

The Living Gospel



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Introduction

Jesus told us that the two most important commandments are to love God and to love our neighbour. The other New Testament writers reinforced this message, and faithful people in the Old Testament understood it also.

Everything must be viewed from the right perspective and have the right foundation. If we get the basics right - living by love and faith, then we have God's way to deal with things that happen in our lives. We hope this book helps all of us to get the basics right, and encourages us to live by them.

Chapter One: Love - The Way of God

Love is the great key to our salvation. It is the only way the Bible can be truly understood. It is the greatest commandment in Gods word. Jesus says the first and greatest commandment in the whole Bible is “to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. The second is this: Love your neighbour as yourself. There is no commandment greater than these “(1). We can go to college, be great at sport or be an inventor – yet in the Bible is something far greater than all these can offer. What is it? It is love, and the offer of eternal love. Love is the reason for our existence, the reason for this beautiful planet and the greatest intention God has for your and my life.

Jesus says that ‘all the law and the prophets’# hang on this great commandment of love (2). Love then is the only way to understand the Bible. As Jesus says, we are to read every word from the perspective of love. This is true too because “God is love” (3), and He could not be the author of a book that is not full of love.

There are many examples of true love in action. The dedication of a parent to a sick child, the devotion of a true friend in difficult times, and the giving of a person’s life to save another. These are similar to the love of Jesus for us. He willingly gave His life for each of us that we all can be saved. He is devoted to us at all times and dedicated to helping us in our weakness as humans.

The Pharisees and Sadducees ## believed they followed Gods laws. They had an amazing knowledge of the Bible, were always at Gods temple in Jerusalem, always praying, fasting and keeping the Jewish feasts. Yet they missed the purpose of all their learning and worship, because it did not lead them to truly love God and all people. Love was not their focus or goal.

The apostle Paul was once a Pharisee (4). When he became a Christian, he learnt the true purpose of Gods commands. He said to a young man Timothy, ‘the purpose of Gods commands is love from a pure heart, from a good conscience, and from sincere faith’(5).The purpose of the Bible is to create in us a new heart – a ‘pure heart’, a heart that grows in love to God and all people. This is the great intention of the Bible.

A man came to Jesus and asked him, “What shall I do to inherit eternal life?”(6) This is one of the most important questions we could ask when we decide we really want to follow God. The answer given is ‘to love God and our neighbour as ourself.’ Jesus then gives us an example of what is meant by our neighbour, and what true love means in practice.(6). In the story, our neighbour is anyone who needs help. The man who was the true neighbour carried the man who was robbed and beaten on his donkey to an inn. He gave money to the manager of the inn to look after him till he was well. He told the manager he would return later and give him any extra money that was needed. The point of Jesus story is that true love of our neighbour continues till they are healed, and includes everyone.

Near the very end of the Bible there are three letters written by the apostle John, one of the close followers of Jesus. In the first letter John focuses on what love is, what it has achieved and how it treats others. He says that love leads us from death to life(7), and that now as Christians we need to dwell in love as God does(8). In his second and third letter he writes to two Christians, giving us examples of how true love works in action. His third letter finishes “our friends greet you, greet the friends by name.”(9) True friendship is putting into practice the love he speaks of. As it says in the book of Proverbs, “a friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity.”(10).

As Christians, our great witness to this world is our true love for each other. Jesus says, “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”(11). When we do have arguments, we work to forgive, and honour each other again. Our desire to truly reconcile with each other and to dwell in love is our great witness as true Christians. Jesus says, ‘I pray for all disciples that will believe in me – that they all may be one, as you Father are in me, and I in you, that they all may be one in us, that the world may believe that you have sent me.’(12).

As a Christian, I may have the gift of speaking in every language, be able to tell the future, understand great secrets, have an amazing knowledge of the Bible and such strong faith that I could move mountains. I may give all my money to feed the poor and be burnt to death for being a Christian – but all these are worth nothing! Nothing! Nothing! before God unless my motive to do these things is love (13). Why? Because “God is love” (14), and the only way we can be in Him and he in us is when His love dwells in us, and we show this to all people. We have one of the most beautiful descriptions of what true love is in the Bible.

“Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails.” (15). These things, as Christians, are our goal – our focus – our desire, and foremost in our teaching. Through growing in these characteristics, we come closer to God, and to a greater understanding and appreciating of Him. Jesus gives us another powerful explanation of what true love is, ‘all things that men should do to, even so do to them, for this is the law and the prophets (16). The way we want to be treated is the way we treat others. Again Jesus emphasizes the purpose of the Bible is loving our neighbour as ourself.

It is interesting that part of the second great command is “to love your neighbour as YOURSELF”. We need to love ourselves first, to truly love our neighbour. How do we love ourselves? We love ourselves by looking after our bodies (17), by being happy with who we are, and respecting our uniqueness (18). We believe we are loved by God and Jesus for who we are (19), we forgive ourselves (20), and try to practice to all ‘the more excellent way of love’(21).

In the two great commands is a word that occurs more than love:

“YOU shall love the Lord YOUR God with all YOUR heart, with all YOUR soul, with all YOUR mind, and with all YOUR strength. This is the first commandment. And the second, like it, is this: YOU shall love YOUR neighbour as YOURSELF.” Gods appeal is to you – personally. It is your responsibility, your desire – not another’s. It must be because you want to – not because of pressure or force from others. It is your free choice to decide to love God and your neighbour – because you want to. This is true Christianity. It is easy to make excuses, or to miss the power of this emphasis because of the failures of others – and not try to live a life of love. “He doesn’t”, “she doesn’t”, “I have been hurt too much”, “Christians are hypocrites”, “my church doesn’t teach these things” are examples of excuses we all struggle with. When we accept these as excuses, we are less likely to be deceived by them. Daily Bible reading, prayer, building an intimate relationship with God and Jesus and finding others who follow these teachings are powerful helps to continue on the path of love, and not turn from it.

In saying all these things, I wish and pray I was much better at loving. I know people who, from what I see, are greater at loving than me. It is comforting to know God doesn't look at how much we achieve – how high we climb on the ladder of love. He is interested in our motive – just that we try – not how high we get. Remember what Paul said to Timothy – ‘the purpose of all commands is love FROM A PURE HEART, FROM A GOOD CONSCIENCE.’(22). King David was a man “after Gods own heart” (23). He wanted to build a temple for God because he loved and honoured Him. God told him he couldn't, and then said these unforgettable words to him – ‘In that it was in your heart, you did well’ (24). There are times when we really want to show our love, really want to help someone, really want to do something good – and it doesn't work out or goes all wrong or doesn't happen. It is wonderful to know that God rejoices when our motive is love out of a pure heart, even when things don't work out.

There are times too when we love people – and they let us down and really hurt us. At times like these we feel like giving up, and it seems like ‘love is not worth it’. Though at times loving is painful, and we pull back from loving, we still will come to the realization it is the best way to live. God confirms this in His own experiences. In the days of Noah the whole world was filled with violence and wickedness (25). God was in so much pain at their way of life He said, ‘ I am sorry that I made man on the earth, and it GRIEVES ME IN MY HEART’(26). Later God chose the nation of Israel. At one point they were so evil that God explained to them how he felt, ‘I am BROKEN by your whorish heart’(27), He said. These experiences - though very hurtful – did not turn God from love. Hundreds of years after these experiences God says, ‘I so loved the world that I gave my only begotten son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life.’(28).

(1) Matthew 22v36-40, Mark 12v28-34. (2) Matthew 22v39-40 (3)1 John4v8, 16 (4)Acts 9v1-19 (5) 1 Timothy1v5 (6)Luke 10v25-37 (7)1 John3v14 (8)1 John4v7-21 (9) 11 John v14 (10) Proverbs17v17 (11) John 13v34-35 (12) John 17v20-21 (13) 1 Corinthians 13v1-3 (14) 1 John 4v3-8 (15) 1 Corinthians13v4-8 (16) Matthew 7v12 (17) Ephesians 5v29 (18) 1 Corinthians 12v14-31 (19) Galatians 2v20-21, Matthew 11v28-30 (20) Psalm 32v1, 11 (21)1 Corinthians 12v31 (22) 1 Timothy 1v5 (23) Acts 13v22 (24) 1 Kings 8v18 (25) Genesis 6v5, 11 (26) Genesis 6v6 (27) Ezekiel 6v9 (28) John 3v16

All the old testament – the first three quarters of the Bible. ## Religious groups who opposed Jesus teachings.

Chapter Two: FAITH

Miraculous Faith

After loving God and our neighbour, faith is the next greatest teaching in the Bible. Love and faith are the concrete we build our lives upon, and many times in the New Testament love and faith are linked together – “hearing of your love and faith”, “faith which works by love”, “your work of faith and labour of love”(1) etc. The apostle Paul says ‘the purpose of every command in the Bible is love from a pure heart, from a good conscience, and from sincere faith’ and that “now abides faith, hope and love.”(2) Love and faith are the two main teachings that identify us as Christians.

Real Bible based faith, is believing, accepting and doing what God says, as revealed in the Bible. The only way to know true faith is by the fruit it bears.

“Without faith” we are told, “it is impossible to please God”, because anyone who comes to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him (Heb.11:6).

A Bible definition of faith is given to us in Heb 11:1: “Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.”

Our faith stretches from the ‘infinite’, believing that God created the universe, which I call easy faith, to the ‘intimate’, believing that God loves me more than I could possibly imagine, which appears to be a much more difficult faith to grasp.

To have faith in God means that we trust him and are certain that what he says is true, that we believe in him and rely on him and are assured that he has the truth of eternal life, and it is his great joy to share it with us.

Not only does faith give us confidence in God for eternal things, but it is a day by day, moment by moment walk with God and Jesus, knowing that we are actually the temple of the living God (1Cor 6:19). God being always present with us through the power of the Holy Spirit, therefore we are able to draw on him for help, strength, courage, guidance and comfort. WOW!

Good, strong, healthy, vibrant, overflowing, unwavering, courageous, growing, active, sharing, joy- filled, rejoicing, Christ focused, Bible based, God honouring, obedient faith, with a solid foundation of love and hope (1 Cor 13:13) is indeed one of the most important and precious goals of every single seeker of truth. In Gal 5:6 Paul tells us that “ neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love”, and in the book of James we are told that “ faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead .”

Faith in general, is indeed a miraculous quality. With faith our lives are a joy, filled with hope and very much worth living, we tend to have a deep inner peace, knowing that things will end up being OK even if we are in the worst of situations. Without faith our life can be a very sad place, without joy and hope, feelings of not being good enough, not measuring up and all that ‘lousy feeling’ stuff, feeling that things will end up bad, even though the circumstances that we find ourselves in are very fortunate and we may even be the envy of many. The only one to see a problem looming is Mr. Doubt sneaking around within our hearts and minds. Who wouldn’t want faith in their lives, and plenty of it, the choice is ours. Bible faith is far more powerful than every day faith, as it’s focus is on the eternal God with eternal rewards.

We can speculate on what 'faith' is, and does, but the Bible helps us to really understand it's essence by giving us many examples. In Heb 11 We have a list of friends who did various things by faith in God. We are greatly impressed by this list of faithful and could even find it a bit discouraging as we are reminded of their great victories, But surely any thought of discouragement must be turned to hope as we realise that they were very fragile humans, their faith in God was the source of their amazing victories. This is the very reason we have the record, God is saying, they did it, you also can believe and do what is required of you.

We read in Heb 11 That by faith, by faith, by faith these people DID various things . I would just like to look at two of these characters. In v 11,12 it says "by faith Abraham, even though he was past age-and Sarah herself was barren-was enabled to become a father because he considered him faithful who had made the promise. And so from this one man, and he was as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky"....etc, Romans reinforces the hopelessness of Abrahams situation in ch. 4v18-21 "Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations...! Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead....Sarah's womb was also dead. Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith giving glory to God, (Now the crunch line), being fully persuaded that God had the power to do what he had promised. Could any of us find ourselves in a more challenging situation than this, God was there for Abraham, he is there for us. Also in the case of Moses, Heb. 11:24-29 tells us of the remarkable feats that Moses accomplished through faith, leaving Egypt and not fearing the wrath of Pharaoh, keeping the Passover and crossing the Red sea, how amazing. But what we find from the book of Exodus is that Moses didn't feel that he was the man for the task, he felt it was beyond his capabilities. Exod. 3v11 says "But Moses said to God, 'who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh' 4v3...What if they do not believe me or listen"...4v10 I can't speak...4:13 O Lord, please send someone else to do it"

What a changed person Moses became when he finally stopped arguing with God and making excuses and put his faith, his trust in God. In fact there are many examples of faith that started out as weaknesses but the weaknesses are overcome when the eyes are focused on the solution, which is God, rather than on the problem, which is ME.

As we look at the encounters that Jesus had with various people during his ministry we see faith at the very front of his teaching. He was very encouraging to people who demonstrated faith with such statements as, "your faith has healed you, Mat" 9:22, or "According to your faith" Matt 9v29, again "Woman you have great faith, Your request is granted "or Mat 21v21 "If you have faith and do not doubt"...v22 "If you believe you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer".

On the other hand Jesus was extremely unhappy when lack of faith was displayed, "O you of little faith", Jesus often groaned (Mat.6v30), or "He was amazed at their lack of faith". Jesus had such responses to lack of faith simply because the lack of faith meant the people didn't fully believe and trust God, but that they found more comfort in limiting Him.

We are often very fragile and a little bit on the weak side when it comes to displaying faith in God. Who can't relate to the man who said to Jesus, " I believe, help me overcome my unbelief" (Mk 9v24), or to the disciples, when challenged by Jesus on forgiveness, responded, "Increase our faith" (Lk 17v5). Fortunately there is an amazing treasure chest of faith at our disposal, if we just take the time to prayerfully lift the lid and sift through the contents, it is in the Bible. We are told that " faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God/Christ" (Rom 10v17). The Bible is Gods word, it is the way he has chosen to reveal His plan and purpose to people, and

His plan and purpose just happen to be based on FAITH, HOPE and LOVE. Gods Spirit speaks to us mightily through his word directing and growing our faith. It is a tragedy that most people pick up their faith second hand, from what others say and write and think, rather than trusting God to speak directly to them through his word.

As we seek God through the pages of His word we get an idea of how all powerful and immense God is, being the creator and sustainer of the universe (Gen 1)... and not only this, but also this creator God reveals himself to us as a loving Father, who loves us more than we could possibly imagine (Jn 3v16). As we come to see God more clearly through his word and his creation, how could our belief, faith and trust in him not fail to soar higher and higher?

For a short time after the creation was complete, man and God were living in harmony, but this was short lived. As we know the man failed a fairly simple test, the man disobeyed God, being aware that the consequences of this would bring death into the world and destroy his wonderful relationship with God. I don't think he could have imagined just how devastating the result of him going against God would be. We can't be critical of Adam, because anyone of us would have done the same thing. We prove this every day by making choices, like Adam did, that, to varying degrees are against the will of God. Sometimes knowingly, sometimes in ignorance. One of the most appropriate Bible verses for us all would have to be Rom 3v23 "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God". This is a humbling place to find ourselves, and we rightly deserve the wages of our ways, ie. "The wages of sin , is death" Rom 6v23. This is the harsh reality of our situation.

Fortunately our father in heaven loves us so much that he doesn't want us to stay dead, in fact he wants us to have a restored relationship with Him (Rom. 5v9-1), and wants us to live with Him for all eternity. He has taken it upon himself to work out a way by which we can be reconciled to him, (Rom 5:15-20), by providing a way to be forgiven of all our wickedness, the result of which is that we are able to live at peace with Him, now, and have the sure hope of eternal life, and be able to approach him as our very own loving father, confident of his love for us, 1John 3v1...Heb 8v11,12.

The end result of this reconciliation, this forgiveness, this peace, is the wonderful gift of eternal life that we have through faith. We are told in Rom 6v23 "The gift of God is eternal life". In Jn. 3v16 We have in summary the Good news, I think that "Good News" is a fairly tame way of describing it. It is the unimaginably, fantastic, wonderful, and however else you can describe it brilliant news, this hope is described in the book of John...."For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten son, that whosoever believes in Him might not perish but have eternal life". If these thoughts don't bring tears to the eyes, or at least fill you with joy and overflowing hope, may we pray, Please Lord, "Increase our faith".

This is the answer to a changed life, a trusting faith filled existence rather than a lifeless life without faith. Take God at his word. In Christ you are forgiven, You share in that wonderful promise to Abraham, Gen 12:3..."In you all nations on earth will be blessed" see interpretation at Gal 3v8,9 "The scripture foresaw that God would justify (To count them as OK before him, his friends, forgiven, set free from sin) the gentiles by faith and announced the gospel to Abraham: "all nations will be blessed through you".

We also have this hope expressed in Acts 3:25....He said to Abraham, "Through your offspring all peoples on earth will be blessed"...v26 "When God raised up his servant, he sent Him first to bless you by turning each of you from your wicked ways." We can't really know God until we

know Him as the one who has forgiven our sins and wickedness (Heb 8v11,12). Until we reach the point in our faith walk when we can say, my sins are forgiven, Christ died for me, and really believe it, all our thoughts on 'the truth' and 'Gods ways' are merely speculation, not good news, but doubtful news.

In Christ's death we share with him in His victory over sin. In His resurrection we share with Him in his victory over the grave and death. At His return we will share with Him in His divine nature. The epistle of John tells us in ch. 3v2 "Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when appears we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as he is." v3 "Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself just as he is pure."

We have been saved by a Gracious and Almighty Loving Heavenly Father. Our faith response to what has been done for us is to extend our hand in kindness to others. It starts with the golden rule of "...doing to others as we would have them do to us" Mat 7v12, which is really the least asked of us to do," and grows, to "Love others as I have loved you" Jn 15v12... this is where we are called to go and keep growing until the Lord returns. We can only grow as we, by faith, live out the words of the inspired writer. In Heb 12v2 We are encouraged to "fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross scorning it's shame, and sat down at the right hand of God. v3 "Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and not lose heart." As you fix your eyes on Jesus, as you meditate on the wonders of His love for you, as you accept, through faith the promises of God as being for you personally - May the God of hope fill you with joy and peace as you trust in Him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit (Rom:15:13). Praise God for His kindness, mercy, grace and love, received by faith, for what He has done for us.

Living by Faith

We learn from Hebrews 11 that a great purpose of the Old Testament is to teach us about faith, and to build our faith. Hebrews 11 is filled with examples of faith, and they are just a selection of many more examples that could have been chosen from the Old Testament. Likewise in the New Testament believers are identified by their faith. We are called "the household of faith", "the faith", we have "the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ", and are "established in the faith."(3)

Faith is essential to our salvation, 'without faith it is impossible to please God'(4). It is the way God saves us – He 'purifies our hearts by faith', 'our faith makes us right before God', 'the promise we will become heirs of the world is through our faith. God did it this way so we could all be saved', 'we are justified by faith, and so have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ'(5). Faith is the way we live our lives – 'the life we now live, we live by faith in the Son of God', 'the just shall by his faith'(6).

What is faith? You cant see it, buy it or wear it. It is a power inside us that motivates us to follow God and Jesus Christ – 'this is the victory that overcomes the world – our faith'(7), and in Hebrews 11 we are given many examples of what faith is able to do. It is believing "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life"(8). It is believing we are made right with God and have peace with Him. It is believing our salvation is assured through a life of faith(9). It is believing the supernatural – and not limiting God. He does not belong in the box we often make Him fit in. Peter, a disciple of Jesus, walked on water by faith – but then looked at the wind and waves and began to sink. Jesus

said to him, "O you of little faith, why did you doubt"(10). The disciples of Jesus were caught in a storm, and their boat began to sink. They thought they were going to die, so they went below and woke Jesus. He climbed to the deck and calmed the sea and said to them, "Why are you so fearful? How is it you have no faith"(11).

In Hebrews 11 we are also given examples of believers who God worked miracles for – because of their faith.

Faith is believing God has a different life for each of us, and honouring His direction for each of us. In Hebrews 11 we see the diversity of faith. For Abel - it meant death, for Noah - being saved, for Daniel - shutting lions mouths, for his friends – escaping fire, for the woman in Shunem – having her Son resurrected, for David – victory in war. For others – wandering in dens and caves, hiding in fear, being eaten by lions, burnt at the stake, being stoned, sawn in half, tortured. From the time the gospel was made clearly known to all people – which began with John the Baptist – for him it meant living in the desert, wearing camel skin and eating locusts and wild honey. For Jesus it meant being despised and rejected, eating with tax collectors and sinners and having no place to lie his head at night. For the apostles it meant forsaking everything they had, being beaten and having a death warrant from Jews and Romans. For the apostle Peter it meant crucifixion, and for the apostle John it would living to an old age (12)

If these are our examples, then living by faith is not intended to be always comfortable, civilized and predictable. It is not fitting all believers in a nice little box. Faith is at times radical, risk taking, being different, ready to change. Faith is linked inseparably with grace (the favour God shows us and the help God gives us) and the two stand together as one, "it is of faith that it might be according to grace", "we have access by faith into this grace by which we stand" (13), and faith and grace are sometimes interchanged, because they are so closely linked(14). Faith is the way to Gods grace.

Faith is such an important thing to understand and to ask God to give you – I mean, what is it? We hear the word faith used – you know, people of 'this' faith or 'that' faith (is that what it's about?) Is it a set of beliefs? What is the faith that God wants me and you to have? "Be strong and of good courage, do not fear nor be afraid of them: for the Lord your God, His is the One who goes with you. He will not leave you nor forsake you" (15).

It's so easy to be faith-less. Just before the Israelites went into the promised land with Moses, God made Mt Sinai thunder with great power. But the people were so scared of what they saw, they wouldn't get too close to Him. They thought he was a hard, scary God, and pushed Him away. But He wasn't trying to scare them off by showing them thunder and lightening, He was trying to show them that all this power was going to be with them when they went into the promised land. He was going to fight for them. He was their shield and protector, and there was no force or army that could ever beat Him. All they had to do was trust in that. He was on their side, to deliver them. But most of them never got it. He was never the object of their affection.

God delivers people who believe that He delivers them. That's the faith He requires. That He has done it. He lifts up the poor and the needy, He exalt the low and brings down the mighty. He is my strong tower and my defence, and in Him I won't be moved. I will run to Him and be safe.

Not many of the faithful had an easy time of it thought – usually the opposite. Because faith makes you as bold as a lion, not in your own righteousness, but in declaring His righteousness to other people. Because He is with you, and in you, and you in Him. He shows you to hate evil

and love righteousness. This often puts the faithful in dangerous situations. They've been sawn asunder, burned alive, swept away, because of what they've said, and where they've gone... but they always had faith in God, they always declared that God was right, and that man was wrong.

And now we are to declare His righteousness to those that will be born, that He delivers us.

We live by love and faith, and we need to be aware of things that can minimize or destroy our growing faith. Perhaps the greatest problem is being justified by works rather than our faith, and from the beginning to the end of the Bible this teaching has mostly come from within the church. When the disciples asked Jesus for ways to 'increase their faith'(16), he said faith grows when we don't see our works as profit to God or making us better than others. The apostle Paul says, "a man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law; for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified."(17). Paul is speaking here about the law of Moses found in the Old Testament, and the same is true of any other laws we make to justify ourselves – 'I go to church all the time', 'I read the Bible every day', 'I organize church functions', 'my family wear respectable clothing', 'my children win church prizes', 'I thank you God I am not like those church people over there'. These ways to justify ourselves can be like the prayer a Pharisee gave – "God, I thank You that I am not like other men – extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess." With all the Pharisee did – he was not justified before God.

The tax collector who 'did' much less, and could only say, "God be merciful to me a sinner"(18) was justified before God. Faith is the unity we share as Christians. We are of the "household of faith"(19) – not the "household of works."

Duty, guilt or shame can easily damage our growing faith. 'I must go to church', 'God is an angry God', 'He is angry with my sins', 'I am guilty', 'I am not good enough', 'I must go to church to appease Him'. When we are constantly driven by guilt and shame or duty, or others use guilt and shame to manipulate us, this is not a life of faith. We need to build our faith in the love, justification, grace, peace, freedom and rest that God and Jesus give us in the gospel – and allow this good news within us to bear its unique fruits.

Appearance is another way to wrongly justify ourselves before God . Jesus said to the Pharisees, 'you clean the outside of the cup – clean the inside, then the outside will be clean', 'you outwardly appear beautiful to men'(20). True disciples are known by their fruits of love, kindness, gentleness, faith etc(21). Our unity is in love and faith – not in what we wear or how many church activities we attend. A church with high standards is a church known for its love and faith – "we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of your love for all saints"(22), "remembering without ceasing your work of faith, labour of love and patience of hope"(23). The Pharisees especially were caught up in this tradition of appearance rather than 'encouraging each other in faith'(24). To be fully accepted in their 'group' a person had to follow their strict laws of washing, of the Sabbath, make long prayers, have wealth, physical health, and an appearance of holiness and sinlessness. Likewise we can be bound by similar traditions and have 'groups', rather than one body of believers who fully accept each other because of our faith in God and Jesus.

An insular religion minimizes and can destroy true faith. 'The world out there is evil, only mix with the people of our church or denomination', 'let all men become all things to us' rather than

becoming “all things to all men, that by all means we might save some”(25). Insular religions tend to make more rules than the simplicity of faith that unites us.

Justifying ourselves by knowledge destroys the power of faith and love. The apostle Paul says, “knowledge puffs up, but love edifies”(26). Knowledge of itself is useless before God. ‘If we have all knowledge and have not love it profits us nothing’(27). The Pharisees were an example of this. They had an amazing knowledge of the Old Testament – but they did not love all people and killed Jesus. The true purpose of knowledge is to grow in love and faith and encourage others(28)

The New Testament speaks about “the joy of faith”(29). What is this joy? It is the joy of knowing our faith cannot be stolen. It is the joy of believing we will be in the Kingdom with God forever. It is the joy of believing God and Jesus are always with us. It is the joy of believing we are forgiven.

Faith is sometimes a step into the unknown, an agreement to not be always comfortable. It is an adventure – believing all things are possible. Faith is being ourselves – and using our unique talents for Gods glory.

As you think about faith, read the life of Jesus in the gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John). What did a life of faith mean for Jesus? And what does it mean for you personally in your unique life and situation?

(1)Philippians 1v5, Galatians5v6, 1 Thessalonians 1v3 (2)1 Timothy 1v5, 1 Corinthians 13v13 (3) Galatians 6v10, James 2v1, Colossians 2v7 (4) Hebrews 11v6 (5) Acts 15v7-9, Romans 4v13-16;5v1 (6) Galatians 2v20, Habbakuk 2v4 (7) 1 John 5v4 (8) John 3v16 (9) Romans 5v1, John 3v36 (10) Matthew 14v31 (11) Mark 4v40 (12) John 21v18-22 (13) Romans 4v16,5v2 (14) Romans 3v24,28; Acts 15v9-11 (15) Deuteronomy 31v6 (16) Luke 17v5-10 (17) Galatians 2v16 (18) Luke 18 v9-14 (19) Galatians 6v10 (20) Matthew 23v25-27 (21) Galatians 5v22-26, Matthew 7v12-20 (22) Colossians 1v4,8 (23) 1 Thessalonians 1v3,8; 4v9 (24) 1 Timothy 1v4 (25) 1 Corinthians 9v19-22 (26) 1Corinthians 8v1 (27) 1 Corinthians 13v1-3 (28) Isaiah 50v4 (29) Philippians 1v25

Chapter Three: The Grace of God and Jesus

"However, I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me - the task of testifying to the good news of God's grace" (Acts 20 v 24)

These are the sentiments about the gospel from the apostle Paul as he shares the things that are very deepest and dearest to his heart. The grace of God he was so eager to tell people about, so passionate about, and share with everyone he came across. He hoped people would respond to God's kindness, God's undeserved kindness to them, and share in a life of peace with their Creator, having been forgiven of their wrong, sinful, rebellious ways. For trying to pass on this amazing message he was beaten and outcast, by those who even used to be his friends, ultimately he was killed for trying to share his gospel of grace.

Not only was forgiveness and reconciliation on offer, through grace, but also the hope of Eternal Life. God is prepared to forgive our wicked ways, which truly deserve death, according to the law, and give us the gift of eternal Life which we did not deserve (Rom 6v23) - this is indeed grace. Not only do sinners not deserve life, but unfortunately no matter how hard we work at it there is really no way to escape from the fact that we will end up dead. Scientists are trying to dream up ways to stop us from dying, and many, many religious people have even come to the conclusion that death is really a release from some physical jail, (our bodies), that on death, we are released to a life of bliss in eternity with God, they have made death, equal life.

Although there are a variety of thoughts and convictions on the matter we all really and truly end up as dust, dead, as the Bible so plainly describes in lots of places. (Genesis 3v19; Psalm 89v47-48; Ecclesiastes 9v5-6 v 10; Ezekiel 18v4; 1 Cor 15v20-23; 1 Thess. 4v13-14; Hebrews 11v8-13)

If I were God and people treated me like we treat our heavenly Father I would leave them dead and be glad they were gone, fortunately I'm not God, but I am trying to be more like him and His Son Jesus and follow the command to "love your enemies".

Unlike me, with some of the negative feelings I have warring in me, being gracious is a part of God's character. Back in Exodus when the name of our heavenly father was proclaimed to Moses in chapter 34v6 it went like this..."The Lord, The Lord, the compassionate and GRACIOUS God, slow to anger abounding in Love....etc. In 2 Chron 30v9 we are told "...The Lord your God is graciousness and compassionate. He will not turn his face from you if you return to Him", and again in Neh 9v17.....But you are a forgiving God, GRACIOUS and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love. Therefore you did not desert them."

You may notice at the end of the last quote, it says "therefore you did not desert them", the point is, they very much deserved to be deserted. The context is in regard to the people that Moses brought out of Egypt, not far out of Egypt the people "became arrogant, stiff necked, and did not obey your commands. They refused to listen and failed to remember the miracles you performed among them". In fact they were so rebellious that they wanted to throw Moses out of the leadership and set a new leader over them to take them back to slavery in Egypt, but as it says, "you did not desert them", even though they deserved to be, that equals grace. Legally and justly God could have left their carcasses to rot in the desert, after all, "the law came through Moses", and under the law their rebellion should be dealt with by death, but not our God. Thankfully he showed his Love by being gracious beyond measure to them, as we are reminded in Ps 103v10 "he does not treat us as our sins deserve, or repay us according to our

iniquities. v11 For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; , v12 as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us.v13 As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him. Indeed, “The lord is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love.

The Lord is good to all; he has compassion on all he has made. Ps 145v8,9 “The Lord longs to be gracious to you, he rises to show you compassion.” Isaiah 30v18.

Even though the old testament is full of affirmations and examples of Gods grace most of the people reading of how wonderful God was, still couldn't really understand just how gracious he really was, this is strange, with such glorious reflections on the character of our Father in the Holy scriptures it is a wonder that there could be any room for doubt. But such is the wonder of the nature we possess, we have the ability to make darkness out of the most bright light.

God knew that we still were not convinced of how gracious and loving he is, he knew that from the moment we were created, but he was determined that he would not stop until the full measure of his grace was poured out to us. This grace of God was revealed through the Lord Jesus Christ. In John 1:17 we are told, “ the law, (Justice) was given through Moses, grace and truth came through Jesus Christ”.

And what a challenging revelation this grace that the Lord put into practice proved to be, and still proves to be up to this very day. In Luke 1:40 we are told of Jesus “ ...the child grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom and the GRACE of God was upon him”. In Luke 4:22 again “..All spoke well of him and were amazed at the GRACIOUS words that came from his lips”.

Jesus came proclaiming a God that the people hadn't even appeared to imagine, having a heart of compassion and grace for those who were not acceptable by the religious or secular standards of the day, mixing it with even the ones who were thought to be under the curse of God, and even touching the supremely unclean, the lepers, and allowing himself to be touched by the wicked in Luke 7:37-50.

In his stories Jesus shared his insights of the forgiving, loving, compassionate, gracious and joyful God that our Heavenly father is. One of the most challenging and memorable would surely have to be the parable of the merciful father in Luke 15. You can read the full story in Lk 15:11 - 31, think about it and see where you fit into the picture.

It is a story about the truly gracious, loving heart of our heavenly Father, Jesus tells the story of a son who wants to go his own way, leave the family home, and the family, take his share of the inheritance and go and do his own thing. The son ends up squandering all the inheritance in wild living, in the end not even being able to afford enough food to feed himself. Who wouldn't say, serves him right, I have certainly felt like that, and I can feel justified in harbouring this attitude. We can even find lots of bible verses to support our attitude, eg. Prov 5:23; Prov 10:4; and also the popular verse that says, “A person will reap what they sow”.

Not so with the Father, we don't find dad sitting down inside the house, sulking in his self righteousness, thinking up ideas of confession for the son to go through, making plans to insure that this will never happen again, being ready to meet out justice, pouring over the thought of how much money the son has wasted and how it will have to be repaid for him to find favour with the family again. We find a dad who is not being reasonable at all. At the fathers response I

can imagine that many would be horrified, "What are you doing, Don't you know what this wicked boy has done, he deserves to be punished, to pay for his wrongdoing", instead dad is up there pouring out grace and love on this undeserving wayward lad. I love dad's response, it is as follows, Lk 15:20 "...While he was still a long way off, his father saw him (He had to be looking for him, surely) and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.".....:22 "...the father said to the servants, Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet.:23 Bring the fattened calf, lets have a feast and celebrate.:24 For this son of mine was dead and is alive again: he was lost and is found." So they began to celebrate." I can imagine that the listeners were shocked and dumbfounded, Jesus was telling the listeners, and us, the readers, what God is like, do you believe it, a God of such love compassion and grace. You had better believe it, because we are all, to some extent, greater or lesser, just like the wild living son who has rejected the father.

The reason I love the dad's response is because I too need our Heavenly Father and Jesus to respond to me, just like the father in Jesus story responded to his son. In fact we all need the grace of God to reach out and touch us. We all have been like sheep that have strayed out of the way, our sins have separated us from our God, All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, we all have the heart that is described in Jer 17 as being deceitful and beyond cure, and it would seem that most of us have done things that we would not like everyone to know about. But God is there, he knows our lives inside out, there is nothing that is hidden from him, he actually knows us better than we know ourselves, which is a very humbling awareness to have. Although God knows us and our weaknesses and wickedness, Our father is always wanting for us to return to him, ready to throw an incredible celebration, and have rejoicing (Lk 15:6,10,32) in heaven when we repent of our ways, and determine in our hearts to follow Jesus.

In the way that is typical of God's grace and love, he has taken the initiative in reaching out to us in a very clear and unmistakable way. By raising up for us his own special Holy one, his dear sinless son, Jesus, to be our saviour from sin and death. Billions have heard the name "Jesus", and are aware that it means, "saviour", this is an indication that God's message, his gospel of grace is something he has made possible for everyone to have a chance of hearing and responding to.

As has been quoted previously from Acts 24, that it was the apostle Paul's life's labour, it was the thing that drove him, that he might complete his task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace. He had experienced the wonder of God's undeserved kindness, his grace, being richly poured out on him and wanted to let every body else know how great it was and to share in God's blessing, of joy, forgiveness of sins, and the hope of eternal life, In 1 Tim 1:13, 14 he tells us of the wonder of his conversion, "Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. The Grace of our Lord Jesus was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and the love that are in Christ Jesus". Under God's justice Paul was worthy of death, under God's grace, that is found only in Jesus, Paul was given a new start, and he knew this new start, this freedom, this peace with God, is on offer to all, as is stated in Titus 3:7 'So that having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life', In Romans 3:23 we are told "for all have sinned and have fallen short of the glory of God,:24 and are justified freely by his Grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus ". In 1Tim 2:4 It says, speaking of God "who wants all men saved and come to a knowledge of the truth", The extent of God's desire to have us become part of his family and share in his grace and the blessings that flow from it is described in Rom 5:8 "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died

for us". God had his son treated like the sinner deserves,
That the sinner can share with Christ in the eternal life that Christ deserves, by having faith in
what was done for us, Isaiah 53; 1Pet 2:24; 2Cor 5:21; 2Cor 8:9.

Amazing grace how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me, I once was lost, but now am
found, was blind but now I see. Such is the truth for all who come to understand the gospel, the
good news of Gods grace in all it's marvelous truth . For now we can but wait, but not be idle, We
are encouraged by Peter in his first letter, "to prepare our minds for action; be self controlled;
set our hope fully on the grace to be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed from heaven". Until
then may the spirit of the living God and his son Jesus burn in you with all power and love as you
"proclaim the year of the Lord's favour" and get about telling of the wonderful things the Lord
has done for you.

Chapter Four: Freedom and Liberty in Jesus

Are you really free? If you answer yes – maybe you are, and this chapter is to challenge your answer. If you answer no – then we hope this chapter will help to truly set you free.

Do you really know yourself? Are you allowed to be yourself? Or are you like a robot that just plays a role in life? Do you really think the way you think – or is it the way you are supposed to think? What is ‘the truth that makes you free’?(1) Has the truth of Jesus really made you free? – and free from what? We hope you can answer these questions after you have read this chapter.

Freedom can mean a lot of things. Some banks offer ‘freedom accounts’, most people in jail crave for freedom in a different way. People with severe disabilities desire freedom from the limitations of their disabilities. Many of us live in ‘free’ countries’, and we have freedom of choice. Freedom therefore is used in many different ways, and means different things to different people. What does God say about freedom? and what freedoms does He want us to have? In the two greatest commandments(1), the first is the freedom to love ourselves – ‘you shall love your neighbour as yourself.’ This doesn’t mean I kiss myself, tell myself ‘Imp so adorable’ and ‘I can have whatever I want’ or ‘I have had enough of speaking about myself – its over to you - what do you think about me?’ It is not like an insurance ad I saw – ‘to the most important person in the world – you.’ It does mean to know and appreciate who we are – what we are like – to think the way we think – feel the way we feel. Like the apostle Paul says, ‘we are all like different parts of a body’(2). God made us to have very diverse personalities, abilities, likes and dislikes – and His creation reflects this diversity.

In the two greatest commandments there is a word highlighted more than love – “you.” Your and my desire to love must be your freedom to want to – not forced upon you and me by a group, by pressure or expectation or guilt or the fear of rejection. On these teachings hangs the way God uses freedom in His Word.

The apostle Paul says, “ For you, brethren, have been called unto liberty; only do not use liberty as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another”(3). Each of us is called to freedom, but if I am free – why can’t I do what I like? God tells me I am free –now to live a life of love – that’s not freedom! Freedom is about me getting what I WANT – music, relaxing, drinking, eating, sleeping and people around me who think the same. Why would I want to go to church and love people very different to me? I can praise God much better being where I want to be, doing what I want to do. This sounds like a great argument!

One answer to this is – because God loves us He calls us to the greatest freedom that can be found in life – which is love. I can do all the things I WANT, but I will still find underneath it all something lacking. I will not find full freedom in a self – centred life.. To live a life of love doesn’t mean I don’t listen to music, relax and do things I enjoy. God in His love gave us this beautiful world and “richly all things to enjoy”(4) – in balance.

The freedom and liberty God calls us to - is to care for people in their troubles and show His character and mercy – and not judge (5). This is the most fulfilling freedom we can find in life. This is true Christianity. To live like this and treat others like this frees us all from guilt, pride and condemnation.

If I am really afflicted because lots of bad things have happened to me and my family – and I come to get some comfort from my church – and some condemn me, some look down on me like I am a failure, some avoid me, some make me feel guilty – can I call this a place of liberty

and freedom? How can others rejoice in their freedom they have in Jesus – and not set me free by their attitudes toward me?(6)

There are many freedoms that seem to be so, but in the end their consequences do not bring freedom. I am free to keep my anger and hatred of another person – but in the end it eats me up and takes away my joy. I am free to sleep around – but in the end there are STDs, unwanted pregnancies, dissatisfaction and frustration. I am free to get drunk – but in the morning there's a headache or hangover, or a car accident, or I have done something I would not normally have done. I am free to smoke dope – but in the end there's short term memory loss, depression, schizophrenia, bi-polar.

When we compare any freedom to its consequences – love is the greatest freedom.

The apostle Paul says, “Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage”(7). We have freedom from being justified by law in Christ. The Jews generally have chosen freedom through works of law. Jesus highlights the consequences of this freedom – “The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, ‘God, I thank You that I am not like other men – extortionary, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all I possess’(8). When we choose to justify ourselves by ‘I do this and I do this’” the consequence is pride. That is self elevation, judgment of others, and the right to have and use power to crush offenders – and so freedom is destroyed.

There is a very good article by John Stibbs that summarises many of the things we have learned:

Few of us take rejection very well as we all want to be part of something greater than ourselves, so much so it seems we are prepared to modify or even compromise our personal belief system (what we believe about ourselves) to gain or keep that acceptance. And thereby we project an image of ourselves which, simply put, is pleasing to others whom we may hold in high esteem. We hold them in esteem because for instance they know more than us and can pontificate on many matters scriptural and so on, and whose approval we may desire to make us feel good about ourselves etc. This is putting one's foot on the slippery slope of power and control, because we are handing our own power over to others; and control of ourselves to control by the group or its tacit leader and legalism. Of course we don't know we're doing this, as we have become well socialised by this time into this sort of 'going along to get along' behaviour. We in essence hand over our freedom which Christ died to secure for us. Freedom in Christ is emancipation from the arbitrary rule of men. The freedoms I mean are these:

To see and hear what we see and hear, rather than what we're supposed to see and hear; to think what we think, rather than what we're supposed to think; feel what we feel, rather than what we're supposed to feel; imagine what we imagine; rather than what we're supposed to imagine. When these freedoms are compromised, as they are in all of us from childhood, then we are mystified, we cannot trust ourselves, indeed we become taught not to trust ourselves. Hence we are unable to exercise self control because we've handed that power over to another or others.

There are some other passages that speak about the use and misuse of freedom, and I would like to summarise these:

We are to respect each others freedoms(9). To legislate, or see righteousness in practices outside the gospel are contrary to the freedom of love(10). The Pharisees had strict laws about washing before eating and about exactly what you could and could not do on the Sabbath day.

Jesus opposed these, and even though the Pharisees were offended – he continued his practice. The reason? The Pharisees believed these things were righteousness before God – and they were not. Therefore what we wear, as long as it is modest(11), is part of the freedom of love we are each given. Likewise with the songs and music we play – if it is hymns and an organ or songs and a band – both can equally give glory to God. Every person’s freedom should be respected, not just our own, as this is selfishness and not love.

We have the freedom to believe what we believe on teachings that are outside the Gospel that saves us. There are different interpretations about the creation account, prophecy and so on – and these are part of the freedom of love. That is – I love you – and respect your opinion, even though I may not agree.

There are times though when we do not exercise our liberties. This is when we have someone who is really weak in conscience on an issue – and would leave Christ and sin if I exercised my conscience. An example of this is when our friend has a problem with alcohol. When we are with them we don’t drink alcohol. We don’t exercise our right to drink alcohol – because we love the person, and seek their health and salvation.

We do not limit our freedoms when others force or pressure us to do things their way because they have power or control – or they see righteousness in works that are not part of the Gospel. As Jesus – we are to oppose them in love.

‘The truth’ in the Bible is Jesus(12). Jesus is ‘the truth’ – because He is the true saviour, the true Son of God and showed us the true way to live. This truth makes us free because we are freed from sin, we see the free love of God to us in giving His Son, and we are made free to love – which is the greatest freedom God could give us.

(1)John 8v31-36 (2)1 Corinthians 12 (3)Galatians 5v13-15 (4)1 Timothy 6v17; Psalm 104 (5)James 1v25-27,2v12-13 (6)1 Peter2v16-17, 11Corinthians3v17-18 (7) Galatians5v1 (8)Luke 18v11-14 (9)Romans14 (10)Matthew 15v7-9; Acts 15; Colossians2v20-23 (11)1 Timothy 2v9 (12)John 8v31-36

Chapter Five: Fruit of the Spirit

We have heard the gospel of Jesus Christ!

And so we find that we are convicted in our hearts of being sinners. We are in good company. Throughout the ages, every man and woman, convicted in their hearts of isolation from God through sin, and of a desperate need for God's grace, have called out, "What can I do to make things right again?".

When Peter preached to the thousands in Jerusalem, just after Jesus' resurrection and ascension, he finally said..."it was this Jesus, whom you crucified, that God has made both Lord and Christ." (Acts 2v36). "Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart" (Acts 2v37). Of course they were! They had taken the Lord of Light, the son and Lamb of God and by wicked hands had crucified him. They had taken the very purpose of creation and hung him on a tree. They were guilty of the most terrible and barbaric act in history! What had they done? How could they get back to God from here? They cried out the only thing they could. They cried out the same words that you and I cry out when we are convicted of our own inability to help ourselves. They "said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Men and brethren, what shall we do?" We are helpless, we can only trust in the Grace of God. The answer was the same answer given to every broken and contrite heart throughout history." Then Peter said to them, repent, and let every one of you be baptised in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins". (Acts 2v38).

When Paul and Silas preached the love of God in Philippi, they were taken by the rulers, flogged, and thrown into jail. Here the jailer, charged with their safekeeping, fixed their feet into stocks. Then, at night, the earthquake of the Lord opened the prison doors, releasing their chains. The guard, thinking they had escaped, was about to commit suicide, when Paul cried out "we are all here". In shock, the jailer thought..."what have I done". In a flash he realised that these were the servants of the true God, that he had locked up the Spirit of God in chains, that he had whipped and flogged the vessels of God's grace and mercy....that he had re-crucified the Lord of Light all over again. In desperation he called out "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" (Acts 16v30). Like those who had gone before, he sought a way back from the hopelessness of his situation, realising that he had no way back, so he could only trust that God could find a way for him. Paul and Silas cried out "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household....and immediately he and all his family were baptised. " (Acts 16v31-33)

You see, you can't get back to God by yourself; only God can bring you back through His forgiveness and grace. But you do need to show your faith, love and commitment to Him, through symbolically joining with Jesus in his death and resurrection, through baptism. And so we are baptised in the saving name of Jesus of Nazareth, to taste of the forgiveness and grace of God. What then? Do we walk away, back to the old life, back to work, study, or family, just as we did before?

How can we! We are new creatures! Born of the spirit! "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new" (2 Cor 5:17)

Romans chapter 8 describes the new creature.

1 There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit.....

5 For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit.

9-11 But you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. Now if

anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he is not His. And if Christ is in you, the body is dead because of sin, but the Spirit is life because of righteousness. But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you.

14 For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God.
How joyous it is to be God's children, and to be born of the Spirit!

Paul begs his followers in Romans 12, v1. "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. 2 And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God."

So, do we suddenly stop sinning, after we are baptised into Jesus? No, we grow in grace, and hopefully move ever closer to His image, through the help of the God's Spirit.

There is a curious story in Mark 8:22. Jesus enters a city called Bethsaida, and a blind man is brought to him. Jesus spat on his eyes, and said "do you see anything?". "Yes" said the man "I see men like trees, walking." Then Jesus touched him a second time, and now he saw everyone clearly. Why did Jesus touch him twice? What? Didn't the miracle work the first time? Did Jesus need a second go? No, Jesus had cured many a sick, blind and dead person at a single touch. Jesus was illustrating something. Did you know that the prophets before Jesus were able to raise the dead, cure sickness, feed a crowd on a handful of bread (through God's power)...but never did they heal a man born blind. This miracle was reserved for Jesus alone. You see, Jesus is the light of this world (John 1). Only He can lead us from blindness to God's light. Only He can lead us from stumbling in the dark to basking in the light of God's glory. Perhaps Jesus was saying that this light does not come into our lives at a single touch. At the first touch, at our first encounter with Jesus, we see just a little. It is the subsequent touches that further reveal his wonder and glory. It is in the subsequent touches that we also come to see men as Jesus saw them...as sheep without a shepherd, desperately in need of salvation. Very few of us grow from a 'blind man' to the full nature of Christ, at one touch. Few of us are fully converted by one lightening flash on the Damascus Road.

Think of Peter for a moment. He had three years to walk and learn at the feet of Jesus. For three years he walked in the light of the son, touched day after day by His grace and glory. "Who do people say I am?" said Jesus. The answer came back...some say you are this, some say you are that... "But who do you think I am?"

"You are the Christ, the son of the living God" said Peter. "You are blessed" said Jesus, "because men have not revealed this to you, but the Father in heaven has."

Touched! Touched by the Christ, the son of God.

But then Jesus began to show to His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things and be killed, and be raised the third day. Then Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him, saying, "Far be it from You, Lord; this shall not happen to You!" But He turned and said to Peter, "Get behind Me, Satan! You are an offence to Me, for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men." (Matt 16:21-23)

Where was the touch now? Peter saw men as trees, without the fullness of the light of understanding. Then Jesus said to them, "All of you will be made to stumble because of Me this night....but after I have been raised, I will go before you to Galilee." Peter answered and said to

Him, "Even if all are made to stumble because of You, I will never be made to stumble." Touched again...how could he desert the Lord he had come to love! Now Peter sat outside in the courtyard. And a servant girl came to him, saying, "You also were with Jesus of Galilee." But he denied it before them all, saying, "I do not know what you are saying."another girl saw him and said to those who were there, "This fellow also was with Jesus of Nazareth." But again he denied with an oath, "I do not know the Man!" And a little later those who stood by came up and said to Peter, "Surely you also are one of them..." Then he began to curse and swear, saying, "I do not know the Man!" Immediately a rooster crowed. And Peter remembered the word of Jesus who had said to him, "Before the rooster crows, you will deny Me three times." So he went out and wept bitterly. (Matt 26:69-75)

Where was the touch now? Once again, Peter could not tell the difference between men and trees. He needed more touching! Then, after the crucifixion and resurrection, the risen Jesus stood before him and said; "Peter, do you love me". "You know I love you Lord". Touched again! Then on the day of Pentecost, after the ascension of Jesus, Peter received the Holy Spirit, and preached powerfully, and did many miracles. Touched again! This time by the Holy Spirit. But even now he did not fully understand the gospel. He still could not tell the difference between gentile men, and trees. While Peter was on his roof top praying, he fell into a trance, and saw as it were a huge sheet, held at the four corners, full of animals, birds, reptiles etc, all of which were unclean for a Jew to eat. God spoke to him "Arise Peter, kill an animal and eat it". "No" said Peter, "I've never eaten anything unclean". God replied " don't call what I have cleaned unclean".

He still didn't understand! He still didn't know that the Gentiles, once outside God's plan, were now called to salvation through Jesus.

Surely now he could see the light in all its full orb'd glory!
He had been touched by living with Jesus for three years.
He had been touched by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.
He had been touched by the vision of God, in which he heard His voice.

What more could he need! Oh, wouldn't we want to have had his experience. How would you have loved to walk and talk with Jesus, to receive the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and the talk with God. What more could Peter need. You'd think that that would be all one could need! But, do you know, he had not yet seen the difference between men and trees!

In the letter to the Galatians, we read that Paul had to take him aside, and explain the way of God more perfectly, that all people, gentile or Jewish, are equal before God.

Touched again! This time by his brother in Christ. We may not get to walk and talk with Jesus, experience the miraculous gifts of the Spirit, or receive visions from God, but we do get to talk with our brothers and sisters. They are a God provided gift, that we may all grow in grace, be touched over and over, and finally see men, not as trees, but as Jesus saw them. So we grow toward the image of Jesus. We may still sin, but "My little children, these things I write to you, so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous."(1 John 2:1)

With God's help, the seed of grace given to us sprouts into a plant, blossoms into flowers, and then bears fruit. It is the fruit born of the Spirit of God. Its' origin is not human, but of God. "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith," (Gal 5:22). These are not human traits, but the outpouring of God given love. "For the fruit of the Spirit is in

all goodness and righteousness and truth;" (Eph 5:9). The life the Christian now leads is not his own. It is Christ's life, bearing all the fruit needed to bring glory to our Father. "For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps: "Who committed no sin, Nor was deceit found in His mouth"; (1 Peter 2v21).

Chapter Six: The Kingdom of God

The Kingdom of God on Earth, ruled from Jerusalem by Jesus Christ returned to earth, will be the grand climax of the history of the human race. It will bring in a new and glorious age, and one that will exceed our highest hopes for a paradise to dwell in, with our Creator and also Jesus Christ truly with us. Both the Old and New Testaments of the Bible tell how the Kingdom of God will go through an establishment period, a development period and a never-ending peace period, a happy and contented state of the world that has been the dream of all ages – that dream come true.

The establishment period will be from the return of Jesus (to raise and reward the righteous – 2 Tim 4v8) to his proclamation of the Kingdom from Jerusalem to all the world (Psalm 2). The development period involves the defeat of all opposition to his rule, the elimination of evil, violence and corruption from the world and the preaching of peace to the ends of the earth (Psalm 72). When all the world accepts His rule, an everlasting era of peace, plenty, tranquility, praise and worship will prevail. It will be the Garden of Eden restored, a literal and physical kingdom on earth (Isaiah 51v3). A place in this kingdom is the promised reward to all true believers down through the ages. (Matthew 5v5, 19v28)

THE BELIEVER'S REWARD IS ETERNAL LIFE ON EARTH

There are many Bible passages that speak of the kingdom on earth. "All the earth shall be filled with the glory of the Lord" (Numbers 14v21) "The kingdoms of this world (will) become the kingdoms of our Lord and his Christ and he shall reign for ever and ever" (Rev.11v15). Combine this with Rev.5v10 "...and have made us (believers) kings and priests to our God and we shall reign on the earth".

The Kingdom of Heaven is another phrase used to describe this wonderful Kingdom because its origin, its direction and planning comes from heaven. The Kingdom vision is described in Micah 4v2 "Out of Zion the law shall go forth and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem".

The Kingdom is never called the Kingdom in Heaven, and Jesus says in John 3v13 "No one has ascended into heaven". When Paul speaks about the faithful people in Hebrews 11 he concludes "And all these, having obtained a good testimony through faith, did not receive the promise, God having provided something better for us that they should not be made perfect apart from us" v39-40. All the faithful - past, present and future, receive their reward at the same time, that is at the return of Jesus to the earth (2 Tim 4v8). At that future time, the Kingdom of God on earth will have its beginning.

The future Kingdom is spoken of by Daniel in chapter 2 of his book. After foretelling the three ancient empires that would control the Israelites and the Holy Land after Babylon, the final step is described as a stone cut out without hands destroying the metal man empires and growing to fill the whole earth. It is described in Dan.2v44, "The God of heaven will set up a kingdom which will never be destroyed; the kingdom shall not be left to other people; it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms and it shall stand forever." The political arrangements of the world will be overtaken by the Kingdom of God on Earth, never to be destroyed. The blessings of honest, just rule and worldwide peace and contentment will finally be realized.

Despite admirable and best intentions, the failures of the United Nations will be replaced by the righteousness of God's kingdom. The instability of global economies, and confrontations between nations and ideologies often leading to war and violent destruction will pass away and be no more. The pain and suffering caused by disease, poverty and loneliness will also be

rectified. All these situations beyond the remedy of nations will be solved by Jesus in the Kingdom Age. God's kingdom becomes a reality following the return of Jesus.

THE GLORIES OF THE KINGDOM

For those who are weary of the painful or corrupt or violent ways of this world there are wonderfully inspiring descriptions of the coming Kingdom of God. The benefits of the kingdom fall into a number of categories. The following list applies to the individual person, experienced in a completely changed nature of bodily existence and based on the promises of Rev. 21:4, "God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away."

- No more death - When violence, evil and all resistance to the rule of Jesus has been eliminated, death in human beings will disappear (1 Corinthians 15:20-28). Eternal life will be a life worth living because the following benefits will be universal.
- No more pain - Is there an individual on earth who has not suffered from pain of some sort? Some people suffer a lifetime of pain and discomfort – in the kingdom there will be complete relief, a life free of pain. Disease can bring an intense period of pain – cancer and arthritis are just two of many causes. All these causes of pain will exist no more. "The nursing child shall play by the cobra's hole and the weaned child shall put his hand in the viper's den. They shall not hurt nor destroy." (Isaiah Ch. 11) Freedom from pain and fear of pain will be an enormous blessing, particularly to those chronically afflicted by pain and disease. Health problems will not be an issue any more.
- No more sorrow or crying - Sadness will be a thing of the past. No longer will pressure, distress, pain, loneliness, poverty or any other negative aspect of our lives cause us to cry – the only tears we shed will be tears of joy and happiness!

Security is a big worry these days. Fear is a dominant feature of modern living – fear of walking the streets at night, fear pervades airports, fear of terrorist attacks, fear of war and conflicts. Micah 4:4 provides a guarantee of kingdom security. "Everyone shall sit under his vine and under his fig tree and no one shall make them afraid." To the list we are compiling we can add

- Personal security and safety Since there is to be no cause for sorrow or crying, safety is automatic and to rule out any doubt Micah 4:4 emphasises that "no one shall make them afraid". This point is picked up by Isaiah 11 and extended to all nature. "They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain" Isaiah 11:9. Vv.6-8 provide examples.
- The wolf will live alongside the lamb peacefully, as will the leopard and goat and the calf and the lion. They will be so harmless that a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze together and their young shall be quite safe.
- Animal feeding habits shall be changed. The lion shall not kill to feed but eat vegetation "like the ox". Very young children will not be injured by snakes and reptiles. The laws of nature will be modified so that the earth will be renewed as it was in the beginning, and as God intended it to be.

A combination of Isaiah 9:6-7 and Isaiah 11:1-5 provides a glimpse of the rules of law and government in the future Kingdom of God. Isaiah 9:6 clearly defines Jesus as the kingdom ruler, "For unto us a child is born; unto us a son is given, and the government will be upon his shoulder and his name will be called Wonderful, Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end." From this

we learn

- Jesus will be the sole ruler No other king or president will be tolerated.
- The final priority will be worldwide peace War and death will be no more. Worldwide peace will only be achieved when Jesus does it His way.

Isaiah 11v2-4 develops this further. "The Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon Him. The Spirit of wisdom and understanding, The Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD. His delight is in the fear of the LORD, and He shall not judge by the sight of His eyes, nor decide by the hearing of His ears; but with righteousness He shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth."

This shows that Jesus will rule with that inner spirit that comes from God. Therefore He will rule by inner knowledge and not just by what He will see or hear. He will be utterly fair and able to divine the truth no matter what people say.

- Wisdom and understanding will characterize the rule of Jesus.
- Total knowledge, justice and absolute fairness will be the result of Jesus knowing all things.

There is another aspect introduced by this passage that must be noted. "He shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall slay the wicked. Righteousness shall be the belt of his loins, and faithfulness the belt of his waist." This procedure is the means by which peace will be extended throughout the earth. The wicked will not be tolerated. Righteousness and faithfulness will be demanded and those who resist will be slain.

In the kingdom age there will be a special connection between the reign of Jesus from Jerusalem and the restored nation of Israel. Jesus Christ will reign on King David's restored throne. At the conception of Jesus the angel told Mary, "He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God will give him the throne of his father David. And he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." (Luke 1v30-35). Further, when the disciples asked Jesus what kingdom role they would have, Jesus assured them, "When the Son of Man sits on the throne of His glory, you who have followed Me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel" Matthew 19:28. Israel will be ruled by the twelve apostles. Israel has always occupied, and will continue to occupy, a special place in God's Kingdom plans. Proof of this is Israel's progressive restoration.

GOD'S KINGDOM, PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

There are three other senses in which the Kingdom of God has an existence. The first is in the Old Testament history of Israel and the second is in the congregation of true believers over the centuries down to today.

Ancient Israel was a real kingdom that God initiated and to which God was closely attached. God's prophets were the medium by which God exerted his influence on the nation and its kings, along with occasional direct revelation to some individuals. Often God intervened in the political circumstances of, not only Israel, but the surrounding nations. Israel was his specially chosen people (and still is). "For you are a holy people to the LORD your God; the LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for himself, a special treasure above all the peoples on the face of the earth" Deuteronomy 7:6, and Zechariah 2:8 says that "he who touches you touches the apple of his eye." In every practical sense Old Testament Israel was the Kingdom of God (1 Chronicles 28v5). But it was temporary, fallible, and limited

The second sense in which the Kingdom of God has a meaning is among true believers who follow Jesus. This kingdom is not a political kingdom but is bound together by the faith of

believers, and our desire to live as Jesus taught us. Most of Jesus teaching focuses on this aspect of the Kingdom (Luke 4v43, 8v1). The previous chapters in this booklet are about this aspect of the Kingdom.

The third sense is in Jesus first coming two thousand years ago.

In the context of Jesus healing the blind, dumb and mentally disturbed man (Matthew 12) Jesus said, "If I cast out demons by the spirit of God surely the Kingdom of God has come upon you." The healing work of Jesus showed His Kingdom and a taste, a sample of the benefits of His greater Kingdom to come. A little of the wonders of the Kingdom had arrived, temporarily at least. The same thought reoccurs in Luke 10v9-11, again about miracle working by the seventy. "Heal the sick and say to them, 'The Kingdom of God has come near to you'" The miracle works of Jesus, His holy life, His love, faith and grace and His authority showed the Kingdom of God in a way that had not been seen before.

It is absolutely necessary for those interested in the Christian religion to understand the Old Testament. So much vital information about the Kingdom of God on Earth is contained in the Old Testament. To go to church holding only a bound New Testament is to be ignorant of so many Old Testament details of the Kingdom of God and the significance of the restoration of Israel to the Holy Land today. The Old Testament prophets, who were Jews, provided hundreds of pieces of information about events future to our time.

To understand these gems of information in the Old Testament is to be able to see details about our future life. For example, Zechariah 14v16-17, "It shall come to pass that everyone who is left of all the nations which came against Jerusalem shall go up from year to year to worship the King, the LORD of hosts, and to keep the Feast of Tabernacles. 17And it shall be that whichever of the families of the earth do not come up to Jerusalem to worship the King, the LORD of hosts, on them there will be no rain." This has not yet been fulfilled. It is a prophecy of the future of our world. A time when God will establish His Kingdom over all the earth. Only the whole Bible has all the answers to our future, and the future of this beautiful planet on which we live.

CONCLUSION

God created us for a purpose. We are not on this wonderful planet just to fill in the years until we die. It's the one opportunity God has given us to understand His purpose – our one chance to find out His message and the reason for putting us here.

God is watching us. He is observing how we treat others and if we are going to make the commitment to love and faith that gives us eternal life. He offers an eternal life of love and joy as a free gift! None of us can ever earn it and none of us deserve it, but He loves us so much and really wants us to be in His Kingdom, and part of His family, that He gave His only Son to die for us. He asks us to respond to His love and grace by making a commitment to Him – that we show this commitment by finding out why He has done things, and what He wants us to do.

The first step is believing that God exists and that He cares about us and really does want us to be part of His family – in other words, having faith in Him.

The second step is believing the things that really matter. Jesus said the two greatest commandments are to love God and to love our neighbour. This booklet has been an introduction to finding out about these things and about the fruits of the spirit that will grow in us by God's grace.

When we believe these things, the next step is to make the commitment that God has asked of us, by being baptized. (Acts 2v47-48, 8v12, 18v8: Romans 6)

It is God's desire and appeal to reach out to save us eternally. We've got a choice. We can choose life forever or we can ignore the overwhelming evidence around us that there is a Creator to this universe who has a plan. We choose this option to our own peril. It's the easier option because it requires no faith in God or responsibility to Him, but then there is also no future in it. At the end of our days we become like the generations before us. We slowly become a distant memory and even that passes with time. While we have life is the time to search out and seize the amazing offer God is making to us. But no-one can do it for you. From within each of us must come our own desire to search for God's message.

This booklet has tried to present the essence of the Gospel message and the fundamental basics of love, faith, grace, the fruits of the spirit, eternal life and the Kingdom of God.

For a comprehensive Bible study manual which systematically covers the whole of the Bible message we encourage you to read "Bible Basics".

This can also be viewed on-line : biblebasicsonline.com or wcarelinks.net

Or ordered from Bible Basics, PO Box 152, Menai Central, NSW, 2234 Australia

If, after thinking about the teachings contained in this booklet you really want to be baptized and follow Jesus, please contact us at the above address.

May the Grace of God be with you.