heard me. And I knew that thou hearest me always: but because of the people which stand by I said it, that they may believe that thou hast sent me.

God the Father always hears His Son and answers His every prayer. Because He was sinless. He always did the things that pleased the Father. So, the Father always heard Him. So, for example, in John 17, Christ prayed for Christian unity:

John 17:20,21
Neither pray I for these alone [the disciples]*, but for them also which shall believe on me through their word; That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that thou hast sent me.*

The Ecumenical Movement think this means Christ is praying for all the denominations to get together to try and be as much one as they possibly can. But we've got to make the effort. No! True Christians, those who have had a new heart put within them, who truly love the Lord in their hearts, are already one in Christ Jesus. Christ prayed to His Father we may be one, so therefore we are all one. Whenever we meet a fellow believer in Christ, we already have sweet fellowship:

1 John 3:14
We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren.

We don't need to make an effort at unity, we already have it with every real believer. God the Father answers every prayer of God the Son.

And then we're introduced to another group who were there:

[55] And many women were there beholding afar off, which followed Jesus from Galilee, ministering unto him: [56] Among which was Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James and Joses, and the mother of Zebedee's children.

We haven't come across this group in the narrative yet, but there was a group of women there. They were looking on at the crucifixion from afar off. These were already followers of Christ, so maybe they didn't want to get too close in case they were recognised.

We think of Christ going around with His disciples, a group of men. But there were also women who followed Jesus from Galilee and ministered to Him. They were all there at the cross, albeit at a distance. Where were the men, the disciples? We've no record of any of them being at the cross, apart from John, to whom Christ committed His mother for her care. We're told that, after Gethsemane, the disciples all forsook Him and fled:

Matthew 26:56
….*Then all the disciples forsook him, and fled.*

They were despondent after this point, and only came to see the truth for themselves after the resurrection.

Now, just as an aside, it's an interesting exercise to look at all four gospels, and the lists of the women at the cross. We can deduce some interesting facts.

Mary Magdalene is the only one named in all four gospels. She is commonly thought to have been a prostitute. But there's nothing in the Bible about that. We only know two things about her. Her name, Magdalene, probably meant she came from Magdala, on the Sea of Galilee. And we're told that Christ cast seven devils out of her. That's all we know.

Then there's **Mary the mother of James the Less and Joses.** This could be Christ's mother, because He had half brothers with those

names, but that's very unlikely. If it referred to Christ's mother, the text would have said. It could possibly be the mother of the apostles James and Judas (not Iscariot), because this James was the lesser known of the two apostle James's, in which case she's the wife of Alphaeus. Or it could even be the mother of Barnabas, because his real name was Joses. We don't know for sure.

Then there was **Salome**, who, we're told, was the mother of Zebedee's children, namely the apostles James and John. We can also deduce that she was Christ's mother's sister. So, when Christ committed His mother to the care of John, He was committing her to His cousin, because by this time, both Joseph and Zebedee had died. We know that none of Mary's other children believed at this point, although they did later, so Christ was committing His mother to the nearest believing relative. Maybe that's why John was the only disciple at the cross. If anybody cornered him, he could say he was simply there as a close relative. In any case, John tells us himself that he was known to the high priest:

John 18:15
And Simon Peter followed Jesus, and so did another disciple [the writer, John]*: that disciple was known unto the high priest, and went in with Jesus into the palace of the high priest.*

That's interesting, isn't it. John seemed to be under the radar of the religious authorities, whereas Peter would never have been able to get into the High Priest's palace alone. There is sometimes prudence in keeping one's head down.

Now, what about the chief priests, scribes and the elders. What happened to them after the crucifixion? Were they all converted too? We don't know. But we're told in Luke:

Luke 23:48
And all the people that came together to that sight, beholding the things which were done, smote their breasts, and returned.

All the people who witnessed the crucifixion of Christ were heavily affected in some way. Nobody was mocking Him or railing upon Him any more. They ***"smote their breasts"*** as they returned home. And by Acts chapter 6, we're told:

Acts 6:7
And the word of God increased; and the number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem greatly; and a ***great company of the priests*** *were obedient to the faith.*

And then we read of one member of the ruling council in particular:

[57] When the even was come, there came a rich man of Arimathaea, named Joseph, who also himself was Jesus' disciple: [58] He went to Pilate, and begged the body of Jesus. Then Pilate commanded the body to be delivered.

John tells us that Joseph of Arimathaea had been a secret disciple of Christ's for a while:

John 19:38
And after this Joseph of Arimathaea, being a disciple of Jesus, but secretly for fear of the Jews, besought Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus: and Pilate gave him leave. He came therefore, and took the body of Jesus.

He didn't want to lose his position on the ruling council, so he'd been following Christ secretly. We're told there were several secret believers on the council:

John 12:42,43
Nevertheless among the chief rulers also many believed on him; but because of the Pharisees they did not confess him, lest they should be put out of the synagogue: For they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God.

The ruling council had such a tight grip over the people, they were too scared of being open about their faith. But look at Joseph now. He's not scared any more of what the council might do to him. He boldly goes up to Pilate and asks for the body of Christ, which he gives him. He doesn't care if the council knew it or not. And this is the beginning of the end of the iron rule of the religious leaders of Christ's day.

We're not actually told Joseph was there at the cross, this was in the evening. But it would have been odd if he wasn't there. For a start, he knew Christ was dead, which is more than Pilate knew. And I just

wonder if it was he who managed to persuade a group of his fellow priests, scribes and elders to be there to witness Christ's crucifixion. He wouldn't have joined in with the mocking, but maybe he was there and had brought them.

[59] And when Joseph had taken the body, he wrapped it in a clean linen cloth, [60] And laid it in his own new tomb, which he had hewn out in the rock: and he rolled a great stone to the door of the sepulchre, and departed.

Joseph of Arimathaea would have needed help for that, and John tells us he had a helper:

John 19:39
And there came also Nicodemus, which at the first came to Jesus by night, and brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about an hundred pound weight.

Nicodemus was the man in John 3, who came to Jesus by night because he was so scared the authorities would find out. But now he receives boldness too, and isn't bothered who knows what he's doing any more. The cross of Christ not only changed people from darkness to light, from mocking Him to taking Him seriously, but it also emboldened those who believed already but had before been too afraid to show it.

Christ's prayer, **"*Father forgive them, for they know not what they do*,"** was most certainly answered. Every single person at the cross was affected by what they saw.

God the Father always answered Christ's prayers, because He always did the things that pleased Him. He was sinless. But what about us? Does the Father always answer our prayers? No! We're not perfect like Christ was. We often ask for wrong things.

James 4:3
Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it upon your lusts.

So if we ask for a million pounds, we probably wouldn't get it because we'd use it on ourselves. But if God wanted us to have it to build His kingdom, and He thought He could trust us with it, He might just give it to us. John says:

1 John 5:14,15
And this is the confidence that we have in him, that, if we ask any thing according to his will, he heareth us: And if we know that he hear us, whatsoever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we desired of him.

God does answer every one of our prayers, as long as they are according to His will.

We know that God delights that men would turn to Him, that we would repent of our sins, that we should finish trusting in ourselves and put our trust in Him. So if we ask these things of Him, He'll surely give them to us. But we have to first forsake our sin and trust in what the Lord Jesus Christ did for us in those three hours of darkness to take our sin away. Only Christ can save us, if we come to Him. Mohammed can't save anybody. Buddha can't save anybody. They didn't make an atoning sacrifice for sin. But Christ did.

Acts 4:12
Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved.

Mark 4:1-20. The Parable of the Sower

Read Mark 4:1-34

I want to look today at the parable of the sower.

[1] And he began again to teach by the sea side: and there was gathered unto him a great multitude, so that he entered into a ship, and sat in the sea; and the whole multitude was by the sea on the land. [2] And he taught them many things by parables, and said unto them in his doctrine, [3] Hearken; Behold, there went out a sower to sow:

Christ's speaks to a great multitude from a boat so they can all hear. In Luke 5:3 He does the same, and there we're told that He borrowed Peter's boat. That could have been the same occasion, but if Luke's narrative is chronological, it isn't. So maybe Christ made a habit of preaching from a boat, we don't know.

Before we look at the parable, it would be interesting to know why Christ taught in parables at all. People who don't know their Bibles very well tell us He spoke in parables so people could understand Him better. But that's not the reason at all, because we're told here exactly the opposite was the case:

[11] And he said unto them, Unto you [the disciples] ***it is given to know the mystery of the kingdom of God: but unto them that are without, all these things are done in parables: [12] That seeing they may see, and not perceive; and hearing they may hear, and not understand; lest at any time they should be converted, and their sins should be forgiven them.***

Christ spoke in parables deliberately to hide the truth from the multitudes. Now that seems very strange at first, why on earth would He want to do that? Later on it says:

Mark 4:33,34
And with many such parables spake he the word unto them, as they were able to hear it. But without a parable spake he not unto them: and when they were alone, he expounded all things to his disciples.

It says here, "*as they were able to hear it.*" So, when He spoke to the multitudes, after giving the story to them without explanation, we're told:

[9] And he said unto them, He that hath ears to hear, let him hear.

He challenged them. What are you going to do with this parable? And He left them thinking about it. He only spoke "*as they were able to hear it.*" He never gave them anything they were unable to understand. They were ***able*** to hear and understand what He said, but the question is, were they ***willing***?

Most of the crowd only followed Him for the free healthcare. They weren't bothered about His teaching. So those people just drifted off. But if we were there, and we wanted to know more, what would we have done? Surely, we would've gone up to Him to ask. Christ was always approachable. He would never turn anyone away. And that's why Christ did things like this. He only explained parables to those who wanted to know more.

[10] And when he was alone, they that were about him with the twelve asked of him the parable.

"*They that were about Him with the twelve*." So the word "*disciples*" doesn't just mean the twelve. It included anybody else who wanted to know more. These were His disciples, His followers. All who asked Him for more.

Do any of us want to know more about God, about the Lord Jesus Christ? Has something been put on our heart to desire to know more about Him? There is something we can do. We can come to church, we can talk to the minister, we can read our Bible, these are all good

things, but the best thing of all is that we can ask Christ Himself. Pray to Him. Sit at His feet. Learn of Him. He said:

Matthew 7:7,8
Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you: For every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened.

Matthew 11:29
Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls.

[13] And he said unto them, Know ye not this parable? and how then will ye know all parables?

Christ here even challenges the disciples. Telling them that they ought to know the meaning of the parables. And so should we. So let's look at this parable of the sower.

[3] Hearken; Behold, there went out a sower to sow:

[14] The sower soweth the word.

We're told the seed is the word, the word of God. But who's the sower? Ultimately, it's God. But the Lord likes to use means, and we are the usual means by which He sows His word. Wherever and whenever we witness to anybody of the things of the Lord, whether in church, in open air meetings, or just in general conversation, that's the sowing process.

But we need to recognise our limitations. All we can do is sow. And maybe water a bit. But we can't produce life. We can't make anything grow. The apostle Paul said:

1 Corinthians 3:6,7
I have planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase. So then neither is he that planteth any thing, neither he that watereth; but God that giveth the increase.

We're just instruments God uses to do the sowing. Let's not pretend we're anything more.

So, let's look at the first type of soil, **the wayside**.

[4] And it came to pass, as he sowed, some fell by the way side, and the fowls of the air came and devoured it up.

[15] And these are they by the way side, where the word is sown; but when they have heard, Satan cometh immediately, and taketh away the word that was sown in their hearts.

The first type of hearer here is compared to the seed that fell by the wayside. People hear the gospel, they come across the things of God, and there's no response, they just walk away. I'm sure we know many people like that. In fact, we were all like that once.

Ephesians 2:12
Having no hope and without God in the world.

The only feeling we should have towards such people is pity. We were there. We know exactly what it was like. But the Lord dealt with us. He changed us, when we were least expecting Him to do so. And he can change them too.

1 Corinthians 6:11
And such were some of you: but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God.

It says here, Satan comes and immediately takes away the word that was **"*sown in their hearts*."** This phrase **"*sown in their hearts*"** has made some think these are truly converted but fall away quickly. But that's not possible. The heart here is just another metaphor for soil. That's where the seed goes. In Luke's gospel we're told:

Luke 8:12
….then cometh the devil, and taketh away the word out of their hearts, ***lest they should believe and be saved.***

So these people aren't saved at all. The devil makes sure they aren't. The soil is so hard on the wayside, it just bounces off and produces nothing.

Giving such people the word isn't a waste of time. They've at least now heard it. We leave results with the Lord. They may repent later on and we know nothing about it. But if they deliberately continue to reject the word, continuing to be hard, wayside soil, they will be judged accordingly.

2 Thessalonians 1:7-9
….the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with his mighty angels, In flaming fire taking vengeance on them that know not God, and that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ: Who shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power;

Now, in complete contrast, let's have a look at **the good soil**:

[8] And other fell on good ground, and did yield fruit that sprang up and increased; and brought forth, some thirty, and some sixty, and some an hundred.

[20] And these are they which are sown on good ground; such as hear the word, and receive it, and bring forth fruit, some thirtyfold, some sixty, and some an hundred.

The fourth type of hearer is compared to the seed that fell in good soil. If the seed falls in good soil, the root establishes itself, it grows and produces fruit. That's the true believer. This is where we all need to be. We're all born wayside hearers, with no interest in the things of God. But God changes hearts. A true believer is someone who has been changed by the Lord from within. He's been born-again, he's become a new creature in Christ. His stony, wayside heart has been broken up by the Lord, and is now good soil. And now he's doing what the Lord has called Him to do – producing fruit. That's the purpose of every Christian – to produce fruit. Spiritual fruit:

Galatians 5:22,23
But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance.

These are the marks of the real Christian. Before we became a Christian, we couldn't produce any of these at all. This is the fruit of the Spirit. We never had the Holy Spirit within us before we became a Christian. But the true believer has been fundamentally changed. The Holy Spirit has come to dwell within Him, and He now has the ability to produce spiritual fruit. And the fruit we produce is our witness to the world. The more fruit we produce, the more of an effective witness we can be to everyone around.

There are the only two types of people in the world. Those who've been born again of the Spirit of God, and those who haven't. There's no other type. We're all either one or the other. Now, it would be a lot easier if these were the only two types of soil. We could then easily distinguish between unbelievers and believers. At least we'd know where everybody stood. But life isn't that simple. Just to confuse things, there are two other types of soil, **stony ground** and **thorny ground**.

There are unbelievers who appear to be Christians but they've never been born again, and there are believers, who have truly been born again, but they appear to be no different from unbelievers. And I think that's what we're talking about here with these two types of soil.

First **the stony ground hearer:**

[5] And some fell on stony ground, where it had not much earth; and immediately it sprang up, because it had no depth of earth: [6] But when the sun was up, it was scorched; and because it had no root, it withered away.

[16] And these are they likewise which are sown on stony ground; who, when they have heard the word, immediately receive it with gladness; [17] And have no root in themselves, and so endure but for a time: afterward, when affliction or persecution ariseth for the word's sake, immediately they are offended.

The stony ground hearer hears the word and receives it with joy. He calls himself a Christian. He joins the church. He may be in the church for a long time. He may be in a high position in the church. But he's never been born-again of the Spirit of God in his heart, because we're told that these **"*have no root in themselves*."** He's a hypocrite.

A hypocrite is someone who professes with his mouth to be a Christian but who isn't really a true Christian in his heart. He's never had the fundamental heart change necessary. Christ had most of His opposition from hypocrites:

Matthew 15:7-9
Ye hypocrites, well did Esaias prophesy of you, saying, This people draweth nigh unto me with their mouth, and honoureth me with their lips; but their heart is far from me. But in vain they do worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men.

There are many warnings in the Bible to look out for hypocrites in the church.

Matthew 7:22,23
Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity.

How do we recognise a hypocrite? Well, to start with, we're told:

Matthew 7:20
….by their fruits ye shall know them.

So if they're in the church but not producing fruit, we should be wary of them. But that isn't an infallible principle. We're going to find out in a minute that there are also some true believers who don't produce fruit. So we can't judge infallibly by this means, but we can use it as a general principle.

In fact it can be almost impossible to discern the hypocrite. They can look so much like the true believer. They can copy fruit production quite well, they're very good actors. In the end only God knows the

heart. We're not called to judge anyone, because we can't see the heart. We're to accept an outward credible profession of faith until their hypocrisy becomes obvious.

Matthew 7:1.
Judge not, that ye be not judged.

There is one sure way hypocrites can be flushed out of the church, and that's when tribulation or persecution comes. Then they can't be seen for dust.
Maybe a muslim army comes into our town, puts a sword to everyone's neck and tells us all to convert to Islam or die. A hypocrite will have no problems doing that to save his skin. But the true Christian would rather die than deny His Lord.

Although we shouldn't look for persecution, that's often the reason why God sometimes brings it on a church, to purge it of hypocrites.

That's the stony ground hearer, the hypocrite. He professes belief in Christ, but he's never been born again. Now **the thorny ground hearer**:

[7] And some fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up, and choked it, and it yielded no fruit.

[18] And these are they which are sown among thorns; such as hear the word, [19] And the cares of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the lusts of other things entering in, choke the word, and it becometh unfruitful.

The thorny ground hearer hears the word, and responds to it, and he also joins the church. Now for many years, I thought the thorny ground hearer wasn't a true believer either, because we're told here he's unfruitful. But I've changed my mind. I now really think this does refer to a true believer, but he's a backslider, he's a disobedient Christian. That's why he's not producing fruit.

There is a root within him. He's alive, but he's being choked. Notice it says "***becometh*** *unfruitful*." That suggests he used to produce fruit but he's now stopped. Other things have taken priority in his life. The **"*cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches and the lusts of other things entering in.*"**

Our **cares and concerns in this world**, which are all genuine, take over and overwhelm us. We stop trusting in the Lord to look after us. He has told us:

1 Peter 5:7
Casting all your care upon him; for he careth for you.

Philippians 4:6,7
Be careful for nothing; but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God. And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

We need to unburden our cares onto the Lord, not try to think everything is on our shoulders. But we don't do that, and our cares overwhelm us.

Then there's **"*the deceitfulness of riches.*"** This is especially a concern in a country like ours, where we all have plenty. We quite like our nice homes, our comfortable lives. Being rich isn't wrong in itself, Abraham and Solomon were rich. But it can deceive so easily. It gets in the way of our walk with the Lord.

1 Timothy 6:10
….the love of money is the root of all evil .

Matthew 6:24
Ye cannot serve God and mammon.

And the **"*lusts of other things*"** enter in and get in the way. We want too much. We need to stop desiring things, and become like the apostle Paul, who said:

Philippians 4:11
I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content.

If we're truly the Lord's people, we should make sure that none of these things get in the way and choke the plant so it can't produce fruit any more. The good thing is that nothing can get so much in the way that we lose our salvation altogether. It's not possible for a true believer to lose his salvation. We can't be un-born again. We've so many promises in the Bible about that:

Romans 8:38,39
For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

John 10:27,28
My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me: And I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand.

Hebrews 13:5
I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee.

A true believer can never lose his salvation, but he can become unfruitful. That's why there are so many Bible passages calling us to be diligent, to walk worthy of our calling and so on. They're not there because if we don't, we'll lose our salvation. They call us to be diligent, because if we're not, we become unfruitful. We let the thorns choke us. In other words, we lose our witness to the world.

2 Peter 1:5-8
And beside this, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue; and to virtue knowledge; and to knowledge temperance; and to temperance patience; and to patience godliness; and to godliness brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness charity. For if these things be in you, and abound, they make you that ye shall neither be barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Peter is writing to true believers – we're told they all have faith. He calls them to add to their faith all these attributes. What are these attributes?

These are all fruit. Fruit production is an active thing on our part. We shouldn't sit back and say to ourselves, "Now we're saved the Lord will do everything." No, we need to be up and doing.

The Lord has given us a new heart. That's out of sheer grace. We didn't deserve it at all. That new heart then gives us the capacity to produce fruit, which we never had before. But we then have to make an effort to be fruitful.

When we backslide, we become barren and unfruitful. And, as long as we're in a backslidden state, we're miserable. The Lord makes sure of that. He doesn't like to see us in a backslidden state, so He makes us miserable that we might come back to Him. He chastises all those He loves:

Hebrews 12:6
For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth.

Here's another passage. This uses a different metaphor. It talks about building rather than fruit, but the message is the same:

1 Corinthians 3:11-15
For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if any man build upon this foundation gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, stubble; every man's work shall be made manifest: for the day shall declare it, because it shall be revealed by fire; and the fire shall try every man's work of what sort it is. If any man's work abide which he hath built thereupon, he shall receive a reward. If any man's work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss: but he himself shall be saved; yet so as by fire.

This passage is talking about believers. They all have the foundation, Jesus Christ. The one who builds precious things on that foundation, things that will survive the fire, eternal things, shall receive a reward. But the one who has all his work burned up, shall suffer loss, although he will be saved in the end.

This shows there'll be people in heaven who are barely saved, "*yet so as by fire*." They'll have done a lot of work in this world, but its all wood and hay and stubble, it'll all be burned up in the judgment. They won't be able to take the fruits of any of it to heaven. All that work will be

for nothing. We don't want to be like that. A worldly, backslidden Christian wastes his life. That's why the Lord will try to wake him up from that condition. Christ taught:

Matthew 6:19-21
Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal: for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.

Not the other way around. So many Christians misquote this and say "where your heart is, there will your treasure be." That's the wrong way round. Don't follow your heart, whatever you do. That'll be disaster. Where's your treasure? Heaven, or earth? Wherever it is, that's where your heart truly is.

That's the thorny ground hearer. A true believer. He'll get to heaven. But he's very disobedient, and totally unfruitful.

That's the parable of the sower. Which one of these four types of soil are we?

Do we have no interest in the things of God? Well, we could say, "I'm not interested," and at least we're being honest, unlike the hypocrite. But whether we're interested or not is irrelevant. This isn't just another hobby, to be interested in or not as we please, like stamp collecting. What do we do in our spare time? Oh, we go to church. No. This is a matter of life and death.

By nature we're all born with sinful natures. If we want to carry on the way we are, that's fine, go ahead. But we'll have to accept the consequences of our actions. Living for self is a waste of time. We need to change. And only God can change us. We must repent of sin, put our trust in the Lord Jesus Christ to save us from our sins, and if we're genuine, He'll change our life. He'll give us a new heart that can then start producing spiritual fruit. That's real life. Not concentrating on our own little selves. We need to put our trust in eternal things. Trust in Christ for salvation, He is the only hope for all of us.

Or, are we a hypocrite? Maybe we've been in the church for many years. Maybe our family has been coming here for five generations, I don't know. But that won't get us into heaven. All of us who call ourselves Christian, need to examine ourselves to make sure our hearts really have been changed:

2 Corinthians 13:5
Examine yourselves, whether ye be in the faith; prove your own selves. Know ye not your own selves, how that Jesus Christ is in you, except ye be reprobates?

And then we've got a message to true believers too, those who know they've truly had their hearts changed. In the good soil, we are told that Christians:

"bring forth fruit, some thirtyfold, some sixty, and some an hundred."

We can interpret this two ways, and we're not told which. Both are true.

It could mean that we've all got different capacities to produce fruit, some thirtyfold, some sixty and some an hundredfold. There's another parable Christ told, which seems to imply this. In that parable, one man is given five talents to start with, and he's expected to make five more. One is only given two talents to start with, but he's only expected to make two talents more, not five, to get the same reward. So the message is we should be working at full capacity, with whatever we've been given to start with.

But it could also be saying something else. Christ said:

Matthew 5:48
Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.

Now, I don't know about you, but even with the Holy Spirit in my heart and the best of intentions, I can't do that. I want to, it's my aim in life, but I fail. We all backslide. Maybe the parable is teaching us we should be producing a hundredfold, but some of us only produce sixty, and others only thirty. So maybe the lesson is to stop backsliding and start producing fruit again.

I've been saying all along, we should produce fruit, and that's right. But actually we can't produce fruit. Only God gives the increase. It's the Holy Spirit that produces fruit in our lives. We're just the fruit tree. But a good gardener knows there are things he can do to promote the fruit's growth. He can prune the tree. We know the Lord does the pruning because we're told:

John 15:2
Every branch that beareth fruit, he purgeth it, that it may bring forth more fruit.

But there are things we can do as well. We can water it. We can dung it. And we can get rid of the weeds. And, do you know, that's the Christian's life.

Mark 9:14-29. Demon Possession

Read Mark 5:1-20
Mark 9:14-29

I want to talk today on the subject of demon-possession. Now, please stay with me. You might say, "What on earth has that got to do with me?" To which I reply, "Hopefully, nothing." I pray to the Lord that none of us will ever experience it in our lives or families.

But the fact remains that there is a spiritual dimension to our lives.

Ephesians 6:12
For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.

The Bible doesn't tell us much about this spiritual dimension, and we shouldn't pretend we know more than we're given in the Bible to know. One of the things we find out about this spiritual dimension, is that there is such a thing as demon-possession. So we've got to deal with the subject as much as we can, from the little information we have. And we are given so little information on this subject for a reason. It's not good for us to delve too deeply into these things. There are many people out there who think they've got the power to cast demons out, and it has to be said, they make a comfortable living out of it. But they don't know what they are doing, and neither should we pretend we know all about this subject either. Let's see what the Bible says and stick to that. I've got four points:

1. Demon Possession is a real phenomenon.

Some people dismiss demon-possession altogether, and believe it to be no more than what we call today a neurological or psychiatric illness. There's a classic example here:

[17] And one of the multitude answered and said, Master, I have brought unto thee my son, which hath a dumb spirit; [18] And

wheresoever he taketh him, he teareth him: and he foameth, and gnasheth with his teeth, and pineth away: and I spake to thy disciples that they should cast him out; and they could not.

They see **"*he teareth him: and he foameth, and gnasheth with his teeth*,"** and they say, Ah, that's what we know today as epilepsy. People in those days were more superstitious, so attributed it to the devil. But epilepsy doesn't make one dumb, and it doesn't make someone "pine away," or wither away. Modern translations say "become rigid," which would fit with epilepsy, but the word is to wither, like a withered hand. In any case epilepsy doesn't deliberately throw people into fire or water to try to destroy them:

[22] And ofttimes it hath cast him into the fire, and into the waters, to destroy him: but if thou canst do any thing, have compassion on us, and help us.

So demon-possession isn't an illness. It's something altogether different, it's a real thing, a supernatural being taking over a person's mind and faculties.

Before we continue with this text in Mark 9, I want to look at another example for a minute, the man in the land of the Gadarenes, in Mark 5. What were his symptoms?

Mark 5:4,5,7
He had been often bound with fetters and chains, and the chains had been plucked asunder by him, and the fetters broken in pieces: neither could any man tame him. And always, night and day, he was in the mountains, and in the tombs, crying, and cutting himself with stones…. And cried with a loud voice, and said, What have I to do with thee, Jesus, thou Son of the most high God? I adjure thee by God, that thou torment me not.

He thinks he's somebody else, so he's bipolar, and he self-harms. That's how he would be diagnosed today. Now, these things can normally be treated and controlled very well with modern medicine. Please don't think I'm rubbishing modern medicine. These illnesses exist, and can be treated by modern medicine. If we've got symptoms, see the doctor. But what I'm saying is that demon-possession is altogether different.

The Gadarene man had supernatural strength. He could break chains. No man could tame him. He was heard in the town from the tombs where he lived, so he had a supernaturally loud voice. And he knew exactly who Jesus Christ was, the ***"Son of the most high God."*** Demons know things like that, people generally don't. And they also knew that they were eventually destined for torment, with no alternative or way out.

Nowhere in the Bible speaks of "good spirits." We have angels, but the angels that kept their first estate, are simply called angels, and they don't "possess" people. They are messengers of God who minister to the saints:

Hebrews 1:14
Are they not all ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation?

But we do read of "*evil spirits*," "*unclean spirits*," and "*devils*," or "demons." These all refer to the same thing, and I suggest that these are *fallen angels*. Otherwise, where else could they have come from? We read of some angels who fell:

2 Peter 2:4
For if God spared not the angels that sinned, but cast them down to hell [tartarus]*, and delivered them into chains of darkness, to be reserved unto judgment;….*

Jude 1:6
And the angels which kept not their first estate, but left their own habitation, he hath reserved in everlasting chains under darkness unto the judgment of the great day.

At the beginning of time, some angels fell. These fallen angels were cast into chains of darkness in "*Tartarus*" by God. And there is no plan of redemption for them. This occurrence of the word "*Tartarus*" in 2 Peter 2:4 is the only place it is found in Scripture. Evil men go to Hades (or Sheol in Hebrew), Both are translated "hell" in our Bibles, which may cause some confusion, but they are separate places.

However, there is a way they can leave "*Tartarus*," but only for a short time as the Lord allows. The only way they can leave is for them to possess a body. They can't wander around free without a body for very long, because we read:

Matthew 12:43,44
When the unclean spirit is gone out of a man, he walketh through dry places, seeking rest, and findeth none. Then he saith, I will return into my house from whence I came out; and when he is come, he findeth it empty, swept, and garnished.

They have to possess a body or be cast back into Tartarus.

They can't possess animals, as can be seen here clearly in Mark 5. The swine couldn't hold them. The devils are so violent, the swine are destroyed. But they can possess men.

Why on earth would the Lord allow fallen angels to possess men? Most of us are in full control of our own faculties. So our sins come from ourselves. We are fully to blame for them. We can never say, "The devil made me do it," as an excuse for our sin. And that's how it is normally. However, some individuals decide they are going to worship Satan, or some other evil spirit. If they continue on this path for so long, God will give them over, just as He gives people over to do other depraved things:

Romans 1:24,25
Wherefore God also gave them up to uncleanness through the lusts of their own hearts, to dishonour their own bodies between themselves: Who changed the truth of God into a lie, and worshipped and served the creature more than the Creator, who is blessed for ever. Amen.

This is altogether different from anything medical or psychological. It's a real possession of someone by a demon, or an evil spirit. They take over inside of them.

And look what happened after the demons had gone out of this Gadarene man:

Mark 5:15
And they come to Jesus, and see him that was possessed with the devil, and had the legion, sitting, and clothed, and in his right mind: and they were afraid.

What a contrast. From a wild man in the tombs that no man could tame, to a man "*sitting, and clothed, and in his right mind*." Back in control of his own faculties again. A huge difference only Christ could have done in Him.

Some people again want to limit demon possession, saying that it is very, very rare these days, and was only more manifest around the time Christ was on the earth, because He was the Saviour and the devil was more active while He was around.

Maybe that's partly true. Maybe the devil was more active around the time Christ was on earth. It makes sense. But from that, we can't deduce that it doesn't happen any more, or that it's very, very rare now. People who have that view are usually those who've never come across it. Demon possession has occurred throughout history, and still occurs today.

It's more outwardly manifested in places like Africa and Asia, where evil spirits are openly worshipped. The evil faces and forms of statues in Voodoo, Hindu and Buddhist temples are clearly demonic in origin. Anyone bowing down to such things for any length of time will surely be affected somehow by them, maybe eventually becoming possessed by them.

In the West, demon possession tends to be rarer because not as many people worship evil spirits here. And in any case, it's more hidden from view because it's lumped together by doctors as a "mental health" issue. Most demon-possessed people in this country would probably be locked away in some secure psychiatric unit. But demon-possession isn't a mental illness. When we see it, the difference will be obvious.

In cases of demon-possession, the person is clearly possessed by another being taking control over them. It would be a far more powerful being than any of us could ever be, and the person possessed would lose control of their faculties. And all of them clearly know exactly who Jesus Christ is. The apostles were once followed by a girl:

Acts 16:16-18
And it came to pass, as we went to prayer, a certain damsel possessed with a spirit of divination met us, which brought her masters much gain by soothsaying: The same followed Paul and us, and cried, saying, These men are the servants of the most high God, which shew unto us the way of salvation. And this did she many days. But Paul, being grieved, turned and said to the spirit, I command thee in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her. And he came out the same hour.

She met them while they were at prayer. The devil will always try to interrupt godly activity. In the 1904 Welsh revival, there were cases of people screaming in the middle of sermons. And then she said, "*These men are the servants of the most high God, which shew unto us the way of salvation."* What's wrong with that? She knew the truth. A lot of churches would call that good witnessing. But the truth coming from the lips of someone possessed by a demon isn't a good witness at all. So Paul cast the demon out. Easy. So every time we come across a case of demon-possession, let's cast it out, like Paul did. Hang on.

2. Men do not have the power to cast out demons today.

And we should never believe that we do have. Don't mess with demons, we don't know what we're doing, and they're much more powerful than we are. We shouldn't even try to be a conduit for God to cast them out. It's dangerous. Keep away. Now, where's my Biblical warrant for saying that?

There are no instructions how to cast out demons in the Bible. I know of people who have taken the few examples in the Bible of Christ and the apostles casting out demons, and turned that into a manual as to how we can do it too. But that's a wrong use of Scripture.

The power to cast out demons was one of the "*signs and wonders*," and **NOT** a spiritual gift. It's not in 1 Corinthians 12 or 14 or other passages on spiritual gifts. So we don't have it today. It was one of the "*signs and wonders*" which only Christ had, and those to whom Christ gave it temporarily. And there are three occasions we know about when He did that:

a. The twelve *(Matthew 10, Mark 3:14,15, Luke 9:1-10)*:

Matthew 10:1,8
And when he had called unto him his twelve disciples, he gave them power against unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal all manner of sickness and all manner of disease.... Heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, cast out devils: freely ye have received, freely give.

We've got to note here that one of the twelve was Judas Iscariot:

Matthew 10:4
....and Judas Iscariot, who also betrayed him.

So an unbeliever can be given the power to cast out demons, if Christ so wishes him to have it. And then we see that this was only for one particular campaign:

Matthew 10:5,6
These twelve Jesus sent forth, and commanded them, saying, Go not into the way of the Gentiles, and into any city of the Samaritans enter ye not: But go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.

We're called to go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature, not just "*the lost sheep of the house of Israel*," so this instruction can't be for us. And once the campaign was over, the power ceased. We see that back in our text in Mark 9:

[18] ....and I spake to thy disciples that they should cast him out; and they could not.

The disciples couldn't cast this demon out, not because they lacked faith, but because the power from the earlier campaign, which they still thought they had, had ceased. They could no longer cast out demons. And then the second occasion Christ gave this power:

b. The seventy *(Luke 10:1-20)*:

Luke 10:1
After these things the Lord appointed other seventy also, and sent them two and two before his face into every city and place, whither he himself would come.

This also was just for one particular campaign, because they were sent "*before his face into every city and place, whither he himself would come."* And we know they cast out demons, because later they boasted of it:

Luke 10:17
And the seventy returned again with joy, saying, Lord, even the devils are subject unto us through thy name.

But Christ warned them not to boast. Having the power to cast out demons isn't important:

Luke 10:20
Notwithstanding in this rejoice not, that the spirits are subject unto you; but rather rejoice, because your names are written in heaven.

And then the third occasion Christ gave this power:

c. The apostles *(Acts 1:8)*:

Acts 1:8
But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth.

Power was given to the apostles for a short time after Pentecost, to prove that they were the witnesses Christ had chosen. And we've got examples of them using this power to heal and cast out evil spirits:

Acts 8:7
For unclean spirits, crying with loud voice, came out of many that were possessed with them: and many taken with palsies, and that were lame, were healed.

But this power ceased after a time. We know that, because later on in his ministry, Paul couldn't even heal his friend:

2 Timothy 4:20
Erastus abode at Corinth: but Trophimus have I left at Miletum sick.

Those were three special occasions when Jesus Christ gave power to men to cast out demons. I'm not saying spiritual gifts have ceased. I'm not a cessationist. I'm happy to believe spiritual gifts exist today, depending on how they are defined. What I am saying is that casting out demons isn't one of them. It's not in any of the Biblical lists of spiritual gifts. It was one of the "*signs and wonders*" only Jesus had, or gave to others for a short time.

What about many people today who claim to have a "deliverance" ministry? I'm going to condemn them. Sorry. They're no different from exorcists. We're warned about them:

Acts 19:13-17
Then certain of the vagabond Jews, exorcists, took upon them to call over them which had evil spirits the name of the Lord Jesus, saying, We adjure you by Jesus whom Paul preacheth. And there were seven sons of one Sceva, a Jew, and chief of the priests, which did so. And the evil spirit answered and said, Jesus I know, and Paul I know; but who are ye? And the man in whom the evil spirit was leaped on them, and overcame them, and prevailed against them, so that they fled out of that house naked and wounded. And this was known to all the Jews and Greeks also dwelling at Ephesus; and fear fell on them all, and the name of the Lord Jesus was magnified.

These exorcists in the passage were trying to cast out evil spirits using the name of the Lord Jesus. Surely that's how we should cast them out, in the name of Jesus, not any other name. But it didn't work. They ended up being overtaken themselves by the evil spirits. That should warn all of us off trying such things ourselves. Dabbling with evil spirits is dangerous, even if we think we can cast them out ourselves because we've got Jesus in our hearts now. Keep away, we don't know what we're playing with.

When it tells us, "t*he name of the Lord Jesus was magnified,*" it was because the exorcists had been exposed as not being able to cast demons out at all.

What do these "deliverance" ministries tell their people? Do they tell them all illness, physical and mental, is caused by Satan? Do they tell them they can heal all illness, physical as well as psychological? If they say they can, they're quacks. And they're after your money. Christ came across a poor lady who'd been taken in by this sort of thing:

Mark 5:25-29
And a certain woman, which had an issue of blood twelve years, And had suffered many things of many physicians, and had spent all that she had, and was nothing bettered, but rather grew worse, When she had heard of Jesus, came in the press behind, and touched his garment. For she said, If I may touch but his clothes, I shall be whole. And straightway the fountain of her blood was dried up; and she felt in her body that she was healed of that plague.

If we've got a problem, physical or mental, we don't need to go to a quack. Why do we need to go to these people at all? We don't. Go to Christ directly. Just touch the hem of His garment. We don't need these charlatans.

3. How can we get demons cast out?

So, if we can't cast demons out, how can we get them cast out? I've just given the answer. Go to Christ. Christ alone can cast demons out, we can't. And nobody who claims to have special powers can either. The only way to get demons removed is to call on God in prayer to remove them. That's what we've got in our text:

[25] When Jesus saw that the people came running together, he rebuked the foul spirit, saying unto him, Thou dumb and deaf spirit, I charge thee, come out of him, and enter no more into him. [26] And the spirit cried, and rent him sore, and came out of him: and he was as one dead; insomuch that many said, He is dead. [27] But Jesus took him by the hand, and lifted him up; and he arose. [28] And when he was come into the house, his disciples asked him privately,

Why could not we cast him out? [29] And he said unto them, This kind can come forth by nothing, but by prayer and fasting.

The disciples here had lost the power Christ had given them temporarily for the earlier campaign. But they can't understand why they can't still be like Christ and have powers like this for ever. Well, we don't need them. We've all got something far more powerful than merely the power to cast out demons, exciting though that sounds. We've got the power of prayer. In all our situations, whatever they may be, however big or small, whether it's a need to cast out a demon, or to travel safely, whatever we need, we can go to God in prayer. And that's the God-ordained method for every situation we find ourselves in today.

1 Peter 5:7
Casting all your care upon him; for he careth for you.

James 5:16
The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much.

But how do we pray? We come to the fourth point, and this is the most wonderful of all:

4. Real Christians cannot be demon-possessed.

Real prayer is a relationship with God. It's not an outward form of religion. It's an inward change in the heart. Anyone can begin this relationship. We simply need to repent of our past sins, be finished with our old life, and turn to Jesus Christ. Start talking to Him, communicate with Him. Prayer is a continual relationship. It's not just going through a form. And we need to cry to God, earnestly, genuinely and sincerely, and He will change our hearts from the inside. We will become new creatures, from the inside:

Ezekiel 36:26,27
A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgments, and do them.

Real Christians have been changed from the inside. It's difficult to explain to anyone who's never experienced it. But they now have the Holy Spirit inside them, possessing them. They are now the Lord's. And they can never be lost or possessed by demons any more.

1 John 4:4
Ye are of God, little children, and have overcome them: because greater is he that is in you, than he that is in the world.

Romans 8:38,39
For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Sometimes an exorcist seems to succeed, and the people all say, "Hallelujah!" But it's only because the demon has left voluntarily and temporarily. It will be back again soon enough, maybe with others:

Luke 11:24-26
When the unclean spirit is gone out of a man, he walketh through dry places, seeking rest; and finding none, he saith, I will return unto my house whence I came out. And when he cometh, he findeth it swept and garnished. Then goeth he, and taketh to him seven other spirits more wicked than himself; and they enter in, and dwell there: and the last state of that man is worse than the first.

But if the Holy Spirit comes into the heart, nothing and no one can displace Him. No demon can ever come back.

The devil won't like it if we become a Christian. He'll certainly be there trying to attack us. But he can only attack externally now. That's why we need to put on our spiritual armour:

Ephesians 6:11
Put on the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil.

The devil can never possess us any more. We're no longer His and never can be.

If we come across anyone who calls him or herself a Christian and at the same time thinks they're possessed by a demon (as opposed to simply being attacked externally), we have to say that either they're mistaken about actually being possessed, or that they aren't a truly born-again Christian in their hearts, and haven't got the Holy Spirit within them.

Let's all make sure we know the Lord. Then the devil can't touch us.

Colossians 2:13-15
And you, being dead in your sins and the uncircumcision of your flesh, hath he quickened together with him, having forgiven you all trespasses; Blotting out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to his cross; And having spoiled principalities and powers, he made a shew of them openly, triumphing over them in it.

Luke 2:1-20. The Shepherds

Chapter 1 of Luke is mainly about the birth of John the Baptist, but in the middle of it we read something quite remarkable. The angel Gabriel appeared to a young virgin called Mary, who was espoused to be married to a man called Joseph, and said:

Luke 1:31-35
And, behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name Jesus. He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest: and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David: And he shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end. Then said Mary unto the angel, How shall this be, seeing I know not a man? And the angel answered and said unto her, The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God.

God became man. The miraculous conception of our Lord Jesus Christ is the most wonderful event ever to have occurred in this world. God manifest Himself in the flesh. And to do that, He didn't use anybody special. He used two ordinary young people:

John 1:14
And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth.

And not only were they young and ordinary, but they lived in Nazareth, of which was said:

John 1:46
Can there any good thing come out of Nazareth?

Nazareth was an obscure place way up north, far away from the religious centre in Jerusalem. If God was going to come to earth, we'd think he would choose the Temple in Jerusalem, but no, Nazareth, an unassuming Northern town was the place God chose to live and grow up. God doesn't use the great things of this world to display His glory:

1 Corinthians 1:27-29
But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty; And base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, yea , and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are: That no flesh should glory in his presence.

And then we have a marvellous display of God's providence at work. At the same time as our Lord had been placed in Mary's womb in Nazareth, way over in Rome, completely separately, Caesar Augustus decided to hold a census of the whole Roman Empire:

[1] And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed.

Now this seems to have been a one-off event, because in Acts there's a reference to an uprising that took place around this time:
Acts 5:37
After this man rose up Judas of Galilee ***in the days of the taxing****, and drew away much people after him....*

"in the days of the taxing" implies a one-off, unique occasion.

To fulfil the prophecy of Micah, Christ had to be born in Bethlehem:

Micah 5:2
But thou, Beth-lehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel; whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting.

It was this one-off decree from Caesar Augustus in Rome that sent Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem. Otherwise they'd never have gone. There was no other reason to go. Joseph didn't seem to have any family in Bethlehem, otherwise he'd have stayed with them when he was there. Any relatives he had must've either died out or, like him, left the area. So this one-off event happening at exactly the same time Mary was due to give birth was God's providence in action. God always works His providence, so He gets all the glory.

And notice it says **"*that all the world should be taxed*."** The phrase **"*all the world*"** can't be taken literally. The Australian aborigines weren't taxed. **"*All the world*"** here refers to the whole Roman Empire over which Caesar Augustus had authority. So when we come across the phrase "*the world*" or even "*all the world*" in Scripture, we've got to be careful, it doesn't necessarily mean every human being in the world head for head.

[2] (And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria.)

The Bible pinpoints the time of Christ's birth accurately. It was at the same time Caesar Augustus was ruling in Rome, Cyrenius ruling in Syria and Herod the Great in Judea.

I looked these people up on Wikipedia. It tells us there that Cyrenius was governor of Syria between 6AD and 12AD, and that Augustus died in 14AD, so it's agreed their reigns coincided, but it tells us that Herod died in 4BC, so, according to this, his reign doesn't coincide with the other two. We're then given an explanation for this:

"*The Gospel of Luke uses it* [the census] *as the narrative means to establish the birth of Jesus, but places it within the reign of Herod the Great, who died 10 years earlier. No satisfactory explanation of the contradiction seems possible on the basis of present knowledge, and most scholars think that the author of the gospel made a mistake.*"

How are these dates arrived at? Scholars decide. Historians decide. Whenever we get a discrepancy between what the Bible says and what scholars say, which one does the BBC use? Which one is taught in our schools as fact? But which one is right? The Bible is always right, because it is the Word of God. Every word was breathed by Him as men were inspired of the Holy Ghost, so it can't be wrong:

2 Peter 1:21
For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost.

Scholars who differ from the Bible, whether historians, scientists, archaeologists, or anybody else, will always be wrong. Not so long ago archaeologists were very keen to tell us that Pontius Pilate never existed, because no evidence of his existence has ever been found in the archaeological record. Until they found an inscription in Caesarea with his name on it. Then they suddenly went quiet. Never follow men. Always follow this book.

[3] And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city.

We may find the phrase **"*His own city*"** difficult to understand, but in China, everybody has a "family book" held by the family head in the place where they're registered. That's where they can get welfare, and free education for their children. But if they move away, they lose these benefits. That's why so many children stay with grandparents while their parents go to the big cities to work. They can't take their children with them without losing their benefits. That's the idea of having your ***"own city,"*** a place where you're registered.

This must have been a huge migration of people throughout the Roman Empire. It must have caused unprecedented difficulties for the population, all at the whim of the emperor.

[4] And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David:)

Joseph was **"*of the house and lineage of David*."** We know that because we've got two genealogies of Christ in the Bible, one in Matthew 1 and the other in Luke 3. One traces Christ's descent through David's son Solomon, the other through his son Nathan. A lot of people think the genealogy in Luke is Mary's, but I don't agree. It states clearly that it's Joseph's. Mary was a "*cousin*," a close relative, of Elisabeth, John the Baptist's mother, who was from the High Priestly line. So how can we explain a divergence in the two genealogies between David and Joseph? There can be several explanations, the simplest is that at least one name in the list is female. If there are no

sons, the line goes through the eldest daughter. Anyway, Joseph, in both genealogies, is descended from David.

In the Matthew genealogy, Joseph is descended through the kings of Judah. So if the monarchy had continued after the Babylonian exile, which it didn't, then Joseph would have been the king of Judah and Jesus Christ, legally his first born, would have been his heir. So I suggest Christ started His public ministry age thirty, upon the death of Joseph. On the cross there was written above Him "*The King of the Jews*." That was a true statement. Had the monarchy continued, He really would have been the king of Judah.

But Joseph wasn't a king, he was a carpenter in Nazareth. Fourteen generations after the last official king of Judah, the kingship had been all but forgotten. There's probably somebody in the world today who's a direct descendent of Genghis Khan, but nobody knows who he is, probably sweeping the streets of Ulan Bator or something.

[5] To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child.

Mary had to go to Bethlehem too. There were no exemptions. She was heavily pregnant, but she still had to go, not because she was descended from David herself, but because she was now espoused to Joseph who was, and so had to register as his wife.

[6] And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered.

How long were they planning to be in Bethlehem for? Long enough to register. But this was the Lord's time for Mary to go into labour. And now they had a baby, they seem to have settled there for a while, because they're later found by the wise men in a house:

Matthew 2:11
And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense, and myrrh.

But they didn't stay in Bethlehem for long because they were told by an angel to flee to Egypt to escape Herod's attempt to kill all the children in the area.

Later, during Christ's ministry, there was a dispute as to whether He was Christ or not:

John 7:41-43
Others said, This is the Christ. But some said, Shall Christ come out of Galilee? Hath not the scripture said, That Christ cometh of the seed of David, and out of the town of Bethlehem, where David was? So there was a division among the people because of him.

Christ was always known as "Jesus of Nazareth." His actual birth in Bethlehem, while Joseph and Mary were on a short visit there, didn't seem to be widely known.

[7] And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.

There was no room in the inn. Nobody was willing to give up their place for a heavily pregnant woman. That's what people are like. By nature we're all self-centred, and can only think of ourselves and our own comforts. That's why we need a Saviour.

There's no mention of a stable. So "*Once in Royal David's City, Stood a lowly cattle shed*" is rubbish. A stable is assumed because a manger is mentioned, an animal feed trough, but a stable is not in the Bible. Maybe they were in a cave or some other kind of shelter. Maybe they were in the open field, we don't know. But Mary did the best she could in the circumstances. She found some cloths to swaddle Him, and a manger to put Him in, not realising that these would be the signs the shepherds were to look for later, v.12.

Compare Mary's care for her child with Ezekiel's description of the state of Jerusalem:

Ezekiel 16:4,5
And as for thy nativity, in the day thou wast born thy navel was not cut, neither wast thou washed in water to supple thee; thou wast not salted at all, nor swaddled at all. None eye pitied thee, to do any of these unto thee, to have compassion upon thee; but thou wast cast out in the open field, to the lothing of thy person, in the day that thou wast born.

This represents the state of us all by nature. Ezekiel was told by the Lord:

Ezekiel 16:2
Son of man, cause Jerusalem to know her abominations,

We can talk about the sins of our nation, and compare it with Jerusalem here, and that would be a good comparison. But what about our own hearts as individuals? We're full of abominations, sins against God, which we should all be utterly ashamed of. We've not been swaddled or looked after, because we don't look after ourselves. We despise God, we don't want Him in our lives, we want to go our own way. That's what we're all like by nature. That's why the Son of God became man, so sinners like us can be changed, saved to a new life, given a new nature, and finished with our sinful ways for ever.

[8] And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.

Nearby is a group of shepherds, **"*abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night*."** So it's not winter, otherwise they'd be sheltering from the cold, not in the fields.

So, God becoming man, the Word becoming flesh, God Himself coming into this world, wasn't done in a great cathedral, or revealed to some great archbishop or pope. God chose to use a couple of ordinary young people from an obscure town, and some local shepherds. And when Christ chose His disciples, He chose mainly fishermen.

The religious leaders of the day completely missed it all. God passed them all by. In fact the religious leaders of Christ's day ended up as His

worst enemies, and they got Him put to death. Is there a lesson here for the great religious leaders of our day?

[9] And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid.

These poor simple shepherds doing an ordinary night's work were suddenly awakened. Firstly, we're told **"*the angel of the Lord came upon them*."** "*The angel of the Lord*" appears several times in the Old Testament, and he's usually thought of as a theophany, an appearance of Christ in some kind of pre-incarnate state. But I'm not so sure about that. He appears here, but it can't be Christ because He's elsewhere lying in a manger.

And **"*the glory of the Lord shone round about them*."** In the Old Testament, "*the glory of the Lord*" appeared on Mount Sinai, in the Tabernacle, and in the Temple. Whenever "*the glory of the Lord*" appeared, men, like the shepherds, became **"*sore afraid.*"** And it's not surprising, because God is holy, and we're altogether sinful. Isaiah saw it:

Isaiah 6:5
Then said I Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips: for mine eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts.

But it is possible to have a glimpse of God's glory while we are on this earth. But we have to forsake our sin, and turn to Christ for salvation. Then we can be changed from within. We still only see God as through a glass darkly, but we can begin to see something.

2 Corinthians 3:18
But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord.

[10] And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people.

When God appears to us, we fear, we tremble, because of our sin. But if God wants to show favour – and the prerogative is always with Him – He would say, **"*Fear not,*"** like here. There's only no need to fear if He's got good news for us, and He has: **"*I bring you good tidings of great joy.*"** Not only to the shepherds but **"*to all people*."** Including us.

[11] For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.

That very day, in the city of David, that is Bethlehem, was born a Saviour **"*Christ the Lord.*"** For centuries, it had been prophesied a Saviour would come from God. These prophesies are found throughout the Old Testament Scriptures. And a Saviour is exactly what we need, because none of us can save ourselves. Isaiah said:

Isaiah 53:6
All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all.

We can't hope to please God by anything we do, we're too self-centred. God, in His love and mercy, didn't leave us like that, but promised a Saviour who would come into the world, who would live a perfect life, and be put to death on a cross by wicked men. And all those who put their trust in Him shall not come into judgment for their sins, but have their sins placed on Him, so they can be set free.

1 Peter 3:18
For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the Spirit....

John 8:36
If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed.

That's why this is good tidings of great joy to all people. Because in Christ we can have our sins forgiven. In Him we can be set free from the punishment we deserve. No other religious figure can do this. But Christ can, because He is God come down to earth for us.

[12] And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.

And here's the unusual sign they were told to look out for, a babe swaddled, so He was properly cared for, but He was lying in a manger. The angel didn't actually tell them to go, they could have stayed where they were and not bothered. But how could they not go, when such marvellous news had been revealed to them?

[13] And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, [14] Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.

In salvation, all the glory goes to God. We can't deserve it, we can't obtain it. It comes purely by the mercy of God. And we really ought to understand this. We must come to an end of ourselves, and realise salvation, deliverance from wrath to come, is all of the Lord.

And then there's this phrase, **"*on earth peace, good will toward men*."** But Christ said:

Luke 12:51
Suppose ye that I am come to give peace on earth? I tell you, Nay; but rather division:

The **division** Christ spoke of is the division that occurs naturally between men and men, because of Him. Some will believe in Him and be saved to eternal life, others won't.

The **peace** spoken of here is peace between God and men. Not all men, because some will never believe. But God sent Christ as a Saviour in an act of good will towards men. We can be reconciled to God today, if only we repent of our sins and come to Him.

John 3:17
For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved.

[15] And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us.

So this great, glorious, heavenly visitation from the angels ends, and the shepherds are back on their own again. And they decided immediately to go to Bethlehem to see for themselves all these things the Lord had told them about.

The obvious question is, who looked after the sheep while they were gone? We always have to think of these silly questions, don't we? We don't know, is the answer. I'm sure the Lord kept them from straying too far, given these exceptional circumstances.

[16] And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger.

They found Mary and Joseph and the babe in the manger just as the angel had told them. Which is why I don't think it was in a stable. Mary was giving birth. If they could have had privacy, they'd have done so and shut the stable door. The shepherds would never have been able to find them then. We're told they **"*came with haste*,"** they were excited, so they weren't looking properly. Mary and Joseph were probably out in the open, maybe a cave, somewhere near the path the shepherds would take from their fields to Bethlehem, a place they would easily find, without really looking. There's another providence.

Mary must have been incredibly tired. She'd just arrived in Bethlehem after several days travel, only to find the inn full. She then went into labour and gave birth, at night, in the open, on the floor. She'd made the effort to swaddle the baby properly, I guess with a piece of cloth from her own clothing, cleaned the manger up as best she could, and placed the baby carefully in it. Then just as she's trying to get some sleep, these sweaty shepherds turn up. Under normal circumstances, she'd be pretty grumpy by now.

But the things of the Lord are wonderful. Who wants to sleep when such momentous events are taking place? And when we become a

Christian, we're finished with our old life. The things of God, which meant nothing to us before, suddenly become exciting.

[17] And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child.

The first thing they did after meeting the new young family, was they **"*made known abroad*"** what had happened. They went and told everybody they could about it. That's what happens when we come to know the Lord. We want to tell others about it.

The Saviour has come. We can be reconciled to God through Him. The shepherds had just witnessed the beginning of the story. We know the rest of it, because it's all here in this book. We love this book. And we love Jesus Christ, for what He has done for us.

[18] And all they that heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds.

And **"*all they that heard it wondered.*"** This was one of the most successful evangelistic campaigns ever. Maybe the next day Mary had lots more visitors to deal with. Maybe someone offered them a house, because they're in one when the wise men came later on.

[19] But Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart.

So much had happened. And Mary kept these things and pondered them in her heart. What was she pondering? Why did God choose me? Do we ever think that? Why did God choose me, and not my unbelieving neighbour? We can ponder on that question for ever, because I'm no better than him, in fact, thinking about it, I'm far worse.

And then she must have been pondering the works of God. The remarkable ways seemingly unrelated things came together in her life. We can ponder Scripture and see God's dealings with His people throughout history. We can also ponder the way God has worked in

our life, because we all have different testimonies. All of them to His glory.

Nothing ever happens by chance. God works everything out in His providence. Mary was heavily pregnant, when she got a letter from the taxman telling her to report to the Bethlehem office by the date she was due. This seemed like a terrible problem for poor Mary. But in faith she undertook that journey. No matter how big the problems we face, they're never there by chance. The Lord is in control of everything.

Romans 8:28
And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.

But what about disasters, illnesses, painful experiences. How can God be in them? Well, what do we think? God isn't the author of sin. But because of man's sin, we live in a fallen world. And it's through this fallenness, God works all things to His own glory:

Mark 13:7
And when ye shall hear of wars and rumours of wars, be ye not troubled: for such things must needs be; but the end shall not be yet.

Psalm 119:71
It is good for me that I have been afflicted; that I might learn thy statutes.

John 16:33
In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world.

If we never had any troubles in this world, and just drifted through life easily, without any problems, nobody would seek after God. We'd all be too busy living our own selfish little lives. God has allowed man to fall, and the world to be a fallen world, to stop us living for ourselves and putting our hope and trust here. This vale of tears is not worth trusting in.

Job 5:7
Yet man is born unto trouble, as the sparks fly upward.

But while we're in this fallen world, we can have the assurance that God is working all things, both pleasant and unpleasant things, for good to His people, preparing them for the next world, which is far better. That's a wonderful thing to ponder in our hearts.

2 Peter 3:13
Nevertheless we, according to his promise, look for new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness.

Despite what it seems like in this world, God is in control of everything.

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8
To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven:
A time to be born, and a time to die;
a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted;
A time to kill, and a time to heal;
a time to break down, and a time to build up;
A time to weep, and a time to laugh;
a time to mourn, and a time to dance;
A time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together;
a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;
A time to get, and a time to lose;
a time to keep, and a time to cast away;
A time to rend, and a time to sew;
a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;
A time to love, and a time to hate;
a time of war, and a time of peace.

[20] And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told unto them.

How is it that the shepherds could be so joyful in their hearts in such a fallen world? Because they had confidence God was in control of it, so they had no need to worry about anything. But not only that, they knew that this child they had just seen was the Saviour of the world, the Christ, the Son of the living God. The one who was to say later:

John 10:10
I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly.

All of us today can have this abundant life too, if only we finish with living for ourselves, and come to this child, this Saviour, whom to know is life eternal. May God grant that each and every one of us may do so.

Luke 2:25-38. Simeon and Anna

At the time of the birth of Christ, we see that the land of Israel was in a mess. The Roman Empire had taken over. Wicked king Herod had been put in charge, and the Jews were oppressed. The religious leaders of the day had twisted the Scriptures, the Pharisees adding man-made laws to them, and the Sadducees taking away from the Scripture by not believing in such things as angels or the resurrection. Despite all this, God still had His people. Ordinary people. Not people of any status in society. Just ordinary people like us.

In the first two chapters of Luke, we come across Elizabeth and Zachariah, the parents of John the Baptist. It was said of them:

Luke 1:6
…they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless.

We come across Mary and Joseph. Of Joseph it was said that he was "*a just man*" (Matthew 1:19). And when Mary found out she was pregnant, she humbly replied:

Luke 1:38
Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word.

We come across humble shepherds going about their daily work, when an angel of the Lord appeared to them:

Luke 2:10,11
And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.

And we come across Simeon and Anna. We'll look at these two for a short time now. God always has His people in the right place at the right time, to fulfil His will. If we are the Lord's people, we should also be exactly where He wants us to be.

Simeon

[25] And behold, there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon; and the same man was just and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel: and the Holy Ghost was upon him.

Here, we find out five things about Simeon:

1. He was **"*in Jerusalem*."** That's where the true religion was outwardly based. Of course, God is everywhere. So we're able to worship Him anywhere, wherever we are. Christ said:

John 4:23
… true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth...

God is not dependent upon a place to be worshipped, but He does have churches in this world, where his witness primarily is. Simeon was in the right place, the Temple, the outward, visible church of his day, despite all its shortcomings. It was being run by Pharisees, Sadducees, men full of their own importance, who hated Christ and eventually got Him killed. But despite all this, it was there that Simeon got the blessing. No matter how bad we think the church is today, we should still make sure we are:

Hebrews 10:25
Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching.

2. He was **"*just*."** The Bible tells us:

Matthew 5:6
Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled.

Christianity is primarily concerned with morality:

1 John 5:19
And we know that we are of God, and the whole world lieth in wickedness.

True religion is not about having a gooey feeling in our heart whenever we think of Jesus, and that's it – otherwise carrying on our lives as before. True religion is about a complete change of heart. Being turned from darkness to light. The gospel is described as being:

Acts 26:18
To open their eyes, and to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins, and inheritance among them which are sanctified by faith that is in me [Christ].

Being finished with the wicked, vain, empty lives received by tradition from our fathers:

Romans 6:1,2,4
What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? God forbid. How shall we, that are dead to sin, live any longer therein?…. like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.

Which side are we really on? Do we love righteousness and hate wickedness? If not, we're not His. We're still in darkness and need to repent. Call upon Christ. It's not too late.

3. He was **"*devout*."** True religion was not just the first priority in his life. It was his life. He saw that everything else in this world was not worth living for. Solomon, the wisest man who ever lived apart from Christ, concluded:

Ecclesiastes 1:14
I have seen all the works that are done under the sun; and, behold, all is vanity and vexation of spirit.

Living for the Lord alone is the only thing worth living for. Everything else is emptiness.

4. He was also **"*waiting for the consolation of Israel*."** He was waiting. Often, we don't think that just waiting is very useful. We would rather be busy, busy, busy, doing something all the time. We get impatient with

waiting. But waiting, or patience, is a virtue. It is a fruit of the Spirit. We are called to wait, like the Thessalonians:

1 Thessalonians 1:9,10
For they themselves shew of us what manner of entering in we had unto you, and how ye turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God; and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, even Jesus, which delivered us from the wrath to come.

The Thessalonians were true believers. They had "*turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God.*" They were waiting for Christ's second coming, as indeed we are. Simeon was waiting for Christ's first coming. Waiting doesn't mean doing nothing. We do whatever the Lord has for us to do in this world. But we also wait and long for Christ to return. Waiting develops patience. We all need to grow in the grace of patience. Without it, we so easily get annoyed at the tiniest problems that come upon us in this world.

Simeon was waiting for **"*the consolation of Israel*."** For centuries, God had promised that a Messiah, a Saviour, would come to save His people from their sins. We have many references to this in the Old Testament. The coming of the Messiah was what the whole of Old Testament history was leading up to.

5. And we see that **"*The Holy Ghost was upon him*."** He was a godly man. He lived close to the Lord. And he was led by the Holy Spirit in all that he did. Let's make sure we are too, and be finished with being led by self, making our own decisions, all the time.

In all these five aspects, Simeon is indeed a wonderful example for us all to follow.

[26] And it was revealed unto him by the Holy Ghost, that he should not see death, before he had seen the Lord's Christ.

The Holy Spirit had shown him that he wouldn't die until he'd seen the promised Messiah for himself. He must have been an old man, otherwise this promise wouldn't make sense. It would only make sense

if his life had been prolonged beyond an average lifetime. We see that he was sensitive to the Holy Spirit, otherwise he would never have known this. We need to learn to be sensitive to what the Holy Spirit has to say to us, in the same way.

[27] And he came by the Spirit into the Temple: and when the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him after the custom of the Law,

Moved by the Spirit on this particular day, he was told to go to the Temple. This wasn't just a sudden thought from nowhere. A lot of people today think the Holy Spirit is leading them to do all sorts of stupid things, things that just pop into their heads at the time. No. Simeon had spent a long time of patiently waiting. During this time, he made sure he stayed close to the Lord. This wasn't a sudden impulse to do something. But when the Holy Spirit did tell him to go to the Temple, he was ready to obey at a moment's notice.

The Lord told him to go to the Temple. At the same time, in the Lord's providence, Joseph and Mary arrived for her purification. This would've taken place forty days after the birth:

Leviticus 12:2-4
If a woman have conceived seed, and born a man child: then she shall be unclean seven days; according to the days of the separation for her infirmity shall she be unclean. And in the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised. And she shall then continue in the blood of her purifying three and thirty days; she shall touch no hallowed thing, nor come into the sanctuary, until the days of her purifying be fulfilled.

And in the crowd at the Temple, in the Lord's providence, they met.

[28] Then took he him up in his arms, and blessed God, and said, [29] Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word.

Simeon took the boy in his arms and praised God. He was now ready for his death. The promise of God had been fulfilled. He'd seen the

Messiah just as the Lord had promised him. And he realised that his life's work had now been completed, and was ready to die.

If we are true Christians, we all have a unique life and calling from the Lord. Our job is to fulfil everything the Lord has for us to do as individuals in this world. But we should also realise that one day our lives here will be over, and we shall go to be with Christ.

We shouldn't be living our lives here so that death overtakes us suddenly. To most people, death comes as rather a shock. They aren't ready. They would have wanted to do so much more in this world before going away to the next. But that shouldn't be the attitude of the Christian. We should be ready for our death. While we're here, we should be aware of the work that the Lord has for us to do, and be diligently doing it. But we should also be aware that God has got a day fixed for every one of us, when we will die and go into the next world. It is inevitable. Paul said:

Philippians 1:21-24
For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. But if I live in the flesh, this is the fruit of my labour: yet what I shall choose I wot not. For I am in a strait betwixt two, having a desire to depart, and to be with Christ; which is far better: Nevertheless to abide in the flesh is more needful for you.

Paul was ready for his death. But he also realised that at that particular time the Lord still had some work for him to do down here. Here, the Lord's promise to Simeon had come to pass. He was now ready to die. He was happy and content to die. He knew his life's work was over. Then he blessed the child.

[30] For mine eyes have seen thy salvation, [31] which thou hast prepared before the face of all people, [32] A light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of thy people Israel.

His own eyes had seen the salvation that the Lord had provided for His people. Centuries of prophecy had now come true. This was the highlight of his life, and he knew that it was such a privilege to be able to see the Lord's salvation for himself.

It's a wonderful privilege to be a Christian. To know Jesus Christ for ourselves. We are now the children of God. The world won't understand us. But that shouldn't bother us, knowing the tremendous privilege it is to know Christ, and that through Him we shall be eternally saved from our sins:

1 John 3:1
Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God: therefore the world knoweth us not, because it knew him not.

But Simeon also knew that this salvation was **"*before the face of all people. A light to lighten the Gentiles.*"** He was perfectly aware that the salvation God had provided was not just for Jews, but for Gentiles too. This was prophesied in the Scriptures:

Isaiah 49:22
Thus saith the Lord GOD, Behold, I will lift up mine hand to the Gentiles, and set up my standard to the people: and they shall bring thy sons in their arms, and thy daughters shall be carried upon their shoulders.

So we see that Simeon, the man of God, was not only close to the Lord, but he knew his Bible well. The two go together.

The church leaders in Israel, on the other hand, hated the idea of their Messiah being for Gentiles. They thought that they Jews were the one true people of God, and nobody else. They thought that they could get to heaven because they were born into the right family. Many people think that. It's very sad. We shouldn't put our trust in our family or church background, or in church leaders, but put our trust in the Lord alone.

[33] And Joseph and his mother marvelled at those things which were spoken of him.

Joseph and Mary, being godly people themselves, understood the blessing Simeon pronounced on the child, and they marvelled. They knew Simeon to be a true believer like themselves, and they joyed in the fellowship they could have with one another.

Psalm 133:1
Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!

But we can only dwell in unity if we have been truly changed in our hearts.

Do we know that experience when we meet a true believer? It's a joy to our hearts. This is our new family. These are the people we should support and have our fellowship with now. These are the ones whom the Lord has changed in their hearts forever. They will now no longer be living for themselves, but for Christ.

[34] And Simeon blessed them, and said unto Mary his mother: Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising again of many in Israel; and for a sign which shall be spoken against, [35] "(Yea, a sword shall pierce through thy own soul also,) that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed.

And then Simeon gave Mary a prophecy. Mary would have accepted it. But it wasn't happy news for her. She was told that her son would be **"*set for the fall and rising again of many in Israel*."** That He would be **"*a sign which shall be spoken against*."** And that a sword would pierce her own soul too.

Mary would witness everything the world would do to Christ. He would be persecuted and put to death. Mary would be at the cross to see His death at first hand. She would have all these trials to go through in this world.

Not only this, but Christ would cause division in the land:

Luke 12:51
Suppose ye that I am come to give peace on earth? I tell you, Nay; but rather division:

The world today is divided into two types of people. Those who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and are saved to eternal life, and those who aren't. True believers will be persecuted by those who do not believe. But Christ said:

John 16:33
In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world.

But Simeon was not the only believer who was in the Temple at that time.

Anna

[36] And there was one Anna, a prophetess, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Aser: she was of a great age, and had lived with an husband seven years from her virginity; [37] And she was a widow of about fourscore and four years, which departed not from the temple but served God with fastings and prayers night and day. [38] And she coming in that instant gave thanks likewise unto the Lord, and spake of him to all them that looked for redemption in Jerusalem.

Anna was also very old. She'd been married for 7 years and then her husband died and she became a widow. She was now 84 years old. Did she have children? We don't know.

How did she spend her time? She **"*departed not from the temple but served God with fastings and prayers night and day*."** What a life! Complete devotion to the things of God. Do we have such complete devotion to the Lord? I don't know about you, but I feel ashamed that my devotion to the Lord is so small. Our lives should be like Anna's. After all, Christ is the only thing worth living for.

As a result of such devotion, the Lord blessed her. At the very same time as Joseph, Mary and Simeon were all together in the Temple praising God for the child, Anna also turned up. The Lord also guided her through the Temple crowds to meet them. And she offered a prayer of thanksgiving.

And then what did she do afterwards? She **"*spake of him to all them that looked for redemption in Jerusalem*."** She told others about the Saviour. God had finally visited and redeemed His people. What a joyful message we have to tell others about. Paul said:

Romans 1:16
I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth.

Despite the dire outward circumstances in the land at the time, there seems to have been plenty of other godly people in Jerusalem. Anna knew many who also **"*looked for redemption in Jerusalem*."** But they weren't the important people. They were the quiet, unknown people in the land. We don't know who they are. But one day we'll meet them all in glory, and be praising God with them for evermore.

So, there we have Simeon and Anna. Two old people. Of whom the world was not worthy. What an example they are to us. May God grant that we all could live our lives in patience, humility and complete devotion, just like Simeon and Anna did.

Luke 5:27-32. The Calling of Matthew

Readings:
Luke 19:1-10
Luke 15

I want to look for a short time at a few verses in Luke chapter 5.

Read Luke 5:27-32.

Christ calls a man named Levi to be one of His disciples.

[27] And after these things he went forth, and saw a publican, named Levi, sitting at the receipt of custom: and he said unto him, Follow me.

The calling of Levi to follow Christ is also described in both Matthew and Mark's gospels. In Mark's gospel he's also called Levi, but in Matthew's gospel he's called Matthew. In all three gospels it's obviously the same event, it's not a different person in Matthew's gospel. So we're talking here about the apostle Matthew. And in the gospel he wrote himself, he doesn't call himself Levi, but he prefers to call himself by a new name, Matthew. Why do you think that is?

The Bible is full of people who have their names changed by God. Abram became Abraham. Sarai became Sarah. Jacob became Israel. Simon became Peter. Saul became Paul the apostle. I suggest that this is God speaking to us throughout the Scriptures, telling us a very important principle:

John 3:3
Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.

Becoming a Christian is not just choosing to follow another religion or philosophy. It's not a choice, something we decide to do (and then maybe decide not to do later). It's altogether different from that. It involves a complete, permanent change of the heart, which only God can give.

Throughout history God has been changing people. We all need to be changed by God in the heart and become completely new creatures. We all need to start our lives all over again from scratch, because we've all messed up the first time. And that's exactly what happened to Levi.

What was Levi doing when Christ came? He was **"*sitting at the receipt of custom*."** In other words he was a publican, or tax collector. Publicans were hated amongst the Jews for two reasons: Firstly, they collected the taxes for the Roman occupying forces. The Jews hated that fact that their land had been taken over by the Romans, so any Jew who worked for the Romans was despised. Secondly, not only that, but most publicans collected far more tax than was due, so they could make plenty of money for themselves. So for these two reasons they were considered to be among the worst of society.

In every society, there are two types of people. There's the respectable members of that society, which is probably the majority. They fully join in with the way the society operates. They pay their taxes and generally keep the laws. And it suits them to do so. But in every society there's also always an underclass. Those who either don't want to be a part of that respectable society, like hardened criminals, or who, maybe through no fault of their own, have dropped out of it. Drug addicts, the prostitutes, the alcoholics, the down-and-outs, and so on. People that respectable members of the society wished weren't there. Publicans were classed in this group.

I suppose you could think of them as "*corrupt government officials*." We don't tend to come across this much in our country, but there are plenty of places in the world where corruption is a normal part of life. To get anywhere in the society at all, you have to bribe officials. The Jews had to pay their taxes, and the only way to do it was through these official tax collectors, who also made sure they pocketed plenty of cash for themselves.

So Levi was a publican, the lowest of the low. Collecting taxes but also cheating the people, and making quite a bit of money for himself.

Publicans visited John the Baptist to be baptised, and he gave them a piece of advice:

Luke 3:12,13
Then came also publicans to be baptized, and said unto him, Master, what shall we do? And he said unto them, Exact no more than that which is appointed you.

That's interesting. John didn't say, "Give up your job, it's corrupt." So the job of collecting taxes isn't wrong in itself. It wasn't like, for example, working in a betting shop, or prostitution or anything like that. If we become a Christian from one of those occupations, we'd have to leave straight away. But there's nothing actually wrong with collecting taxes. On one occasions the Pharisees asked Christ:

Matthew 22:17
Is it lawful to give tribute to Caesar or not?

To which Christ replied:

Matthew 22:21
Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's.

So having a tax system in itself is a good thing. We should all pay our taxes. What John was saying to the publicans who came to him, was simply that they shouldn't collect more than they were required to.

Now, we know that Levi/Matthew must have been one of those tax collectors at John's baptism. How do we know that? When the apostles had to find a successor to replace Judas, we are told the qualifications for being an apostle:

Acts 1:21,22
Wherefore of these men which have companied with us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John, unto that same day that he was taken up from us, must one be ordained to be a witness with us of his resurrection.

As Matthew later became an apostle, he must have had these qualifications. So he must have been at John's baptism, as were all the other apostles. When we think of Christ turning up at the Sea of Galilee and asking a few fishermen, "*Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men,*" we've got in our minds the idea that He'd never met them

before, and they just dropped everything and left their jobs to follow a total stranger. But that's not what happened. In John chapter 1 we see that Christ had already met at least Andrew and Peter before, at John's baptism. And I suggest He met all those who later became apostles there too. They'd already known Christ from that time, and were all expecting one day for Him to come, tell them to finish their ordinary work and follow Him instead.

And that's what happened with Matthew. Originally something in his heart made him want to make the journey from Galilee into the wilderness to find John the Baptist. John gave him this advice not to give up his tax-collecting job altogether, but simply to treat people fairly. After having been baptised by John, a "*baptism of repentance for the remission of sins*" (Mark 1:4), he'd gone back to his tax desk in Capernaum with a renewed heart.

And that's why in the gospel that he wrote himself, he would rather use the name Matthew, which means "*gift of God*." He no longer wanted to be called Levi any more, because he knew that he'd really changed in his heart, and wanted to show the world that he was starting a new life.

Now he was no longer going to cheat the people, but only ask what was due from them and no more. But that meant his problems had probably only just begun. He would now be a lot cheaper to deal with than other tax-collectors, who wanted to make a fat profit on their dealings. So now, he wouldn't only be despised by the respectable members of society, but the underclass would now despise him as well, because he wasn't playing their game of cheating the people any more.

And when we become a Christian, Christ has told us that things will become harder for us too, because we now want to do what is right. Christ said:

John 15:18,19
If the world hate you, ye know that it hated me before it hated you. If ye were of the world, the world would love his own: but because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you.

John 16:33
In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world.

When we become Christians, we may not want to go back to our old lives, our old companions, our old jobs, our old situation. All things have now become new within us. Our desire now is to do far better things, far more exciting things than just going back to our dreary old jobs again. But that's what we're normally called to do. Except, as I said earlier, if our old job was inherently evil, like gambling or prostitution. Normally, we're not called to walk away from a situation the Lord has already put us in. Rather we're called to go back there and be salt and light, be a witness to God's grace in that situation.

Life will become more difficult. But our calling is to stay there and develop the grace of patience. When the Lord's ready, He'll move us on. But it'll be in His own good timing, and not before. And that's what happened to Matthew. One day, Christ came to Matthew's tax-collector's desk, and said, **"*Follow me*."** With new difficulties to deal with in his ordinary job, and the desire in his heart to completely break from his old life, he left everything he knew to start a new life as a disciple of Christ.

[28] And he left all, rose up, and followed him.

Matthew **"*left all*"** to follow Christ. He's not going to collect taxes any more, even though it was a perfectly lawful job. Once the Lord called him to leave, he obeyed. And we too should be obedient to Christ when He calls. There's another tax collector in the Bible, who we read about earlier, called Zaccheus (Luke 19:1-10). See what happened to him.

Zaccheus was a chief tax-collector, and he was very wealthy as a result. But after meeting Christ, he had a complete heart change. As a result, he gave half of his goods to the poor, and offered to give back fourfold to anyone whom he had cheated. That is the evidence of a new heart. He'd been permanently changed from the inside. His actions proved it. There are plenty of people around today who claim they've been "born-again" by the Spirit of God, but the evidence of a

new life doesn't really seem to be there, they're just as worldly as they were before. Now I know we shouldn't judge anyone, but we do have to wonder sometimes. Let's just make sure that isn't us. Let's make sure that if we've truly been changed in our hearts by the Lord, we produce the fruit of that change in our lives.

And we also find out from Zaccheus, that nobody is too far from God that he can't receive a new heart from Him. Even a despised tax-collector can become a true believer, a true "*son of Abraham*."

[29] And Levi made him a great feast in his own house: and there was a great company of publicans and of others that sat down with them.

So Matthew holds a great feast in Christ's honour. And the people who came to Matthew's feast were "*publicans and sinners*." The underclass. These were the only people Matthew had ever known in his line of business. And now he'd come to know Christ, the first thing he wanted to do was invite everybody he knew to his house to meet Christ for themselves.

When something so life-changing happens to us, we immediately have a desire to tell others about it. We want everybody to know that they too can have their sins forgiven and receive a new start in life. But criticism arose from the respectable people:

[30] But their scribes and Pharisees murmured against his disciples, saying, Why do ye eat and drink with publicans and sinners?

The scribes and Pharisees get to hear about this feast. These are the respectable religious men of the day. They come to the house and ask Christ's disciples a question. Notice they didn't go to Christ Himself. That's the way people in the world behave. If they want to extract information from people they don't like, they go to who they think are the weakest first. They never go straight to the top. So we little ones at the bottom ought to always be ready:

1 Peter 3:15
But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts: and be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear….

The Pharisees asked the disciples, **"*Why do ye eat and drink with publicans and sinners*?"** Of course the Pharisees would never do that. They're respectable. They'd have no time for the underclass. The underclass spoil their nice, comfortable, respectable world. So they looked down on Christ and His disciples for mixing with that sort of people. Religious leaders aren't supposed to do that. That's not very "religious" at all.

Jesus heard the Pharisees asking the question to His disciples. And He went straight to them and answered it Himself. He cut out all their political manoevering and worldly-wise ways of doing things. Christ is having none of that. He gave them an answer Himself, in the form of a parable:

[31] And Jesus answering said unto them, They that are whole need not a physician; but they that are sick. [32] I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.

I want to spend the rest of the time now looking at this parable. We only go to a doctor if we feel sick. If we're feeling well, we don't go, because we don't see any need of going. That's a simple idea we can all understand. Christ then uses this simple idea as an illustration of the kind of people He's calling: **"*I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance*."**

The righteous are compared to the healthy man who doesn't feel his need of seeing a doctor. He can't see his illness, his sin. He thinks he's righteous in himself, so he doesn't see his need of a Saviour. So he'll never come to Christ, because he doesn't see he has any sins to be saved from.

Sinners, on the other hand, are compared to people who know they are sick, and therefore do feel their need of seeing a doctor. Only those

who see their sin can see their need of a Saviour. That's all the parable is meant to teach.

But it is easily possible to misunderstand this parable. And that's why we read Luke 15. Luke chapter 15 contains three parables: the parable of the lost sheep, the parable of the lost coin and the parable of the lost (or prodigal) son.

The reason we read that chapter is that all three parables were prompted by an almost identical situation to what we've got in Matthew's house here.

Luke 15:1,2
Then drew near unto Him all the publicans and sinners for to hear Him. And the Pharisees and scribes murmured, saying, This man receiveth sinners, and eateth with them.

Just as in Matthew's house, the scribes and Pharisees complain that Christ receives sinners and eats with them. And on this occasion, Christ doesn't just give one short parable, but three longer ones.

All three parables have the same message. Something is lost, and is then found. That's the main point of each parable. And Christ relates this to the sinner who repents.

The lost sheep:

Luke 15:7
I say unto you, that likewise joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine just persons, which need no repentance.

The lost coin:

Luke 15:10
Likewise, I say unto you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth.

And a lost son:

Luke 15:32
It was meet that we should make merry, and be glad: for this thy brother was dead, and is alive again; and was lost, and is found.

Now, that's the only point of each parable. There is no other deeper meaning. But what we tend to do with parables is over-interpret them. We start asking questions, such as, who do the "*ninety and nine just persons, which need no repentance*" actually represent? Or the nine pieces of silver that were never lost? Or the elder brother?

I heard a whole sermon once on the "*elder brother*." The prodigal son, who is the main point of the parable, was hardly mentioned at all.

And these "*ninety and nine just persons, which need no repentance*." Who are they? Some people say that they represents all believers, all those that have been found and are now in the pen being good little sheep. I find that a bit difficult to accept because even though I have been a Christian for many years, I really can't describe myself as "*needing no repentance*" any more. I'm constantly still needing repentance. Other people say that these 99 represent the Pharisees who think they need no repentance, which if I have to come down on one side or other, I would probably agree with this, because the context is the Pharisees complaining about Christ mixing with sinners. Others think these are the angels who never fell who "*need no repentance*." I'm sorry but I don't agree with any of that really. The problem we have is that, in all these parables, it at least seem to imply that there are many righteous people around who don't need to repent. They stay in the fold. They never go astray. The elder brother, for example, never left the family home. The 99 sheep never left the fold. The nine pieces of silver were never lost.

And similarly in our passage. The parable at least seems to imply that there are plenty of righteous people around who don't need to see the doctor, the Saviour. But these parables aren't teaching that at all. The Bible is very clear:

Romans 3:10-12
There is none righteous, no, not one: there is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God. They are all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no, not one.

Ecclesiastes 7:20
For there is not a just man upon earth, that doeth good, and sinneth not.

Jeremiah 17:9
The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked. Who can know it?

Whenever we come across a parable, it's only trying to show one truth. We shouldn't try to read into it more than it's trying to teach. In the parable of the hundred sheep, the emphasis is the one that got lost. The 99 who didn't get lost don't actually represent anybody in reality, because every one of us is like that one lost sheep. We're rebellious by nature. Similarly, the 9 pieces of silver that never got lost, and the elder brother who never went astray don't actually represent anybody. We're all that lost coin, or prodigal son, every one of us.

Similarly here, there's nobody who's well, and doesn't need a doctor. We're all sick and desperately need one. We're all sinners and desperately need a Saviour. The only difference is that some people realise that, and others don't.

And that's what this parable is getting at. **"*I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance*."** Many people may think they're perfectly well, but none of us are. We're all terminally ill, but we don't realise it. Most people carry on with their lives never realising they desperately need a doctor to cure them, a Saviour to save them from their sins. But we do.

If we think we're righteous, we're never going to see our need of a Saviour. But if we see our sins, we see the problem, and there is hope. We've still got to go to the doctor. But it's better to see the problem than not see the problem. At least if we see the problem, we're now within the sound of Christ's call. And that's all Christ is teaching us in this parable.

And there's another possible misunderstanding with this parable. We might come to the conclusion that Christ didn't come for respectable people at all, but only the underclass. But that's not true either. These two types of people are just a picture. The real distinction is between those who see their sins before God and those who don't. Many respectable people come to see their sins, repent and turn to Christ, and are saved from them. And many of the underclass never come to see their sins, and so never repent of them.

The apostle Paul was about the most respectable person you could ever come across. He said about himself:

Acts 26:5
After the most straitest sect of our religion I lived a Pharisee.

He was such a proud man. But after he met the risen Christ on the road to Damascus, his heart was changed. He had become a new creature, and his new life would now make him realise that pursuing self-righteousness the way he did – being so proud in himself – was all a complete waste of time:

Philippians 3:8
Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ.

And he came to see that far from being one of the most righteous, respectable members of society, he now saw that, actually, he was the worst of sinners:

1 Timothy 1:15
Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief.

And that's what Christianity should do to us. It should break our pride. The whole point of all of these parables is to try to get us, whoever we are, respectable or underclass, to see our sinfulness before a holy God.

But then we still need to do something about it. Many people can see they're ill, but they don't want to go to a doctor. Maybe they think he'll hurt them, or get them to change their lifestyle, or send them a huge

bill or something. There are lots of reasons why people, even though they know they're sick, will just not go to the doctor. But, the doctor is the only hope they've got of a cure.

Many people can see their sins, but all that does is put them within the sound of Christ's call. They still have to respond to it. They still have to go to the doctor, to call upon Christ to save them. And that will mean a change of lifestyle. We must give up our sins. That's the cost. Many people can't do that. Christ will give them the strength to do it, but people still find it too painful to think about, because they love their sins so much. But going to the Saviour is the only hope any of us have of a real cure for the problem of our sins.

John 3:36
Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on them.

The call of Christ is a call **"*to repentance*."** That's not a very popular word nowadays. It's unheard of in most churches today. The modern gospel today is altogether different. It tells us that Christ can give you a sense of self-worth, self-esteem, self-confidence. But that's not Christianity at all, it's humanism.

I spoke at a meeting in China once, and I mentioned we're all sinners and how Christ can save us from our sins, you know, the usual gospel message. And afterwards one young woman got up and said, "We shouldn't condemn ourselves," by which I took to mean she didn't like what I said very much. But that's what's taught in the churches these days. Don't talk about sin, don't talk about repentance. Tell people to think positive thoughts about themselves. Tell them they're worth something. But the problem is that I ***am*** a sinner. I'm not worth anything. What has this modern gospel got to say to me? Don't be negative. Snap out of it. But whatever anyone says to me, the fact remains I'm a sinner and I'm not worth anything. What I need, and what we all need, is a Saviour to save me from my sins. To die in my place. To take the punishment that I deserve and to place it on His shoulders instead. And that's exactly what we've got in Jesus Christ. This is the gospel message. This is the only message that can effectually treat the human condition. Not just words telling us to cheer up.

I'm not quite sure what message modern churches have for anybody if repentance is missing. Yes, we need to have faith, we need to have hope, we need to have more love, love, love between us, all of those things are true. But if we don't repent of our sins, if we're not prepared to accept that we need to change from the way we are by nature, then we won't be able to produce these things of ourselves. We need the Lord to change us. We need a new heart.

Only Jesus Christ can do this, and save every one of us from our sins, but we must call upon Him in prayer. It's a question of simply asking. And He's ready to receive all who come to Him:

John 3:17
For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

Jesus Christ is our only hope. We all need to forsake our sins and come to the physician of souls. And let Him cure us from the one illness that matters.

Finally, I just want to look at one more parable:

Matthew 21:28-32
But what think ye? A certain man had two sons; and he came to the first, and said, Son, go work to day in my vineyard. He answered and said, I will not: but afterward he repented, and went. And he came to the second, and said likewise. And he answered and said, I go, sir: and went not. Whether of them twain did the will of his father? They say unto him, The first. Jesus saith unto them, Verily I say unto you, That the publicans and the harlots go into the kingdom of God before you. For John came unto you in the way of righteousness, and ye believed him not: but the publicans and the harlots believed him: and ye, when ye had seen it, repented not afterward, that ye might believe him.

Let's not be like the Pharisees, who saw no need of a Saviour at all. Let's at least acknowledge our sins, and our need of a Saviour. That's what these parables are trying to teach us. And then let's want to repent of our sins, be finished with being the way we are by nature. Want to change. And let's put our trust in our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, who came into the world for the express purpose of saving sinners. He

can save us. He can give us the strength we need to break free of sin. He has said:

John 6:37
He that comes to me I will never cast out.

May every one of us here today come to know the true, real, and complete heart-change and new life that only Christ can give, and know the real joy of having our sins forgiven through Him.

Luke 7:1-10. Unworthiness

Read Revelation 5 and Luke 7:1-10

I want to look at this passage in Luke 7. In Luke 6, there's what appears to be a shortened version of the Sermon on the Mount, the full version of which is in Matthew 5-7.

There's a bit of controversy about whether Luke 6 describes the same event as in Matthew, or whether it's a different occasion. Those who think it's a different occasion point out in Matthew Christ sat on a mountain, but here He is standing in a plain:

Matthew 5:1,2
And seeing the multitudes, he went up into a mountain: and when he was set, his disciples came unto him: And he opened his mouth, and taught them, saying,

Luke 6:17-20
And he came down with them, and stood in the plain, and the company of his disciples, and a great multitude of people out of all Judaea and Jerusalem, and from the sea coast of Tyre and Sidon, which came to hear him, and to be healed of their diseases; And they that were vexed with unclean spirits: and they were healed. And the whole multitude sought to touch him: for there went virtue out of him, and healed them all. And he lifted up his eyes on his disciples, and said....

And we also see that the beginning of His speech is different. In Matthew there are nine beatitudes, "*Blessed are the....*" meek, poor in spirit, pure in heart etc. In Luke, there are only four, and each one has an equivalent opposite woe attached to it:

"*Blessed be ye poor.... Woe unto you that are rich"*
"Blessed are ye that hunger now.... Woe unto you that are full"
"Blessed are ye that weep now.... Woe unto you that laugh now"
"Blessed are ye when men shall hate you.... Woe unto you when all men shall speak well of you"

But actually I don't think these are strong enough reasons to necessarily think they're two separate events. We've got four accounts of the crucifixion which differ slightly in that they emphasise different things. But that's what's to be expected from different accounts by different

people. In a court of law, if all the witnesses said exactly the same thing down to the very last detail, we can't help thinking the whole trial is being fixed.

It could be that it was the healings in vv.17-19 that took place on the plain, after which Christ called his disciples up the mountain to teach. Luke doesn't mention that, but it would have occurred between vv.19-20. And He stood for the miracles but could have sat to teach. It's fairly easy to reconcile these details and conclude it was the same event.

But perhaps the best evidence in favour of both accounts being the same event, is that, in both passages, immediately after Christ finished speaking, He entered Capernaum and this healing of a Centurion's servant took place. And that's what we want to look at today.

[1] Now when he had ended all his sayings in the audience of the people, he entered into Capernaum.

In Matthew's account Christ heals a leper on the way to Capernaum, but Luke omits that.

"*His sayings*" were originally aimed at the disciples – in both Matthew and Luke, that's whom it says He was speaking to. But the multitude followed, and they also heard His words, so His words were also **"*in the audience of the people*."** And they were attracted by what He said, because it was different, it was refreshing. In Matthew it says:

Matthew 7:28,29
And it came to pass, when Jesus had ended these sayings, the people were astonished at his doctrine: For he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.

It was primarily aimed at the disciples, but the multitude found it attractive. They could see, still as unbelievers, what a different, radical, refreshing lifestyle Christ was presenting. Even unbelievers can see it's beauty, but their selfish natures make it impossible for them to follow it. Before we can even begin to follow this way of life, we need a new heart within us. And that's why it's primarily for disciples. It teaches

them how they should live. But that doesn't mean the beauty of it can't be a witness to unbelievers.

If we can see the beauty of this way of life, but we also realise we can't live up to it, that's a good thing. We need to know the Lord of heaven can give us a new heart to be able to live such a beautiful lifestyle, if only we ask Him. As Christ said in the sermon Himself:

Matthew 7:7,8
Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you: For every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened.

[2] And a certain centurion's servant, who was dear unto him, was sick, and ready to die.

Capernaum is on the north coast of the Sea of Galilee. After Christ left Nazareth, He based Himself in Capernaum. About the same time that Christ arrived there, a Roman Centurion's servant fell sick and was about to die.

The Centurion wasn't a Jew, he was a Roman soldier stationed there. And he had a servant, or slave, who was very dear to him. Do we find that strange? He actually cared about a slave's welfare. Most slaveowners wouldn't have bothered. If a slave died, it's an inconvenience, but they could just go down the market and get another one. It's no big deal when a slave dies. This Centurion had no reason to care about this man, but he did. He treated his slave as a real person. That's what we should be doing, but it's very unusual. He was concerned about the welfare of the least of those under his supervision.

[3] And when he heard of Jesus, he sent unto him the elders of the Jews, beseeching him that he would come and heal his servant.

The Centurion didn't seem to realise Christ was living there, he'd just heard of His presence in the locality, so this must have been just after Christ's arrival. The Centurion had heard about Him, and by his

attitude he seemed to know who He was. And he'd heard that He'd come into the city. A perfect opportunity to help his slave.

If we only had Matthew's gospel to go on, we'd be under the impression the Centurion himself came to Jesus. But here, in Luke, he doesn't actually meet Christ at all. He sends two groups to meet Him instead. The point is, these two groups both spoke in the Centurion's name, they spoke for him. So Matthew simply states that it was the Centurion who spoke the words, but the words were actually spoken by these others whom he'd sent. This is an important detail, because it's fairly crucial to the subject we're looking at.

The first group the Centurion sent, were Jewish elders. Why did he send Jewish elders? Maybe he thought that Christ wouldn't listen to a Gentile. He was friendly with the Jews, and he had friends who were Jewish elders, so he sent them to deliver his message.

They besought Christ, and pleaded with Him to come and heal the Centurion's slave. That was the original message the Centurion told the elders to give. That's what's in Matthew. But the Jewish elders added something extra that the Centurion hadn't told them to say:

[4] And when they came to Jesus, they besought him instantly, saying, That he was worthy for whom he should do this: [5] For he loveth our nation, and he hath built us a synagogue.

The elders thought it would be useful to say something about what the Centurion had done for the Jews. This wasn't any old Centurion. Most of them wouldn't be friendly at all to the Jews, and the Jews wouldn't be friendly to the Romans, because the Romans were occupying their land. But this Centurion had been good to the Jews. He'd built them a synagogue. The elders though it was necessary to say that. This Centurion was different. He loved the Jews over whom he ruled, and he showed that by building a synagogue.

The elders took it upon themselves to add something onto the Centurion's original message. They thought they needed to prove he was worth Christ's attention. But this addition didn't make any difference as to whether Christ would heal the servant or not. If the

Centurion had found out they'd added to his message, he'd have been horrified.

If we're ever entrusted with a message from anyone else, we must make sure we just give the message. We don't add to it, nor take away from it. We're not speaking for ourselves. That's particularly important as Christians, because we've been entrusted with the gospel. And we need to make sure we pass the message on accurately without embellishment.

2 Corinthians 5:20
Now then we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us: we pray you in Christ's stead, be ye reconciled to God.

[6] Then Jesus went with them. And when he was now not far from the house, the centurion sent friends to him, saying unto him, Lord, trouble not thyself: for I am not worthy that thou shouldest enter under my roof:

So Jesus goes with them. Not far from the house, a second group then appears with another message from the Centurion. These were the Centurion's friends. The message this time really shows the Centurion's humility. He calls Christ **"*Lord*."** He tells Him not to trouble Himself by coming to his house, because he wasn't worthy of a visit from Him.

[7] Wherefore neither thought I myself worthy to come unto thee: but say in a word, and my servant shall be healed.

He didn't even think himself worthy to leave his house to meet Christ. He knew Christ could heal by just saying a word from a distance, and expected Him to do that and not trouble Himself, or condescend, by going out of His way to come to the house.

So we've got this situation whereby the Jews had thought the Centurion was eminently worthy, because he'd been kind to them. But he saw himself as thoroughly unworthy.

This reminds us a bit about Christ's words at the end of Matthew 25:

Matthew 25:34-46
Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: For I was an hungred, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in: Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me. Then shall the righteous answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee an hungred, and fed thee? or thirsty, and gave thee drink? When saw we thee a stranger, and took thee in? or naked, and clothed thee? Or when saw we thee sick, or in prison, and came unto thee? And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me. Then shall he say also unto them on the left hand, Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels: For I was an hungred, and ye gave me no meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me no drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me not in: naked, and ye clothed me not: sick, and in prison, and ye visited me not. Then shall they also answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee an hungred, or athirst, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not minister unto thee? Then shall he answer them, saying, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye did it not to one of the least of these, ye did it not to me. And these shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal.

The ones who inherit the kingdom can't for the life of them see that they've done any of the good works Christ mentioned. They just think of themselves as so unworthy of inheriting the kingdom, they don't think about anything else. They certainly don't think of how good they've been. On the other hand, those who do think they've been good, are proud of it, and deserve to inherit the kingdom, end up just as surprised when they find themselves in everlasting punishment instead.

The thought of our own unworthiness is the key to real humility. Think of the crowds pressing around Christ demanding a miracle for themselves. And then think of the woman with an issue of blood who just crept up behind Him just to touch the hem of His garment. Christ healed many people, but why should anyone presume that He would? We should never presume on Christ to do anything for us. Who are we? We can ask, but never presume. This man saw himself as utterly unworthy of receiving anything from Christ.

Do we feel ourselves totally unworthy to approach Christ? Or do we strut into church every week thinking somehow we deserve to receive a blessing? This whole episode is fundamental with regards our attitude towards spiritual things. The wonderful thing is that we can approach God. We're told we can come before Him boldly:

Hebrews 4:16
Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need.

But we must also come before Him in the right attitude of humility. There are probably hundreds of examples of how we should approach God in the Bible. Here's a few of them:

Jacob:
Genesis 32:10
I am not worthy of the least of all the mercies, and of all the truth, which thou hast shewed unto thy servant.

Job:
Job 42:5,6
I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear: but now mine eye seeth thee. Wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes.

David:
2 Samuel 7:18
Who am I, O Lord God? and what is my house, that thou hast brought me hitherto?

Isaiah:
Isaiah 6:5
Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips: for mine eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts.

John the Baptist:
Matthew 3:11
He that cometh after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear.

The prodigal son:
Luke 15:19
And am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants.

If we're following the Lord, we really need to learn from examples like this from Scripture.

[8] For I also am a man set under authority, having under me soldiers, and I say unto one, Go, and he goeth; and to another, Come, and he cometh; and to my servant, Do this, and he doeth it .

The Centurion is a man under authority to his superiors in Rome, and at the same time he has people under him whom he has authority over. In other words, he's a middle-manager. And to some degree we're all middle-managers. We all have, as the Westminster Shorter Catechism puts it, superiors and inferiors. God has put every one of us in whatever position we have in life. And it's our job to know our place. To recognise our place and to be content with it. We've all got people over us, whether it's the government, our employer, or the head of our family. And most of us have others whom we're responsible for. The fifth commandment says:

Exodus 20:12
Honour thy father and thy mother: that thy days may be long upon the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee.

This isn't only about families, it's about every relationship we've got with those above us. We're to honour our superiors, whoever they are.

To know whom we should honour, and whom we have responsibility for, is very important. This Centurion knew just that. So many people think of themselves as king of their own universe, not responsible to anybody over them, nor responsible for anyone under them. But nobody is. We've all got responsibilities. We're all middle-managers like this Centurion, and we need to be aware of our responsibilities to others above or beneath us.

This is all very well with regards our relation with our fellow men. But what about our relationship with God? How much more should we

understand what our attitude should be towards Him. Look at this Centurion's attitude towards Christ. Did he strut into His company demanding a miracle? Did he think himself as being worthy of having his servant healed? No. All of us before Christ are not worthy of the least of His mercies.

[9] When Jesus heard these things, he marvelled at him, and turned him about, and said unto the people that followed him, I say unto you, I have not found so great faith, no, not in Israel.

Christ **"*marvelled at him*"** for what he'd said. And He never even met him. He turned to the two groups of people and said, **"*I have not found so great faith, no, not in Israel*."** Very few people in the Bible are said to have **"*great faith*."** The only ones I can find are:

Christ said to ***the Syrophenician woman*** (Matthew 15:28) *"O woman, great is thy faith."*

Stephen was said to be (Acts 6:8) "*full of faith and power*."

Barnabas was said to be (Acts 11:24) "*full of the Holy Ghost and of faith."*

Abraham was said to be (Romans 4:20) "*strong in faith*."

Why was the Centurion's faith great? Because of his whole attitude, particularly his humility. He had a very responsible position in society, but he didn't think of himself as anything special. He obeyed his superiors in Rome, and looked after even the least of his inferiors, his slaves. At the same time he was never ever proud about the position he had. So many people are full of themselves and their status in the world, but they're nothing:

Galatians 6:3
For if a man think himself to be something, when he is nothing, he deceiveth himself.

And if we want to have great faith, we need to accept that everything we have is not our own achievement, but has been given to us by God.

We need to realise we don't have anything to boast about in this world. And we need to trust in God for everything.

Christ said He had not found so great faith, **"*no, not in Israel*."** Matthew adds a bit here:

Matthew 8:11,12
And I say unto you, That many shall come from the east and west, and shall sit down with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven. But the children of the kingdom shall be cast out into outer darkness: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

The problem with the Jews was, they thought their pedigree would get them to heaven.

John 8:39
They answered and said unto him, Abraham is our father. Jesus saith unto them, If ye were Abraham's children, ye would do the works of Abraham.

They thought because they were born a Jew, they were children of the kingdom, but Christ told them that's not necessarily true. The Jews had many privileges. They had the Scriptures. They had the prophets. They had the Messiah Himself born one of them. But that counts for absolutely nothing if they never lived the way their Scriptures told them to.

And it's so sad that so many people have effectively the same attitude, whoever they are, not just Jews. Millions blindly follow the religion of their family, the religion they were born into. Assuming their family was right all along. Maybe they were right. But they just assume that, and never think for themselves. They certainly never cry to God asking Him to show them the truth. We're told anyone who seeks after God genuinely, will be heard.

Jeremiah 29:13
And ye shall seek me, and find me, when ye shall search for me with all your heart.

John 8:31,32
Then said Jesus to those Jews which believed on him, If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed; And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.

We must stop trusting in our background, our family religion, or anything else we think we have, and rather seek the Lord with all our heart. Only then will we truly find Him.

[10] And they that were sent, returning to the house, found the servant whole that had been sick.

The two groups of people who were sent by the Centurion, returned to the house and found the servant healed.

What can we learn from this Centurion, whom Christ never met because he was so humble that he wouldn't even presume to meet Him? Our utter unworthiness, and Christ's absolute worthiness. This man had **"*great faith*."** So he's an example to us. And we really need to have his attitude. To see our utter unworthiness before God. Do we see that? I think we fancy ourselves too much. The world out there tells us to be somebody, to be confident about ourselves, to impress people with what we have. And they'll even misquote Scripture to us. They'll say, "Don't hide your light under a bushel."

But, let's be honest. What have we got to impress people with? Nothing. And what little we might have has been given to us by the Lord anyway. The fact is, we are utterly unworthy. We're not worthy of the least of God's mercies. Yet He showers them on us.

Who is the only one in the whole universe that is worthy? If we don't know, we'll be miserable in heaven, because we'll all be crying it out to all eternity:

Revelation 4:11
Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honour and power: for thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created.

Revelation 5:12
Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honour, and glory, and blessing.

Let's make sure we abase self to the dust, and exalt Him, who alone is worthy.

Luke 9:28-36 & 2 Peter 1:16-21.
The Transfiguration of Christ

Every day, we're surrounded by people who live with no regard for God whatsoever. And because we have to live with them and work with them, it's so easy for us to get caught up into their way of thinking ourselves. Before we know it, we've just spent another whole day without once thinking of the Lord. When we ought to be pleasing Him and doing His will, we find ourselves ending up talking nonsense just like everybody else. As Paul said:

Romans 7:24
O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?

But despite all that, if we're Christians, we know the Lord is there. He's revealed Himself to us. He's changed our hearts. His Holy Spirit has come to dwell within us. We know all His promises are true. We know He loves us and cares about us. But many times, to build up our faith, we'd just like to have a bit more proof of His presence. "If only I could see God. If only He'd reveal Himself to me. Then I'd have great faith. Then I'd be able to stay closer to the Lord." Job had that problem. He'd lost everything, apart from a grumpy wife:

Job 23:3
Oh that I knew where I might find him! that I might come even to his seat!

Then we read this passage in Luke 9, and we wish we could have the same experience of God that Peter, James and John had. Shortly before His death, Christ gave them a glimpse of His glory, in what is colloquially known as His transfiguration.

Luke 9:28-36

[28] And it came to pass about an eight days after these sayings, he took Peter and John and James, and went up into a mountain to pray.

Christ took Peter, James and John aside to pray. That's a good start. We should be a praying people. But we invariably find ourselves too busy.

We should never be too busy to pray. To communicate with the Lord. Prayer is so important for our spiritual well-being.

[29] And as he prayed, the fashion of his countenance was altered, and his raiment was white and glistering.

While He was praying, Christ gave these three disciples a view of Himself that no-one else would ever see, not even the rest of the disciples. His appearance was completely changed and His clothing became white and glistering:

Mark 9:3
And his raiment became shining, exceeding white as snow; so as no fuller on earth can white them.

This intensely bright light is a feature of God's presence. Paul saw it:

Acts 22:6,9
And it came to pass, that, as I made my journey, and was come nigh unto Damascus about noon, suddenly there shone from heaven a great light round about me…. And they that were with me saw indeed the light, and were afraid

It was noon, yet an even greater light than the noonday sun shone from heaven. It was so bright, it made everybody in Paul's company afraid.

1 John 1:5
God is light, and in Him is no darkness at all

Revelation 21:23
And the city had no need of the sun, neither of the moon, to shine in it: for the glory of God did lighten it, and the Lamb is the light thereof.

While we're in this world, I don't think we really know what light is. We're really just groping around, looking through a glass darkly.

[30] And, behold, there talked with him two men, which were Moses and Elias: [31] Who appeared in glory, and spake of his decease which he should accomplish at Jerusalem.

Moses and Elijah appeared in their glorified bodies, and started talking with Christ. And they were speaking about the most wonderful thing possible – the death that Christ was just about to accomplish at Jerusalem. That's the most important subject in the world. His death on the cross, whereby He'd pay the price for the sins of all those who would come to Him, so that they wouldn't have to pay for their own sins themselves. Is the death of Christ central to our lives? How often do we speak of it with each other? I feel ashamed.

[32] But Peter and they that were with him were heavy with sleep: and when they were awake, they saw his glory, and the two men that stood with him.

Christ was standing there in His glory, talking with Moses and Elijah in their resurrection bodies, about the most glorious event this world will ever know. And Peter, James and John were asleep! And there's one other occasion when Christ took these three apart. In Gethsemane. And they were asleep there too!

Matthew 26:41
….*the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.*

When they finally woke up, Moses and Elijah were just leaving:

[33] And it came to pass, as they departed from him, Peter said unto Jesus, Master, it is good for us to be here: and let us make three tabernacles; one for thee, and one for Moses, and one for Elias: not knowing what he said.

Peter hastily asked them all to stay, so they could build three tabernacles for them. And it says here, **"*not knowing what he said*."** Peter was the sort of person who, when anything unusual happened, he's got to get in there and say something, even if it's something stupid. He's got to be involved. Let's learn from this. If we don't know what to say, shut up. Stop trying to think we're so important that we have to say or do something.

Peter recognised that this was a special experience, so he wanted to build a memorial to it. But he'd missed the most important point of the whole experience – the conversation between Christ, Moses and Elijah. He knew just enough to realise they were speaking about Christ's death, otherwise we wouldn't know about it here, but he hadn't taken in anything more than that. He didn't understand why Christ had to die. In fact later on, Peter even cut off somebody's ear to try to stop Him going to the cross.

And we're like that. We're very good at having our memorials, our church traditions and we busy ourselves about church activities, but we're not so good at just sitting down and listening to what Christ actually taught.

Many churches in this country are hundreds of years old. Great. Let's celebrate that. That's good. Let's celebrate God's goodness in giving us a witness to His truth for such a long time. But if all it is to us is a memorial, a social occasion, a milestone in the church's history, then we've lost the point. We must always keep in mind why this chapel is here. It's a witness to Jesus Christ. And we should be asking ourselves such questions as: What did Jesus Christ actually teach? Why did He have to die? How can we apply this to our lives? He's the one we should be following, and His is the teaching that we should be propagating from here. That's the most important thing about this chapel – about any chapel. Otherwise we may as well not be here at all.

[34] While he thus spake, there came a cloud, and overshadowed them: and they feared as they entered into the cloud.

And then a cloud came over, and they feared. In the Bible, we find that whenever anybody gets so close to the living God, a spirit of fear comes upon them. In fact, it's the unbelievers of whom it's said:

Romans 3:18
There is no fear of God before their eyes.

Isaiah encourages us to:

Isaiah 8:13
Sanctify the LORD of hosts himself; and let him be your fear, and let him be your dread.

And then, if the cloud wasn't fearful enough, God actually spoke to them:

[35] And there came a voice out of the cloud, saying, This is my beloved Son: hear him.

When God was about to give the people of Israel the Ten Commandments, they were so fearful, especially of the Lord's voice:

Exodus 20:18,19
And all the people saw the thunderings, and the lightnings, and the noise of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking: and when the people saw it, they removed, and stood afar off. And they said unto Moses, Speak thou with us, and we will hear: but let not God speak with us, lest we die.

[36] And when the voice was past, Jesus was found alone. And they kept it close, and told no man in those days any of those things which they had seen.

Peter, James and John saw Christ in His glory. They heard Him speak of His death that was soon to take place. They'd seen Moses and Elijah in their glorified bodies. They'd heard the words of God the Father Himself. And they'd experienced the fear of God as they approached so close to Him. Yet, at the time, it didn't actually change them at all. They still didn't understand that Christ had to die, and that He would rise from the dead. And Peter was still to deny Him three times. This weakness and ignorance was probably the reason why Christ told them not to tell anybody until after His resurrection.

After the resurrection, everything changed. Christ had made His atoning sacrifice on the cross. The apostles had seen and talked with Him in His resurrection body. Now they understood all about why Christ came to die. He came to save His people from their sins. The disciples had now become altogether different people. And here in

Peter's second letter, he writes about the importance of what he saw that day when he was half-asleep:

2 Peter 1:16-21

[16] For we have not followed cunningly devised fables, when we made known unto you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of his majesty.

Peter was an actual eyewitness of Christ's majesty. He now knew for sure that Jesus Christ has all power, and that He's coming again, next time in glory.

And Peter feels the needs to tell his readers that he's not just making all this up. Why? He's now absolutely sure in his own mind about his experience of the glorified Christ on that day. But how could he convince others of it? Why should others believe him? It was only a personal experience. Many people today say, "God told me to do this, God told me to do that." Well, let's suppose He did. The problem is, how can you convince me that God has spoken to you? And how can I convince you that God has spoken to me? We love hearing testimonies. Every believer's got a testimony of God's dealings with them. And hearing testimonies is a very encouraging thing. But we must also acknowledge that a person's experience of God is a very difficult thing to actually prove to anybody else.

So, when we're giving our testimony to unbelievers, we should give it by all means, but be aware that they're probably going to want to see proof of something, otherwise they might be thinking it's just a "cunningly devised fable." Now, if our life has completely changed, and they've seen a huge difference, that's going to be by far the best witness we could possibly be to them.

[17] For he received from God the Father honour and glory, when there came such a voice to him from the excellent glory, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. [18] And this voice which came from heaven we heard, when we were with him in the holy mount.

Peter testified that he heard the voice of God Himself, when he was on the mountain. He was actually half-asleep, and missed most of what happened, but now he realises how important and "holy" that mountain really was.

Maybe we've had some tremendous experiences of God in the past. And that's great. Let's recall them, like Peter is doing here. When we look back, we can see where the Lord has led us, and that will help to strengthen our faith.

But, in difficult times, we can begin to doubt even these real experiences of God that we were once so sure of in the past. "Was that really God leading me to do that?" "Did God really work then, or was it my imagination?"

In the Lord's goodness, He's given us something far better and far more reliable than our own experiences of Him to strengthen our faith. And He's given us something far better than our own unprovable experiences to convince others of the truth.

At the end of the parable of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16, Christ said:

Luke 16:31
If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead.

The heart of the natural man is so dark, we are told here that even if he saw for himself someone rising from the dead, it wouldn't necessarily convince him of anything. Even if he receives all the physical proof he was demanding, it still may not be enough to convince an unbeliever. Something far more is needed. And here we've got the answer. The Lord has given us today a far greater witness in this world, even than any experience of God's power, great though that might have been. He's given us "*Moses and the prophets,*" the Bible. If we don't hear what they have to say, we won't be convinced by lesser proofs of God, like someone rising from the dead.

[19] We have also a more sure word of prophecy; whereunto ye do well that ye take heed, as unto a light that shineth in a dark place, until the day dawn, and the day star arise in your hearts:

The only way we can come to know God for ourselves is if He chooses to reveal Himself to us. There are three ways God has revealed Himself to us:

God has revealed Himself to all men in creation:

Romans 1:20
For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse

But Creation only reveals that an all-powerful creator God exists, i.e. His "*eternal power and godhead*." That's enough to render all men without excuse for their sin, because they know they're responsible to this God.

For us to know anything else about God, His attributes, His love, His kindness, His justice, His mercy, His plan of salvation, we need Him to reveal more of Himself to us. The second way He has revealed Himself is in Jesus Christ. God became a man. Jesus Christ is called the Word of God:

John 1:14
And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth.

And Christ is called the Light of the World:

John 8:12
Then spake Jesus again unto them, saying, I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life.

But Christ only came into the world for a short time, in one particular place. Most of us will never actually physically see Him. So the Lord has revealed Himself in a third way, by provided a completely reliable witness to Him accessible to everybody in every age.

And that's what we've got in the Scriptures. "*Moses and the prophets.*" This is what we need. We do well to take heed to this book. It is like a light that shines in a dark place. It's all we've got. All other writings in the world are purely the ideas of men. But this is altogether different. It's the Word of God Himself.

Christ is central throughout this book. It's a reliable history book. It's an accurate record of what we need to know about the life and death and resurrection of Christ. It's a reliable guide as to what God requires of us. It's a reliable manual of Christian living. In fact, it's everything we need:

2 Timothy 3:16,17
All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: that the man of God may be perfect, throughly furnished unto all good works.

The Scriptures weren't written by a single man. That's important, because if that was the case, it would just be somebody's opinion. Mohammed wrote the whole of the Koran. Joseph Smith wrote the whole of the Book of Mormon. The words of one man can't be a witness to anybody. The Bible says:

2 Corinthians 13:1
In the mouth of two or three witnesses shall every word be established.

The Bible is a collection of 66 books, written over about 1600 years, by many different authors, who all bear testimony to the same one true living God.

But, you may say, aren't there contradictions in the Bible? There are several accounts of the same event, with seemingly different information.

I don't recommend reading novels or watching films particularly, Fiction is a complete waste of time if you ask me, but lets suppose we read a novel. It's fine first time around, we don't have a problem with the text. But read it a second time through, and a third time, and we'll soon discover mistakes in it. "That can't be true, because this happens later on." Or try watching a film. We can watch it once and it's fine, but

watch it a few times, and we soon begin to see the continuity errors in it. And that's what it's like with every work of man. They all contain mistakes. But with the Bible, the opposite is the case. When we first read it, we might think there are lots of contradictions in it, but the more we read it, the more these apparent contradictions are resolved.

The Bible is different from every work of man. The more we read it, the fewer apparent contradictions we find, and the more it becomes one unified whole. And that's because, although many human authors wrote the Scriptures down, they're not the words of men:

[20] Knowing this first, that no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation. [21] For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost.

The Holy Spirit moved the writers to write the words God wanted them to write. And it's the Holy Spirit we need, to understand the words properly too. There are many people who know the Bible well, but they're completely wrong because they don't have the Holy Spirit. And there are a lot of people who say they've got the Holy Spirit, but ignore the Bible altogether. We need both.

Remember, this isn't an ordinary piece of literature. The Holy Spirit inspired the words. Christians know that already. They know there's something different about this book. It moves us whenever we read it:

Luke 24:32
And they said one to another, Did not our heart burn within us, while he talked with us by the way, and while he opened to us the scriptures?

Jeremiah 20:9
Then I said, I will not make mention of him, nor speak any more in his name. But his word was in mine heart as a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I was weary with forbearing, and I could not stay.

The Word of God is alive. It is living and powerful:

Hebrews 4:12,13
For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. Neither is there any creature that is not manifest in his sight: but all things are naked and opened unto the eyes of him with whom we have to do.

The Bible is living and powerful. It's got power to convert the soul, to change people's hearts, to convince them of truth. And it has power to help the believer grow in the faith:

Psalm 19:7,8
The law of the LORD is perfect, converting the soul: the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple. The statutes of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart: the commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes.

The Bible is living and powerful. It's exciting to the believer. It burns within his bones. But there are many others who are totally unmoved by it.

Terry Waite was the Archbishop of Canterbury's special envoy during the war in Lebanon in the 1970s. He was captured by muslims and imprisoned in a cellar for five years on his own. The war eventually ended and he was successfully released. Years later he spoke at a Christian convention. He said that after four years of imprisonment, his captors gave him a Bible. What a wonderful provision from God! But he said "I read through it several times (he had nothing else to do of course), and I found no comfort in it whatsoever." I know we're not supposed to judge people, but I can honestly say that, at that time, He can't possibly have known the Lord – because the Bible meant nothing to him. Maybe he's become a Christian since, I don't know.

Contrast that with a man I met once. When he was young, he was walking with some friends, and they came across an empty church. The door was open and there was nobody around, so they went inside. And, just fooling around, they pretended to play church. His mates all sat in the pews, and he got into the pulpit and pretended to be the preacher. He opened the Bible randomly, and started reading from it, and as he was reading the words, suddenly in his heart he realised that it was all

true. None of his other friends shewed any reaction at all to the words that were read, but his heart had been changed forever.

Suddenly, what we've always thought was just a boring stuffy book, comes alive. We realise that it's all true. Then it becomes so precious to us. Because it's living and powerful. It's got a life of it's own. It's God's Word, not man's.

Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox and others want the church to be a higher authority than the Scriptures, so they would tell us that the Bible is a product of the church – the church decided in about the fourth century which books would go in the Bible – but that's not true. This verse tells us that. **"*Holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost.*"** Scripture became Scripture as soon as it came off the pen of the writer, whether church councils recognised it as Scripture or not. The fact that it took nearly 400 years for a church council to decide what Scripture was, just proves how long it takes church councils to agree on anything.

In any case, they got it wrong. They got the 27 books of the New Testament right, but they got the Old Testament wrong. They decided that a Greek translation known as the Septuagint was the inspired Word of God. Not only was that a translation from the original Hebrew, but it contained 14 extra books, which we know today as the Apocrypha. And that's why Roman Catholic Bibles contain these extra books.

It's the original Hebrew Old Testament that's the inspired Word of God:

Romans 3:1,2
What advantage then hath the Jew? or what profit is there of circumcision? Much every way: chiefly, because that unto them were committed the oracles of God.

How do I know that the Apocrypha is not the Word of God?
– It's got mistakes in it,
– The oracles of God were committed to the Jews not Greeks, and
– It doesn't burn in my bones when I read it.

Let's go back to verse 19:

….ye do well that ye take heed, as unto a light that shineth in a dark place, until the day dawn, and the day star arise in your hearts

We should take heed to this book. It's far more sure than even our own experience. It's a light that shines in a dark place. It's the only light we've got. But we've only got it for a short time. **"*until the day dawn, and the day star arise in your hearts.*"**

One day, we'll get to glory, and we'll no longer need the Bible any more:

1 Corinthians 13:12
For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.

While we're here in this world, we need direction. We need guidance. We need the Lord to show us the way. Here, we still only see the things of God through a glass darkly. Many people disagree on many different Scriptures and their interpretation. And that's always going to be the case. But that doesn't stop the Scriptures being a light shining in a dark place. It's all we've got to go on. But the Lord will make sure that we've got enough light to see our way through this world, and bring us safely to our home in the next world.

Do we want to know what heaven is like? There are glimpses of it in this book. Do we want to know what Christ was like? Do we want to know why He came into the world? He came into the world to save sinners. That's us. If we put our trust completely in Him and His saving work on the cross, He can take us out of this miserable old life of ours, into to a new life, an eternal life with Christ ruling in our hearts. Why would anyone not want that? Let's read this book and find out all we can about our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. He can change our lives forever through this book. And this book can also give us everything we need to know for life and godliness. It keeps us from sin:

Psalm 119:11
Thy word have I hid in mine heart, that I might not sin against thee.

Psalm 119:105
Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path.

Let's love this book. Let's take heed to it. Let's be converted by it. Let's live by it. Let's make it our most precious possession. And let us allow it to change us day by day, so that we can become ever more like Christ, who said:

John 17:17
Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth.

This book is a far more sure word of prophecy than any experience we can ever have. And it's a far better witness to unbelievers than we can ever be ourselves. The best thing we can do is point people to this book. To the extent that the truth from this book is preached, propagated and lived out in our lives, that's the extent to which the Lord can use us to bring people to Himself.

Luke 14:25-35. Counting the Cost

Read Luke 14

We read the whole chapter, but I just want to concentrate on the last eleven verses:

[25] And there went great multitudes with him: and he turned, and said unto them,

Wherever Christ travelled, He had a problem with multitudes. You might say, why is that a problem? Wouldn't it be good if our church was packed every week. Well, it depends why they're here. If they're here to worship God, or for Bible teaching, or genuinely to find out more about the Christian faith, then, yes, they're very welcome. But, if they're here for other reasons: maybe it's the trendy thing to do, or they're just here for the free food, and they're not at all interested in the worship or teaching, and if by being here they prevent others who want to come for more genuine reasons, getting in, that becomes a problem.

That's the problem Christ had. Sadly, there were so many people following Him who were only there for what they could get for themselves – miracles, free food and so on. They might have called themselves His followers, or disciples, but only a few really were.

Mark 3:20
And the multitude cometh together again, so that they could not so much as eat bread.

Christ needed to make a distinction between those who followed Him for wrong reasons, and those who truly were His disciples. And He used various techniques to do that.

Firstly, He only spoke to the multitudes in parables. Not to help them understand, but:

Mark 4:12
That seeing they may see, and not perceive; and hearing they may hear, and not understand; lest at any time they should be converted, and their sins should be forgiven them.

Why'd He want to do that? The parables were teasers. Those who wanted to know more, could ask Him, and He'd willingly explain everything:

Mark 4:34
But without a parable spake he not unto them: and when they were alone, he expounded all things to his disciples.

Jesus is approachable. And we need to know that too. "*Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find.*" But those who weren't really interested wouldn't bother.

Another technique He used was hard sayings. After the feeding of the five thousand, the crowds wanted to make Him king. He never came to be an earthly king, so He quickly got away from them. When they found Him again, He began to teach using hard sayings:

John 6:53
Then Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, ye have no life in you.

This technique seemed to work very well, because we're told:

John 6:60,66
Many therefore of his disciples, when they had heard this, said, This is an hard saying; who can hear it?.... From that time many of his disciples went back, and walked no more with him.

And here in this passage is another technique to try to thin the crowds. Here He gives three **"*Ye cannot be my disciple*"** statements. And here they are:

[26] If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple.

[27] And whosoever doth not bear his cross, and come after me, cannot be my disciple.

And down in v.33:

[33] So likewise, whosoever he be of you that forsaketh not all that he hath, he cannot be my disciple.

Christ wanted to get across that not everybody who calls themselves a disciple of Christ, necessarily is one. That's such an important principle to understand.

There are 2.4 billion people in the world who identify themselves as Christian. That makes it the largest religion in the world. But that's not what Christ said:

Matthew 7:14
Strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it.

So, it must be the case that, within the total number of all who say they're a Christian, the number of true disciples is a lot less. A true disciple of Jesus Christ is one who's been changed on the inside. He came into the world to change hearts and to give eternal life:

John 12:46
I am come a light into the world, that whosoever believeth on me should not abide in darkness.

John 17:3
And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent.

I have to say straight away, how dare we judge anybody. We can't see anybody's heart except out own. As long as someone gives a credible profession of faith in Christ with their mouth, we must accept it,

whether they really do have true faith inside them or not. So we should never judge anybody. But, the fact remains, although we can't see who are Christ's true disciples, they're a lot less than the total number who profess to be.

By giving the multitudes these **"*cannot be my disciple*"** statements, He's asking them to examine themselves – not others – to see if they're true disciples in their hearts. That's a useful exercise for us too. So, let's look at these statements in turn, and here's the first:

[26] If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple.

Is Christ really teaching here that we should hate our own families? Surely, God is love, and we're not to hate anybody. And that's true. It depends what you mean by "*hate*." If you mean being nasty or vindictive to anyone, of course that's wrong. Christ said:

Matthew 5:44,45
But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven.

Romans 12:19-21
Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord. Therefore if thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink: for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head. Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good.

That's the Christian way. But what's this about hating family members?

– Firstly, Christ put it differently on another occasion:

Matthew 10:37
He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me: and he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.

There, Christ tells us that if we love our families more than Him, we're not worthy of Him – we cannot be His disciple. Here, He tells us unless we hate our families, we cannot be His disciple. Hate, here, is the same as loving less. There's an example of this with Jacob:

Genesis 29:30,31
And he went in also unto Rachel, and ***he loved also Rachel more than Leah****, and served with him yet seven other years. And when the Lord saw that* ***Leah was hated****, he opened her womb: but Rachel was barren.*

To love someone less than another means that, if you had to choose, one must be rejected. That's what Christ meant here by the word "*hate*." He's not saying be nasty to them, or treat them badly. But one day we might have to choose Him above our families.

– Secondly, Christians think differently from unbelievers. We used to be like them, living for self, pleasing ourselves, no interest in pleasing the Lord. But we've been changed on the inside. We now want to honour God and follow Him, more than anything else. Consequently we now hate, or at least disapprove of, the unbeliever's lifestyle. So, if half our family are unbelievers, we must hate their lifestyle, because it's wickedness.

– Thirdly, not only should we hate the lifestyle of unbelieving family members, but **"*yea, and his own life also*."** We should hate ourselves too. We should be so glad we've been saved from our old life. And we should want our unbelieving family members to be saved from their way of life too. And we should also keep on hating ourselves for continuing to fall into sin, even now when we should know better. Sin still clings to the best of believers.

That's what Christ is getting at. If we don't hate the lifestyle of the unbelievers in our families, including the unbelief still lurking within ourselves, we cannot be His disciple:

1 John 2:15,16
Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of

the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world.

And then there's the second ***"cannot be my disciple"*** statement:

[27] And whosoever doth not bear his cross, and come after me, cannot be my disciple.

We're called to bear a cross. Christ had a real physical cross to bear. His sufferings were unique. His whole life was one of suffering for righteousness sake, and He ended up dying on a cross. On that cross, He willingly took on Himself the sins of all His people, so they wouldn't have to take the punishment themselves. Today we can be freed from the guilt of all our sins by trusting in Him and what He did on that cross for us. We can't enter into His sufferings, and we don't have to. He did it all. How thankful we should be.

But, the Christian life is not a bed of roses. We still have our own daily burdens to deal with. God has placed all of us in unique situations. And life is burdensome:

John 16:33
In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world.

Maybe we've got an elderly relative to look after, or a wayward alcoholic son, or a debilitating illness. Everybody's got their own unique "crosses" to bear, and that's what we're called to do – bear them, and as Luke says elsewhere, "*take up your cross* ***daily***."

We might think our problems are overwhelming, and if we try to do everything ourselves, it will be. But as Christians, we've got the living God within us to help us. We don't have a dead religion like Buddhism, Islam or Roman Catholicism, where what they call "prayer" is just reciting words. We pray to a living God, who hears and answers all our prayers. He's always there when things are otherwise impossible:

Matthew 19:26
With men this is impossible; but with God all things are possible.

Some people think being a Christian means we have no more problems. Jesus came to take them all away. Don't think about sin any more. Just think positive thoughts about yourself. That's not Christianity, or reality. Difficulties don't go away once we become a Christian. In fact, they get worse. We'll always have some sort of cross to bear. But if we walk closely with Christ, our crosses become bearable. The apostle Paul had a thorn in the flesh. He asked three times for the Lord to remove it, but He didn't. Instead He said:

2 Corinthians 12:9
My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness.

And then there's the third **"*cannot be my disciple*"** statement:

[33] So likewise, whosoever he be of you that forsaketh not all that he hath, he cannot be my disciple.

We're called here to forsake all we have. A rich, young ruler once came up to Christ:

Matthew 19:21,22
Jesus said unto him, If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come and follow me. But when the young man heard that saying, he went away sorrowful: for he had great possessions.

Christ specifically told this rich man to give all his possessions away. Is that what's meant here by "*forsake all that we have*"? Maybe, but not necessarily. This rich, young ruler had a particular weakness – stuff. He loved it too much. So that's what had to be dealt with.

We're told he "*went away sorrowful,*" and we don't hear anything more about him. Many think he never came to Christ at all, but I don't think so. If he really had chosen his possessions above Christ, he would have just walked off, or maybe become angry. The fact he was sorrowful, means that what Christ said had touched him. It bothered him. And if what Christ says bothers us, there's hope. Because it means we're taking Him seriously.

We're told ***"whosoever he be of you that forsaketh not all that he hath."*** In other words, ask ourselves, which do we love more? Our stuff, or Christ? After we become a Christian, a lot of what we've already got, we're not going to need any more. It fed our old lifestyle, so it's no longer required. So we can happily get rid of it. Everything else we're simply called to hand over to God's use. Whether it's plenty or little. Our property is not our own any more. We've now become merely the Lord's stewards of it. And we're told to give it away to anybody that asks:

Matthew 5:38-42
Ye have heard that it hath been said, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth: But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if any man will sue thee at the law, and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloke also. And whosoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him twain. Give to him that asketh thee, and from him that would borrow of thee turn not thou away.

But doesn't that mean we'll just be a doormat? There are plenty of people out there who know jolly well this teaching of Jesus Christ, and when they find out we're a Christian, they'll take advantage of us. They'll ask us for things knowing we've got to give it to them. We ought to give to anybody in genuine need, but also realise how sly people can be:

Matthew 10:16
Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves: be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves.

We've just got to trust in the Lord that all our stuff won't disappear. It's His stuff anyway. But the point is, all our stuff, we should be willing to forsake, rather than clinging on to it.

There are the three **"*cannot be my disciple*"** statements. If our families mean more to us than Christ, if we're not prepared to bear a cross and if we can't forsake all our stuff, guess what, we cannot be His disciple. Now, in the middle of this there are two parables:

[28] For which of you, intending to build a tower, sitteth not down first, and counteth the cost, whether he have sufficient to finish it ? [29] Lest haply, after he hath laid the foundation, and is not able to finish it, all that behold it begin to mock him, [30] Saying, This man began to build, and was not able to finish.

[31] Or what king, going to make war against another king, sitteth not down first, and consulteth whether he be able with ten thousand to meet him that cometh against him with twenty thousand? [32] Or else, while the other is yet a great way off, he sendeth an ambassage, and desireth conditions of peace.

The first parable is about a man who wants to build a tower, so he starts to build, but halfway through realises he hasn't got enough cash to finish, because he didn't work out the cost at the start. As a result, he's mocked, everybody laughs at him. So the parable seems to teach that before we decide to become a Christian, we must count the cost.

But what is the cost of becoming a Christian? Christ has just told us. We may lose our families, we lose control of our stuff, and we have to bear a cross. Who in their right mind would ever choose that? If becoming a Christian was simply about making a decision, then if we knew the real cost beforehand, nobody would ever choose to come to Christ.

I can see two types of people here:

Some don't count the cost. They think they can start to live the Christian life in their own strength, without realising they can't. What happens? They get mocked, laughed at. If we try to live the Christian life with our own effort, it looks stupid, and it's a terrible witness.

There are others who do count the cost, and they realise they couldn't possibly live up to that standard. But that puts them off Christianity altogether, and sadly, they walk away.

In the second parable, a king wants to go to war, but he realises that he only has 10,000 men compared to his enemy who's got 20,000. So, instead of going to war, he quickly sends an ambassador to the other king and seeks conditions of peace. He's a bit more sensible. He counts

the cost of going to war first, realises he's going to lose, so quickly seeks for peace instead. And that's us. We ought to count the cost of becoming a Christian first. Then realise we can't do it, but rather than walking away, we quickly send an ambassador to God, to desire conditions of peace. In other words, pray to Him, tell Him we can't do it, and cry to Him for mercy. All we can ever say to God is:

Luke 18:13
God be merciful to me a sinner.

If we genuinely mean what we say, then God will come to us, and change us on the inside, permanently, for ever. He will make us an altogether new creature, with a new heart that now has got the ability to live the Christian life, which we didn't have before.

If we really lived the Christian life from a Christian heart, nobody would laugh at us. They'd see we're genuine, we've got integrity. That's the witness. Genuine Christianity from a genuine heart, not trying to be a Christian from a heart that's never been changed.

Then at the end we've got two verses which don't seem to make much sense, or at least don't seem to be connected to what's just been said:

[34] Salt is good: but if the salt have lost his savour, wherewith shall it be seasoned? [35] It is neither fit for the land, nor yet for the dunghill; but men cast it out. He that hath ears to hear, let him hear.

There's a similar verse about salt in Matthew's gospel, and it's connected to light:

Matthew 5:13,14
Ye are the salt of the earth: but if the salt have lost his savour, wherewith shall it be salted? it is thenceforth good for nothing, but to be cast out, and to be trodden under foot of men. Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on an hill cannot be hid.

True Christians, who've been changed from the inside by God, are spoken of as being salt and light in the world. But is there a difference between the two? First of all we're light:

Philippians 2:15
That ye may be blameless and harmless, the sons of God, without rebuke, in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation, among whom ye shine as lights in the world;

We're told to behave as children of light, producing the fruit of the spirit:

Ephesians 5:8-10
For ye were sometimes darkness, but now are ye light in the Lord: walk as children of light: (For the fruit of the Spirit is in all goodness and righteousness and truth;) Proving what is acceptable unto the Lord.

I suggest that the light is the spiritual light we receive from God when He changes us. We become new creatures in Christ, and we change permanently. The light can never go out:

Matthew 5:14
A city that is set on an hill cannot be hid.

We can never lose our salvation. Not one of God's people will be lost:

John 10:28
And I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand.

But we can stop being fruitful. We can hide our light under a bushel. The light's still there, shining, but nobody can see it any more. When the light is hidden, nobody can tell we're a Christian any more. We behave just like everybody else. That's where the metaphor of salt comes in. Our saltiness has been lost, our witness to the world is lost. We lose our savour.

I'm sure we've all backslidden at some stage in our Christian lives. We know the light's still there in our hearts, but it's hidden, the saltiness has gone. And in that state I can guarantee that person is miserable. The

difference between a backslidden Christian, and someone who walks away from a profession of Christianity but never was a true believer, is that going back into the world would never bother the latter. But a true Christian will never be happy until he comes back to the Lord. In a backslidden state, we cease to be fruitful, our witness for Christ disappears, and we're miserable. And look what happens:

"It is neither fit for the land, nor yet for the dunghill; but men cast it out."

We become useless, not even fit for the dunghill. It's possible to be a fruitless Christian:

2 Peter 1:5-8
And beside this, giving all diligence, add to your faith [notice faith is already there] *virtue; and to virtue knowledge; And to knowledge temperance; and to temperance patience; and to patience godliness; And to godliness brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness charity. For if these things be in you, and abound, they make you that ye shall neither be barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

Notice "***men*** *cast it out*." God hasn't cast them out, the light's still there in the heart, they're still one of the Lord's people, but the witness before men has gone.

A backslider is very similar to the person who tries to be a Christian in his own strength. A backslider is a true believer trying to be an unbeliever. As opposed to an unbeliever trying to be a believer. Either way, the world laughs. The witness is not there. A Christian trying to be like the world and an unbeliever trying to be a Christian looks so stupid. It's embarrassing. Nobody is going to take our faith seriously if we find ourselves like that.

That's the text. But there's one question we might still have in our minds. If living the Christian life is impossible to do ourselves, and we can't live it without the Lord changing us, why do people bother becoming Christians at all? What's the point? Why don't we all just give

it all up and go down the beach instead? A few Scriptures might help with this:

Ecclesiastes 1:14
I have seen all the works that are done under the sun; and, behold, all is vanity and vexation of spirit.

King Solomon, the wisest man who ever lived (apart from Christ), said that. If all we see are the things "*under the sun*," everything in this world is pointless. Nothing in this world satisfies. Many people today suffer from depression. I just want to tell you, you're right. And it gets worse:

1 John 5:19
The whole world lieth in wickedness.

Look at how much evil there is in the world, not just on the news, but in our town, maybe even in our home. Why is the world like this? It's not God's fault. When He created the world, "*He saw that it was good.*" So where does evil come from?

Mark 7:21-23
For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, Thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lasciviousness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness: All these evil things come from within, and defile the man.

The problem is in us, our own hearts. I can't solve the problems in Syria or Yemen or Ukraine or anywhere else. But I'm not responsible for them. I'm not even responsible for what my neighbour does. I'm only responsible for all the wickedness that comes out of my own heart.

Nobody makes a decision to live the Christian life, because they fancy living some alternative lifestyle. Although we do it willingly, the Christian life is not an option, one of many to choose from. We ***must*** become a Christian. We ***must*** be born again. We ***must*** be changed. The consequence of not become a Christian, is that we'll be justly judged by a righteous God for everything we're responsible for – what comes out of here, the heart. And nobody will be able to stand. If we're

drowning, and somebody throws us a lifebelt, it's not a lifestyle choice whether we grab hold of it or not. We've got to, or we drown.

After Christ had tested the people with hard sayings, and most of them stopped following Him, Simon Peter, despite all his faults, stayed, and actually gave the correct response:

John 6:67,68
Then said Jesus unto the twelve, Will ye also go away? Then Simon Peter answered him, Lord, to whom shall we go? thou hast the words of eternal life.

There's nowhere else to go. There's no other way to be saved from the judgment to come, but by Jesus Christ, "*the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world.*" May we all call on Him in repentance and faith, so that we too can not only be changed for ever, but realise it's a delightful life serving Him. We're free from the guilt of all this sin.

Psalm 32:1,2
Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man unto whom the Lord imputeth not iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no guile.

Luke 16:19-31. The Rich Man and Lazarus

This is a parable. A story to teach us something. And it's about a rich man and a beggar.

[19] There was a certain rich man, which was clothed in purple and fine linen, and fared sumptuously every day:

First of all, we're introduced to a rich man, and we're told he **"*was clothed in purple and fine linen*,"** which indicates he was a well-respected member of society. And he **"*fared sumptuously every day*."** He had all he could ever want, all the time. And I can't help thinking that applies to all of us here. Compared to most of the world, we're so well-off.

But this parable isn't simply about a rich man and a poor man. If all we see in this parable is that it's better to be poor than rich, we've got it wrong. That's not what it's teaching. It's about attitude of heart. It's possible to be rich, and, unlike this man, kind and generous to others. And it's just as possible to be poor, and just as selfish towards others as this rich man. However, most of the time, rich people tend to be content with their riches and don't bother too much about others less well off than themselves. This rich man was like that. And he had a problem every day that he kept well outside of his gated compound.

[20] And there was a certain beggar named Lazarus, which was laid at his gate, full of sores,

Some people think this isn't a parable but a real event, because if it is a parable, it would be the only one one in which somebody is named, Lazarus. This isn't the same Lazarus who was raised from the dead in John 11. But I don't think his being named means necessarily that it's not a parable. I think he's named to show us that beggars full of sores are still real people. I think it's significant the well-respected rich man isn't named.

Anyway, whether this is a parable or not, the point is, Christ told this story to teach us something. And we need to understand what it teaches.

Lazarus was laid at the rich man's gate. He supposed the rich man might have had compassion on him. We don't know how long he'd been there, but he never got anything.

[21] And desiring to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man's table: moreover the dogs came and licked his sores.

And he's not merely a beggar. He's so full of sores that the dogs came and licked them. They must have been really bad, and oozing pus. He's not only poor, but in poor health too. It wasn't something he could hide. Dogs followed him. He was in a really bad way.

And he desired **"*to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man's table*."**

This man isn't a scrounger. He's genuinely desperate. He's not after the life of the rich man. He's not demanding some kind of change in society so he can live like the rich man. He's not even asking for justice so the rich man would be forced to give him something by law. He's simply appealing to the rich man's compassion. He's just after a few crumbs. That'll do. Even a few coppers would make the world of difference to this beggar. To the rich man that would be nothing. But the rich man has no compassion whatsoever for poor Lazarus. And there's not much Lazarus could lawfully do about it.

But something happens to both of them which changes everything. Something inevitable happens to us all soon enough. We all die. Then where will we be?

[22] And it came to pass, that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels into Abraham's bosom: the rich man also died, and was buried;

This story gives us just a small insight into what happens after death. There's not much in the Bible about what life after death is like actually. Most people think nothing happens, we just get snuffed out. When you're dead, you're dead. When our body's gone, our soul is as well. But how do we know that? Where do we get that information from? There's no basis at all for believing it. The best we can say is that we don't know what happens after death. But the fact that we still exist and that something does happen to us after death is one of the few things we do know about, because God has revealed it.

Hebrews 9:27
It is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment.

There's a judgment after death. And just thinking about it, that's surely a good thing. Justice in this world is so obviously not done perfectly by anyone, although I'm sure the judicial system tries its best. But men can't see the heart of a person. Men can't really judge motives, they can't see what a person's really like inside. But God can. There is no hiding from the one true God, Lord of heaven and earth. He alone can judge righteously:

Psalm 7:9
Oh let the wickedness of the wicked come to an end; but establish the just: for the righteous God trieth the hearts and reins.

Revelation 16:7
Even so, Lord God Almighty, true and righteous are thy judgments.

We're told that the rich man **"*died, and was buried.*"** And that's it. We find out in a minute that he does actually go somewhere, or at least his soul does. But there's no fanfare for this well-regarded man in this world. He might have had a great funeral, because he was so highly regarded. But in God's eyes, he's just another one who **"*died, and was buried.*"**

On the other hand, we're told the beggar died and something very special happened to his soul immediately afterwards. He **"*was carried by the angels into Abraham's bosom.*"** Whatever that means, it sounds good. What a wretched life he'd had. We don't know how long for. But what is our life in this world really? It's all "*vanity and vexation of spirit.*"

Genesis 47:9
And Jacob said unto Pharaoh, The days of the years of my pilgrimage are an hundred and thirty years: few and evil have the days of the years of my life been....

Psalm 90:10
The days of our years are threescore years and ten; and if by reason of strength they be fourscore years, yet is their strength labour and sorrow; for it is soon cut off, and we fly away.

Job 5:7
Yet man is born unto trouble, as the sparks fly upward.

Are we happy here, really? Do we love this world? Do we want this life to go on for ever? The rich man did. He was quite happy here, surrounded by his riches. Unpleasant things, like poor, sore-infested beggars he could lock outside of his gate and ignore. But do we really want this world to go on for ever, with all its evil, misery and decay? Surely not.

Or do we have trials and tribulations here, like Lazarus? Let's be honest about this life. It's miserable isn't it? The fittest survive at the expense of the weak. Justice is never done properly. Is not our life, every day, one of "*labour and sorrow*," as Moses put it?

Don't get me wrong. We shouldn't be unthankful for the lives God has given us. As long as we've breath, there's work to do. But we shouldn't love this present, evil world.

1 John 2:15
Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him.

Philippians 1:21-23
For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. But if I live in the flesh, this is the fruit of my labour: yet what I shall choose I wot not. For I am in a strait betwixt two, having a desire to depart, and to be with Christ; which is far better....

So, Lazarus, after such a wretched existence in this world, ends up in Abraham's bosom, a place of eternal rest from his labours. In his life, he never tried to fight for any rights he might have had, and he never

stole to help himself, which makes me think he was trusting in the Lord for his daily needs. And the Lord finally takes him away out of this world to a far, far better place. But the rich man goes somewhere completely different:

[23] And in hell he lift up his eyes, being in torments, and seeth Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom.

The rich man goes to hell, to torments. Now, a lot of people, even genuine Christians, have a problem with the idea of hell. First of all we need to get rid of fancy, superstitious, mediaeval ideas of hell we might have in our minds. Hell is not a place of heat and flames with the devil in charge keeping us down in there with his pitchfork. Where that idea came from I don't know. Well, I have got an idea. It was probably from the pope frightening people to death to keep them in his church. I hope you don't think that's what I'm doing. God forbid. The devil isn't in charge of hell, he's it's most notorious prisoner.

Matthew 25:41
Then shall he say also unto them on the left hand, Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels.

I don't think people have a problem with hell so much. Most people are happy to believe in some kind of just judgment after death. It's the eternity of it that people have a problem with. The fact it lasts forever. So men invent such places as purgatory, places which have a time limit. Even Adolf Hitler will get out eventually. But that's not what the Bible teaches.

Isaiah 33:14
The sinners in Zion are afraid; fearfulness hath surprised the hypocrites. Who among us shall dwell with the devouring fire? who among us shall dwell with ***everlasting burnings****?*

2 Thessalonians 1:7-9
The Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with his mighty angels, In flaming fire taking vengeance on them that know not God, and that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ: Who shall be punished with ***everlasting destruction*** *from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power....*

Even many genuine Christians find the idea of hell difficult. They read such things as:

John 3:16
For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not ***perish****, but have everlasting life.*

They see the word "*perish*" and say, Aha! those who believe in Christ get everlasting life, but those who don't, simply get snuffed out. But that can't be what it means. If that was the case, God would be unjust. Nobody would get the punishment they deserve. Sinners would love that. They don't want a boring life for ever with a goody-goody like Jesus. They want to indulge their lusts as much as they can, believing the worst thing that can happen is that they'll be snuffed out and never be brought to account. Teaching people that if they don't repent they'll just be snuffed out, gives them exactly what they want.

1 Corinthians 15:32
Let us eat and drink; for to morrow we [but] *die.*

If we have a problem with the eternity of the punishment, I'm sorry, but the Bible teaches it. And I think that's to wake us up. To give us a push, to make us realise we've got to do something about this now, in this life, because there's no second chance after we die.

So this rich man ends up in hell, in torments. And he looks up. And he can see what's happening in the other place. And that place is **"*afar off*."** There's no hope of getting there now. In any case, as we find out later in v.26, there's **"*a great gulf fixed*"** between the two places so nobody can get between them. It's impossible to make amends for anything we've said or done after we're dead. The only time we have to sort ourselves out is now.

And who does the rich man see? **"*Father Abraham*,"** as he calls him in v.24. The rich man was a Jew. He thought having Abraham as his natural father was sufficient to get him a nice, comfortable place in the next world. But that's not necessarily so:

John 8:39
They answered and said unto him, Abraham is our father. Jesus saith unto them, If ye were Abraham's children, ye would do the works of Abraham.

Many people are like this, not just Jews. They think their pedigree can get them to heaven. But it's not because we're born into a certain religion that God accepts us, it's whether we live our lives as God requires. And that applies to everybody, whatever religion we're born into.

Where's Lazarus in all this? Was he a devout Jew? Did he go to the Temple with the rich man? Did he strictly observe the Sabbath and all the Jewish festivals? Even though he truly believed in God, he probably wouldn't have been anywhere else but begging for his food every day. He'd have to. He'd have no time to attend the Temple. Yet he's the one who ends up in Abraham's bosom, not the rich man, who thought himself so devout.

[24] And he cried and said, Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus, that he may dip the tip of his finger in water, and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame.

The rich man cries out to who he thought was his ***"Father Abraham."*** He calls on him to grant him mercy. Men are all too keen to call on creatures for mercy, whether it's Mary or the saints or somebody. But mercy only comes from God. And the very solemn thing we find out here, is that God's mercy runs out in the next world.

God is such a merciful God here. He gives us food and clothing and all things. Yet how many of us are really thankful? Vast multitudes totally ignore Him, the provider of us all.

Exodus 34:6,7
The Lord, The Lord God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, Keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, and that will by no means clear the guilty.

Psalm 103:8
The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and plenteous in mercy.

Romans 1:21
W*hen they knew God, they glorified him not as God,* ***neither were thankful****; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened.*

Notice, the rich man doesn't say, "There's been some kind of mistake, I'm in the wrong place. Can you, Father Abraham, get God to sort this all out for me?" He knows he's in the right place all right. And we all will, when we get there. There'll be no atheists in hell.

Philippians 2:10,11
That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, ***and things under the earth****; And that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*

In the next world, nobody will complain that God is unjust. They know that wherever they end up, they're there justly, and the only one they'll have to complain about is themselves.

So the rich man knew he was in the right place. But he's so used to ordering people around, he asks Abraham, **"*have mercy on me, and send Lazarus, that he may dip the tip of his finger in water, and cool my tongue*."** We realise here for the first time, he knew very well all about the beggar at his gate, even knowing his name was Lazarus. He's not just some anonymous beggar who just happened to be there. There's more to the story. The rich man knew exactly who he was, and had deliberately, wilfully ignored him, shut him outside and not had compassion on him.

But he still thinks he can order people around. In the next world, the wicked will no longer be able to use their silver-tongues, their charm, their dominating personalities or whatever else they may have had here, to get people to do whatever they want any more. Their power of persuasion is completely finished.

And we see he's **"*tormented in this flame*."** We don't necessarily need to think of hell as being literal flames, the Bible uses various metaphors, "*weeping and gnashing of teeth*," *"the blackness of darkness for ever," "where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched*." Take your choice. Whichever one, it's not very pleasant. But it's perfectly just.

Genesis 18:25
Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?

[25] But Abraham said, Son, remember that thou in thy lifetime receivedst thy good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things: but now he is comforted, and thou art tormented.

Abraham rebukes the rich man (without naming him) and tells him the truth, which the rich man would have known all along, really, if he'd only admitted it to himself. He'd only ever received good things in his life, whereas Lazarus had only received evil things. Now, we can't blame God for our lot in life. It's what we do with it that counts. Notice it says "***thy*** *good things*." They were his. God had blessed the rich man with material wealth, but what had he done with it? Amassed it all for himself. He couldn't even spare a few coppers for Lazarus. That's the point. It's not wrong to be rich as such, but we must be thankful for everything we've been given by God and use it wisely, which this rich man never did.

[26] And beside all this, between us and you there is a great gulf fixed: so that they which would pass from hence to you cannot; neither can they pass to us, that would come from thence.

There is no second chance after death. At the moment of our death everything is fixed, and there's no turning back. No more opportunity to repent. Just an endless lifetime of regret for the things we've done here. To escape that, we must get right with God here.
And there's only two places to go in the next world. Either **"*Abraham's bosom*,"** a place of eternal comfort, or **"*hell*,"** a place of everlasting torment. And what we do in this world determines where we go permanently in the next. But who can do enough good works to get to Abraham's bosom by themselves? Nobody.

Psalm 130:3
If thou, Lord , shouldest mark iniquities, O Lord, who shall stand?

But there is good news:

Psalm 130:4
But there is forgiveness with thee, that thou mayest be feared.

None of us can achieve heaven. We're sinners. The rich man never thought that about himself. He was quite happy in his own little bubble, thinking he was going to be all right. But Lazarus saw himself for who he really was, a sinner. How do I know that? He was in the situation he was in, but he didn't fight for his rights, because he knew he hadn't got any. He didn't steal, because he knew it was wrong. He humbly accepted his lot, and trusted in the Lord to look after him on a daily basis. We don't need to get to his level of deprivation before we can know the Lord, but do we humbly accept the Lord's providence in our lives? Or are we fighting all the time to get what we think we deserve?

Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners. Not those who think they're righteous.

Matthew 9:13
I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.

The rich man thought he was all right, he thought he had Abraham as his father. So he never saw his need of someone to save him from his sins. He'd just laugh at the idea. But Lazarus did see his need. Do we see ourselves as sinners before a holy God, in which case there is hope for us. If you just laugh at me saying that, all I can say is repent, or perish like the rich man. Christ died on the cross to save sinners, and we need to call on a Him ourselves, as individuals, and then we can be saved to everlasting life:

1 Peter 3:18
For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God.

John 3:36
He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him.

I'm not trying to frighten anybody. I'm not after anybody's money, or following, or support. I'm just telling the truth. If you choose to ignore

me, go ahead. You're free to walk away. Be it on your own head. Be like the rich man. Hide from reality behind your gated compound, enjoying the finer things of life. I'm just telling you where that lifestyle leads.

The rich man at last comes to a realisation of his situation, but it's too late. Now there's no way out. And finally, he has some kind of compassion. On the family he's left behind.

[27] Then he said, I pray thee therefore, father, that thou wouldest send him to my father's house: [28] For I have five brethren; that he may testify unto them, lest they also come into this place of torment.

He realises there's nothing more he can do about his own predicament, but he's got five brethren still alive on earth, who he knows are in the same situation he was in, totally oblivious to reality. Living lives to the full for themselves, and hiding away from the truth.

And he still thinks he can order Lazarus about. He doesn't say, "Let **me** go to my brethren...." but "*send **him** to my father's house.*"

The plea now is urgent. He realises his brethren need to be persuaded of the truth of what the next life entails. He's desperate that they don't end up where he is. And he knows they're going to end up there if nothing is done about it. This is the urgency of the gospel.

On the one hand, God saves sinners. Thank God it's not up to us and our persuasive abilities to convince people of the truth, otherwise nobody would be saved. But on the other hand, we'd be utterly negligent if we didn't say anything about the situation people are in at all. We need to be responsible watchmen. Ezekiel was told:

Ezekiel 3:18,19
When I say unto the wicked, Thou shalt surely die; and thou givest him not warning, nor speakest to warn the wicked from his wicked way, to save his life; the same wicked man shall die in his iniquity; but his blood will I require at thine hand. Yet if thou warn the wicked, and he turn not from his wickedness, nor from his wicked way, he shall die in his iniquity; but thou hast delivered thy soul.

But Abraham turns down his request for anyone to go back to earth:

[29] Abraham saith unto him, They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them.

"Moses and the prophets." The Bible. There is a witness to all men, and it's here in this book. And it's the only witness. These are the words of God to men to tell them of their predicament and how they can be saved from it. Abraham told the rich man that the Bible is a sufficient witness. In it, God has revealed our situation to us, and the solution, nothing more is necessary.

The rich man's brethren were also, presumably, devout Jews who would have known the Scriptures fairly well. Just think about the millions of people throughout the world today who don't have this book. Just think about the many in this country alone who have this book readily available, but never read it, never have any interest in it. This book is the witness of God to us. It's a far greater witness than anything else. Which is why, when we go to church to hear a preacher, he ought to always expound this book, and never go off at a tangent, but stick to the text.

The rich man knew his brethren had the Scriptures, but his concern was that he also knew they wouldn't read it, they wouldn't actually take heed to what it said. Because he didn't. Like so many all around us today. We must read this book, and apply it to our lives:

Luke 11:28
Blessed are they that hear the word of God, and keep it.

The rich man has one final plea. Although he knew his brethren would have had the Scriptures, he also knew they wouldn't read it, or if they did, they wouldn't heed a word of it. So he thinks he's got a better idea. He thinks he's found an even greater witness than the Scriptures. If someone came back from the dead, that would surely convince them:

[30] And he said, Nay, father Abraham: but if one went unto them from the dead, they will repent.

But Abraham tells him it wouldn't work:

[31] And he said unto him, If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead.

We can have somebody here, now, come back from the dead, and tell us about the torments that await us if we don't repent, and it still wouldn't persuade us. It might impress us for a while. But the impression would fade, and we'd be back to our old ways soon enough. One man did come back from the dead. Our Lord Jesus Christ. He had many witnesses, on one occasion there was about 500 people all at once. A court of law could be successfully convinced of the resurrection of Christ as an historical event. But how many people believe because of that today? Not many. Oh, it's just a story from long ago, it didn't really happen. It's nice for people who need a crutch to lean on, but not me.

But the Scripture is more than just words in a book, it's living and powerful:

Hebrews 4:12
For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.

Read this book. It can change your life.

So, what can we learn from the parable of the rich man and Lazarus?

Luke 13:5
Except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish.

Luke 18:9-14. The Pharisee and the Publican

Also read Job 40:1-14.

I want to look today at this parable of Christ's, about the Pharisee and the publican. It only occurs here, in Luke's gospel. But it's a very important parable, because it shows us the kind of mindset we ought to have before God. What attitude the Lord finds acceptable in His sight. I fear this attitude's missing in most churches today. So we can learn a lot from this parable.

Normally, when Christ spoke in parables, He told the story to the multitudes, but only gave the explanation to the disciples afterwards. Why did He do that? Well, many people were following Him just for what they could get out of Him. They maybe wanted to see Him perform a miracle, or to get something for nothing from Him, like a free meal. They weren't really bothered about His teaching, His teaching meant nothing to them, so after He'd finished speaking, Christ just lets them walk away.

But if the parable created a desire in someone's heart to want to know more, what could they do? They could approach Christ to ask Him about it, and they'd become His disciple. Christ was approachable. And He's approachable today. If we don't understand a Bible passage, or what He's doing in our life, we can ask Him. Talk to Him. Jesus Christ, the Lord of Glory, is approachable and answers prayer.

But this parable is slightly different from the others, in that the explanation comes together with the parable. And we find that Christ wasn't speaking to a general multitude here, but He had a target audience:

[9] And he spake this parable unto certain which trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others:

There are plenty of people in the world who **"*trust in themselves*."** We only have to switch on television to see all sorts of people with opinions. Reporters ask people for their "opinions." Everybody seems to have an opinion, not just politicians. And they've all come to their

opinion for themselves. They **"*trust in themselves*"** that their opinion is the right one.

And we also see that these people were **"*trusting in themselves that they were righteous*."** Now, a lot of us would say, "I'm righteous. I do the best I can, and try my best to live a good life." And it's good to be righteous. It's good to want to do the best you can to live a good life. That's not the issue. We're all agreed on that. But the thing is that these people were "***trusting in themselves*** *that they were righteous*." And that's where they went wrong. As we'll hopefully see.

And they **"*despised others*."** We know we shouldn't despise others. Most of us would at least try to get on with people different from ourselves, people with different opinions. But really, just by our having an opinion at all, by definition we think everybody else is wrong. We at least look down on others. We'd never admit to despising them, but when we judge people for their opinions, that's exactly what we're doing.

So, if we're trusting in ourselves, if we think we're doing our best to do what's right, and certainly, if we're despising or looking down on others, then this parable is for us.

[10] Two men went up into the temple to pray; the one a Pharisee, and the other a publican.

The first thing to notice is that both these men were religious. They both went up to the temple to pray. We're not talking here about a Christian and an atheist, or two people of different religions. We're talking about churchgoers. They're in the same church. They profess to know the same God.

The Pharisee was outwardly, a highly moral man. In fact, he was the most morally upright person anyone could have come across in Christ's day. When Christ spoke of the righteousness that we should all have, He said:

Matthew 5:20
Except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven.

When Christ wanted to give the best possible example of outward morality, He chose that of the scribes and Pharisees.

And not only were they extremely moral, but they were Bible-believers too. In Christ's day, the church had two main factions: Pharisees and Sadducees:

Acts 23:8
For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, neither angel, nor spirit: but the Pharisees confess both.

The Sadducees were liberals. They didn't believe a word of the Bible. And there are plenty of people in the church today who disbelieve the plain teachings of Scripture. But the Pharisees believed every word of the Bible. They were like good evangelicals.

And then we have the publican, or "tax-collector," as it is in other translations. The Pharisees were respectable upright members of the community, but the publican was the opposite. He was a despised member of the community. He went to the Temple just like the Pharisee, so he was a Jew. But his day job was to collect the taxes for the Roman authorities. The Romans were seen by the Jews as the occupying force, just like the Palestinians see the Israelis of today.

The publican was despised because he was seen to be sucking up to the occupying power. And not only that, but most publicans also asked for more taxes than were necessary to make a bit of money for themselves on the side.

So the publican was a despised member of the community, and the Pharisee was a respected member of the community. That's the difference.

And we now see a complete difference in the way they both prayed. The way we pray is always very revealing about our spiritual state.

[11] The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself….

The Pharisee (and the publican) stood for prayer. Actually, that's the Biblical posture we should adopt for public prayer. There are three postures mentioned in the Bible for prayer: standing, kneeling and falling prostrate. Sitting isn't mentioned in the Bible. Slouching certainly isn't. I think sitting must be a lazy, Western phenomenon, because in every other church I've been to or heard about, it's been normal to stand for public prayer. It's only respectful to the Lord. If we wanted to petition the King, we wouldn't sit.

Anyway, the Pharisee prayed ***"with himself."*** This is variously translated as "standing by himself," or "said to himself." Either way, this is a private prayer between the Pharisee and God. This is a prayer that shows from the heart what he was really thinking. This prayer definitely wasn't for public ears.

The Pharisees loved to pray in public. Christ warns us not to be like them:

Matthew 6:5
And when thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are: for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward.

The Pharisees just wanted to be seen of men, so they'd get the respect of men. The approval of God wasn't even in their minds.

But this prayer of the Pharisee here, wasn't meant to be the eloquent type of prayer he'd normally give in public to impress people. No. He'd never want the public to know that this was what he was really thinking in his heart.

….God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican.

Well, he does thank God. That's a good thing. We should be thankful for everything the Lord gives us. But he's thanking God for being himself. He's so proud of the fact that he's different from others.

As far as he's concerned, the publican can be labelled with the evil men of this world, the extortioners, the unjust and the adulterers. The Pharisee thinks himself above all of these because he's so moral, so righteous, and proud of it. And he then goes on to boast, to God, about what he does:

[12] I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess.

He **"*fasts twice in the week*."** I was surprised when I found this out, but fasting isn't in the Mosaic law at all, although it's always mentioned in the Bible as a good, profitable thing to do, especially in conjunction with prayer. But, the Pharisee obviously thinks he's obeying God by fasting twice a week, whereas there's no real Biblical warrant for it. Maybe some tradition had crept in, which involved fasting on certain days, or maybe he decided to fast himself, we don't know for sure. The Bible doesn't tell us.

He also **"*gave tithes of all that he possessed*."** Tithing ***is*** in the Mosaic law, so there is a Biblical warrant for giving at least a tenth of one's income to the church. In fact, Christ commends the Pharisee for tithing. But he was omitting more important things:

Matthew 23:23
Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith: these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone.

I'm sure the Pharisee was very content with his prayer. He must have gone away with his head held high, thinking he'd done his duty for another day, feeling so proud of himself. But was God happy with it? Well, I don't think so.

Let's now compare and contrast the Pharisee with Job. Job lived about 2,000 years earlier. It was said of him:

Job 1:1
There was a man in the land of Uz, whose name was Job; and that man was perfect and upright, and one that feared God, and eschewed evil.

Both the Pharisee and Job were impeccable in their outward conduct. They were the best, most morally upright men that we could find anywhere in their respective day. But that's just about where the similarity ends.

The Pharisee behaved the way he did to impress men. All his supposed good works were only for show. Christ actually gave a warning about the Pharisees:

Matthew 23:3-5
….do not ye after their works: for they say, and do not. For they bind heavy burdens and grievous to be borne, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers. But all their works they do for to be seen of men

On the other hand, Job's good works came from a genuine heart. And as a result, the Lord had blessed him with a large family and plenty of stuff.

Briefly, the story of the book of Job is that Satan comes along and suggests to God that Job was only being morally upright because God was blessing him for it. So, the Lord, for no real reason, took everything away from him. That was a test of Job's faith. Yet Job didn't complain, and still worshipped God:

Job 1:21
….And said, Naked came I out of my mother's womb, and naked shall I return thither: the LORD gave, and the LORD hath taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD.

And we're told that:

Job 1:22
In all this Job sinned not, nor charged God foolishly.

After that, Satan had another go, and now even Job's health was taken away from him. The only thing he had left was a grumpy wife, who told him:

Job 2:9
Dost thou still retain thine integrity? curse God, and die.

But, even then, Job still clung to his faith in God:

Job 2:10
But he said unto her, Thou speakest as one of the foolish women speaketh. What? shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil? In all this did not Job sin with his lips.

But when three of his friends came to him to try to comfort him, he made a mistake. He opened his mouth. And most of the rest of the book of Job is the conversation Job had with these three so-called comforters.

Throughout the conversation, Job couldn't understand why the Lord had brought all this disaster upon him. He knew from his heart he'd always tried to do his best, to do what was right. Yet the Lord was treating him like this. He cried to the Lord, but God didn't seem to answer him any more. It seemed that He was no longer there. What would we have done in that situation? I'm sure by that point, many people would have abandoned what little faith they had in God altogether. But Job never did that.

Even though he was in this situation, and God seemed not to be there any more, he still stuck to the fact that one day, after his death, he'd be redeemed:

Job 19:25-27
I know that my redeemer liveth, and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth: and though after my skin worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God: whom I shall see for myself, and mine eyes shall behold, and not another; though my reins be consumed within me.

The Pharisees on the other hand, never had any assurance like that in their hearts at all. They knew jolly well they were only doing what they did for show, to impress men. They knew they weren't being genuine in their hearts. But Job knew absolutely that he'd been genuine. And he knew that the Lord knew that. That's why he was so perplexed when all this trouble came on him.

Well, Job's so-called comforters finished speaking, they'd been absolutely no use whatsoever. And then we're told something very interesting:

Job 32:1
So these three men ceased to answer Job, because he was righteous in his own eyes.

Even though Job had genuinely been upright in everything he'd done, his mistake came when he started to see himself as righteous in his own eyes. Job had begun to think along the lines of the Pharisee who had **"*trusted in himself that he was righteous.*"**

Job 32:2
Then was kindled the wrath of Elihu the son of Barachel the Buzite, of the kindred of Ram: against Job was his wrath kindled, because he justified himself rather than God.

This young man Elihu comes along, and, unlike Job's three useless comforters, he immediately puts his finger on the problem. In Job's own mind, he had declared himself to be just rather than God. So Elihu, rather than continuing to look at the problem from Job's perspective, starts to look from God's perspective. And that's what changes Job's thinking completely. After Elihu's speech, God Himself then finally speaks:

Job 38:1-5
Then the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind, and said, Who is this that darkeneth counsel by words without knowledge? Gird up now thy loins like a man; for I will demand of thee, and answer thou me. Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth? declare, if thou hast understanding. Who hath laid the measures thereof, if thou knowest? or who hath stretched the line upon it?

And what's the result of God finally answering Job? We saw it in the passage we read earlier: Job saw his own wretchedness, and he was speechless:

Job 40:3-5
Then Job answered the LORD, and said, Behold, I am vile; what shall I answer thee? I will lay mine hand upon my mouth. Once have I spoken; but I will not answer: yea, twice; but I will proceed no further.

And there's another place in the Bible where we come across someone else was speechless. Christ told a parable about a king who made a wedding for his son:

Matthew 22:11,12
And when the king came in to see the guests, he saw there a man which had not on a wedding garment: And he saith unto him, Friend, how camest thou in hither not having a wedding garment? And he was speechless.

When we come before the one true God Lord of heaven and earth on Judgment Day, we too will be speechless. We won't be trying to justify ourselves then. We couldn't even begin to do that.

Just imagine what heaven would be like, if entrance was granted on the basis of what we've done? It'd be awful. It'd be full of people boasting about themselves. "I got to heaven by doing this, or that." They'd be like the Pharisee: ***"I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess."***

– "I prayed five times a day, fasted during Ramadan and went on the Hajj."

– "I walked round and round the temple with my prayer wheel, chanting the same prayer a million times."

– "I went to confession, took the Mass and obeyed the pope."

– "I chose Jesus as my personal Saviour."

Is that the right one? No! That's just as much boasting in a work as all the others are! What you're effectively saying is, "I'm better than my unbelieving neighbour because I chose Jesus as my Saviour and he didn't." None of those is the way to heaven.

A heaven full of people boasting about their achievements would be terrible. No. The only way to heaven is by penitence. Bringing ourselves down.

Let's go back to the parable, and look at the prayer of the publican.

[13] And the publican, standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, God be merciful to me a sinner.

This is an altogether different attitude from that of the Pharisee. The publican didn't strut into the Temple and thank God for how wonderful he was, for all the good works he'd done, and how faithful he'd been. Rather, he just crept inside the door, he was **"*standing afar off.*"** When we go to a church, where do we sit? Do we apply the Biblical principle?

Luke 14:8-10
When thou art bidden of any man to a wedding, sit not down in the highest room; lest a more honourable man than thou be bidden of him; and he that bade thee and him come and say to thee, Give this man place; and thou begin with shame to take the lowest room. But when thou art bidden, go and sit down in the lowest room; that when he that bade thee cometh, he may say unto thee, Friend, go up higher: then shalt thou have worship in the presence of them that sit at meat with thee.

And not only did the publican stand at the back, but he **"*would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven*."** When we come before the judgment seat of Christ, we'll not only be speechless, but we'll be humbled to the dust as well.

So, what should be our general attitude of mind? It should be one of humility, not pride. Plenty of people go to church, who quite like their status in the church, their position, their knowledge, their ability to debate theology, or whatever they fancy themselves doing. But we shouldn't be like that:

Ecclesiastes 5:1,2
Keep thy foot when thou goest to the house of God, and be more ready to hear, than to give the sacrifice of fools: for they consider not that they do evil. Be not rash with thy mouth, and let not thine heart be hasty to utter any thing before God: for God is in heaven, and thou upon earth: therefore let thy words be few.

And the publican smote upon his breast, as a sign of mourning, repentance, and humiliation for his sins. And all he could say was **"*God be merciful to me a sinner.*"** That's all we can ever say before a holy God. A sinner is all we are, compared to God. Job excelled in

righteousness compared to others, and genuinely and honestly was one of the most righteous men that ever lived. Yet even he eventually had to acknowledge that the righteousness of God far exceeds any righteousness we can ever produce by ourselves.

Isaiah 64:6
But we are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags; and we all do fade as a leaf; and our iniquities, like the wind, have taken us away.

[14] I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other:….

If all we looked at was outward appearance, this conclusion should surprise us.

Outwardly, the Pharisee was seen to be by far the most upright, moral person on the face of the earth, and the publican was the most despised. But:

1 Samuel 16:7
….the LORD seeth not as man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the LORD looketh on the heart.

It was the publican, not the Pharisee that God declared righteous, because God saw his heart. He wasn't proud, full of himself. He was humble and genuine. He didn't boast of his achievements, but recognised his need.

What is God's plan for us all? What is God's overarching intention for the whole world? His ultimate purpose? It's here:

….for every one that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted.

That's the overall plan of God. And we find it throughout the Bible. In the passage that we read earlier, God challenges Job to:

Job 40:12
Look on every one that is proud, and bring him low.

And of course, Job couldn't do that, and neither can we. We can't even bring ourselves down, we're all so proud by nature. We need God to do it for us.

Isaiah tells us of this overall plan of God:

Isaiah 2:17
And the loftiness of man shall be bowed down, and the haughtiness of men shall be made low: and the LORD alone shall be exalted in that day.

Even wicked king Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon got it, eventually:

Daniel 4:37
Now I Nebuchadnezzar praise and extol and honour the King of heaven, all whose works are truth, and his ways judgment: and those that walk in pride he is able to abase.

The apostle Paul tells us:

Ephesians 2:8,9
For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast.

And Paul concludes that the whole reason God works this way, is:

1 Corinthians 1:29
That no flesh should glory in his presence.

Do we want to be made right with God? We shouldn't even attempt to do it by our own efforts, because we can't. We must realise that. Cry to Him for mercy. Cry to Him. Cry, **"*God be merciful to me a sinner.*"** Not just saying it as an empty chant like the Eastern Orthodox churches do, but meaning it from our hearts. And the God of heaven will hear, and change our heart. The only way to heaven is the way of the cross. The way of humility. The way of self-abasement. Boasting is excluded.

1 Peter 5:5,6
God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble. Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time

And that's why God's way of salvation is altogether different from every other religion in the world. Salvation can only come by putting our trust in a Saviour outside of ourselves. A Saviour who died in our place to turn away God's wrath. A Saviour who took upon Himself the sins of all those who would come to Him. That's what we need. And that's what we can have freely, in our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, if only we ask Him. He is the only Saviour. May we all come to know Him truly, for ourselves.

Luke 23:33-47. Good Friday

In the so-called "Christian calendar," Good Friday is the day when we're supposed to think particularly on the death of Christ. And on Easter Sunday, two days later, we're supposed to think particularly on His resurrection.

The Christian calendar isn't in the Bible at all. So festivals such as Christmas and Easter are purely traditions that have been introduced later. So we aren't obliged to celebrate any of them. And in any case, we shouldn't just spend one day a year thinking about these things. The death and resurrection of Christ are so central to our religion that the Bible gives us instructions to think about them far more often than that.

Soon after Christ's resurrection, Christians started meeting on the first day of the week. The Bible tells us that the first day of the week began to be called the Lord's Day. So, we should be celebrating the resurrection of Christ every Sunday, not just on one day a year. The Bible also tells us to remember the Lord's death, not just once a year, but every time we take the bread and wine in the Lord's Supper, or Communion:

1 Corinthians 11:26
For as often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do shew the Lord's death till he come.

Therefore, we need to understand why the death of Christ is so important to us. And I hope we can get some insight into this as we look at this passage.

First of all, we need to notice the circumstances in which Christ died. He was put to death by crucifixion, as a common criminal, at the age of about 33 years old, by the Roman authorities. But why did they put Him to death? What crime had He committed?

Normally, that would be an easy question to answer, because whenever someone was crucified, their crime was usually written on a notice above their heads. But we see here in v.38, that in Jesus Christ's case, it

read: **"*This is the king of the Jews*."** This statement produces more questions than answers.

Actually, He was the king of the Jews. If we look at His family tree in Matthew chapter 1, we see that He was a direct descendent of Jeconiah, the second to last king of Judah. After Jeconiah was taken into captivity by the Babylonians, his uncle Zedekiah was put on the throne for eleven years, until, eventually, Jerusalem fell, and the people were taken into exile.

Seventy years later, after Babylon itself was captured by the Persians, some Jews returned to rebuild Jerusalem, under Jeconiah's grandson Zerubabbel. But he never called himself king, he was only known as ***governor*** of Judah. The monarchy was never re-established. And the royal family went into obscurity until eleven generations later, his direct descendent Jesus would grow up in a simple carpenter's family in an obscure town called Nazareth.

But nobody knew that Christ was of royal blood at the time. In any case, that wouldn't have been a reason to put Him to death. The religious leaders wanted Him put to death because he claimed to be the King of the Jews, and they just didn't agree. In fact, the more we look into the events that took place, the more we see that He didn't actually commit any crime at all.

Here in the text, one of the thieves on the cross said (v.41), **"*this man hath done nothing amiss*."** And in v.47, the Roman centurion said, **"*Certainly, this was a righteous man*."** And earlier on in this chapter at Christ's trial before the Roman governor Pontius Pilate, Pilate himself said no less than three times, **"*I find no fault in this man.*"** And even the disciple Judas, who betrayed Him, said afterwards, **"*I have sinned in that I have betrayed the innocent blood.*"**

I think there's far more to this than these people simply believing that Christ was innocent of calling Himself the king of the Jews. The whole way He behaved as He was put to trial and accused of all sorts of things they found no evidence for, was entirely different from the way we would have behaved.

If we were accused of a crime we were innocent of, we'd try our best to fight for our rights and attempt to establish our innocence. But Christ didn't fight. Instead, He said calmly:

John 18:36
My kingdom is not of this world: if my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight, that I should not be delivered to the Jews: but now is my kingdom not from hence.

So, who was this person? This behaviour is altogether different from anything we have ever known. This person was truly different from anyone else.

And when we look at His life, we again see how differently He behaved. Far, far differently than any of us can even understand. And He calls us to such a high standard as well. Listen to this from Matthew chapter 5. This is just part of a much longer teaching:

Matthew 5:39-48
But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if any man will sue thee at the law, and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloke also. And whosoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him twain. Give to him that asketh thee, and from him that would borrow of thee turn not thou away. Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; that ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust. For if ye love them which love you, what reward have ye? do not even the publicans the same? And if ye salute your brethren only, what do ye more than others? do not even the publicans so? Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.

Jesus Christ lived His life in a far different way to any of us. We're all so selfish, self-centred, self-seeking, living for our own pleasures rather than living for God. Everything we do is for our own benefit, our own desire, our own ambition. Jesus Christ, on the other hand, gave Himself for others. He lived His life for His heavenly Father, not for Himself.

The Bible says of Him that He was sinless. He didn't do anything wrong in His entire life. There was no fault found in Him, not just in His trial before Pilate, but in His entire life. This man was indeed the Son of God:

Hebrews 7:26
….*holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners, and made higher than the heavens.*

Hebrews 4:15
[He] *was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin.*

1 John 3:5
….*in him is no sin.*

1 Peter 2:22,23
Who did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth: who, when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not; but committed himself to him that judgeth righteously.

Jesus Christ was a sinless man. The only sinless man that has ever lived. So, why did He end up being put to death? Well, there are two answers to that question:

The immediate circumstances were that the religious leaders were jealous of Him. They wanted control over the people. They wanted to be their spiritual guides. Up until this point they were. But when Christ came along, it was said:

Mark 12:37
….*the common people heard him gladly.*

Matthew 7:29
….*he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.*

As Christ started His own public ministry, people began following Him, and the religious leaders began to lose their control over them. And particularly after Christ had raised Lazarus from the dead, the religious leaders finally decided to take action:

John 11:47,48
Then gathered the chief priests and the Pharisees a council, and said, What do we? for this man doeth many miracles. If we let him thus alone, all men will believe on him: and the Romans shall come and take away both our place and nation.

John 11:53
Then from that day forth they took counsel together for to put him to death.

Now, they didn't have the authority to put someone to death, so they had to persuade the Roman authorities to do it for them. And with no evidence against Christ with regards any crime, they still managed to succeed in doing that, using their own powers of persuasion. Even though Pilate really knew He was an innocent man, the religious leaders still managed to persuade him to crucify Him. Now, those were the immediate circumstances.

But again, something far deeper is going on here. When Peter tried to defend Christ after He had been captured, Christ said:

Matthew 26:52-54
Then said Jesus unto him, Put up again thy sword into his place: for all they that take the sword shall perish with the sword. Thinkest thou that I cannot now pray to my Father, and he shall presently give me more than twelve legions of angels? But how then shall the scriptures be fulfilled, that thus it must be?

And again, He said elsewhere:

John 10:17,18
Therefore doth my Father love me, because I lay down my life, that I might take it again. No man taketh it from me, but I lay it down of myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. This commandment have I received of my Father.

The Bible tells us that Christ laid down His life voluntarily. He could have prevented His own death from happening, but He didn't. And this must prompt the question, Why? Why on earth would anyone want to do that? How can someone deliberately laying down his life be good, be useful in any way? And then we remember something else He said, which we often think about in times of war:

John 15:13
Greater love hath no man than this: that a man lay down his life for his friends.

There was something far greater going on here than simply an innocent man dying on a cross. Christ was laying down His life for His friends.

John 15:14
Ye are my friends, if ye do whatsoever I command you.

Let's now finally go to the text we're looking at today.

[33] And when they were come to the place, which is called Calvary, there they crucified him, and the malefactors, one on the right hand, and the other on the left.

So the scene is set, There are three people being crucified, Christ in the middle and a thief on either side.

[34] Then said Jesus, Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do….

An innocent man who had done no wrong was being crucified. And more than a man, the Son of God Himself. They were crucifying the Lord of Glory. So, arguably this was the worst crime in history, God being put to death on a cross by men. And here Christ is actually praying to God to forgive them. Why shouldn't God judge them for their wickedness? And then we realise that this is what it's all about. The forgiveness of sins.

Acts 5:30,31
The God of our fathers raised up Jesus, whom ye slew and hanged on a tree. Him hath God exalted with his right hand to be a Prince and a Saviour, for to give repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins.

Just looking at things from this world's point of view, the death of Christ was unjust. But injustices happen all the time in the world. Innocent men are quite often wrongly punished and guilty men quite often get away with their crimes. So, what we see in Christ is just

another miscarriage of justice. That's all we see. But we need to start seeing things as Christ saw them, not from this world's point of view, but from the point of view of eternity.

….And they parted his raiment, and cast lots.

This is actually a fulfilment of prophecy:

Psalm 22:18
They part my garments among them, and cast lots upon my vesture.

In fact so many of the events that surround the death of Christ are actually prophesied in the Old Testament. Look particularly at Psalm 22 and Isaiah 53. If these passages don't clearly prophesy Christ, I don't know what will convince us otherwise that He's the Saviour the Scriptures said would come. And of course, these Roman soldiers had no idea they were fulfilling prophecy. We can't accuse them of trying to fake a prophecy's fulfilment in any way.

[35] And the people stood beholding. And the rulers also with them derided him, saying, He saved others; let him save himself, if he be Christ, the chosen of God. [36] And the soldiers also mocked him, coming to him, and offering him vinegar, [37] And saying, If thou be the king of the Jews, save thyself.

[39] And one of the malefactors which were hanged railed on him, saying, If thou be Christ, save thyself and us.

Now, three lots of people started mocking Christ, the rulers, the soldiers and one of the two criminals. All they can do is mock and sneer at Him. They laugh at His claim to be the Messiah, the Saviour. To them, He's totally powerless to save anybody, because He's stuck there, hanging on a cross. So they mock Him by challenging Him to come down from the cross and save Himself. They think that if He can't even save Himself, how can He possibly be a Saviour for anyone else? And when He doesn't come down from the cross, they assume that He's not coming down because He can't come down.

And this is typical of what every one of us is like. All we see is this world. We don't see things from the point of view of eternity. If all we see is this world, we too are going to think that Christ is powerless. He was just a good man. He was just another religious teacher, one of many. That's all we think of Him. But if we start seeing things from an eternal perspective, seeing that death is not the end and there's a judgment to come, then, and only then, can we just begin to understand that Christ dying on a cross wasn't weakness, but victory.

Remember, Christ didn't come just to save us from some temporary problem, like oppression by the Romans, or some other political end. He came to save us from our sins. That's the real problem we need to be saved from. And it is an eternal problem, not a temporary one. In fact, that's what His name means:

Matthew 1:21
….and thou shalt call his name JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins.

As long as we're just looking at this world all the time, we're not going to see the importance of this. We're rather just going to be looking for temporal solutions to temporal problems. In fact, we're not even going to see our sins as much of a problem at all. So, how do we react when someone comes along to tell us that our real need is for our sins before God to be dealt with? We'd mock them. We'd laugh at them. And we'd put them to death if we could, because they're disturbing our enjoyment of this world. And that's exactly what these people did. And it's exactly as Christ prophesied:

John 7:7
The world cannot hate you; but me it hateth, because I testify of it, that the works thereof are evil.

Our sins deserve the eternal punishment of God. And that's what we're going to get, unless we recognise our need of a Saviour from sin. We need a Saviour because we can't save ourselves, it's impossible, we're not good enough.

That's why Christ talked so much about forgiveness of sins. That's why Christ died on the cross. He laid down His life for His friends. He took

upon Himself the sins of all those who trust in Him for salvation, so that they won't need to be punished themselves:

1 Peter 2:24
Who his own self bare our sins in his own body on the tree, that we, being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness: by whose stripes ye were healed.

Christ knew exactly what He was doing when He went to the cross. He didn't have to save anyone. He could have just not bothered. But He did it because He loved His people. He laid down His life for his friends. It was the only way any of us could be reconciled to God. This is what we need to understand. Yet our minds are usually so closed to these things.

But look what happened to one of the thieves. He did begin to understand this. In Matthew's gospel, we read that at first both thieves mocked Him:

Matthew 27:44
The thieves also, which were crucified with him, cast the same in his teeth.

But we see here that one of them suddenly changed:

[40] But the other answering rebuked him, saying, Dost not thou fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation? [41] And we indeed justly; for we receive the due reward of our deeds: but this man hath done nothing amiss. [42] And he said unto Jesus, Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom.

It's as though a light had suddenly been switched on in his understanding. He had just begun to see something of what Christ was getting at.

He rebuked the other thief for mocking Christ. He recognised he himself was a sinful man, receiving the due punishment for his sins. He also saw that Jesus had done nothing wrong, and that all He had said about His being a king of a kingdom not of this world was true. And he asked to be remembered in it.

He was no longer putting his trust in anything this world had to say. All the world's philosophies are vain and empty. He recognised his sins, realised that Jesus was right after all, and asked Him for the free forgiveness of sin that He had been teaching about, that only He could give, and which was the very reason for His coming into the world in the first place. That's the point we need to get to. Stop trusting in ourselves. Stop believing in this world and its empty ideas. Trust in Christ.

1 Corinthians 15:19
If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable.

And he got a welcoming response from Christ:

[43] And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, To day shalt thou be with me in paradise.

Paradise. Where's that? That's the place we should all want to go to after death. The place where all of Christ's people, those who truly put their trust in Him for salvation, will go. Even death can't stop us from getting there, but our sins can. Our sins will send us to eternal punishment instead. We must cry to God for Christ to take our sins away, so we may be free from the burden of them:

2 Corinthians 5:20,21
….be ye reconciled to God. For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him.

1 Peter 3:18
For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God.

Once we've been reconciled to God, we'll have true peace, even through death.

[44] And it was about the sixth hour, and there was a darkness over all the earth until the ninth hour. [45] And the sun was darkened….

This wasn't an eclipse. Eclipses don't last that long, and anyway, it was Passover, which was always at a full moon. The moon would have been on the opposite side of the sky to the sun, so it couldn't possibly have moved in front of the sun for an eclipse. The darkness could only have been the hand of God.

….and the veil of the temple was rent in the midst.

Only the High Priest was allowed behind the Temple curtain once a year, and then not without a sacrifice. As long as the curtain stood, it symbolised that the way into the true Holy Place of God's presence in heaven had not yet been revealed. But now, with Christ dying on the cross, He has made the true sacrifice for sin, and the way has now been made clear for everybody who puts their trust in Him to receive the salvation for their sins that the animal sacrifices could never take away. They were only ever symbols of the true sacrifice of the coming Saviour. Now Christ's own shed blood has opened the way for reconciliation with God by faith in Jesus Christ:

Romans 5:1
Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ

[46] And when Jesus had cried with a loud voice, he said, Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit: and having said thus, he gave up the ghost.

Then Jesus could die in peace, knowing that His work had been finished. He put His Spirit into God the Father's hands. And we need to do the same. God has now provided a way of being reconciled to Him, through the blood of Christ. Let's not just try to laugh it off, and say we don't need it. It's the one thing every one of us really does need right now, whether we realise it or not. But we need to forsake our sin, hate it, get rid of it. Put it all onto Christ. That's why He came, to take away our sin.

Well, may all of us come to repent of our sins, put our trust in the Son of God, have a new heart given to us, and start today to live the new

life that He gives to all those who ask, a life of righteousness. So we can then truly say, with the apostle Paul:

Galatians 2:20
I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me.

John 3:1-21.
Ye Must Be Born Again (Reformation Day)

On October 31st 1517, a German monk, Martin Luther, nailed a list of 95 grievances against the church of his day on the door of his local church in Wittenberg, Germany. That incident is generally taken by historians as marking the beginning of the Protestant Reformation in Western Europe.

The great call of the Reformation was the phrase "*Justification by Faith Alone*." By which we mean that we are made right with God, accepted by Him, not by any good works we do, because we can never do enough, but we're made right with God purely by His grace alone, which we receive by faith, by simply believing in the Saviour He has sent, the Lord Jesus Christ.

This "*Justification by Faith Alone*", not only went against the church of Luther's day, but it goes against every other religion in the whole world. All religions, except Protestant Christianity, believe you have to do something to gain the favour of the god or gods of the religion. Buddhists walk round and round their temples endlessly reciting chants, because they think it'll give them a better life the next time around. Muslims have to go through a ritual prayer sequence five times a day, do charitable works, fast during Ramadan, go on the Hajj to Mecca if they can, and so on. And then maybe they'll be good enough for Allah to let them into heaven. Roman Catholics have to go to Mass and do as many good works of charity as they possibly can.

And the sad thing about all these religions, is that nobody can ever know for sure if they've done enough. They've just got to hope for the best. What a terrible burden that must be, never knowing if their god is pleased or not.

But Protestants believe we can get to heaven, and avoid any punishment for our sins, "*by Faith Alone*." In other words, simply by believing on Jesus Christ for our salvation. That's true. That's the good news we have for the world:

Acts 16:31
Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved.

It's a great comfort to the Christian to realise that our eternal destiny doesn't rely on what we do, because none of us are anywhere near good enough:

Isaiah 64:6
But we are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags; and we all do fade as a leaf; and our iniquities, like the wind, have taken us away.

And it's also a great comfort to be able to know for sure that we're saved, and that we're never going to get the punishment we deserve.

John 10:28
And I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand.

The closer we get to God, the more sin we see in ourselves. It's promises such as these that are the greatest comfort to us every time we fall into sin.

But, there's one major objection people have to this. If, once we're saved, we're always saved, and we can't lose our salvation once we've got it, isn't that just licence to sin? If all we have to do to get to heaven is say we believe in Jesus, then we can do what we like, and we'll still get there. We can go out on a sinning spree, God won't mind, He'll forgive us everything anyway. That can't be fair. Surely salvation must depend on what we do, and not faith alone.

It's that objection I want to address today by looking at this passage:

[1] There was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews:

We know nothing else about Nicodemus except he was a ruler of the Jews. It was the rulers and religious leaders Christ had the most trouble with. They were jealous of Him. The people realised that Christ "*spoke as one with authority and not as the scribes*". He knew what He was talking

about. As opposed to the church leaders with their clever speeches trying to impress people. The religious leaders eventually handed Christ over to the Romans for crucifixion. But here, Nicodemus, one of those leaders, comes on his own to see Christ.

[2] The same came to Jesus by night, and said unto him, Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him.

He probably went at night to avoid detection by the ruling council. He didn't want them to know he'd gone to see Jesus. That'd have been embarrassing.

But another reason he came by night could be that he couldn't sleep. All the time in his mind he was wondering whether this Jesus Christ of Nazareth was the prophesied Messiah or not. Maybe he'd heard bad things said about Him in the council, and it was bugging him. He didn't want to go against God, he had to get to the truth. He had to find out. He couldn't sleep until he'd found out. So he went to Him in the middle of the night to sort it all out in his mind.

And he says: ***"We know that thou art a teacher come from God."*** Notice *"**We** know*." So there was more than one of them in the council who secretly recognised Christ was from God. Nicodemus seems to have been sent as a spokesman for them. We know of Joseph of Arimathaea, he was one of them, we meet him later in Scripture.

"For no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him." They'd been convinced of Christ having come from God by the miracles. And that's exactly what the miracles were meant to point to. Sadly, most of the people who saw the miracles just wanted free healthcare. Christ told them:

John 6:26,27
Jesus answered them and said, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Ye seek me, not because ye saw the miracles, but because ye did eat of the loaves, and were filled. Labour not for the meat which perisheth, but for that meat which endureth unto everlasting life, which the Son of man shall give unto you.

And that's all Nicodemus managed to say. We don't actually know why he went to see Jesus, because he never got the chance to ask whatever he came for. Jesus intervened by saying something quite remarkable:

[3] Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.

Christ **"*answered*"** before Nicodemus had asked a question. And He comes out with this statement, which Nicodemus didn't understand. And we may not understand it either, but it is actually the most fundamental teaching of the Christian faith. Christ tells Nicodemus nobody can see the kingdom of God unless he is **"*born again*,"** or "*born from above*."

Nicodemus had told Christ that they had recognised He was a teacher sent from God. And that's true, He was a teacher. He teaches us some wonderful lessons, let's hear Him. Let's love our enemies, let's do good to those who persecute us, let's turn the other cheek, go the extra mile. He's given us some wonderful teaching that nobody bothers with in the modern world today. So by all means let's spread His teachings abroad.

But, if all we see in Jesus Christ is a teacher, yes, it would be good to follow Him. But we'd soon find out that we couldn't keep it up for very long. No matter how hard we try to follow His teaching, we can't do it. Even to begin to follow Christ, we need a fundamental change in our very nature. And that's what Christ meant when He said **"*Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God*."** Nicodemus wondered what **"*born again*"** meant:

[4] Nicodemus saith unto him, How can a man be born when he is old? can he enter the second time into his mother's womb, and be born?

The only sort of birth Nicodemus is familiar with is natural childbirth. It's obvious a grown man can't go through that again. So here is a religious leader on the ruling council, with absolutely no concept of heavenly things.

And that's what we've got in the church today. Christian churches have been in existence for many centuries in this country. Most of them were started by good Christian people. But, they've now become no more than glorified social clubs. As generations have come and gone, all teaching on heavenly things, has been completely lost. The only sermons in these churches nowadays are no more than moral or political messages. The church in Nicodemus' day after many centuries of tradition, had become no different.

[5] Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. [6] That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. [7] Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again.

Christ explained that to be **"*born again*,"** doesn't mean going through physical childbirth again, but rather it means a spiritual birth. There's a completely different dimension to life that by nature we're all totally unaware of. We've all been born of water, born of the flesh. That's natural childbirth, which we've all been through to get here. But if that's all we've experienced, there's a whole spiritual dimension that we just can't see, we really can't. To see the kingdom of God, to begin to live a Christ-like life, we also need to be born of the Spirit. That's the new birth, a spiritual birth. And we must all go through this spiritual birth, in order to have any hope of getting out of this sinful life we've been born into.

2 Corinthians 5:17
Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.

[8] The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit.

Then Christ compares everyone **"*born of the Spirit*"** to the wind. Now that might seem odd at first. The wind **"*bloweth where it listeth*."** We think of the wind as moving about at random, and the weather coming

about by random movements in the air. But that's not the case at all. The weather, in its minutest detail, is controlled by God in His overarching providence.

Dunkirk 1940. Thousands of soldiers had to be quickly evacuated from continental Europe as the Nazis were advancing. Just for that one day, the English Channel was calm as a millpond to allow many to be saved alive.

In 1984 York Minster was struck by lightning causing a lot of damage. Why did God do that? Three days beforehand an openly unbelieving bishop had just been consecrated there. God will not be mocked. It was said of Christ:

Mark 4:41
What manner of man is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?

I heard a preacher once say that it was Satan that caused earthquakes and hurricanes and what we call "natural disasters," but that's not true. Satan's not that powerful. He's powerful, we don't mess with him, but he's a spiritual enemy, he's the accuser of the brethren. He can't change the weather.

We hear the sound of the wind but we can't tell where it comes from nor where it's going. And that's compared to everyone born of the Spirit. We can't see the wind, but we can see its effect. And it's the same with spiritual things. The world can't understand the born-again Christian. Everybody born of the Spirit no longer behaves the way the world behaves. They no longer live for themselves, but for Him who gave Himself for them:

Galatians 2:20
I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me.

The world can't understand the new birth, because it has no experience of it. They can't explain our new life, our new desires, our new behaviour, no longer living for ourselves but for Jesus Christ.

1 Corinthians 2:14
But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.

[9] Nicodemus answered and said unto him, How can these things be? [10] Jesus answered and said unto him, Art thou a master of Israel, and knowest not these things?

Nicodemus was outwardly very high up in the religious hierarchy. He was a master in Israel. But he knew absolutely nothing of spiritual things at all. And Christ rebukes him for that. And Christ goes on:

[11] Verily, verily, I say unto thee, We speak that we do know, and testify that we have seen; and ye receive not our witness. [12] If I have told you earthly things, and ye believe not, how shall ye believe, if I tell you of heavenly things?

Christ is the true witness from the Father, who came into this world to teach us about heavenly things. But men don't receive the witness of God. Nobody listens to Jesus Christ today. Just on an earthly level, nobody bothers with His teachings. Where is He in our education system? Nowhere. So how can anybody be expected to know spiritual, heavenly things? He came to this world and was rejected. Men prefer their own way.

John 1:10-13
He was in the world, and the world was made by him, and the world knew him not. He came unto his own, and his own received him not. But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name: Which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.

So, how do we receive this new birth? How can we become **"*born again*"** so that we can see the kingdom of God? So that we can see spiritual things?

[13] And no man hath ascended up to heaven, but he that came down from heaven, even the Son of man which is in heaven.

We must come to Jesus Christ. He is the only way. He is the only one who is of the Father, come down from heaven. Who is "*God manifest in the flesh.*"

Acts 4:12
Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved.

John 14:6
I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me.

We must believe in Jesus Christ, put our trust in Him to save us from our sins:

[14] And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: [15] That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life.

This refers to a judgment God brought on the people of Israel in Numbers 21:

Numbers 21:6-9
And the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and much people of Israel died. Therefore the people came to Moses, and said, We have sinned, for we have spoken against the LORD, and against thee; pray unto the LORD, that he take away the serpents from us. And Moses prayed for the people. And the LORD said unto Moses, Make thee a fiery serpent, and set it upon a pole: and it shall come to pass, that every one that is bitten, when he looketh upon it, shall live. And Moses made a serpent of brass, and put it upon a pole, and it came to pass, that if a serpent had bitten any man, when he beheld the serpent of brass, he lived.

God brought a judgment on Israel for their sin. But He also provided a way out. Anyone who had been bitten, who then simply looked at the brass serpent, lived. That's all they had to do, just look. Now I'm sure many people would have thought that to be ridiculous. How is it

possible that just looking at a piece of brass can save anyone from snake poison? So I'm sure many of them wouldn't even have bothered to look, because they thought it stupid.

And that's exactly what we've got in the world today. We've all been bitten by the serpent. We've all been born in a fallen state, with a sinful nature. But God has provided a way out. All we have to do is look to Jesus Christ, believe in Him, trust in Him, and we can be saved from our sins, from our sinful, selfish natures. But so many people around us think that's ridiculous. So they don't.

[16] For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

God loved the world **"*so*,"** in this manner: Not that God is going to forgive everybody everything unconditionally anyway, no matter how bad they are. No, no, no. That's not the manner in which God loved the world. He loved the world in this manner: that whosoever simply believeth in Christ should not get the due punishment for their sins, but have everlasting life.

Now, we must forsake our sin, to repent of our past lives, our sinful natures. We've got to be finished with that life. But then all we need to do is believe in Him, put our trust in Him. That's it. That's all we can do. And, if we are genuine, if we truly hate our old life and want to change, and want to receive the new life Jesus Christ can give, then pray to Him, believe in Him, start to trust in Him to lead and to take care of us. That's it.

And if we're genuinely genuine, He will respond. He will put a new heart within us and change our very nature. Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners. We must recognise ourselves as sinners and come to Him:

[17] For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved.

Jesus Christ came the first time as a Saviour. All those who put their trust in Him will surely be saved. But He's going to come again at the end of time as a judge. While we are here, now, there's still hope for every one of us. He's come to save. And all we have to do is trust in Him to save us to eternal life:

[18] He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.

But if we just sit back and do nothing, we'll reap what we sow. We'll be judged according to the natural human nature we received at birth. Do we really want to continue living for self, selfish desires, selfish ambitions? Aren't we fed up with that yet? By nature every one of us loves darkness. We don't want Christ. That's why, when Christ came into the world, he was put to death. Not that He did anything wrong, He was sinless. But men couldn't abide His light:

[19] And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. [20] For every one that doeth evil hateth the light, neither cometh to the light, lest his deeds should be reproved. [21] But he that doeth truth cometh to the light, that his deeds may be made manifest, that they are wrought in God.

So, do we hate the light of Jesus Christ, because we don't want to give up our sin? Or do we love the truth, in which case we'll be drawn to the light. That's the choice everybody has to deal with.

Nicodemus is mentioned in two other places in Scripture, and it's obvious that sometime after this meeting with Christ, such a change had happened to him. In John 7, we find him standing up against the rulers in the council:

John 7:48-52
Have any of the rulers or of the Pharisees believed on him? But this people who knoweth not the law are cursed. Nicodemus saith unto them, (he that came to Jesus by night, being one of them,) Doth our law judge any man, before it hear him, and

know what he doeth? They answered and said unto him, Art thou also of Galilee? Search, and look: for out of Galilee ariseth no prophet.

And then later on in John 19, we hear of him with Joseph of Arimathaea taking away the body of Christ to give Him a decent burial:

John 19:38-40
And after this Joseph of Arimathaea, being a disciple of Jesus, but secretly for fear of the Jews, besought Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus: and Pilate gave him leave. He came therefore, and took the body of Jesus. And there came also Nicodemus, which at the first came to Jesus by night, and brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about an hundred pound weight. Then took they the body of Jesus, and wound it in linen clothes with the spices, as the manner of the Jews is to bury.

Nicodemus had received the new birth. It was obvious that he'd experienced a true change in his heart. When we first meet him, he knows nothing of spiritual things whatsoever. To him, Christ was just a teacher from God, not his Lord and Saviour. But now, see how he loves Him, as he boldly stands up to the council, and as he takes the Lord's body for burial. Without the new birth, he wouldn't have done either of those things. He'd probably just have kept quiet to save his skin. His boldness is the fruit of the new birth.

So, back to "*Justification by Faith Alone*." If we've never experienced the new birth, if we've never been born-again in our hearts and received a new nature from Christ, then it's quite understandable we'd think that salvation obtained simply by believing, without any connection to our good works, is too easy.

That would provoke two kinds of response: Firstly, the critics of it would say it gives licence to sin. That can't possibly be right. So they reject it altogether.

But there'll also be a lot of other people who'll think it's a great idea. Because they want to carry on freely in their sin, and still have that heavenly insurance policy at the same time. And it has to be said, Protestant churches today are full of that kind of people, and it's a terrible witness to the truth. Christ said:

Matthew 7:22,23
Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity.

On the other hand, the truly born-again Christian has had a fundamental change of nature. He now hates sin. He just wouldn't want to sin. He would rather want to run away from sin whenever he can. The very last thing on his mind is to think that now he's saved he can sin all he wants. No. God has written the law in his heart, to take away his desire to sin:

Psalm 119:11
Thy word have I hid in mine heart, that I might not sin against thee.

Christians still sin, but whenever we do, we don't do it deliberately, we don't want to do it, we fall into it. And every time it happens, we hate it. Let's never take the forgiveness of sins lightly. It took Christ to the cross to forgive sin. Forgiveness with God should never be thought of as easy and cheap.

Psalm 130:4
But there is forgiveness with thee, that thou mayest be feared.

To the world, just like Nicodemus at first, Christ is no more than a teacher, one of many, just like Mohammed and Buddha and all the rest. No. He's far more than just a teacher. He is Lord and Saviour to all who believe.

Let's make sure that every one of us puts our trust in Christ, and receives the new birth that He freely gives to all who call upon Him. Then we'll be saved from our sins, we'll know we've been saved, we'll know we can never be lost, and we'll certainly never ever want to try to find an excuse for sin any more.

John 6:26-27. The Miracles of Christ

Read John 6:1-27

When Jesus Christ was on earth, one thing that marked Him out from everybody else was that He performed miracles. A miracle is something over and above the course of nature. By definition, miracles don't ordinarily happen. Ordinarily, God uses means. That's the only way we can have order. Otherwise we couldn't do anything. Fire is normally hot, so we can cook our food on it. If we didn't know whether it was going to be hot or cold before we lit it, we couldn't plan anything. We have to have natural laws. But God is God. He's free to work above and beyond them, if He so wishes. And He does, in miracles.

We saw two of Christ's miracles in the passage that was read. The first one was the feeding of five thousand men, plus women and children, using only five barley loaves of bread and two small fish. The second was Christ walking on the water of the Sea of Galilee and calming a storm. Things like that don't happen every day. They're over and above natural means, so they're defined as miracles.

1. Christ's Miracles were Real Miracles

First, we've got to ascertain that Christ's miracles were real. We shouldn't have to do this, but today our universities are full of atheist theologians. If you go to any university today to study theology, you will be taught the miracles weren't real, the resurrection didn't happen, Mary, when she bore Christ, was a "young woman" not a virgin, Moses' miracles before Pharaoh were the result of a volcanic eruption, the Biblical account of Creation is a myth, and the Bible itself isn't the word of God, it's just a jigsaw of man-made writings.

We can't argue with these people. Our ultimate authority is the Bible, which is God's revelation to man. But they don't believe that. They believe what they want to believe. So it's impossible to pin them down, or to discuss anything with them. Christ said:

Matthew 15:14
Let them alone: they be blind leaders of the blind. And if the blind lead the blind, both shall fall into the ditch.

It's fairly simple to show that Christ's miracles were real. The people believed they were:

John 6:2
And a great multitude followed him, because they saw his miracles which he did on them that were diseased.

Not only that, but Christ's greatest enemies recognised them as real miracles. They couldn't deny it. After Christ healed the man born blind in John 9, some Pharisees murmured about Him, but they couldn't deny the miracles:

John 9:16
Therefore said some of the Pharisees, This man is not of God, because he keepeth not the sabbath day. Others said, How can a man that is a sinner do such miracles? And there was a division among them.

They admitted He did real miracles. They didn't call him a charlatan, a fake healer. They dismissed Him for other reasons. They thought Him a sinner and a Sabbath-breaker.

And later on, they held a council, where none of them denied that He performed miracles:

John 11:47,48
Then gathered the chief priests and the Pharisees a council, and said, What do we? for this man doeth many miracles. If we let him thus alone, all men will believe on him: and the Romans shall come and take away both our place and nation.

They were far more concerned that the Romans would take away their place and nation than anything else. Why didn't they just call Him a fake? Because they couldn't. Every miracle Christ worked was real. And they knew it. So that's the first point. These miracles were real, despite what theology professors tell us.

2. We Can't do Miracles like Christ Today

We've got plenty of atheists to deal with. But we also have the opposite extreme. Faith healers. Benny Hinn, Morris Cerullo, Peter Popoff. We see them on our so-called "Christian" TV channels every day. And if we believe them, they'll take all our money.

Faith-healing isn't unique to Christianity. There are faith-healers in every religion. Animists have faith-healers, Buddhist do too, even Islam has them. Because there's money in it.

And they're popular, because vulnerable people who're sick, who've tried everything else without success, will try anything, so they easily fall prey to a smooth-talking faith-healer.

Have you heard of Derren Brown? He's an illusionist, a stage magician. He's made several very good TV programmes showing that the techniques of these faith healers are exactly the same ones he uses as an illusionist. He's done a very good job exposing their deceit. But he's an atheist, and sadly, he throws the baby out with the bath water. He proves these faith-healers are fake, but concludes Christianity is too. But that doesn't follow.

Christ could perform miracles, but we can't today. We need to show that from the Bible.

We read of two occasions during Christ's ministry when He gave the power to perform miracles to some of His disciples for certain campaigns. In Matthew 10, the twelve disciples went out, only preaching to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. And in Luke 10, seventy went out as a vanguard, into every place He himself would go later.

He also gave His apostles this power for a while after His ascension. That's it. They're the only occasions when Christ gave power to others to do miracles. The Bible calls these miracles "*signs and wonders*," and we're told specifically they're the signs of an apostle:

2 Corinthians 12:12
Truly the signs of an apostle were wrought among you in all patience, in signs, and wonders, and mighty deeds.

Many think Acts chapter 2 proves we can do miracles today, but it says nothing of the kind. On that unique occasion, some people spoke miraculously with other languages. But I suggest that even this was only the apostles, because we're told:

Acts 2:7
And they were all amazed and marvelled, saying one to another, Behold, are not all these which speak Galilaeans?

What were the miracles Christ gave to His disciples on these occasions? The best list we have is in Matthew 10. This was to the twelve, and notice that included Judas Iscariot:

Matthew 10:1,8
And when he had called unto him his twelve disciples, he gave them power against unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal all manner of sickness and all manner of disease.... Heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, cast out devils: freely ye have received, freely give.

Take this list "*Heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, cast out devils*," and compare it with the lists of "*spiritual gifts*" mentioned elsewhere in Scripture. They're not the same. These "*spiritual gifts*" are given to the church, and I suggest they are still with us today, otherwise why are they in the Bible at all? The most comprehensive list of these we have is in 1 Corinthians 12:

1 Corinthians 12:8-10
For to one is given by the Spirit the word of wisdom; to another the word of knowledge by the same Spirit; To another faith by the same Spirit; to another the gifts of healing by the same Spirit; To another the working of miracles; to another prophecy; to another discerning of spirits; to another divers kinds of tongues; to another the interpretation of tongues....

Aha! There we are. The "*spiritual gifts*" of "*the working of miracles*" and "*healing*." It's always assumed that the miracles mentioned here are the same as the miracles Christ did. But they're not. In 1 Corinthians 12,

the Greek word for "*miracles*" is " *dunamis*," which is usually translated "*power*." In the gospels, the usual word for Christ's miracles is "*sayimon*," which is usually translated "*sign*." We can argue over what "*the working of miracles*" actually is, but it's not the same as the "*signs and wonders*" Christ performed.

And as for the spiritual "*gifts of healing*" (notice the plural), why do we assume they mean instant physical healing like Christ's miracles? It could be something completely different. Some people have a gift of being able to speak healing words to people in need. Knowing exactly the right thing to say at the right time in order to defuse a volatile, or awkward situation. The "*gifts of healing*" could simply mean the gifts of being a peacemaker.

Nowhere in the lists of "*spiritual gifts*" are "*heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, cast out devils*." These were the "*signs*" Christ and the apostles did, not the "*spiritual gifts*" we have today. The spiritual gifts also include "*wisdom*," "*knowledge*," "*faith*," "*helps*," "*governments*," and "*tongues*," or other languages. These are for the church today, and are not in the list of "*signs and wonders*" which only Christ and the apostles could do.

In any case, "*spiritual gifts*" are gifts of the Spirit, which are only given to believers as the Lord wills, so Judas couldn't have had any. But he was given "*signs and wonders*" to do.

We can't perform the miracles Christ and the apostles could do today. So, if aunt Bessie is sick, we don't go up to her and say, "Be healed in the name of Jesus!" But what we can do is pray. There is a God in heaven who can heal. He is the one we go to. He may heal, or He may not. It may be her time to die. But we still go to Him and accept whatever He has for her. We don't try to pretend we can heal her ourselves.

3. What was the Purpose of the Miracles?

Christ and the apostles performed miracles. But what was their purpose? Did Christ come to give us physical healing on demand? Why can't we have the miracles today?

Christ didn't do any miracles for the first thirty years of His life. He only started them after He began His public ministry. In John 2:11, we're told His turning water into wine was the "*beginning of miracles*." Why did He only start then? He could've healed so many more.

The miracles were not an end in themselves. Physical healing is not an end in itself. Unless Christ comes again in our lifetime, we're all still going to die. Christ raised Lazarus from the dead, but he still died again later. We must all face death, because we're sinners:

Romans 6:23
The wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Hebrews 9:27
It is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment....

The miracles were good things, they healed people from crippling illnesses, fed people in the wilderness. Christ went about doing good. The only ones who complained about Him were the religious leaders, who wanted Him out of the way so they could be in charge.

Acts 10:38
How God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Ghost and with power: who went about doing good, and healing all that were oppressed of the devil; for God was with him.

Why people today don't want to know or desire Him, I don't know. He only ever did good.

But He didn't come just to do a few miracles then go away again. The miracles pointed to something far greater, namely the fact that He was the Christ, the prophesied Messiah.

It had always been prophesied that a Messiah, a Saviour, would come to save the Lord's people. Many thought that just meant a physical salvation for Israel from their enemies, such as the Romans. But God meant it to be far more than that.

We're all born with a problem. We're sinful, selfish creatures by nature. From all eternity, God planned to save a number that no man can number from the consequences of that sin. To do that, He had to send His Son to die on a cross to take the punishment for their sin in their place. If we don't have Jesus Christ dying in our place as our substitute, there will be no hope for us in eternity. We'll have to be punished for our own sin for ever and ever. That's why knowing Jesus Christ, repenting of our sins and coming to Him, calling on Him to save us, is the most important thing in the world. Without Him there's no hope for us. But how are we to know who this Messiah is, when He's arrived on earth? Many people throughout history have claimed to be some sort of Saviour:

Matthew 24:4,5
And Jesus answered and said unto them, Take heed that no man deceive you. For many shall come in my name, saying, I am Christ; and shall deceive many....

But Christ did miracles. This was the proof He was from God. It's true, we're told that in the end times false Christs will come with "*great signs and wonders*:"

Matthew 24:23,24
Then if any man shall say unto you, Lo, here is Christ, or there; believe it not. For there shall arise false Christs, and false prophets, and shall shew great signs and wonders; insomuch that, if it were possible, they shall deceive the very elect.

But will these really be real miracles, like Christ did? I don't think so. They'll be very, very clever deceptions. So clever that even some of the elect will be taken in for a time.

Nicodemus saw Christ's miracles and realised they meant that He came from God:

John 3:2
The same came to Jesus by night, and said unto him, Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him.

Many others in Christ's day saw the miracles and realised this was the Christ too:

John 7:31
And many of the people believed on him, and said, When Christ cometh, will he do more miracles than these which this man hath done?

Christ's miracles were only ever meant to be signs, pointing to something greater, His having come from God. His teachings were far more important than miracles. But most didn't realise that. They didn't want boring teaching. They just wanted more miracles now.

After the feeding of the five thousand and the calming of the storm, a crowd met Him in Capernaum. They were actively seeking Him. But Christ saw their real motive.

John 6:26-27

[26] Jesus answered them and said, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Ye seek me, not because ye saw the miracles, but because ye did eat of the loaves, and were filled. [27] Labour not for the meat which perisheth, but for that meat which endureth unto everlasting life, which the Son of man shall give unto you: for him hath God the Father sealed.

They were looking for Him, not because they **"*saw the miracles*,"** in other words, saw what they were pointing to – the fact He was from God and that His teachings were far more important than His miracles. Oh no. It wasn't because they saw the real purpose of the miracles. They came to Him because they **"*did eat of the loaves, and were filled*."** In other words, for the free healthcare, the free food, something for nothing. They didn't come for His teaching. They couldn't care less about salvation to eternal life, or having their sins forgiven. And it's the same today too. All people want is things here, now.

Christ went on to tell them that we're not called to labour for things down here, on this earth, **"*which perisheth, but for that meat which endureth unto everlasting life.*"** And that only comes from one source, the Son of Man, Christ Himself. So He started teaching them spiritual things. But they didn't want that. No interest. And many of them went away:

John 6:60
Many therefore of his disciples, when they had heard this, said, This is an hard saying; who can hear it?

John 6:66
From that time many of his disciples went back, and walked no more with him.

And that's what we get today. If we could do wonderful miracles, just like Jesus Christ did, our churches would be full. That's just what people want. Something for nothing. And many churches today set themselves up as having "healing ministries" to attract people. And it does for a while. They're very well attended. Until they find the healing's all fake. These churches seem lively, but they've got a very high turnover. And there's never any teaching about what Christ really came to this world to do – to save His people from their sins. That's what we should be doing, preaching the gospel of God's redeeming grace.

Don't get me wrong. As I said, God can heal. But we ask Him through prayer. To set ourselves up as a "healing ministry" implies it'll always work. And if it doesn't, then we can just blame the victim... er sorry... the patient for not having enough faith. A "prayer ministry" would be far more useful, leaving it to God to heal or not as it pleases Him.

So, the miracles weren't an end in themselves. Their purpose was to point to Jesus Christ as being the Saviour that came from God. He is the one we should listen to and trust in:

Matthew 17:5
This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased; hear ye him.

4. Why Different Ways of Performing the Miracles?

When we look at Christ's miracles, there are many occasions when He just said a word, and the person was healed. There are other occasions when He said nothing and they were healed. There are occasions when the healing was more complicated than that. And there were occasions when He performed the same miracle in different ways.

As an example, Christ gave many blind people their sight, and we have details about three of them in the Scriptures. Let's have a look at them:

With blind Bartimaeus in Luke 18, He just said the word and he was healed:

Luke 18:40-43
And Jesus stood, and commanded him to be brought unto him: and when he was come near, he asked him, Saying, What wilt thou that I shall do unto thee? And he said, Lord, that I may receive my sight. And Jesus said unto him, Receive thy sight: thy faith hath saved thee. And immediately he received his sight, and followed him, glorifying God: and all the people, when they saw it, gave praise unto God.

Christ asked Bartimaeus what he wanted, and after he'd replied, Christ simply said: "*Receive thy sight: thy faith hath saved thee.*" That's it. An instant healing. And as Christ is from God, that's what we ought to expect every time. But there are two other examples:

With the man born blind in John 9, it was more complicated. Christ spat on the ground, anointed his eyes then told him to wash in a specific place:

John 9:6,7
When he had thus spoken, he spat on the ground, and made clay of the spittle, and he anointed the eyes of the blind man with the clay, And said unto him, Go, wash in the pool of Siloam, (which is by interpretation, Sent.) He went his way therefore, and washed, and came seeing.

And with a man in Bethsaida in Mark 8, Christ performed the miracle in two stages:

Mark 8:22-25
And he cometh to Bethsaida; and they bring a blind man unto him, and besought him to touch him. And he took the blind man by the hand, and led him out of the town; and when he had spit on his eyes, and put his hands upon him, he asked him if he saw ought. And he looked up, and said, I see men as trees, walking. After that he put his hands again upon his eyes, and made him look up: and he was restored, and saw every man clearly.

He led the man out of town, spat on his eyes and put His hands on him. But he only partially saw, so He put His hands on him again and asked him to look up, then he was restored fully. This is the only miracle in the Bible done in two stages. It didn't work the first time, so Jesus had to "try again." Is that right? Of course not. Christ never made mistakes or only partially did something. He could have just said a word to heal him, like Bartimaeus. There must be a reason for this miracle being in two stages.

There must be a purpose behind Christ using different methods to do the same thing. Each one of these methods must be teaching us something about our spiritual blindness.

Only Christ can give us spiritual light. That's the first thing:

Ephesians 5:14
Awake thou that sleepest, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give thee light.

With Bartimaeus this was instantaneous. Suddenly he's alive. We're all born spiritually blind. And when Christ comes into our lives, He makes us us see. Suddenly light. The Bible comes alive. The things of God become a reality. We suddenly see the truth.

With the man born blind, after he was anointed with the clay he was still blind for a while, and he had to obey Christ and go to the pool of Siloam to wash. This teaches us obedience. Yes, Christ is the only one that can give us light, but we need to change. We need to become obedient to Him. After He has changed us, we might still be in the dark for a while, until we learn some obedience. Even if what He tells us to do seems strange, we still need to obey Him to see clearly.

And the third case is in two parts for a purpose. When we become a Christian, we see spiritual light for the first time, and it's wonderful. But we don't see clearly straight away. We only see men as trees walking. All things have become new, but we don't see them clearly yet. Only when we continue to look up to Christ, do things become clearer.

So the three different methods are teaching us different things about spiritual life.

With both the man born blind and the man in Bethsaida, Christ used His spit. Isn't that strange? What gives us spiritual light? The Word of God, the words of Christ, from His mouth:

Psalm 119:130
The entrance of thy words giveth light; it giveth understanding unto the simple.

That's the picture. If we want spiritual light, we must come to Jesus Christ. Not me, not Mohammed, not Buddha, but Jesus Christ. His words are living and powerful:

Psalm 19:7
The law of the Lord is perfect, converting the soul.

Hebrews 4:12
For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.

That's what the miracles of Christ are all about. Only He and the apostles had the power to do them. They were never meant to be an end in themselves, but pointed to Christ as being from God. And even the different ways Christ performed them teaches us lessons.

But there's one last thing.

5. The Miracle of Providence

This is the miracle we deal with on an everyday basis today.

Miracles had hardly ever happened before. The man born blind in John 9 said:

John 9:32
Since the world began was it not heard that any man opened the eyes of one that was born blind.

We only find miracles occasionally in the Bible, particularly the Exodus and in the time of Elijah and Elisha. Other than that, they're very few and far between.

But there is a miracle that God continually performs every day. We see it throughout the Bible, throughout history, and it's taking place here, now. The wonderful miracle of Providence. Unlike the other miracles, this miracle doesn't bypass the natural laws God has set up. It doesn't go above or beyond those means. But using those means, we can say that ***nothing happens for no reason***. God is working all things out to His own glory.

From the largest things:

Psalm 148:8
Fire, and hail; snow, and vapour; stormy wind fulfilling his word....

To the smallest:

Matthew 10:29,30
Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? and one of them shall not fall on the ground without your Father. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered.

And He particularly works everything out for the good of His people:

Romans 8:28
And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.

Incredibly, even the wicked acts of men He works out for our good and His glory:

Genesis 50:20
But as for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive.

Acts 2:23,24
Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain: Whom God hath raised up,

having loosed the pains of death: because it was not possible that he should be holden of it.

And above all, He defeats our greatest enemy. Pride. This is the greatest miracle of all:

Daniel 4:37
Those that walk in pride he is able to abase.

If there's one thing all of us need, it's for our pride to be destroyed within us:

1 Samuel 2:3
Talk no more so exceeding proudly; let not arrogancy come out of your mouth: for the Lord is a God of knowledge, and by him actions are weighed.

1 Peter 5:5,6
God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble. Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time....

Only the Lord Jesus Christ can humble the soul. Come to Him. Trust in Him:

Matthew 11:29
Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls.

Jesus Christ, who came from God as the miracles testify, is worthy of all our worship. We can trust in Him completely. This is the confidence we can have, knowing that God is in control of everything. Nothing is outside of His control.

This is the real Christian life, living our lives trusting that all things, both pleasant and unpleasant, work together for good, even when they don't seem to be.

Habakkuk 3:17,18
Although the fig tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vines; the labour of the olive shall fail, and the fields shall yield no meat; the flock shall be cut off

from the fold, and there shall be no herd in the stalls: Yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation.

John 9. The Man Born Blind

[1] And as Jesus passed by, he saw a man which was blind from his birth.

Jesus saw a man born blind. And the disciples asked Christ a question about him:

[2] And his disciples asked him, saying, Master, who did sin, this man, or his parents, that he was born blind?

The philosophical question here is, Why was this man born blind? Was it for his own sin, or his parent's sin? So the general idea going around was that disability was the result of sin. Now, in one sense that's true. All disabilities are in the world because of sin:

Romans 6:23
For the wages of sin is death.

In fact all illnesses, weaknesses and imperfections are because of sin. We all decay and die because of sin. If sin never came into the world, this world would be perfect, nobody would decay and die, nobody would be disabled. In that sense only, it's the result of sin. But individual disabilities are not necessarily directly connected to particular sins.

[3] Jesus answered, Neither hath this man sinned, nor his parents: but that the works of God should be made manifest in him.

When Christ said this, He didn't mean they'd never sinned, of course not.

Ecclesiastes 7:20
For there is not a just man upon earth, that doeth good, and sinneth not.

What He meant was, this man's blindness wasn't caused by his sin or his parent's sin directly. Then Christ gives the real reason this man was

born blind. I hope Stephen Fry is listening to this. A while ago, he said, "When I see God, the first thing I'll ask Him is, 'Bone cancer in children. What's that all about?' " Well, for a start, when we meet our maker, none of us will be saying any such thing. We won't be saying anything. Like the man in the parable without a wedding garment, we'll be speechless.

Here's Christ's answer: **"*That the works of God should be made manifest in him*."** This doesn't just refer Christ healing him. That would be a "work of God," singular. It says, **"*works"*** plural. That refers to his whole life. Even if he was never healed, the real reason he was born blind was so **"*that the works of God should be made manifest in him*."**
I remember, many years ago, not long after I was converted, I was in a street, and there was a young man who was blind and dumb, handing out tracts. It was obvious he loved the Lord. He wasn't made like that because of his sin. God made him like that so that **"*the works of God*"** could be **"*made manifest in him*."**

We can extend this to us all. We might think our situation is bad. But remember, God has given us whatever situation we're in, **"*That the works of God should be made manifest in"*** us. And then Christ goes on to talk about the works He was given to do:

[4] I must work the works of him that sent me, while it is day: the night cometh, when no man can work. [5] As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.

Christ Himself had been given works to do, amongst which were His miracles. He said:

John 8:12
I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life.

But He here says, ***"the night cometh, when no man can work."*** Now Christ has left this world, we're in the night. We don't see His miracles any more. But Christ is still the light of the world. He now shows Himself forth in His people. We can't do miracles like He did, but we

can still have His light in us. So it's important we live life worthy of our calling:

Ephesians 5:8
For ye were sometimes darkness, but now are ye light in the Lord: walk as children of light.

[6] When he had thus spoken, he spat on the ground, and made clay of the spittle, and he anointed the eyes of the blind man with the clay, [7] And said unto him, Go, wash in the pool of Siloam, (which is by interpretation, Sent.) He went his way therefore, and washed, and came seeing.

Christ performs this miracle in a fairly complicated way. This blind man obeyed Christ in every detail, even if it sounded odd. It worked. Suddenly light. We should just do what Christ tells us. Allow Him to change us. Pray to Him. That might sound an odd thing to do, talking to someone we can't see, but try it. Speak to Him. Tell Him we're finished with our old life, and want a new one from Him. He'll hear.

And Christ used His spit. Isn't that strange? What gives us spiritual light? The Word of God, the words of Christ. That's the picture. If we want spiritual light, we must come to Jesus Christ. His words are living and powerful. They convert the soul.

[8] The neighbours therefore, and they which before had seen him that he was blind, said, Is not this he that sat and begged?

This man had undergone a complete life change. From being born blind, spending his life begging, now he can see. He's altogether changed. His neighbours couldn't believe the difference, so much so, that some of them didn't think it was the same person:

[9] Some said, This is he: others said, He is like him: but he said, I am he.

When he found out people were saying this, he immediately corrected them. When we're truly converted, we want people to know the truth too:

2 Corinthians 5:17
Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.

People who knew us before don't understand what's happened to us:

1 Peter 4:4
They think it strange that ye run not with them to the same excess of riot, speaking evil of you.

But we should be ready to give our testimony. Yes, I am the same person, but I've been changed from the inside by Jesus Christ. Of course, many will just think it's just a passing phase. And they'll willingly accept us back into their way of life again at any time. That'll be our first temptation. If we're to be a real witness for Christ, we must be consistent. This man was so thoroughly changed, the neighbours wanted to know more:

[10] Therefore said they unto him, How were thine eyes opened?

They're asking questions. How many times has anybody come up to us and asked for our testimony recently? Not many. Maybe that's to do with the fact we're not much different from the rest of them after all. So the man gives his testimony in detail:

[11] He answered and said, A man that is called Jesus made clay, and anointed mine eyes, and said unto me, Go to the pool of Siloam, and wash: and I went and washed, and I received sight.

He simply told them exactly what happened. It might have sounded ridiculous, but he just told it like it was. We should be ready to do exactly the same thing. And look at the result:

[12] Then said they unto him, Where is he? He said, I know not.

They asked, **"*Where is he?*"** They wanted to find Christ too. They all had their particular needs, and after hearing this remarkable testimony from one of their neighbours, they wanted Him for themselves. Just giving our testimony in a simple, straightforward way, without embellishment or exaggeration, is a wonderful witness to everybody around us.
In answer to their question, the man had to say, **"*I know not.*"** That was the truth. Jesus had left, and He honestly didn't know where He was. We can learn two things from this:

Firstly, if someone comes up to us and asks us a question about our faith (it usually happens when we're least expecting it), if we don't know the answer, don't pretend, don't waffle. Be honest. Just say, "*I don't know*." We're not trying to impress anybody, not even God. Of course, the first thing we'll do when we get home is try to find the answer.

Secondly, this is the way true religion works. The very first thing that happens is that we're changed from darkness to light. We're born again. Justification is by grace alone:

Ephesians 2:8
For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God.

We become new creatures in Christ first of all, before we get to know anything. Then, only afterwards, we start learning things. We are sanctified by the truth:

John 17:17
Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth.

We don't need to know anything to come to Christ. We just need to obey Him. Put our trust in Him. Once He has changed our hearts, we'll then start growing in:

2 Peter 3:18
....grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

So, if we don't know the answer to anything, don't be afraid to say, **"*I know not*."**

[13] They brought to the Pharisees him that aforetime was blind.

They couldn't find Christ, so the neighbours did what they thought was the next best thing, and brought him to the Pharisees. The church leaders. They didn't know any better. They thought the church leaders would know what they were talking about. But that's not necessarily true. The Pharisees were actually Christ's greatest enemies. They were jealous that people were following Christ, not them. Eventually they'd hand Christ over to the Romans to be put to death. But the neighbours didn't know that.

If we want to know what Christianity is all about, we shouldn't go to the church leaders. They just fancy themselves. No! We go to Jesus Christ. We find out for ourselves all about Him in the Bible. Should we trust our lives to the General Synod of the Church of England? God forbid! We trust our lives to Jesus Christ.

[14] And it was the sabbath day when Jesus made the clay, and opened his eyes.

The Pharisees were very strict on the Sabbath. There's nothing wrong with that. We ought to treat our Sabbaths properly, as a day of worship and rest. Today that's a Sunday, not Saturday. But they'd added many extra-Biblical rules of their own. So they particularly didn't like Christ healing on the Sabbath. It broke all their rules, so it must be wrong.

[15] Then again the Pharisees also asked him how he had received his sight. He said unto them, He put clay upon mine eyes, and I washed, and do see.

So the Pharisees asked the man how he'd received his sight. Another opportunity to give his testimony. It was a briefer testimony than he gave his neighbours. Maybe, unlike his neighbours, he found their attitude intimidating. That's why he didn't bother with details.

[16] Therefore said some of the Pharisees, This man is not of God, because he keepeth not the sabbath day. Others said, How can a man that is a sinner do such miracles? And there was a division among them.

After hearing the man's testimony, the Pharisees split into two factions. Some simply repeated, **"*This man is not of God, because he keepeth not the sabbath day*."** But others of them had become interested, **"*How can a man that is a sinner do such miracles*?"**

And that's what happens. Christ said:

Luke 12:51
Suppose ye that I am come to give peace on earth? I tell you, Nay; but rather division.

This will always happen. Some will believe, some won't. But we must continue to witness.

[17] They say unto the blind man again, What sayest thou of him, that he hath opened thine eyes? He said, He is a prophet.

After giving his testimony, he got another question. The Pharisees ask, **"*What sayest thou of Him*?"** That question is a lot trickier to answer. It didn't ask for a factual answer, it asked for an opinion. The Pharisees wanted him to declare where he stood, with regards Christ. Did he agree with them that He was a sinner, or did he think He was of God? He didn't take sides, he simply replied to the best of his understanding. **"*He is a prophet*."**

Muslims would give that answer, because to them that's all Christ is, a prophet. But He's more than that, He's the Son of God. But we can't blame the man here. He doesn't know that Christ is the Son of God yet, He finds that out later in the passage.

[18] But the Jews did not believe concerning him, that he had been blind, and received his sight, until they called the parents of him that

had received his sight. [19] And they asked them, saying, Is this your son, who ye say was born blind? how then doth he now see?

So, they can't get him to either agree with them or condemn himself, so they try another tactic. They now say they don't believe he'd been born blind. So they get his parents involved. They ask them if he was born blind, and asks them how he now sees.

[20] His parents answered them and said, We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind: [21] But by what means he now seeth, we know not; or who hath opened his eyes, we know not: he is of age; ask him: he shall speak for himself.

They confirm that this is their son and that he was born blind. But they tell them they don't know how he saw. That was true, in the sense they weren't there when Christ had healed him. But the man must have told them, because we find out:

[22] These words spake his parents, because they feared the Jews: for the Jews had agreed already, that if any man did confess that he was Christ, he should be put out of the synagogue. [23] Therefore said his parents, He is of age; ask him.

They refused to confess Christ, because they knew they would be thrown out of the synagogue if they did. Which is why they gave the answer, **"*He is of age, ask him*."**

John 12:43
For they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God.

And there are plenty of people today who love their church so much, they would rather deny Christ than have to leave it. That's very sad. But what did their answer achieve? They'd saved their face in the synagogue. But they'd put the pressure back on their son.

[24] Then again called they the man that was blind, and said unto him, Give God the praise: we know that this man is a sinner.

The Pharisees call the man to appear before them again. This time they don't ask a question, but they tell him what they want him to say. **"*Give God the praise,*"** means, "Agree with us." But the man's quickly beginning to see through their hypocrisy, and he's not going to be scared of them like his parents. But his theology is still not quite right yet:

[25] He answered and said, Whether he be a sinner or no, I know not: one thing I know, that, whereas I was blind, now I see.

He says that he doesn't know whether Christ is a sinner or not. Maybe that's what he really believed at this point. He confesses Christ isn't a sinner later. But the Pharisees want him to confess that Christ is a sinner. So, really, the man's telling them that that's not the point. The point is, **"*one thing I do know, that, whereas I was blind, now I see*."**

This man had been healed by Christ. He was blind from birth, now he sees. That's a fact, the evidence is right in front of everybody. But the Pharisees just don't want to believe it.

[26] Then said they to him again, What did he to thee? how opened he thine eyes?

If they can't get him to agree with them, they ask the same questions again and again until he does. That's the way the world operates. Most people under such pressure would get fed up and agree, just for the easy life. But if we love God, if we love the truth, if God's testimony is on the line, we can't do that. That would be living a lie. All the Pharisees are achieving now is making this man even bolder, even more sure of his position.

[27] He answered them, I have told you already, and ye did not hear: wherefore would ye hear it again? will ye also be his disciples?

He now sees clearly the church leaders for what they are. They're just trying to get people to look up to them and follow everything they say. They're hypocrites. Christ said:

Matthew 23:2-5
The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat: All therefore whatsoever they bid you observe, that observe and do; but do not ye after their works: for they say, and do not. For they bind heavy burdens and grievous to be borne, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers. But all their works they do for to be seen of men

We're to follow church leaders as much as we possibly can, because they're the leaders of the outward visible Christian church. But don't do as they do. Follow Christ instead. All the church leaders want is to be seen of men and respected in the streets.

This man finally stands up to them. They're not used to that. They rule by fear. His parents were scared of them, because they had power to throw them out of the synagogue. But this man isn't bothered about getting thrown out of the visible church. He has Christ. He knows who to follow. He laughs at the Pharisees. **"*I have told you already, and ye did not hear: wherefore would ye hear it again? will ye also be his disciples?*"** So they get mad:

[28] Then they reviled him, and said, Thou art his disciple; but we are Moses' disciples.

Well, Christ said:

John 5:45-47
Do not think that I will accuse you to the Father: there is one that accuseth you, even Moses, in whom ye trust. For had ye believed Moses, ye would have believed me: for he wrote of me. But if ye believe not his writings, how shall ye believe my words?

[29] We know that God spake unto Moses: as for this fellow, we know not from whence he is.

They say they don't know where Christ was from. That's a lie. He was known as "Jesus of Nazareth." Just a little earlier, there'd been a dispute about Him. Then they were sure:

John 7:40-43
Many of the people therefore, when they heard this saying, said, Of a truth this is the Prophet. Others said, This is the Christ. But some said, Shall Christ come out of Galilee? Hath not the scripture said, That Christ cometh of the seed of David, and out of the town of Bethlehem, where David was? So there was a division among the people because of him.

And then the man born blind gives his last speech before the church leaders:

[30] The man answered and said unto them, Why herein is a marvellous thing, that ye know not from whence he is, and yet he hath opened mine eyes.

He mocks their statement they don't know where Christ came from. If anyone can heal a blind man so miraculously, surely we'd want to know more about Him, wouldn't we?

[31] Now we know that God heareth not sinners: but if any man be a worshipper of God, and doeth his will, him he heareth.

As the blind man thinks through his new found faith, his theology is getting clearer and clearer in his own mind. He says, **"*God heareth not sinners*."** The argument goes: God heard Christ when He healed the blind man. So Christ, whoever He is, can't be a sinner, like the Pharisees claimed Him to be. In fact, **"*If any man be a worshipper of God, and doeth his will, him he heareth.*"** In other words, this man, Jesus Christ, is of God. He's not a sinner. The miracle proves it. And that's what the miracles were there to do.

The Pharisees' claimed that, **"*This man is not of God*,"** (v.16) and **"*We know that this man is a sinner.*"** (v.24). And here, the man born blind directly contradicts both statements.

[32] Since the world began was it not heard that any man opened the eyes of one that was born blind.

This must be of God. It has never happened before. This is the problem with people who see miracles around every corner. It cheapens the work of Christ. If miracles were commonplace, Jesus Christ would be no big deal. But it's never been like this before.

[33] If this man were not of God, he could do nothing.

That's the last the Pharisees ever get to hear from this man. They can't stand it any longer. Nobody before has ever dared to stand up to them. Christ Himself would do so in due time. If we are Christ's, we must follow Him, because there is no other way.

1 John 3:13
Marvel not, my brethren, if the world hate you.

John 15:18,19
If the world hate you, ye know that it hated me before it hated you. If ye were of the world, the world would love his own: but because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you.

Why did the world hate Christ? Because He testified of it that its works we're evil. These Pharisees were hypocrites. They taught lies in the guise of truth. Now, we have a choice. Do we simply follow lies, just for an easy life? Or do we stand up for truth? Christ said:

Matthew 10:28
And fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.

[34] They answered and said unto him, Thou wast altogether born in sins, and dost thou teach us? And they cast him out.

They cast the man out of the visible church. That's all they could do. Soon enough, they'd do worse to Christ. They'd hand Him over to the Romans to be killed.

And this is what we're called to do, if necessary. We don't deliberately try to get ourselves thrown out of a church, but we should follow

Christ. And if that puts us at odds with our church, so be it. We must follow Christ. Even if it means we end up without the camp:

Hebrews 13:13,14
Let us go forth therefore unto him without the camp, bearing his reproach. For here have we no continuing city, but we seek one to come.

This man had been changed from darkness to light. He could do no other. But what happened now to this poor man? Well, Christ found him:

[35] Jesus heard that they had cast him out; and when he had found him, he said unto him, Dost thou believe on the Son of God?

The first thing Jesus does is teach him some theology. So far, this man's discovered for himself that Christ was a prophet, that He wasn't a sinner and that He was from God. Now the difficult bit. **"*Dost thou believe on the Son of God?*"**

[36] He answered and said, Who is he, Lord, that I might believe on him?

He doesn't say, "No, I don't." Which would have been the truth. He says more than that. He indicates he doesn't know, but, look, he wants to believe, he desires to know who the Son of God is more than anything else. So he asks the only One who has all the answers.

[37] And Jesus said unto him, Thou hast both seen him, and it is he that talketh with thee. [38] And he said, Lord, I believe. And he worshipped him.

Christ says He's the Son of God, and of course the man believes. He'll believe whatever Christ tells him from now on. Forget the church leaders. Jesus Christ truly is the Son of God and is worthy of all our trust. And he worships Him. That's the only suitable reply.

John 5:25
Verily, verily, I say unto you, The hour is coming, and now is, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God: and they that hear shall live.

[39] And Jesus said, For judgment I am come into this world, that they which see not might see; and that they which see might be made blind.

Christ came to give spiritual light to those who know they're in darkness. But if we think we're in the light, if we think we know everything, like the Pharisees, **"*This man is not of God*"** (v.16), **"*We know that this man is a sinner*"** (v.24), think again. We might keep our reputation before men, but thinking we know it all without Christ, will keep us in the dark.

[40] And some of the Pharisees which were with him heard these words, and said unto him, Are we blind also?

Christ spoke this in the hearing of the Pharisees. They recognised He was talking about them, which He was. So they ask, **"*Are we blind also?*"** Notice **"*also*."** They couldn't quite admit they realised they were the ones Christ was referring to, but they knew really.

[41] Jesus said unto them, If ye were blind, ye should have no sin: but now ye say, We see; therefore your sin remaineth.

"*If ye were blind, ye should have no sin*." That can't mean if we're blind to spiritual things we haven't got any sin. Of course not. In that case there'd be no incentive to seek spiritual light at all. No, it means we should be honest with ourselves and admit our lack of understanding, that's the attitude Christ wants from us. The problem we all have is that by nature, we're far too full of ourselves. And modern psychologists encourage us to have this sense of self-worth, self-acceptance, self-esteem, self-confidence.

But confidence in ourselves is the last thing we need. Confidence in ourselves, our achievements, our knowledge. That's what Christ is

talking about here when He says, **"*Now ye say, We see.*"** We think we see the truth about lots of different things. And we've learned it all ourselves. If we think this way, we are saying to ourselves, **"*We see*."** But in reality, we don't see anything at all. So Christ says, **"*Therefore your sin remaineth*."**

Do we see our sin, our blindness, our need? Or are we so sure we know it all. We've got no need for the Bible, or Jesus Christ in our lives? If that's the case, **"*Our sin remaineth.*"** The urgent need for all of us is to recognise we're sinners in God's sight, to repent, call on Him for help to give us spiritual light. That's the only hope we have. We could just ignore all this, like the Pharisees, who were so sure they were right. But **"*Their sin remaineth*."**

Don't be like them. Come to Jesus Christ. Allow Him to turn us from darkness to light, just like this man born blind. Then we'll truly be able to see. And there'll be no stopping us.

John 10:10(b). Life More Abundantly

There's so much we could look at in John chapter 10.

At the beginning, we've got the parable (vv.1-10) of Christ as the door of the sheepfold, as opposed to the thief who comes into the sheepfold some other way. We see the importance of how we can only enter the kingdom of heaven through Christ. Every other way that people try is false. It doesn't work. They might get into the visible church for a while, and so seem to be in Christ's sheepfold, but they're not truly in the kingdom of heaven at all. We can only get there through the door.

Then in vv.11-16, we've got another parable. Christ as the good shepherd, as opposed to the hireling who doesn't care for the sheep. Let's not follow hirelings. There are plenty of them around in the church today that'll teach all sorts of nonsense. Let's rather follow the true shepherd, Jesus Christ. His true people will know His voice (v.16).

But I just want to focus today on one statement here, that occurs between those two parables, and which can so easily be overlooked.

John 10:10(b)
I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly.

And I want to simply make three points:
1. **"*I am come*"** Christ came for a purpose.
2. **"*that they might have life*"** What does "life" mean?
3. **"*and that they might have it more abundantly.*"** What is the abundant life Christ came to give us?

***1. Christ came for a purpose*. "*I am come….*"**

In fact, we've all come for a purpose. Do we realise that? Not many people seem to think that at all. We're not here at random. We're not here for no reason, but for a purpose. I've heard so many sermons in the past, where the speaker has said something like this: "I'm sure

you've all thought at some time 'Why am I here' or 'What's the meaning of life?' Well I'm going to tell you." And they then go on to talk about the meaning of life being Jesus Christ. Now, the last bit is true, the meaning of life is Jesus Christ. But it's the first bit I've got a problem with. I don't know anybody who's going around asking themselves, "Why am I here?" Or searching around trying to find the meaning of life. Maybe a few depressed people who study philosophy, but most people aren't asking themselves why they're here at all. They're just living their lives for what they can get out of it.

From the moment we're born, all we do is please ourselves. We cry when we want feeding, or when we want our nappy changing. We grow up just pleasing ourselves, and we get so annoyed when our parents tell us we can't have something. And most people live their entire lives like that. They're not thinking about the meaning of life or why they're here at all. They just go out and do what they want to do, enjoying themselves as much as they can. They don't even think about the concept of life having a purpose. In fact they're no different from the animals, who are just unthinking creatures of instinct.

Psalm 49:20
Man that is in honour, and understandeth not, is like the beasts that perish.

And that's the fundamental problem with the human race. Left to ourselves, we never think about anything higher than our basic instincts, such as the idea of having a purpose. But God did create us for a purpose. And it certainly wasn't to please ourselves.

Imagine coming before God on judgment day, and He says to us, "And what did you do with the life I gave you?" What are we going to answer? If all we can say is, "Well, I had a good time," I honestly don't think He's going to be very impressed with such a waste of a life. Yet millions are dying every day in exactly that position.

God originally created us for a purpose, whether we acknowledge it or not. And I think underneath everything, we are aware of that to some degree, because God has given us a conscience. Our consciences tell us that there's a need for purpose in our lives, but we don't like that, so we make every effort to ignore it and carry on regardless.

There are many ways by which people try to placate their consciences. One way is by "having a religion." They embrace the man-made traditions of their immediate surroundings. If they're born into a Muslim family, they call themselves muslims. If they're born into a Roman Catholic family, they call themselves Roman Catholic. If they're born Methodist, they call themselves Methodist and so on. They embrace the family religion. Maybe they think they'll disgrace the family if they don't. But they do it in a purely superstitious way. They don't understand it, they just blindly follow their family's traditions, assuming the family is right. I can't understand that.

To automatically assume the religion we are born into must be the true religion, just isn't logical. Even if it was the true religion, surely we still ought to examine it for ourselves, test it, compare it fairly with others, before coming to any conclusion. But nobody ever does that. They just blindly assume their family must be right. And that's the easiest path in the world to follow. It stops us from thinking any more about purpose.

That's not the way it should be. All of us were created for a far, far higher purpose than just living, eating, sleeping and blindly following empty traditions. A real purpose. The Westminster Shorter Catechism tells us exactly what that purpose is:

Q1. "What is the chief end of man?" A. "The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy Him for ever."

1 Corinthians 10:31
Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God.

Our real purpose, the real reason we're all here, is to glorify the One true living God, Lord of heaven and earth who created us in the first place. It doesn't matter if we say we don't believe in Him. We don't believe in His existence. It doesn't matter whether we believe He exists or not. What we believe is irrelevant. It's what actually ***is*** that matters. Every one of us has been put onto this earth to glorify God, whether we accept it or not. And if we spend all our time living for ourselves and not even attempting to glorify Him, then what does that mean? We're all sinners. We've all fallen short of His requirements.

Psalm 14:2,3
The Lord looked down from heaven upon the children of men, to see if there were any that did understand, and seek God. They are all gone aside, they are all together become filthy: there is none that doeth good, no, not one.

Romans 3:23
….all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God.

We've got to understand this principle. We all came into this world for a purpose, to glorify God. But we've all failed and ended up glorifying ourselves instead.

Now, Christ said, **"*I have come…*"** Christ also came into this world for a purpose. And that too was to glorify God:

Hebrews 10:9
I come to do thy will, O God.

Unlike us, He did glorify God in His life. So if we want to know how to glorify God, His is a good example to follow.

But He's more than an example. There's a huge difference between His coming and ours. He was truly and fully a man, but He was also the Son of God. And His purpose wasn't just to glorify God in His own little life, like ours is. He also had a far greater purpose. He was specifically sent by God to come into this world to save poor wretches like us from our sinful nature. That's what His name means:

Matthew 1:21
….thou shalt call his name JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins.

He came to wake us up from this sleep we're in, only looking at the things of this world, living only for what we can get out of life. He came to give His people a new life, a higher life, far greater than just living for themselves. And that brings us to the second point:

2. Christ came "*….that they might have life….*"

(a) Who are the **"*they*"**?

There's a modern idea going around, which is quite wrong. It goes something like this: Christ died for the sins of the whole world. Therefore, everybody's sins have now been taken away. So that can mean either one of two things:

The first idea says that, if everybody's sins have been dealt with, then everybody on the face of the earth will be saved, and must now be going to heaven. No matter what we do, no matter how badly we behave, we're all going there because our sins have been paid for. So don't think about sin any more. That's negative. Just have a sense of self-worth, self-acceptance, self-esteem. Think positive thoughts about yourself all the time.

This is a very common view in the church today. The problem with that idea is that there's absolutely no justice about it whatsoever. If it were true, then God would simply be an unjust monster. Nobody would be judged and given the just punishment they deserve for their sins. We could be terrible people, and we'd all be let off in the end.

To get around that problem, another idea has been invented which goes something like this: Christ has died for the sins of the whole world, but it's now up to us to respond to Him. We've got to make a simple, positive choice as to whether we follow Him or not. Choose Christ, follow Him, and we'll get to heaven. Don't choose Christ, and we won't.

In this scheme, we choose Christ just as we might choose Mohammed or Buddha or any other religious teacher to follow. Our salvation becomes all-dependent on our choice. But that's not salvation, because we're saving ourselves. It's do-it-yourself religion, based on our choice. And it can't be true, because it's impossible. We can't choose Christ. None of us can see higher than our own natural instincts. And even if we could, who's to say that, after we've had a bad day, we can decide to stop choosing Him. Our supposed salvation is up in the air all the time, depending on how we feel. Nobody can have any sense of assurance in that way of thinking.

And even then, if that was the way to heaven, when we get there, heaven would be full of people boasting about how clever they'd been because they'd chosen Christ and their neighbour hadn't. Heaven

would be a terrible place, and again it would be totally unjust. If we're going to be saved at all, boasting ***must*** be excluded.

So the **"*they*"** in this passage can't refer to everybody in the world. It must refer only to God's people. And of course, that would fit the context of the passage. Those who hear Christ's voice. Those God draws to Himself. These are the ones the "*they*" refers to.

By nature we can't come to Him by ourselves. We first need God to open our eyes to let us to see above our own pathetic, natural lives. So rather than us just simply making a decision to follow Christ, we need to acknowledge our need of God to change us first. That's what salvation is. We need God to do the saving, because we can't save ourselves.

(b) The word **"*might.*"**

The word **"*might*"** is usually used today in a completely different way to the way that it's used in the Bible. We use the word **"*might*"** today simply to mean *possibility*. We say, for example, "Tomorrow I might go shopping." By which we mean, maybe I will, maybe I won't. There's still a sense of unsureness about it.

But when the Bible uses the word **"*might*,"** it doesn't mean that at all. It's got a far more definite meaning. It means "*in order for*." And we do use this meaning too. For example, we could say, "I remove the tree branch, that the path 'might' be cleared." By which we mean, "I remove the branch, '*in order for*' the path to be cleared." The path is now definitely cleared because I've removed the branch. We don't mean, after removing the branch, maybe it's clear, maybe it isn't. No, I've cleared it completely by moving the branch. That's the way the Bible uses the word. Let's look at a few Biblical examples:

John 15:25
But this cometh to pass, that the word might be fulfilled

In other words, "This cometh to pass, '*in order for*' the word to be fulfilled." Now this has come to pass, the word has been fulfilled. There's no uncertainty about it. It doesn't mean "Now this has come to

pass, the word might be fulfilled, but then again it might not." No, it's definitely been fulfilled by this coming to pass. What about this one:

John 3:17
For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved.

This verse is often interpreted to mean that God sent His Son into the world so that maybe people will be saved, maybe they won't, depending on whether they choose Christ or not. But it doesn't mean that. That's the wrong definition of the word **"*might*."** It means "God sent His Son into the world 'in order for' the world through Him to be definitely saved." No doubt about it. This "world" he's talking about will be saved.

I said earlier that not everybody is going to be saved. So the phrase "the world" here can't mean everybody. It can only refer to the world of all God's people, whoever they are. In other words, now Christ has been sent into the world, the sins of God's people have been removed, and the way is now clear for them to be saved. There's no doubt about it.

Similarly in this verse: **"*I am come that they might have life*,"** means "I am come '*in order for*' them to have life." In other words, Now Christ has come, our sin has been taken away, and this has, undoubtedly, absolutely, given His people **"*life*."**

(c) What is **"*life*"**?

Surely, we've all got **"*life*."** We all exist. We're all living, moving, breathing creatures, our heartbeats are functioning. But if that's all we think life is, then it's because we're only looking at the word **"*life*"** from our own natural viewpoint. What we see here in this world, isn't the life God has for us. The life God talks about is far higher, far greater.

Actually, the Bible talks about our life, our existence, in this world as a living death:

Ephesians 2:1-3
And you hath he quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins; wherein in time past ye walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience: among whom also we all had our conversation in times past in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind; and were by nature the children of wrath, even as others.

If we just live for this world, we're described as "*dead in trespasses and sins*," walking "*according to the course of this world*," "*fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind*," "*by nature the children of wrath*." That's the life we're in now, seeking no higher than our own pleasure. But the passage then goes on to talk about what **"*life*"** really is:

Ephesians 2:4-7
But God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us, even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ, (by grace ye are saved;) and hath raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus: that in the ages to come he might shew the exceeding riches of his grace in his kindness toward us through Christ Jesus.

We were "*dead in sins*," but God "*quickens*" us, He "*raises us up*," to "*sit together in heavenly places*," He "*shews us the exceeding riches of His grace and kindness*." That's what we need. We don't need this pathetic existence we've got at the moment. We're created for so much more than this. Aren't we wearied by it yet? This life is full of troubles and trials. Why? Because God is wanting us to seek a much higher life than this one.

Don't we want to get out of bondage to the things of this world? God is offering us all, life. Real life. Life far greater than the one we've got here:

Matthew 11:28
Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

Romans 6:23
For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Eternal life is the opposite of eternal death. Living our lives wanting no more than what this empty world can offer us, is such a waste. And we must be liable to God's judgment if we continue in it. But there is a way out. We can get away from this empty existence. But we have to forsake our sin. We must repent of our sins and turn to God through the Saviour He has sent. And then we can receive the eternal life He has for His people:

Acts 14:15
….turn from these vanities unto the living God, which made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and all things that are therein….

But sadly, that's the stumbling block most people fall at. They don't want to leave their sins. They like them too much. They don't want to break free, even when they hear about free salvation offered to them in Jesus Christ. A new life, which can be theirs freely if only they would forsake sin and come to Christ. Remarkably, they'd rather hang on to their sins than accept a new start, a new life without sin dragging them back all the time. They'd rather join the crowd laughing at Christianity, so they can hang on to their pathetic, empty, sinful lives. Even when they're told Christ will help them to break free and they don't have to do it all themselves. Don't be like that. Break free from the crowd and cry to God for help. Everyone who sincerely cries to Him, He will hear and give them a new life.

3. "….And that they might have it more abundantly."

And then we're told that this **"*life*"** God gives His people is **"*more abundant.*"** What does it mean that we might have life **"*more abundantly*"**? How is it more abundant?

(1.) First of all, we escape the judgment to come. We escape the punishment that we all deserve for our sinful natures. We no longer have the thought of a future punishment for our sins hanging over us. What a relief!

Romans 8:1
There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit.

(2.) Secondly, this new life is eternal. If we're just stuck living for no higher things than this world, we're going to have great difficulty seeing beyond our own death. We naturally think death to be the end of our lives. Everything in this life seems so temporary. We can work hard at whatever we do, but it's only ever going to be for a few years, then it's all gone. Walk through a graveyard. Most of the people there have been long forgotten. If this life is all we've got, what's the point in anything?

1 Corinthians 15:19
If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable.

I can't understand how an atheist can have any sense of fulfilment. To believe that we're only here for a short time and then gone for ever, makes everything pointless. Solomon, the wisest man that ever lived apart from Christ, saw exactly that:

Ecclesiastes 1:14
I have seen all the works that are done under the sun; and, behold, all is vanity and vexation of spirit.

But Christ gives us eternal life. Nothing we do for Christ is ever a waste of time. Everything has an eternal purpose. We might not know what that purpose is at times, but we can be assured that everything we do for Christ is of eternal worth:

1 Corinthians 15:58
Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye stedfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord.

(3.) Thirdly, this new life is of a vastly higher quality to the one we have now.

(a.) We're given a new heart:

Ezekiel 36:26,27
A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh.

And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgments, and do them.

Now we have this new heart, we can begin to live the way God wants us to. No longer living for ourselves, slaves to our sins, our natural instincts. We're now free to live godly lives in Christ Jesus:

John 8:36
If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed.

(b.) We now have a real relationship with God. We can communicate with Him, talk to Him, as a man does with his friend. We can pour out our hearts to Him, and know He's listening and answers our prayers. We can cry to Him in times of trouble. We can stop worrying about our situation, our little lives, knowing that God hears us, cares about us and will guide and protect us. This is altogether different from the gods of every other religion on earth. In every other religion, we have to go through the motions, the rituals. There's no real relationship between the worshipper and the god at all. But our God is alive and He cares for every one of us:

1 Peter 5:7
Casting all your care upon him; for he careth for you.

(c.) And we now have God's Holy Spirit living within us.

(i.) He comforts us:

John 14:16,17
And I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you for ever; even the Spirit of truth; whom the world cannot receive, because it seeth him not, neither knoweth him: but ye know him; for he dwelleth with you, and shall be in you.

(ii.) He gives us victory over sin:

Romans 8:13,14
For if ye live after the flesh, ye shall die: but if ye through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live. For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God.

(iii.) He helps us to pray:

Romans 8:26
Likewise the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities: for we know not what we should pray for as we ought: but the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered.

(iv.) And He guides us:

Psalm 139:23,24
Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts: and see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.

Why should anybody not want this **"*more abundant*"** life the Lord gives His people? It's crazy to refuse it, simply because we want to hang on to our sin or fit in with the crowd. And what do we have to do to get this new life? Ask:

Luke 11:13
If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children: how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask him?

It's this new life that we should want. Aren't we fed up with living life for ourselves? For simple, worldly pleasures, which are of no consequence, and don't satisfy?

John 4:14
But whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life.

John 7:37-39
In the last day, that great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried, saying, If any man thirst, let him come unto me, and drink. He that believeth on me, as the

scripture hath said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water. (But this spake he of the Spirit, which they that believe on him should receive).

This more abundant life the Christian has given to him by God, is far more than we could ever ask or think. Yet so few people seem to want it. Sin is far more important to them. Let that not be the case for any of us. May each and every one of us cry to God, repent of our sins, and receive the new life He has for all who truly call upon Him.

Ephesians 3:20,21
Now unto him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us, unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen.

John 12:23-26. Dying to Self

Read John 12

[23] And Jesus answered them, saying, The hour is come, that the Son of man should be glorified.

Who is Christ answering here? We see in the previous few verses:

John 12:20-22
And there were certain Greeks among them that came up to worship at the feast: The same came therefore to Philip, which was of Bethsaida of Galilee, and desired him, saying, Sir, we would see Jesus. Philip cometh and telleth Andrew: and again Andrew and Philip tell Jesus.

Certain Greeks, Gentiles, wanted to see Jesus. They seemed to know Philip, so they asked him, who in turn, with his fellow Bethsaidan Andrew, told Christ. The background is Gentiles wanting to meet Christ. And He answers them **"*saying, The hour is come, that the Son of man should be glorified.*"** Christ's glorification is not just for Jews, but Gentiles too.

Christ here is talking about His own death. He will be glorified by His death. Nobody could have understood that at the time, but within two days Christ would be handed over to the Roman authorities to be crucified, just as He prophesied to His disciples:

Matthew 20:18,19
Behold, we go up to Jerusalem; and the Son of man shall be betrayed unto the chief priests and unto the scribes, and they shall condemn him to death, And shall deliver him to the Gentiles to mock, and to scourge, and to crucify him: and the third day he shall rise again.

How can a death glorify anybody? Well, Christ's death is the most glorious death in the history of the world. By it, He paid the punishment for the sins of all those who would trust in Him, so they'd go free. We can be free today from the punishment our sins deserve. God can acquit us fully on the basis Christ died in our place. But we have to acknowledge that fact. God doesn't just save everybody,

whether they realise it or not. We must acknowledge Him. Realise what Christ's death achieved, and trust in it for ourselves.

2 Corinthians 5:21
For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him.

So, let's love the death of Christ more than anything this world has to offer. If we don't love Christ for what He did, if we totally ignore Him and His atoning work on the cross, how can we expect to have that work applied to us? We must acknowledge our need of Him. The world out there knows nothing about the true nature of the death of Christ. Without Him dying for sinners, there's no hope for any of us, because we can't save ourselves:

Romans 5:8-11
But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, being now justified by his blood, we shall be saved from wrath through him. For if, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, being reconciled, we shall be saved by his life. And not only so, but we also joy in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom we have now received the atonement.

1 Peter 3:18
For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the Spirit....

Despite the world telling us otherwise, every one of us needs salvation from our sins. We receive that from Jesus Christ. And it's free, just come to Him and ask Him. He said:

John 6:37
Him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out.

So, Christ is most certainly glorified in His death. But there's also a sense in which the death of each one of God's people is glorious too. The death of the wicked isn't. God says:

Ezekiel 33:11
I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way and live: turn ye, turn ye from your evil ways; for why will ye die, O house of Israel?

But the death of God's people is glorious. They have turned and repented of their sins:

Psalm 116:15
Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints.

I mention that, because all these verses can apply not only to Christ, but to ourselves too.

[24] Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit.

This firstly speaks of Christ. By His **"*falling into the ground and dying*,"** He **"*brought forth much fruit*."** A number that no man can number will be saved to eternal life because they trust in His glorious death on the cross. There was no other way possible for God's wrath to be appeased. Either we get punished for our own sin, or Christ gets punished in our place. An atonement for sin before the Father has to be made one way or another.

Christ is primarily our Saviour. His work on the cross is the most important thing He ever accomplished. That's what we need to trust in. But He is also our example:

1 Peter 2:21-24
For even hereunto were ye called: because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow his steps: Who did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth: Who, when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not; but committed himself to him that judgeth righteously: Who his own self bare our sins in his own body on the tree, that we, being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness: by whose stripes ye were healed.

Christ suffered unjustly in this world. Men reviled Him. Men hated Him, because He told them their works were evil. Men still hate Him today, so we can expect no better:

John 15:18,19
If the world hate you, ye know that it hated me before it hated you. If ye were of the world, the world would love his own: but because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you.

So, how should we react when we're hated for Christ's sake? When men despitefully use us? We ought to react the way Christ reacted: "*Who, when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not; but committed himself to him that judgeth righteously.*" That's easier said than done.

When we become a Christian, when we acknowledge Christ and His death on the cross, and come to Him and trust in Him genuinely and completely for the forgiveness of our sins, He comes to dwell within us. We receive a new nature:

2 Corinthians 5:17
Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.

The Holy Spirit is now within us to guide us and to give us the ability to react in the right way, yet we still have our old nature dragging us back all the time. And this will continue until we die. Only then will we be free from sin completely. Now, we have a battle going on inside us, the old nature against the new nature. The flesh against the Spirit. But the world knows nothing of this battle. They don't have that problem:

Romans 8:12-14
Therefore, brethren, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live after the flesh. For if ye live after the flesh, ye shall die: but if ye through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live. For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God.

So, it's easier said than done to behave as Christ behaved. He didn't have a sinful nature dragging Him back all the time. But we do. And, when we're under pressure to react in a right way, we make so many

mistakes. We end up getting angry, or annoyed, or reacting according to the old nature far, far too often. No wonder the apostle Paul said:

Romans 7:24
O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?

But he then went on immediately to say:

Romans 7:25
I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord. So then with the mind I myself serve the law of God; but with the flesh the law of sin.

And that's the Christian life. It's always going to have this struggle in it. But we're still called to be like Christ, who never had this problem.

We need to die to self. If we don't, we **"*abide alone*."** There is no hope for any of us if we insist on living for ourselves. Doing what we want to do. There's a whole world out there living for themselves, **"*abiding alone*."** They don't think they're living for themselves. They might think they're doing some great thing for humanity, but they're not. Long ago:

Genesis 11:1-8
And the whole earth was of one language, and of one speech. And it came to pass, as they journeyed from the east, that they found a plain in the land of Shinar; and they dwelt there. And they said one to another, Go to, let us make brick, and burn them throughly. And they had brick for stone, and slime had they for morter. And they said, Go to, let us build us a city and a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven; and let us make us a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth. And the Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of men builded. And the Lord said, Behold, the people is one, and they have all one language; and this they begin to do: and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do. Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech. So the Lord scattered them abroad from thence upon the face of all the earth: and they left off to build the city.

Men think they achieve something, but everything they do is to the glory of themselves. They forget God altogether. It's God to whom all

glory belongs, not puny men. The ultimate aim of all these projects is the glory of man. That man can be proud of his achievements.

It's such a selfish end. And as individuals, we're no better, living for what we want, what we enjoy, what we decide we want to do. When we become a Christian, that way of life ought to be over. And if we truly know Christ and have a relationship with Him, our old way of life is essentially over. But not completely. We still need to continually mortify sin, get rid of all our selfish desires. We can't do this by ourselves, we need the Holy Spirit to do it for us.

That's the only way we can **"*bring forth much fruit*."** Fruit is the ultimate end of the plant. If a plant never brings forth any fruit, it is useless, good for nothing. Christ taught a parable:

Luke 13:6-9
He spake also this parable; A certain man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came and sought fruit thereon, and found none. Then said he unto the dresser of his vineyard, Behold, these three years I come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and find none: cut it down; why cumbereth it the ground? And he answering said unto him, Lord, let it alone this year also, till I shall dig about it, and dung it: And if it bear fruit, well: and if not, then after that thou shalt cut it down.

Our job is to bring forth spiritual fruit. If we don't bring forth fruit, we cumber the ground and ought to be cut down and burnt. Without Christ in our lives, that's just what we deserve:

Hebrews 6:7,8
For the earth which drinketh in the rain that cometh oft upon it, and bringeth forth herbs meet for them by whom it is dressed, receiveth blessing from God: But that which beareth thorns and briers is rejected, and is nigh unto cursing; whose end is to be burned.

So what is the fruit we should be producing?

Galatians 5:22,23
But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, Meekness, temperance.

Ephesians 5:9
(For the fruit of the Spirit is in all goodness and righteousness and truth;)

These are the fruit we should produce. And notice they're the fruit of the Spirit. Unless we have the Holy Spirit within us, we can't begin to produce them. Men without Christ can't do these things. They can fake it to some degree, but they can't produce the genuine article.

But even as Christians, we can be unfruitful. In the parable of the sower, we come across the seed that fell in thorns:

Mark 4:18,19
And these are they which are sown among thorns; such as hear the word, And the cares of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the lusts of other things entering in, choke the word, and it becometh unfruitful.

This might be controversial. Some think these aren't believers at all. But I think they are. They "*become*" unfruitful, so I think they once were productive but aren't any longer. Either way, we've got a good list here of what stops good fruit production: "*the cares of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the lusts of other things entering in."* Even Christians can be taken in by any or all of these things and become unfruitful:

2 Peter 1:5-8
And beside this, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue; and to virtue knowledge; And to knowledge temperance; and to temperance patience; and to patience godliness; And to godliness brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness charity. For if these things be in you, and abound, they make you that ye shall neither be barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

These people had faith, so they were true believers, and they were told to add to their faith: virtue, knowledge, temperance, patience, godliness, brotherly kindness and charity. These are all fruit of the Spirit. "*they make you that ye shall neither be barren nor* ***unfruitful***." The Christian life is about producing fruit. That's our witness to the world:

Matthew 7:20
By their fruits ye shall know them.

John 15:8
Herein is my Father glorified, that ye bear much fruit; so shall ye be my disciples.

So a healthy Christians ought to produce fruit. And the only way to do that, is to die to self.

[25] He that loveth his life shall lose it; and he that hateth his life in this world shall keep it unto life eternal.

We've got to hate our own life in this world. That's not a very popular teaching today. We're told even by so-called "Christian" teachers that we must love ourselves. Christ said "*Love thy neighbour as thyself.*" There we are, we've got to love ourselves. What nonsense!

If we really want to live for Christ, we must be finished with self, we must die to self:

Galatians 5:24
And they that are Christ's have crucified the flesh with the affections and lusts.

If we don't do this, if we still love our affections and lusts, even just a tiny amount, we're loving our life too much. We should be finished with them altogether. That's the theory.
But it's not like that in practice. We don't, or can't, get rid of them completely. We should want to. In that sense we should be finished with them. But when we fail yet again to mortify the flesh, praise the Lord, we always have an advocate with the Father:

1 John 2:1,2
My little children, these things write I unto you, that ye sin not. And if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous: And he is the propitiation for our sins.

When it says, **"*He that loveth his life shall lose it*,"** it's referring to loving this life only, and never thinking of preparing for the next world. Millions out there are losing their lives in the end because, they're not interested in forgiveness of sins. They love their sins. They love their lives here, full of sin. If they carry on like that, they'll lose their lives in the end.

Christians aren't like that. They hate their lives in this world. It's not that they've come to Christ, so everything's now wonderful, they can live the victory life and not have any problems any more. That's loving their life still. No. They're hating their lives because they know they still sin, many times, and they hate it. They want to be free from it. They know, praise God, one day they will be free from it all, because they know for sure Jesus Christ has saved them to eternal life. But while we're here, we must hate ourselves for constantly falling into sin time and time again. It's miserable.

We must hate ourselves in the sense of hating our fleshly affections and lusts. They pander to self, they serve self, to whom we should now reckon ourselves as dead:

Romans 6:11,12
Likewise reckon ye also yourselves to be dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord. Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, that ye should obey it in the lusts thereof.

Galatians 2:20
I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me.

Like a grain of wheat, we, ourselves, living for ourselves and our achievements, hopes and aspirations, must all ***"fall into the ground and die."*** We have nothing to live for in this life any more. That's not a depressing thought, it's a liberating thought to the Christian. We now only want to serve the Lord Jesus Christ. The only way to do that is to die to self. Only then can we produce the fruit God wants us to have as a witness for Him.

Matthew 5:16
Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.

How is it possible for people to see our good works, yet not glorify us, but glorify our Father which is in heaven? If I see someone doing a good work, straight away I'd think they're to be commended. I'd think they ought to be honoured. But that's not how it should be with us.

Whatever we do for Christ, we do for Him, not so that others may think how good we are, because we're not. But so others don't see us at all, but only see our Heavenly Father. We ought to make ourselves invisible. There's a challenge to us.

And we're told, **"*he that hateth his life in this world shall keep it unto life eternal*."** We're struggling with our old selves down here, but one day we know we'll have **"*life eternal*."**

Revelation 12:11
And they overcame him [Satan] *by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of their testimony; and they loved not their lives unto the death.*

So let's keep loving not our lives here. We're finished with living for self. Finished with following these affections and lusts. We're weary of them. Let's only live for Jesus Christ knowing that He will keep our lives to life eternal. A life in eternity, finally free from sin.

[26] If any man serve me, let him follow me; and where I am, there shall also my servant be: if any man serve me, him will my Father honour.

Let's follow Jesus Christ. He was the one who said:

Matthew 16:24
If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me.

If we serve Him and follow Him, we're told here that one day we shall be with Him, **"*where I am, there shall also my servant be*."**

John 14:2,3
In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also.

Not only shall we be with Him, but we shall be like Him, all this sin will be gone for ever:

1 John 3:2
Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is.

And we're also told God will honour us, **"*if any man serve me, him will my Father honour.*"**

We must prepare ourselves for the next world. We need to be heavenly minded. But we will be often criticised for that, and told we're not doing enough in this world. James says:

James 1:27
Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world.

There are two aspects to true religion. One is "*To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction,*" practical good works, which includes preaching the gospel. I'm sure everybody would agree that good works is an integral part of true religion. And "*to keep himself unspotted from the world.*" This is dying to self. The internal part of true religion is just as important as external works. We can busy, busy ourselves with outward works, but we should never forget internal religion, because if we neglect that, our witness disappears:

James 1:26
If any man among you seem to be religious, and bridleth not his tongue [keeps himself not in check internally]*, but deceiveth his own heart, this man's religion is vain.*

Our inward life is our real witness to others. Although it's easily misunderstood from the outside. So Christians are often dismissed as simple people who have a difficult life, so they invent some kind of "pie in the sky when you die," just to keep them going. None of their religion is real, but it keeps them through difficult times. Is that really all we have? Just a bit of fantasy to keep us going? Men throughout history have died for this faith. They know it's real. They were prepared to forsake everything to follow Jesus Christ. Are we?

Hebrews 11:32-12:2

And what shall I more say? for the time would fail me to tell of Gedeon, and of Barak, and of Samson, and of Jephthae; of David also, and Samuel, and of the prophets: Who through faith subdued kingdoms, wrought righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, Quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, out of weakness were made strong, waxed valiant in fight, turned to flight the armies of the aliens. Women received their dead raised to life again: and others were tortured, not accepting deliverance; that they might obtain a better resurrection: And others had trial of cruel mockings and scourgings, yea, moreover of bonds and imprisonment: They were stoned, they were sawn asunder, were tempted, were slain with the sword: they wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins; being destitute, afflicted, tormented; (Of whom the world was not worthy:) they wandered in deserts, and in mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth. And these all, having obtained a good report through faith, received not the promise: God having provided some better thing for us, that they without us should not be made perfect. Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us, Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God.