ROOTED

GROWING A FAITH THAT FLOURISHES

JON HOBBS

Rooted

Growing a faith that flourishes.

"They will be called oaks of righteousness,
a planting of the LORD
for the display of his splendour."

Isaiah 61:3

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Contents.

Rooted.

God's great concern is that we would not simply assent to certain truths as Christians, but have them infuse every part of our lives. We are not to "conform to the pattern of this world, but *be transformed by the renewing of our minds*" (Romans 12v2). Yet few come to faith with much knowledge of the Bible. And no-one could say they fully understand how it explains our world and equips us to live within it. Moreover, our culture is increasingly post-Christian – and often anti-Christian. We therefore need to be particularly well rooted in the Bible's teaching if, like oaks, we are to be immovable in faith, upright in life and glorious to behold (Is 61v3).

These notes are intended to help in some small way. Each study takes about 15 minutes. You could do them on your own in your quiet time, or you could ask to work through them with another Christian –

perhaps meeting once every one or two weeks to discuss two or three studies at a time. Alternatively, two or three could be covered each week in a community group or as part of a course in preparation for baptism, confirmation or membership.

Bible references include the first few letters of the Bible book title, followed by chapter and verse numbers. An appendix is included with a question and answer summary to aid memory.

I would encourage you not to rush. Nothing in these pages is too complex for a teenager or new Christian to grasp. But they do contain weighty truth. At times you may therefore need to pause, re-read and ponder. Five things in particular will help:

1. Ensure you do the Bible studies rather than just reading the notes.
2. As you learn new words, write them down with a definition.
3. Write down other new things you learn.

4. Write down questions that you want to find answers to.
5. Pray for God's help to understand and live by what you read.

My prayer is that…

"…the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, and his incomparably great power for us who believe." (Ephesians 1v17-19)

(1) What is a Christian?

Think for a moment: How would you answer?

The New Testament section of the Bible contains the four gospels recording Jesus' life, a history of the first Christians, important letters written to teach their churches, and a visionary insight into all history. It was written by various people between 45 and 80 AD – just 15-50 years after Jesus was here.

Matthew ends his gospel recording Jesus' final words to his followers before being seen to rise up from the earth into heaven. He told them he had been given "all authority in heaven and on earth," and then commissioned them to "make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything" he "commanded them" (Matthew's gospel, chapter 28, verses 18-20).

We'll unpack some of this at a later time. For now, we need simply see that in claiming to hold such immense authority, Jesus affirms the central Christian conviction that he is God himself, existing as a man, and come to rule over all things. And what he is now doing through his followers, is calling people from throughout the world to share in what he's bringing about - to become subjects of his coming kingdom where all that is wrong will be made right.

What this must mean is obvious: We are to give Jesus our allegiance. We are to obey his commands. But the word "disciple" means "pupil." It describes the relationship of a student to a teacher. So, this obedience is not forced but willing. And this enables us to define what it is to be a Christian: *A Christian is someone who so believes in who Jesus is that they seek to follow his teaching.* That's the nature of Christian faith. It is trust Jesus by trusting all he says.

Hearing God Speak In The Bible

The book of Acts records the history of the first Christians. Peter was one of Jesus' closest followers. In chapter 2 we find him preaching to Jews ten days after Jesus ascended into heaven. He concludes in verse 36 by affirming Jesus now reigns both as Lord and Messiah. "Lord" was the Jewish title for God. "Messiah" is the Hebrew version of the Greek word "Christ." It means "anointed." It was the Jewish title for the king God promised would put the world right. Read Acts chapter 2 verses 36-40.

1) People were cut to the heart in realizing how they had treated Jesus. What does Peter tell them to do (see verses 38-40)?
2) What does Peter promise those who respond this way will receive (see verses 38-40)?
3) Who does he promise these things to (v39)?

4) What questions do you still have about what it means to be a Christian?

To "repent" is to change your mind about a course of action. So, someone repents when they change their mind about Jesus and so turn from living for themselves to live for him as their king. But here we need to be clear: This means the Christian is more than someone who lives by Christian values. They actually trust Jesus. They don't simply hold to what he teaches about lifestyle, but what he teaches about God, his purposes, and how we should relate to him. And on the basis of that, they look to him for forgiveness when they do wrong. We must therefore develop our definition. We might say that: *a Christian is someone who so believes in who Jesus is that they call on him as Saviour to forgive their sin, and submit to him as Lord by following his teaching.* Does that describe your response to him?

The Old Testament section of the Bible contains books written by numerous authors between 1500 and 400 BC. They record God's interactions with humanity since we first walked the planet. We read how he made "covenants" with particular people and with the nation of Israel. A covenant is a binding agreement between two parties – like a marriage. Just like a husband to his wife, God committed to being their God with all the care that brings. But they were to remain faithful - loving and serving him.

A key lesson from the Old Testament is that human beings are not able to remain faithful to God. He formed the people of Israel, gave them wise laws, a special land, and promised to bless them there. Yet again and again they broke his laws, turned to other gods, and so lost all God gave. This showed that left to ourselves human beings will always turn away. God therefore promised a new covenant bound up with Jesus in which he would change people's

hearts so that they would be faithful to him, and fully forgive the extent to which they still fail.

This is the "promise" Peter speaks of (Acts 2v38-39). These two things mean that those who have faith in Christ will never lose the blessings of his kingdom as Israel lost theirs. And it is these two things that are pictured in baptism. When the Christian (or their child) is immersed in water, it symbolises the washing away of the guilt of sin as they are forgiven, and of the grime of sin as the Holy Spirit enables them to do what is right. If you have put your trust in Jesus then these things really are yours. God has accepted you, and you are already experiencing something of the life to come.

In a nutshell, the gospel message is this: In Christ, God is rescuing a people from his judgment and renewing them into his image, all so that they might share in his coming kingdom. It is truly good news.

SPEAKING TO GOD IN PRAYER

Thank God for his gifts of forgiveness and the Holy Spirit.

Ask God to enable you to wholeheartedly trust Jesus by trusting all he says.

(2) He speaks!

HEARING GOD SPEAK IN THE BIBLE

Read 2 Timothy chapter 3 verse 14 to chapter 4 verse 5. Here the apostle Paul writes to a young church leader called Timothy.

1) Why is it so important to study the Scriptures for ourselves (see 3v14-17)?
2) Paul gives an extremely serious charge to Timothy to preach the scriptures. Why is it so important that we hear people preaching the Bible (see 4v1-4)?
3) What should you do if the Bible contradicts what you or your culture thinks?
4) Some ask: "How can you believe the Bible today?" How might you respond?

"Apostle" means "sent one." The apostles were the eyewitnesses to Jesus' resurrection

that he sent to pass his teaching on to the world. In our services we often affirm "The Apostles' Creed." This is a statement of belief Christians have said since the third century that summarizes the central teachings of the apostles – the key things Christians have always believed about God and all he does through Jesus. It is for this reason that one of the things we look for in those wishing to be baptised, confirm their baptismal vows, or become church members, is a sincere belief in God as presented in the creed.

However, we've already seen that true belief is one that actively responds to Jesus. Peter called his hearers to "repent for the forgiveness of sins." They then "devoted" themselves to living by the apostles' teaching as members of the first church (Acts 2v38-47). So, we also look for a sincere response to Jesus that seeks his forgiveness and help, wants to follow his teaching as given through his apostles, and is committed to his

church. Each day's reflection will consider a different aspect of what this all looks like as outlined in our membership booklet. We begin with the paragraph on the Bible:

> "*God has revealed himself in the Bible which is his inspired Word and so entirely trustworthy in all matters of belief and behaviour. What it teaches must therefore be held to and so lived by wholeheartedly. (John 10v35, 14v26, 2 Tim 3v16-17).*"

For the people in Jesus' day, the word "scripture" described the writings compiled together in the Old Testament. They believed God had so overseen the research and thought processes of its authors that they wrote exactly what God wanted them to write. This is what it means to say the Bible is "inspired." And Jesus taught that we should believe this. John's gospel records him describing scripture as "the Word of God" and teaching that it cannot be "set aside" (John 10v35). In other words, it is

God's way of speaking to us about himself and his purposes. It is therefore authoritative, true and trustworthy. We may struggle to appreciate some of what it says until we know more; but so far as we understand it, we must believe and so hold to it - even when it challenges the views of our culture.

Later in the same gospel we read how Jesus promised that God's Holy Spirit would teach his apostles new things and enable them to accurately recall all he had already taught them (John 14v26). Because the apostles were the ones Jesus made this promise to, the first Christians also received the documents they wrote or contributed to as scripture. Eventually they were compiled into the New Testament. It is also therefore adhered to as God's inspired word to us.

Accepting all this is critically important. In our reflections we will come across much wonderful truth and some rather hard truth. But we cannot pick and choose what to accept. If we assume the Bible is wrong on

one matter of belief or behaviour then we cannot be confident it is correct on any other – and so we can have no grounds for our faith at all. No, if we call ourselves Christians then we must hold to Christ's view of the Bible as with everything else.

We live in a world where a whole number of different voices tell us what to believe or how to behave. Some argue that such truth is relative – that if people feel something is right, or decide as a culture that it's right, then it is right or true for them. But God is the creator of all, so his truth is true for all – whether we like it or not. And in his great kindness he has spoken in a book. This shows his wisdom. Word of mouth can be unreliable. Only a book can be translated, studied, memorized, discussed and passed down accurately through history. It is the Bible that is God's word to us. That's why we will look to the Bible in all that follows.

In reading the Bible two things are paramount. First is humility. We must

recognize the limits to our understanding and be ready to hear and obey what we learn, accepting it not as the word of man but the word of God (1 Thess 2v13). Second is thoughtfulness. Rather than simply assume what the Bible says, we need to consider it carefully to ensure we understand it rightly (Acts 17v11). For any Bible passage, asking four simple questions can help:

1) What exactly does it say?
2) Why does it say it as it does?
3) Why does it say it where it does in the book and whole Bible story?
4) What response does it intend to bring?

Why not give these a try?

SPEAKING TO GOD IN PRAYER

Thank God for his kindness in speaking to us in this way.

Ask God to give you a desire to read the Bible, and understanding as you do.

(3) It's all about trust

"I Believe" : *Salvation is received solely as a gift of God's grace, not as a reward for moral or religious effort, but through trusting faith in God as revealed in the Bible and particularly in the following truths [i.e. those of the Apostles' Creed which begins each subsequent paragraph]. (Gal 3, 5, 2 Tim 3v16-17.)*

HEARING GOD SPEAK IN THE BIBLE

Read Luke 18v9-14.

1) Pharisees held to the Jewish religion in a very strict way. How does the Pharisee fail to recognize his helplessness (see verses 9-12)?
2) Tax collectors were known for taxing too much to line their own pockets. Yet both the Pharisee and Tax Collector here display a sort of faith. What makes the tax collector's faith commendable (see v13)?

3) What do you think Jesus wants to teach by v14?
4) How would you respond to someone who says: "Surely if God forgives then I can live as I want?"

It's often assumed religious faith is blind. It is placed in a different category to believing the earth revolves around the sun or Caesar invaded Britain. But this fails to grasp the nature of faith. We live by faith in every sphere. And in these contexts, as in Christianity, faith is to trust something (or someone) on the basis of evidence.

This is one reason why the Bible is so necessary. It comprises sixty-six books written over 1500 years by forty or so authors. It contains history, poetry, laws, proverbs, songs, letters and more. But throughout it purports to be a trustworthy record of God's acts in history, of things he

actually spoke to individuals, and things he led others to write.

We've seen that we accept it is God's word because Jesus taught that and we are convinced he is God's Son. But that's not the only reason. The consistent message that runs through such a diversity of books and the transforming impact it has on people's lives, also proves God is its ultimate author. And this means that Christian faith is much more than a vague belief in a supreme being. It is to trust that the God who is actually there has made himself known in the history of Israel and the person of Jesus – and had that recorded in the Bible. It is to actively trust God himself, by trusting all he has said and promised there. This is rather like trusting a pen-pal that we've never seen but have got to know through their letters. The difference is that the Christian trusts that God is actually present with them, seeing their response and hearing their prayers.

We've already learnt that the great promise God makes through Jesus is to forgive our sins and give us eternal life in his kingdom. This is what we mean by "salvation." It is to be saved from the punishment our sins deserve and from all that is wrong with our world. The most wonderful truth is that Jesus promised these things as a gift – a gift that is received by faith. No-one can be good enough to earn or deserve them. If we're honest, we only pile up our wrongdoing more and more with every day that passes. And Jesus taught that after death he will judge every one of us for this. But that doesn't mean we are without help. If we will only recognize our helplessness and ask Jesus to forgive and save us, he promises to do just that (John 5v21-27).

Here, faith is seen in coming with open hands to Jesus – recognizing we have nothing to offer him in return for our salvation. Like a young child, we are wholly

reliant on him to simply give it. That's why so many unsavoury characters flocked to him. And they went on to live different lives not to somehow merit what he promised, which they could never do, but because they truly trusted him and so wanted to live his way.

"Grace" can be defined as "God's favour freely given." He gives us what we don't deserve, and without cost – without requiring us to reach a certain level of morality or religiousness. This is such good news when the Christian gets things wrong. They are forgiven because they trust Jesus to do as he promised, not because they've managed to attain a certain standard of life. So, when we fall into sin, we don't have to worry about losing all we've been given. It's God's free gift. We simply ask Jesus to forgive us and help us do better, confident that if we are sincere, he does just that.

The fact is that the Christian life is not always easy. Jesus experienced the deepest

suffering before experiencing the joys of heaven. And as his followers we follow the same journey – whether through tragedy, sickness, persecution or the general weariness of Christian service. But we need to recognize that God is more concerned for our eternal happiness than our happiness here and now. So, he uses such things to develop our character, perseverance and longing for the world to come (Rom 5v1-5, 8v18-39). But he also uses them to prove the "genuineness" of our faith. When things are hard, remaining faithful in the knowledge of all we have in Christ shows we truly believe. And this means that even when we suffer, we can know joy because the fact that we stick with Jesus shows we will one day receive his salvation – and with it, his praise for standing firm (1 Pet 1v6-9).

SPEAKING TO GOD IN PRAYER

Praise God for his grace in giving us what we don't deserve.

Ask God to keep you always mindful that you could never merit what he gives.

(4) The one who is

"I Believe In God" : *There is one true and living God, faultless in every way, who eternally exists in three distinct persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. (Matt 28v20, 1 Thes 1v8-10).*

HEARING GOD SPEAK IN THE BIBLE

Read John 14v6-24

1) Why is Jesus' oneness with the Father so important for us (see v6-11)?
2) In what ways will the Holy Spirit continue what Jesus began (see v12-19)?
3) What does Jesus promise for those who love and obey him (see v20-24)?
4) How would you respond to someone who claims it is arrogant to say this is the true understanding of God?

I cannot grasp the wonder of my little finger, let alone our planet or solar system. It is no

surprise then, that there will be much about the maker of our universe that is beyond us. But we have seen how he has made himself known in history and had that recorded for us in the Bible. Moreover, as one Bible writer puts it, God's "power and nature" are evident throughout his creation (Rom 1v18-20). He has made a world full of things that display his beauty, wisdom, orderliness and might. Most importantly, he has made human beings "in his image" (Gen 1v26-27). This means that (at their best!) human nature, relationships and concepts illustrate something of God's nature too.

The simplest description of God is that of "the Holy Trinity." The word "holy" refers to something that is set-apart from everything else in the service of God. When used to describe God it means he is absolutely set-apart in his kingly majesty, perfection and purity from everything else in the universe. He is utterly glorious, faultless and good. As the apostle John puts it: "God

is light; in him there is no darkness at all" (1 John 1v5). He certainly does things we cannot fathom and may well struggle with. But he never does anything wrong.

It was around 1500 BC that God used a man called Moses to rescue the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt ("the Exodus"). In doing so he gave them a special name for himself – "Yahweh," which means "I am that I am." In the ancient world an individual's name represented their character and nature. This name affirms that the God of the Bible is the one true God as opposed to the gods of other religions like those of Egypt. He always existed and was not created. And he is unchanging – always being as he has always been. Later God revealed the "glory" (i.e. excellence) of his name. He declared himself to be: "The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin.

Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished" (Ex 34v6-7).

This is who God is. We'll see that his goodness means he must punish sin. But we must always remember he is reluctant in this, taking no "pleasure in the death of the wicked" (Ezek 18v23). Instead he leans towards love. He delights to see people turn from their sin and experience his forgiveness and healing. He delights to surprise them with his generosity in answer to their prayers, and to receive their efforts in his service though so faltering and imperfect. He delights to be God to them and have them as his people.

The word "trinity" is not in the Bible, but it also helps sum up what the Bible reveals about God. It combines the words "tri" – meaning three, and "unity" – the state of being one. God always exists in three distinct persons – the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. So, it is significant that Jesus commanded people to be baptized in the

single "name" of these three persons (see Matt 28v19). They are each the one being that is God, fully reflecting who he is. Our human nature can help us understand this to some degree. Thankfully, there is only one me. But that "me" is expressed in my will, thoughts and actions. Each fully expresses who I am, and they co-exist at one and the same time. Yet they are distinct too, relating to one-another in different ways.

It's all rather mind-bending. But it is helpful. It shows why relationships, love and service are so important to us. They derive from who God is. Like a perfect human Father, God the Father is the person of God who is in ultimate charge, initiating all things. Like a perfect son, God the Son is the person of God who lovingly represents the Father and his interests. It is therefore God the Son who takes a human nature as Jesus in order to speak for the Father and do his will in human history. Like a perfect human spirit, the Holy Spirit is the invisible presence

of God. As such he is active throughout the universe and in a special way within Christians.

All this needs bearing in mind when we think of God - remembering the three are all equally the one God, sharing the same character and nature.

SPEAKING TO GOD IN PRAYER

Praise God for his majesty, perfection and purity.

Ask God to keep you humbly aware that you will never fully fathom who he is or what he does.

(5) The whole world in his hands

"I Believe In God, The Father Almighty, Creator Of Heaven And Earth" : *God is the all-powerful maker, preserver and ruler of all things. He is distinct from the world, and so although involved in it, he is not part of it. (Gen 1, Col 1v15-17).*

HEARING GOD SPEAK IN THE BIBLE

Read Psalm 104

1) Poetry often uses imagery to illustrate truth. What different things does the psalm presume God controls?
2) In what different ways is God's kindness expressed (see v10-30)?
3) What response should reflecting on these things bring from us (see v1 and v31-35)?

4) How would you respond to someone who says the explanations of science have disproved the existence of God?

Christians differ on how to understand the first chapter of the Bible. They agree it is true, but some think it is intended to be read as a literal account of God creating everything in six days. Others think the days are intended as a kind of analogy, presenting the creation like a working week as a model for our own work. The most important thing all accept is that God made everything, and made it "good." Nothing exists in the spiritual or physical realm that God did not make. And whatever is currently wrong within the universe finds its source elsewhere.

This helps us understand two more things about God's nature. First, he is eternal. He doesn't exist within time, as time is part of what he has created (Gen 1v5, 14-15). We cannot understand what this is like, but every moment of time is eternally present to God.

So, he cannot be surprised or tricked. He knows everything. Second, he is a spirit (John 4v24). Physical things are part of the creation. So, God doesn't have a body and he is not bound by geography. He's everywhere. He's always with us, seeing and hearing whatever happens.

Although each person of the Trinity was involved in the work of creation, the creed stresses the Father as he is the one who initiated it. "Majesty" refers to the splendour, wisdom, power and authority of a king, and Genesis 1 portrays God creating the universe with kingly commands. So, we see something of his majesty as we consider the creation around us. Moreover, his ordering and then filling of the cosmos, sky, sea and land shows that he doesn't just leave the universe to manage on its own. His almighty power and authority are expressed in directing whatever happens within it, and keeping its innumerable processes going.

Science examines how these things operate. But the Christian adds that it is God who ensures they operate as they do - and with the sort of consistency that means they can be examined and relied upon. So, God's faithfulness and kindness is evident throughout nature too. He keeps it going for us.

All this brings home something of how awe-inspiring, glorious and terrifying to contemplate God is. We tend to have such a reduced view of him. Behind our infinite universe is this supremely and unfathomably pure, powerful and perfect intelligence. How astonishing that he is concerned with us.

Psalm 104 explains the death of creatures as God taking away their breath, and their birth as God creating them by his Spirit (Ps 104v29-30). The letter to the Hebrews declares that God the Son sustains "all things by his powerful word" (Heb 1v3). The apostle Paul even writes that God "works

out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will" (Eph 1v11).

A "sovereign" is a king or ruler. All this teaches that the sovereign rule of God is absolute. Nothing happens that he hasn't somehow brought about, permitted or ordered. Indeed, he explains that he directs people's hearts "like a watercourse" (Prov 21v1). This implies that he has created a world where people's decisions "flow" freely, but that they are at the same time directed by circumstances he arranges - sometimes permitting them to continue on a course, sometimes nudging them into another, sometimes stopping them from flowing one way altogether, and causing them to freely flow in a wholly new direction. However it works, the point is that nothing happens but by God's will. Yet, whatever the circumstances he places us in – whether external or internal to us, we act according to the freedom of our will: We do as we desire

and decide. We are therefore truly responsible.

Of course, one of the greatest struggles for the Christian is over why God would in some sense bring about suffering, or create and sustain the life of those he knows will do great evil, and without ordering events so they would act differently (Gen 50v20, Is 45v7, Lam 3v38). This remains a mystery. However, the Christian is able to trust God must have good reasons, as his wisdom, power and goodness is evident not just in the natural order, but most supremely in Jesus.

SPEAKING TO GOD IN PRAYER

Thank God for his faithful provision of the world to enjoy, and the food and resource he provides within it.

Ask God to help you see just how much he gives in the things we take for granted.

(6) Our greatest need

"I Believe In Jesus Christ" : *As the Christ, Jesus is the promised Saviour-King, who redeems sinful human beings from the guilt, penalty and power of sin so they can share in God's kingdom. He is the only mediator between God and humankind. (Gal 3v13-14, 1 Tim 2v5).*

HEARING GOD SPEAK IN THE BIBLE

Read Ephesians 1v3-10

1) List everything here that we have because we are "in Christ"?
2) What moved God to redeem us (see v4-7)?
3) What is God's goal in history that our redemption gives us a share in (v10)?
4) From what you know of the Bible, how would you respond to the question: "How could a loving God allow suffering?"

Scientific theories about origins are much discussed. However, the Bible seems clear about two things: Every human being has descended from one couple – Adam and Eve (Gen 3v20, Rom 5v12-14). And in being created "in the image of God" they were initially without sin. They perfectly imaged God's character.

Genesis 2-3 tells their story. God told them that they could live forever in paradise and perfection as long as they didn't eat of one tree. It was a test of whether they would accept him as the one to decide how they live. This helps define "sin." It is not just about doing bad things. It is to presume to take God's place in deciding right and wrong for ourselves. That's why it's so serious. Flowers that turn from the sun will wither and die. Yet God is the author of life! He therefore warned Adam and Eve that if they disobeyed him, they would die too.

Tragically, this is just what happened. God had also created angels – person, moral

and spiritual beings who serve his purposes (Heb 1v14). "Demons" are those that rebelled against God, led by "the devil" (Lk 10v17-19). They in no way rival God's power. In fact, they can do nothing except by his allowing it (Job 1). Nevertheless, the devil somehow used a snake to tempt Eve to eat from the tree and get Adam to do the same.

Fittingly, God responded by giving the couple what their defiance effectively asked for – life apart from him. He shut them out from the paradise where they and their descendants would have lived forever. This is why the harshness of life seems so wrong to us. We were created for something far better. Yet now every human being is born into a world of sickness, aging, disaster and death. Moreover, inheriting our nature from Adam, we find ourselves inclined to sin from conception. We call this "original sin." And it is proved by every toddler!

The Bible explains that Adam represented all humanity so that his sin and guilt is in some sense counted as ours (Rom 5v12-21). This is why his penalty is received by us as well – why everyone sins and everyone dies. However, if we are tempted to cry "unfair," we should remember that our actual sinful choices make us guilty too. And it is these that we will be judged for (Rom 2v1-4).

We recognize that both anger and justice are right when warranted. And God's extreme goodness means that he is rightly outraged by how we treat him and all he has made. This is what the Bible means by God's "wrath." It is his extreme and justified anger. And it means that like Adam and Eve, those who do not want to live the life of his coming kingdom receive just what they ask for. In the present, God hands them over to their sinful desires (Rom 1v18-32). And beyond death he will shut them out of the kingdom itself. We'll think more on this in

coming reflections. For now, we need only grasp how it shows our need of Jesus.

We have learnt that the Greek title "Christ" ("Messiah" in Hebrew) refers to the king God promised in the Old Testament who would put the world right. He was first promised as soon as Adam and Eve rebelled. God said that one of their descendants would crush the snake whilst being struck by it. This implied that he would put an end to what the devil had begun, reasserting God's rule over people and the world. But he would be injured in doing so, just as Jesus was when dealing with sin on the cross.

This helps us understand the term "redemption." In Jesus' day slaves were redeemed. A payment was made to free them from one master so that they belonged to another. So, when Christians talk of "redemption" they mean that at the cost of Christ's death they are set free from all that is bound up with sin and brought to belong to God. They are no longer under the

powerful mastery of sin and the devil, nor excluded from God's coming kingdom. They are not only forgiven, but have come to know God as Father, and given his Spirit so they are able to live his way.

Jesus is the only one who can grant this redemption. He is the only one sent by God, the only one who has dealt with sin. Think of a mediator seeking to reconcile a couple who divorced after one proved unfaithful. Jesus is our mediator - the only one who can make peace between us and God.

SPEAKING TO GOD IN PRAYER

Thank God that he is putting our world right by placing it under Jesus' rule.

Confess your sins to him, asking his forgiveness because of Jesus' death on the cross.

(7) Who is this man?

I Believe In "His Only Son, Our Lord, Who Was Conceived By The Holy Spirit, Born Of The Virgin Mary" : *Jesus is God's only Son and the only true incarnation of God, fully God in being born by the Spirit and of a virgin, fully man yet without sin. All are therefore to submit to him alone as Lord. (Luk 1v26-33, Heb 4v15)."*

HEARING GOD SPEAK IN THE BIBLE

Read John 5v16-47

1) In what different ways does Jesus teach he is equal with God (v16-30)?
2) What evidence does he say verifies this claim (v31-40)?
3) Why does he say people are unwilling to accept this evidence (v41-44)?
4) So how would you seek to persuade someone Christianity is true?

The Old Testament builds up a picture of what Eden's snake-crusher would look like. Around 2000 BC God promised a man called Abraham that the individual would come from a nation descended from him and bring blessing to the world. That nation was Israel. Around 1000 BC God promised David, Israel's greatest king, that one of his descendants would rule over an everlasting kingdom. He then promised through prophets that this king would die and be resurrected, enabling people to be forgiven their sin, know and obey God, and be raised from death to populate the kingdom in a renewed world. Moreover, those from all nations would share in all that with them. Most strikingly, God revealed that this human king would somehow be God himself, come to deal with sin in person (Isaiah 9v6-7).

We've learnt that God is a trinity of three persons, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Jesus taught that he was God the Son,

taking a human nature to himself in order to live life as a man. This is called the "incarnation" – literally the "in-fleshing" of the Son of God. It means that when we think of Jesus, we always need to keep two things in mind: He is God the Son, constantly upholding the entire universe – all powerful and all wise. Yet at the same time he is God the Son experiencing life as a man with all its limits – feeling tiredness, needing to learn, even suffering death. This means that he really does sympathise with our struggles. He is both wholly divine and wholly human. He lacks nothing of God's own nature, and nothing of what it is to be a man – except that he never sinned or spoke in error (Heb 4v15, Jn 1v14). He perfectly images God. And he is to be treated as God – supremely loved, trusted and obeyed.

Everything rests on this. If Jesus is the Son of God then, whatever our questions or struggles, what he teaches must be accepted as true – as must the Bible he affirms. This

was illustrated on what's been called "the Mount of Transfiguration." There Jesus was seen to suddenly shine with the brilliance of heaven and speak with Moses and Elijah – God's top two spokesmen from the Old Testament, who had long been dead. God the Father then spoke audibly from heaven. And the one thing he stressed was the need to "listen" to Jesus (Mk 9v7).

So, what basis do we have for our faith in Jesus as the Son of God?

The trustworthiness of the gospels is verifiable. Because copies were spread throughout the world, they couldn't be changed. And they show all the marks of being eyewitness accounts. Indeed, their authors had absolutely no reason to make them up. The first Christians were hounded for their beliefs, losing their homes, loved ones, and even lives.

Jesus points us to three components of evidence within the gospels to support our faith in him. First, consider *Jesus' teaching* (Jn

7v14-24). It is unsurpassed in its simple but profound wisdom, and betters life like none other. This would be expected if its author was himself the author of life. Moreover, the honesty and sanity of Jesus' teaching discredits the idea he was in any sense a con-man or mad man. This leaves "God-man" the only real option.

Second, consider *Jesus' works* (Jn 5v36). He performed miracles that he could only do if he bore God's authority. His resurrection from the dead is the most striking. There is no other plausible explanation for the hundreds of people who claimed to see him alive for weeks after he died and then witness him ascend up into heaven. Again, they had absolutely nothing to gain from lying.

Third, consider *Jesus' life* (Jn 5v37-39). Throughout the Old Testament scriptures men claiming to receive visions from God made hundreds of predictions that find astonishing fulfilment in Jesus, centuries later.

This is impossible unless God did speak to those men and shaped Jesus' life to match what he predicted. Indeed, those who study the Old Testament note that God even shaped Israel's history to provide a sort of pattern or shadow of what Jesus would eventually do.

We might believe because philosophical arguments point to the existence of a personal God, or because the alternatives lack basis and lead to despair. But Jesus looks us to his life, works and teaching as the firmest foundation for our faith.

SPEAKING TO GOD IN PRAYER

Thank God for providing such a firm foundation for our faith.

Ask God to give you a strong faith to trust Jesus even in times of difficulty.

(8) The death of death

I Believe He "Suffered Under Pontius Pilate, Was Crucified, Died, And Was Buried; He Descended To The Dead" :
In his death Jesus bore the full penalty for sin, satisfying the justice of God so that those who believe can be pardoned and justified, which is to be declared righteous solely on account of faith in Christ. (Rom 3v9-26).

HEARING GOD SPEAK IN THE BIBLE
Read Romans 3v20-26

1) What do we learn about human beings in v20-24?
2) Why did God have Jesus die (v25-26)?
3) What must we do to benefit?
4) Some say the idea of God punishing is barbaric. How might you respond?

What follows needs time to take in. We've seen Jesus' death was predicted from the beginning. He is the descendant of Adam and Eve who would crush the snake whilst being struck by it. Jesus himself said it was for this "hour" that he came, and that it would be one in which the devil would be "driven out" (John 12v27-33).

The devil's primary work is in deceiving people (Jn 8v44). As with Adam and Eve, he tempts them to sin by causing them to doubt God's word. And so he enslaves them as they readily follow his lead, showing themselves unable to truly love and obey God or experience the blessing of life as he created it to be lived. He eventually destroys them too, as people experience the brokenness of this world and become liable to God's justice for their sin, warranting eternal punishment.

Jesus' death deals with all this. It enables sinners to be reconciled to God with two results. First, we are no-longer liable to his

justice and so no-longer face eternal destruction. Second, we are renewed by the Holy Spirit so that we love God, trusting and obeying his word. We are therefore freed from living a destructive lifestyle. This is why the cross is rightly the centre. All our blessings flow from it.

Justice matters. If a judge didn't act justly, we'd call for them to be sacked. Yet for God not to punish sin would be for him to act unjustly. It would be for him to do wrong. And this would make him not just unreliable, but evil. So, we should be deeply thankful that he is absolutely committed to justice. It shows just how committed he is to doing good, and means that those who do great evil will be called to account. But God's justice is a problem for all because it demands an accounting for the wrong we do too. This is why the apostle Paul says that the sins of people like Abraham and David had been left unpunished. They trusted God. God had therefore forgiven them. But they

lived before Jesus. So, their sins still had to be paid for – otherwise God would be unjust.

Jesus solves the problem. He bore the punishment of all who believe like Abraham and David (Rom 3v25-26). Our faith sort of links us with Jesus so that he can justly represent us. The Bible calls this being "in Christ." It means that believers no longer have to fear punishment for their sin. It has already been punished in Jesus' death. It's as if we were "in" him on the cross. In suffering hostility, torture and death under Pilate Jesus experienced the worst of this world in punishment for our sin. But he also experienced spiritual exclusion from fellowship with God – the equivalent of hell. This explains his anguish (Matt 26v38, 27v46).

To atone for wrongdoing is to make amends for it in some way. In ancient Israel animals were sacrificed to atone for sin. But they could never truly represent people, showing the need for Jesus. His sacrifice

"atoned" for our sin so that we can be "at-one" with God. He paid our penalty. What love! And what assurance: God's wrath has been pacified and his justice has been satisfied.

The word that describes what results is "justification." To be justified is to be acquitted in court. It is for the judge to declare that you have not broken the law but upheld it. With God this is to be declared righteous – declared to have done right by his standards. Of course, only Jesus has actually done this. He fulfilled every righteous requirement. This is why God the Father declared at Jesus' baptism that he loved and was pleased with him (Matt 3v13-17). But because we are "in Christ" through faith, Jesus represents us here too. So, his righteousness is credited to our account. When we believe, the verdict of our judgment day is therefore brought forward: God declares us to be righteous even though we clearly aren't! And because we are "in

Christ," God's love and pleasure is then directed to us as to him.

Most simply, Jesus steps in as our substitute. The record of our sin is transferred to him, meaning that he is punished in our place. And the record of his righteousness is transferred to us, meaning that we are treated as worthy of God's love and life. And by this means God remains just, whilst justifying those who have faith in Jesus (Rom 3v26).

This really is amazing grace. Because Jesus has done all the obeying, this standing is God's free gift to all who believe. It doesn't require us to reach a certain level of righteousness, and it isn't lost when we sin.

SPEAKING TO GOD IN PRAYER

Thank God for sending his Son to be punished on your behalf.

Ask God to help you live in full assurance of what Jesus' death means for you.

(9) Up, up and away

I Believe That "On The Third Day He Rose Again; He Ascended Into Heaven, He Is Seated At The Right Hand Of The Father" : *In history Jesus was raised bodily from death, demonstrating that he is God's only Lord and Christ. He then ascended into heaven from where he now reigns over all things with the authority of God the Father. (Luke 24, Acts 2v22-36).*

HEARING GOD SPEAK IN THE BIBLE

Read Acts 2v22-36. This is part of Peter's sermon 10 days after the ascension.

1) Why did God raise Jesus (v24)?
2) What does this prove (v25-32)?
3) What happens because Jesus has ascended to the right hand of God (v33-36)?
4) What evidence for the resurrection does Peter provide?

History suggests Jesus was born between 6-4 BC, began his ministry around AD 27, and died, rose and ascended to heaven around AD 30. Christians celebrate his birth at Christmas, his death on Good Friday, and his resurrection on Easter Day.

Jesus' birth, life and death is often called his "humiliation." God the Son displayed the greatest humility in setting aside the glory of heaven to become a man and suffer as he did. His "exaltation" refers to how he was then raised from death and lifted up to the highest (most "exalted") place in heaven to receive the honour that is his due.

Jesus' resurrection was real not just symbolic. His followers were prepared to die on the conviction that they had not only seen him alive three days after dying, but that over the next forty days he appeared numerous times, eating with them, teaching them, and then leaving them by literally rising up into the air before being hidden

from their sight by a cloud (Acts 1v1-11). This is the "ascension" of Jesus into heaven.

Jesus' resurrection is all about life. We've learnt that the right penalty for sin is death – the physical end to this life and the spiritual ruin of then being excluded from God's kingdom – the reality Jesus called "hell." But despite taking our sins onto himself, death could not hold Jesus. This shows the penalty for all those sins was fully paid by him. And in coming to life Jesus set a pattern for the life that all who are linked to him by faith will enjoy. It's a spiritual life lived for God according to the ways of his kingdom. It begins now as we are filled with the Holy Spirit. But it's a physical life too: When Jesus returns, we will receive new resurrection bodies to inhabit a new creation (see reflection 13).

In ascending to heaven Jesus fulfilled the offices of Israel's prophets, priests and kings. Like a *priest* offering a sacrifice to God he took his own body to his Father, bearing the

marks of his sacrifice. This forever proves our penalty has been paid. Like a priest Jesus even speaks up for us in some sense too (Rom 8v34).

But he has also been enthroned as *king*, to reign over all things for his Father. To say that he ascended to God's "right hand" stresses that he now holds the most supreme position, bearing God's authority and doing his will: It's rather like being in an offshore operations room, governing everything that happens in the UK. From heaven Jesus governs all history (Eph 2v22).

He acts like a *prophet* in the sense that he now pours out God's Spirit to bring people to faith and equip them to live as his subjects. This powerful work of the Spirit was previously unknown. It began on the day of a Jewish harvest festival known as Pentecost, ten days after Jesus ascended (Acts 2v1-13). His followers heard a sound like a rushing wind, symbolising the Spirit's life-giving power. They also saw what looked like

tongues of fire. This showed that the church's main job from then was to tell people about Jesus. And so, the subjects of the kingdom multiply as people are gathered like a harvest for eternal life (Jn 4v36).

This will continue until Christ returns having put all his enemies "under his feet" (1 Cor 15v25). This means that all that opposes Jesus will then be in its place. The devil, all demonic powers, and all who refuse to embrace Christ's rule will be confined to hell so they cannot corrupt his kingdom. And death itself will be conquered as people are resurrected to life. Everything that is wrong will have been put right.

All this teaches that heaven is a real place where Jesus can now be in his resurrection body - an unseen dimension to our universe, created by God (Genesis 1v1). It's not our final resting place, but where the spirits of believers are present with Jesus after they die, awaiting his return when they will be given resurrection bodies in which to inhabit the

new creation. Indeed, heaven seems to provide a taste of the new creation, in being described as a paradise garden and a city. And although God is present everywhere, it is where his presence is especially apparent and where he receives the worship of angels (Lk 23v43, Heb 12v22-24). Yet, it seems to be part of a broader realm to our universe where (for the time being at least) evil spirits roam too (Eph 1v20-21, 6v13).

SPEAKING TO GOD IN PRAYER

Thank God that he is putting all that is bad under Christ's feet.

Ask God to help you live in full assurance of what Jesus' death means for you.

(10) He'll be back

I Believe "He Will Come Again To Judge The Living And The Dead" : *All are sinful and guilty, deserving God's anger and condemnation. Jesus will therefore return in person as judge, justly condemning those who do not repent in this life to everlasting destruction, yet mercifully receiving the redeemed to everlasting glory. So all need to call on Christ for mercy. (John 5v19-30, 2 Thess 1v5-10).*

HEARING GOD SPEAK IN THE BIBLE

Read 2 Thessalonians 1v3-12

1) Jot down what will happen when Jesus returns?
2) How should this encourage the Christian (v6-10)?
3) What "evidence" should show that the Christian is a true believer and so has nothing to worry about on that day (v3-5)?

4) How would you respond to someone who says: "A God of love would never send people to hell?"

Most assume the universe will continue as it is for at least a few more billion years. But not Christians. Jesus taught that he will return and could do so at any moment (Mat 24v36-51). That's good news. Then he will put an end to all evil and pain - and to death itself. Finally the stress and strain of life in this groaning world will be over. However, Jesus warned again and again that we must be ready, because excluding evil from the world to come means excluding those who choose it in this one.

We've learnt just how sinful and guilty everyone is. The whole creation testifies that there is a wise and powerful God, whilst our consciences reveal his concern for goodness and justice. Yet people suppress all that. Daily, everyone does what they know is wrong. And those who know something of

God's particular will through the Bible or the lives of Christians, ignore that as well. So, every mouth will be silenced when Jesus returns. No-one will have an excuse. We will be judged not just according to what we have done, but according to our words and motives too (Rom 2v6, Matt 12v37, 1 Cor 4v5). And we will not be able to say our judge doesn't understand how difficult it is to do good, as God the Father has entrusted all judgement to his Son, who perfectly obeyed him despite facing the greatest temptations. In comparison with Jesus, none can deny how far we have fallen and how guilty we are.

This really is quite terrifying. But it is also reassuring to know that Jesus will be our judge. He displayed mercy and impartiality throughout his life. So, his judgment will be fair. Moreover, he claimed authority to forgive sins and died to make that possible. We can therefore trust him to keep his word. If you have called on Christ for salvation and

follow him as Lord, you therefore have nothing to fear. It is the Jesus you have come to know and love who is in charge. So, you will rejoice in that day as you see all wrongs finally righted.

Revelation 22v11-15 describes how everyone who has ever lived will be raised from death to face Jesus. It pictures books of human deeds being opened that record everything about us. Yet there is also a book of life that records the names of those God has singled out for his Son. Those listed in that book will be saved. But the record of their deeds still matters (Rom 2v4-8). First, it will be the proof that their faith was genuine, recording how they sought to please Christ. Second, it will determine the degree of reward they will experience in glory (see reflection 13). Those whose names are not in the book of life are those who have not responded to the testimony of creation, conscience and Christians by seeking God

through Jesus (Jn 3v16-18). Tragically, they will be condemned to hell.

This truth tests our faith. We hold to it not because we like it or fully grasp how it fits with God's goodness. We hold to it because Jesus taught it and we are convinced he is God's Son. However, we can be clear about two things: First, the immensity of God's love is displayed in giving his own Son so that any who choose to can escape hell through faith in him. Second, God's justice is displayed in hell being the fullness of what those who desire nothing of Christ have chosen for themselves – an everlasting existence shut out from the place where he is served and loved. In other words, those in hell will have received what, deep down, they want. And we should not think that everyone will experience its horrors to the same degree. They will be proportionate to their deeds (Mat 10v14-15, Rom 2v5-6).

Having said all this, Jesus was clear that hell will be terrible and that there will be no

get-out after death (Lk 15v19-31, Rev14v11). We don't know exactly what it will entail. But the image of fire speaks of how people will suffer under the burning anger of God. That of darkness pictures their sense of loneliness and abandonment apart from the place of goodness and joy. The language of "weeping and gnashing of teeth" stresses their despair and frustration in being permanently excluded from God's kingdom (Lk 13v28). And that of "destruction" teaches all this is to experience an utterly ruined humanity.

People really do need Christ.

SPEAKING TO GOD IN PRAYER

Thank God that he will one day bring justice where injustice has been done.

Ask God to keep you from being complacent about hell.

(11) Personal, powerful and present

I Believe "In The Holy Spirit" : *The Holy Spirit alone grants spiritual life to individual sinners, enabling them to repent, believe, become increasingly Christlike in character and behaviour, and serve his purposes in the church and world. (Eph 1v15-2v10, 1 Cor 12).*

HEARING GOD SPEAK IN THE BIBLE

Read Romans 8v1-17

1) Note the different things the Holy Spirit does for the Christian in this passage?
2) What should this mean for how you live (v12-15)?
3) How should we be encouraged if we see the Spirit change us (v14-17)?
4) What comes to mind when you think about the Spirit's work?

We've learnt that there is one God, a holy trinity who eternally exists in three distinct persons – the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. So, the Holy Spirit is the supernatural presence of both the Father and the Son, active in our world.

It was by the Holy Spirit that they revealed truth to the writers of the Bible, and it is by the Holy Spirit that they give and sustain all life. The Holy Spirit is therefore at work in every millisecond of existence. But what is particular to the Christian is that he comes to live within them, enabling them to live the life they have been called to. And this means that wherever we are and whatever we are doing, God the Father and God the Son are with us – by the Holy Spirit.

Paul writes that the mind governed by our sinful nature "cannot" submit to God's law and so please God. This picks up just how paralysed we are by our love of sin. Jesus used images of total inability. He described people as "blind" to the gospel

and so unable to understand it; as "dead" in sin and so lacking all spiritual life towards God; and as "slaves" who need to be set free if they are to believe and do what's good (Jn 6v53, 8v31-34, 9v39). It's controversial because it implies that people just can't come to Jesus without God enabling them to.

This is the first work of the Holy Spirit in the sinner. As Jesus said, "no-one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws them, and I will raise them up at the last day" (Jn 6v44). Here we see that the Holy Spirit not only ensures people are so convinced by the gospel that they trust Jesus; he ensures they continue in that so that they will definitely be raised at Jesus' return. This touches on the difficult truth of "election" or "predestination." Again and again, Jesus taught that God has chosen and pre-determined who will be saved (Matt 1v25-27, 22v14, 24v24, Jn 5v21, 6v37-65, 13v18, 15v16-19). Now we cannot grasp why God doesn't do this for everyone (Rom

11v33-36). But it makes us deeply thankful that he has overcome our unbelief. It humbles us in knowing that we really have been saved by grace and not because of any desire or effort that has set us above others (Rom 9v6-16). And it gives us hope too. We can share the gospel and pray for unbelievers, confident that God may enable even the most unlikely to respond.

We've learnt that Jesus received the Holy Spirit in a special way when he ascended into heaven. And so, rather like plugging a light into a socket with the power switched on, when we plug into Jesus through faith, we immediately experience a powerful work of the Holy Spirit in lighting up our lives. This is to be "baptised" (immersed) in the Spirit (1 Cor 12v13).

The title "Spirit of adoption" sums up this work. Now "in Christ," God's Son, we become God's children – we are spiritually "born again" so that we can relate to him as Father (Jn 3v3-8). The Holy Spirit then

enables us to become increasingly like him and obey him. This is called "sanctification" – the process of being made holy. The Spirit gives us a desire to hear God speak in the Bible, and an understanding of what we hear. He moves us to pray to our new Father, gives us courage and words to speak of him to others, and equips us with different abilities ("gifts") to serve as members of his family, the church. In short, he grants a foretaste of the life he will give in all fullness when Christ returns.

The "gifts" the Spirit gives can be an enhancement of any skill that benefits God's purposes. But occasionally God may give certain individuals an extraordinary gift such as the ability to be used in miracles or healings, pray in a supernatural language called "tongues," or receive messages for the church by a vision or dream ("prophecy"). Whatever gifts we have, we should accept them with thanks from God, use them in love for the benefit of others, and be content,

never coveting or looking down on the gifts the Spirit has chosen for others (1 Cor 12).

The Christian comes to recognize that they really can do nothing that pleases God but by the Holy Spirit. So, they pray and long for him to be more fully at work within them, knowing Jesus promised to grant just that (Lk 11v13).

And in all our interactions with the Holy Spirit, we should remember that he is a "he" not "it" - a person not a force. The Bible speaks of him being resisted, grieved and lied to. So, if we ignore him when he moves us to live as the Bible teaches, we are not simply ignoring an instinct, but the nudges of a loving friend – of God himself.

SPEAKING TO GOD IN PRAYER

Thank God that he is able to change in you what you cannot change yourself.

Ask God for a greater work of the Holy Spirit in every part of your life (Lk 11v9-13).

(12) Belonging because we believe

I Believe In "The Holy Catholic (here meaning "universal") Church, The Communion Of Saints" : *The universal church is the community of all who hold such true and transforming faith and so are spiritually united in Christ and set apart as holy. As members of this community it is the duty and need of every believer to join a local church where the truths of this creed are proclaimed in word and in sacrament, and where they can be encouraged and encourage others in this faith. (Eph 2v11-22, Heb 10v25).*

The word "church" means "assembly." In the Bible, it doesn't therefore refer to a building, but to a local community of believers who choose to gather in a particular locality and serve Christ together. It can also refer to a town-wide or regional grouping of churches, to the worldwide

community of all Christians, or even the heavenly people of God.

Some don't feel they need church at all. But we've learnt that "holy" describes something or someone that is set-apart for God's service. And "saints" literally means "holy ones," referring not to special Christians honoured through history, but all true believers! In short, the church comprises those who have been set-apart for God through their faith in Christ. In being filled with the same Holy Spirit, they are spiritually united to Jesus but also to one-another. So, they are a "communion" – a group of people in close relationship. Indeed, the New Testament describes them as "citizens", meaning that the church is essentially the community of the kingdom of heaven present here on earth. Made up of those filled with the Spirit, it is a "temple in the Lord" – the place where God is especially present, and "the body of Christ" – where Christ is now active on earth.

All this explains why we can't be reluctant about committing to a local church. By believing in Jesus we are members of the worldwide church that is to continue his work, and united to spiritual brothers and sisters who we now have responsibilities to. Even if we feel we don't need them, they need us. So, we must reject the individualism of our culture and its idea that faith is just a private matter. And we must choose a church not primarily because of things like music or style, but asking: (1) Which church will best develop our faith and service of Christ in loving fellowship with other believers? (2) Which will best enable us (and our children) to reach the communities God has placed us in?

This all makes the teaching we get at church critically important. It is God's means of growing people in faith and equipping them for service. So, we should settle in a church where the teaching of the whole

Bible, focused on the gospel, undergirds everything in a very real sense (Eph 2v20).

"The sacraments" (from a Latin word for "mystery") or "ordinances" are the two particular acts Christ commanded his church to perform as signs and guarantees of all God promises in the gospel. They celebrate God's "covenant" with us in Christ. This is his agreement to bless us with forgiveness, acceptance and the life of his Spirit, if we will continue trusting Christ as his people.

Baptism expresses entry into Christ and his church. It's all about washing. When people turn from their sin and believe, they (and often their children) are immersed in water. This pictures God's promise to forgive and so wash away the guilt of their sin, and pour into them his Spirit to wash its grime from their lives. Going into the water symbolises the person's previous self dying with Christ. Coming out symbolises them starting a new cleaned-up life for God. The Christian can then tell themselves that they

are no longer who they once were. Although they will continue to struggle with sin, they are a new creation filled with Christ's Spirit in readiness for the world to come. And so, they live accordingly.

The second sacrament is the Lord's Supper. It expresses continuance in Christ and his church. It's all about feasting. Believers eat bread and drink wine as a foretaste of their fellowship (i.e. "communion") with Christ and each other in the coming kingdom of God – a fellowship Jesus likened to a wedding banquet. He stressed the need to do this in order to remember his death as the basis for all he gives. The apostle Paul explains that the supper therefore proclaims Christ's death until he comes. The giving of the bread and wine symbolises his giving of his body and blood, and the act of taking and consuming it powerfully speaks of how, through faith, we continually look to Jesus to fill, strengthen and change us just as food and

drink does. So, in a particularly dramatized and tangible way, the very act of receiving the Lord's Supper deepens and draws out our faith, re-focusing it on Jesus for the forgiveness of our sins and life of his Spirit.

Hearing God Speak In The Bible

Read 1 Corinthians 11v17-34

1) Jot down why Christians should take part in the Lord's Supper (v23-26)?
2) What do we learn about the attitude we should have to it (v20-29)?
3) What should the Christian think on as they take part?
4) In what sense would you say the Lord's Supper is and isn't necessary?

Speaking To God In Prayer

Thank God for everything that you can think of that is good in your church.

Ask God that you would better appreciate and readily serve within your church.

(13) To infinity and beyond

I Believe In "The Forgiveness Of Sins, The Resurrection Of The Body, And The Life Everlasting" : *Through their faith in Christ believers are forgiven all their sin, reconciled to God as Father and so loved as his very own. When Jesus returns their bodies will be raised in glory and they will forever inhabit the perfect kingdom to come, with God and with all his people. (Gal 4v4-7, Reve 21-22)*

HEARING GOD SPEAK IN THE BIBLE

Read Revelation 21-22

1) This is a vision where images portray realities. Jot down what you learn about the world to come.
2) What most excites you?
3) Why does Jesus want us to think on these things (22v12-21)?
4) How has thinking on these things practically helped you?

A simple rhyme can help us remember what it means to be united to Christ: "What he has, we have. Where he goes, we go." This is the grounds for our forgiveness. To forgive is to treat someone as if they'd never done the wrong they've done. We've learnt that God forgives us "in Christ" because his righteousness is counted as ours.

But there's much more. "In Christ" we are adopted as God's children, which is to be treated on equal terms with Jesus. It's hard to really believe. But praying for all Christians, Jesus explicitly said to his Father: "you have loved them even as you have loved me" (Jn 17v23). This means that although like any child, we can please or displease God, if we are truly "in Christ" he will never ever stop loving or being a father to us. These things remain unaffected – always.

As for going where Jesus goes: "In" him it's as if we are on a bungee-rope of faith! So just as he was in heaven with his Father

immediately after his death (Lk 23v43), so we will be after ours. And just as Jesus was then reunited with his body to rise from the grave, at his return he will bring the spirits of all who have died from heaven and unite them with resurrection bodies – immortal, healthy, strong, and fit to inhabit this world made new. Jesus' resurrection is the pattern. So, we will be recognizable, although easily mistaken (Lk 24v31) – perhaps because of being free from all aging!

The apostle John tells us that we don't fully know what we will be like then, except that as God's children we will be "like" Jesus, "for we shall see him as he is" (1 Jn 3v2). We will therefore be sinless, fully displaying the likeness of God's character in utter purity and love. This is to be "glorified" - to reflect the glory of God. The apostle Paul likens the transformation to the transformation of a seed into a flower. It will still be us, but far far more glorious in every way.

But it is not only the believer that will be transformed. We look forward to the "regeneration" of all things – the creation of a new heaven and earth, free from all evil and pain. Because Jesus promised the meek would inherit this earth, this must refer to a renewal of this creation, but rid of all that has tainted it (Rom 8v19-21, 1 Cor 7v31, 2 Pet 3v10-13). The point is that our eternal life will be similar to this life, but perfected – the social life of a new Jerusalem on earth (Rev 21v1-3).

It will be an everlasting, moment by moment existence, in which we "reign" with Christ" over the world, utilizing its resources for good as we display God's glory in our character and creativity. It is assumed that our memories will carry over so that we can appreciate that life compared to this one, and rejoice to meet those we known now (1 Thess 4v13-14). That makes it likely that we will carry over the skills we've gained in this life too – giving real significance to our

current study and work (Lk 19v17, Rev 21v26). Whatever the case, the call to fill and subdue the earth will be fulfilled.

All this is set before us to encourage our perseverance in faith and godliness. We should not be surprised that we continue to suffer hardship and struggle with sin. God has promised to help us with both now, but he has promised an end to them only when Jesus returns.

Nevertheless, we are to live as we will then be not as those who live for this world are. And we can readily sacrifice the things of this life because of the reward of the life to come. Then we will enjoy utter peace as we live in harmony with the creation and one-another. And because our friendships with believers will be remembered and continue (1 Thess 4v13-18), it is likely that we will remember much from this life - although with the bad so faded that it no longer brings distress. However, the greatest joy will be to forever contemplate God's

excellence and praise him for his grace. Every moment will therefore thrill our hearts.

But what of passages that teach degrees of reward (1 Cor 3v10-15)? They are also to encourage our service. It seems that although there will be no sadness, there will be degrees of joy. The more faithful we are now, the more joy we will forever experience in knowing God's pleasure at that faithfulness (1 Co 4v5) and in seeing those we have ministered to in glory with us (1 Thess 2v19-20). There is even some hint that those who prove more faithful will receive more responsible tasks (Lk 19v11-27). We'll see!

SPEAKING TO GOD IN PRAYER

Thank God for the incredible blessings that we look forward to.

Think of specific ways you are holding onto this world. *Pray* that you would more readily live for the world to come.

(14) Just call

"I Call On Christ As Saviour" : *I ask Christ for mercy with sorrow and hatred of my sin, relying on his promise to forgive and save from his judgment all who follow him with sincere repentance and faith. (Luk 18v9-14; 1 John 1v5-10)*

HEARING GOD SPEAK IN THE BIBLE

Read Luke 11v1-13

1) In what different ways does Jesus encourage you to pray here?
2) What sort of things are covered by each phrase of the Lord's Prayer?
3) Recall specific times you have experienced God give "good gifts" in answer to prayer. Note them down and thank him for them.
4) What in your experience hinders or helps you pray?

Perhaps the greatest promise of the Bible is that "anyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" (Acts 2v21). To call on God's "name" is to call on him to act according to his character and authority. And so, this promise brings home our desperate need and God's readiness to meet it. By the Holy Spirit believers find themselves not just convicted of sin, but coming to hate it – detesting its impurity, the havoc it wreaks and the displeasure it brings to God. At times we glimpse how serious it is and just how much we deserve God's judgment. But even when we don't, we know these things by faith. Whenever we sin, we therefore call on Christ in prayer to forgive and save us from the judgment we deserve, trusting that he does just that because he has promised to.

"Calling on the name of the Lord" in a broader sense has always described the life of those who know God (Gen 4v26). In doing so, it also points to prayer as a primary way we relate to him.

Jesus noted that prayer when no-one but God can see is a sign of sincere faith rather than just show-faith (Matt 6v5-6). It doesn't need clever words or a peaceful atmosphere. It is simply to talk to God with respect and intimacy, as a child might talk to their dad. In prayer we can therefore bring the totality of life and of our emotions to our heavenly father. Just read the psalms. Not only does God delight to hear us, but he can do immeasurably more than we might ask or imagine.

Jesus' modelled spontaneous prayers throughout the day, early morning prayer, and more extended times when a big issue loomed. We would be wise to do the same. However, prayer is hard. It is a "struggle" (Rom 15v30). And so, as in all things, we need the Holy Spirit's help.

All true prayer is "in the Spirit." This probably means that the Christian looks to the Holy Spirit to bring to mind God's concerns from the scriptures for the issue at

hand, and grant a real concern for those concerns so that their prayers are heartfelt (Eph 6v17-18). Sometimes the believer will also experience the Spirit impressing a particular need on them for prayer (Rom 8v26). So, if you find prayer hard, ask God to help and lead you by his Spirit. We are encouraged to bring whatever requests we have to God (Phil 4v6), but it is those that align with his will that he will grant.

We're given the Lord's Prayer as our primary guide. In praying for "daily" bread it seems Jesus expected its sentiments to be prayed every day. He begins reminding us that we approach a Father who reigns from heaven, and so is both willing and able to answer. The first request is that his name would be held as sacred ("hallowed"). Essentially, this is to pray that his kingdom would come and his will be done in our lives and throughout the world. This is a prayer for the extension, upbuilding and influence of the church. Prayer for practical provision

follows. Daily bread represents our reliance on God for whatever needs each day brings. And he gives so much more. But our greatest need is spiritual. So, we are to daily seek forgiveness for our sins in the knowledge that because we truly believe we will give such forgiveness to others. The Lord's Prayer ends asking God to keep us from any temptation or trial that might overwhelm us, and keep us in faith so that we will escape the traps of the evil one and be delivered on the last day.

It's often said Christianity is a relationship not a religion. We're not simply called to accept the truths we've been studying, but to relate to God on the basis of them. We do that as we trust him in all things, receiving the Bible as his word to us, and responding not just with obedience and service, but with prayer: We might praise and thank him for his character and work, seek his help, confess our sin, express our love, or simply talk over the ups and downs of

everyday life. Some find the word A.C.T.S to be a helpful reminder of the different elements to include: Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, Supplication.

The believer's life is described as "walking before the Lord" (Ps 56v13). It is to live in constant awareness not only that God the Father and God the Son are reigning over all things from heaven, but that they are truly present with us by the Holy Spirit, witnessing our response to them and ready to hear our prayers.

SPEAKING TO GOD IN PRAYER

Express adoration to God for his willingness to hear our prayers as a loving Father.

Confess your prayerlessness to him.

Thank him for making prayer possible through the death of his Son.

Supplicate (ask him) that by his Holy Spirit he would teach and move you to pray.

(15) All for one

"I Submit To Christ As Lord" : *I value Christ above all, and so seek to deny my own desires, instincts, and limited reason in order to hold to and obey his teaching, and that of his apostles, as recorded in scripture, and even when it is hard. (Matt 7v21-27, 10v14, 37-40, 16v24-28)*

HEARING GOD SPEAK IN THE BIBLE

Read Ephesians 4v17-24. In this passage "Gentiles" are unbelievers.

1) What do we learn about the non-Christian world (4v17-19)?
2) What does this tell us about what we receive through the media and culture?
3) What are we to be like now (v20-24)?
4) How would you respond to someone who says: "The Bible is outdated and just reflects the ideas of its day. We know better now."

Everyone makes sacrifices for what they love most. The hoarder sacrifices free space. The careerist sacrifices time with family and friends. The car enthusiast sacrifices money that could have been spent elsewhere. The Christian sacrifices whatever hinders their knowing and pleasing Christ (Phil 3v8).

The inner work of the Spirit means that Christians are not reluctant in turning from sin. Jesus' "beatitudes" picture them as "poor in spirit" – humbly aware of their failings, and mourning over the impact of sin on themselves and others. They are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness with a pure heart, seeking to live in gentleness, mercy and peace with others – even if persecuted (Matt 5v2-10). In short, they want the life of the kingdom of light not the kingdom of darkness. They rejoice that their old self is gone and a new self has been brought into being to live by the ways of the world to come. They grasp something of just how amazing the salvation they've received

is, and so they want Jesus as their Lord. Recognizing him as God's Son, knowing what only he can give, and appreciating his readiness to endure the cross for them, they come to treasure him above all else. They therefore prioritize his will and pleasure above their own, even if it costs them temporary happiness, their job, their family, or whatever else it might be.

Having said all that, Jesus taught that without him, people are spiritually sick, deaf, blind and hard hearted (Lk 5v31, Matt 13v14-15). Every part of us is infected by sin. So, our ideas about God or what he wants are not trustworthy. We should therefore be wary of how readily we might try to fit what we believe to justify our behaviour (Rom 1v18).

But it's not just our minds that are unreliable; our instincts are too. Elsewhere we're told the devil is "at work" in those without Christ and so shaping culture according to his concerns (Eph 2v1-2).

Every one of us is therefore desensitized to God's truth from being raised in a non-Christian society. Moreover, sinning or being impacted by the sin of others can lead to all sorts of confused feelings, especially as we grow up. Add in our own sinful desires, and it's no surprise we tell ourselves things are right and good when the Bible teaches that they are wrong and damaging. Indeed, the Christian faces a lifelong battle between "the desires" of the sinful nature and those of "the Spirit."

This is why Jesus teaches that "whoever" would be his disciple must "deny themselves" (Lk 9v23). Our culture tells us to be who we are and follow our desires. But who we are is broken, confused, stubborn and self-seeking. Jesus therefore tells us to deny our desires and be who we are becoming – the renewed us we will be at his return (Col 3v1-4). And he stresses that this is to follow the way of the cross (Lk 9v23) – a way that can feel hard and mean rejection.

We must learn real discernment with respect to the values and morals that are in vogue today and presented to us by our teachers or media. All culture is religious in the sense that it reflects the beliefs of those within it, whether they are right or wrong. If our lives are to be renewed, the attitude of our minds must therefore be first (Rom 12v1-2). We must be ready to accept God's view of what is good and true in the Bible, and reject whatever contradicts it, even when it means hostility from others. The apostle Paul speaks of the need for "every thought" to be taken captive and made obedient to Christ (2 Cor 10v5).

With all we hear or watch, we could therefore ask four simple questions as a sieve to sift the good from the bad: (1) What *beliefs* are being reflected and passed on through this? (2) How does the *Bible* affirm or correct what's being communicated? (3) What *impact* will hearing or seeing this have on me? (4) Should I *stop* listening or watching?

As Christians we recognize the limits to our own understanding because we see only from the perspective of our short slice of history, in our small part of the world, influenced by our often-questionable desires. And so, we accept all that Christ affirms and reject all that undermines it. And we do this because he is our treasure. Because we love him, we trust him, and we know that the salvation, peace and joy his truth gives, makes it of more worth than the greatest wealth. More than that, the pleasure of Christ at our faithfulness is more precious to us than any amount of acceptance by others.

It is for this reason, that the most important discipline we can develop as Christians, is that of reading the Bible daily, and digesting it like food so that it forms and strengthens us in our faith. This is what Jesus meant by feeding on him as the bread of life, as it is his words that he said are "full of the Spirit and life" (John 6v57-63).

SPEAKING TO GOD IN PRAYER

Thank God for granting you such a great salvation.

Ask God to work a deep love of Christ in you so that you would count everything else loss.

(16) Against the flow

"I Reject The Devil And All Rebellion Against God" : *I turn from all occult practices, other religions and spiritualities, blasphemy, hatred, bitterness, rage, violence, sexual immorality, adultery and homosexual sex, lust and so pornography, crudity, dishonesty, slander, factionalism, jealousy, selfish ambition, drunkenness and greed. (Gal 5v16-26; 1 Cor 5v9-11; Eph 5v3-10)*

HEARING GOD SPEAK IN THE BIBLE

Read Ephesians 4v25-6v9

1) What do you practically need to do in order to live according to these verses?
2) Jot down the different reasons that are given for doing this (4v25-6v9).
3) What wisdom can you see in the instructions for marriage (5v22-33)?
4) Jot down any questions you are left with and need to talk through?

We've seen throughout that there is a right and wrong reason for living the life God calls us to. The wrong reason is to somehow earn or deserve his love or salvation. This is impossible because of our sin. No, these things are a gift. The right reason is because we now trust, cherish and so want to please Christ. Those of true faith will therefore live differently. Indeed, if they don't - if they show no concern over their sin but just continue in it, then they can have no confidence they have truly believed. Jesus warns such people that he will tell them on the last day: "I never knew you" (Matt 7v21-23).

In the previous reflection we saw that the devil conforms people and so societies to his ways. In becoming a Christian, we turn from all that is of him – all deception and disobedience, all refusal to live God's way. We've noted this will at times mean swimming against the currents of our culture. Perhaps the three most controversial areas in

which the Christian must do this today is in rejecting other religions, keeping sex for heterosexual marriage, and upholding the distinction of two genders with specific roles within marriage.

The error of other religions follows logically from the fact that the devil shapes people's ideas and that everyone suppresses the truth that God has made known in creation and in their consciences. This helps when we struggle with the fact that some have never had a chance to hear of Christ. It is not that they have never been faced with the truth of God. It is both around them and within them. And so, no-one has an excuse, as no-one responds to this by worshipping God as he is or living as he desires. Instead, we twist the truth in order to believe what we want to believe and behave as we want to behave (Rom 1v18-25). This is why we need Jesus. Only what he teaches about God and his ways is trustworthy. And he is clear that only those who know God through him truly

know the God who is actually there (Jn 3v16-21, 5v23). Everyone therefore needs to hear the gospel. But we can be comforted as we consider those who haven't. God will ensure it gets to all he will call. And he may use you to do that (Matt 11v27, Acts 10)!

In matters of sex, the Bible's teaching is often assumed to be oppressive and dull - and in terms of homosexuality, a denial of the individual's true self. But God gives marriage for our protection. Within its commitments sex can be enjoyed without the threat of STDs, rejection, or children torn between parents. And in terms of sexual desire, we've seen that everyone experiences those that are wrong and need restraining. Moreover, we are all to some extent damaged and deceived by the world we grow up in. Our true self is the person we will be in the new creation. It is for these reasons that Christians experiencing same sex-attraction should choose not to act on it (1 Cor 6v9-11), and others desiring sex outside

of marriage should seek to remain pure and free from temptation (Eph 5v3-7). Pleasing Christ is more important, even though that could mean a life of singleness.

The brokenness, confusion and rebelliousness of our culture is particularly apparent in homosexuality and transgenderism because they dismiss gender differences that are so clear biologically. This is a striking example of the "darkened understanding" mentioned in the last reflection. And its results should move us to compassion.

In truth, humanity is created male and female, equal but different, to compliment one-another as they do good in the world (Gen 2v18-24). This is why true marriage is heterosexual. The couple are to be a team, combining their gender difference in serving their church and society, and raising children to follow Christ and do the same. By this means they image God as the creator who gives life and brings order. But they are to

image him as saviour too. The husband is to display the sacrificial love of Christ for the church, giving himself up for both the spiritual and material good of his wife. And his wife is to display the willing submission of the church to Christ, respecting her husband's leadership. As a team the couple will agree and act together in many things (1 Cor 7v5). But when rightly understood, this "complementarity" brings a remarkable harmony in doing so.

SPEAKING TO GOD IN PRAYER

Thank God for calling you to be part of his coming kingdom.

Ask God for his forgiveness and help with each of the areas you need to change.

(17) God's new society

"Commitment To The Church In General": *I will respect and submit to the government, encouragement and discipline of Grace Church, diligently attend its Sunday meetings, join the church at the Lord's Supper, and support its witness, work, worship and wellbeing by offering my prayers, money, time and effort to the glory of God and in love for his people. (Heb 10v24-25, 13v17, Rom 12v3-8)*

"Commitment To The Church Congregation": *I will receive my fellow members as brothers and sisters in Christ, bearing with their failings, encouraging their faith, sharing their burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ. (Eph 4v2, 15-16, Gal 6v2)*

HEARING GOD SPEAK IN THE BIBLE

Read Acts 2v41-47

1) Jot down the things everyday believers got up to in the early church (v41-47)?

2) What attitudes of mind did they seem to have towards God and each other?
3) What was the impact of this on the watching world?
4) What would you say to the claim that Christians don't need to go to church?

Are you commitment-phobic? Some are because they've been hurt when committing to people in the past. Others are simply because they live in a consumer culture where people hold back in hope of a better product. Yet Jesus call us to commit not just him but to a church family as well.

The idea of "membership" can feel rather exclusive, and churches should welcome everyone. But it is clear in the New Testament that there was an awareness of who had actually committed to Christ and to a local church, and so were accountable to the church family and leadership for their faith (1 Cor 5v1-13).

We've learnt that Christians are "citizens" of a kingdom. The church is therefore a whole new society, comprising a new humanity governed by God's word. And so, God has appointed leaders to each congregation. In the Bible they are titled "overseers" because of their role, "elders" because of their maturity, and "pastors" (the Latin for "shepherds") because of their activity.

They are called to watch over, feed and strengthen their flock with God's word, protect it against spiritual harm, lead it to Christ and his "pasture," fetch those who stray, and gather other sheep to join them. One type of elder is the "minister" of the gospel (1 Tim 5v17). They are released to focus on teaching and prayer as the other elders take on the other responsibilities, assisted by congregation members serving in various roles. These are often known as "deacons," which simply means "servants."

In committing to a church, the believer happily submits to its leaders so that their work will be a joy not burden (Heb 13v17). This doesn't mean the church member can't question or be involved in decision making. The point is that this should be done respectfully and without causing dissent. Indeed, the New Testament shows whole congregations involved in appointing new leaders - and in the rare act of exercising church discipline.

The idea of church discipline is new to some. Jesus teaches on it in Matthew 18v15-20. When someone confessing faith denies it by persisting in sin even when faced up to it, it is important that they are no longer welcomed as a church member. Instead, they are to be treated as a non-Christian. This is so that they realize the seriousness of their actions and turn back to Christ, and so that other Christians don't think that it's OK to do the same (Heb 12v15). Church discipline

is extremely hard. But it is loving, and often effective.

It's obvious really: The church isn't an optional club for the Christian, and its services aren't a civic ceremony only some might choose to attend. It's a family – a fellowship of deep love for God and one-another. The psalms even picture the gathered people of God as the centre of all creation, from which the worship of God overflows into the world as they speak of and live for him.

This is why, where possible, the Christian fixes their Sunday and mid-week church gatherings as non-negotiables in their diary. These are the wellspring of their week. And so, they "devote" themselves to hearing God's word with his people, remembering Christ at the Lord's Supper, joining with others in prayer and praise, being built up in faith - and welcoming any outsiders. More than that, they are "devoted" to their fellow believers. They want to set a good example

to them and to any children in the church. They want to encourage them in their walk with Jesus. And they want to practically care for and support them. In short, they want to faithfully play their part in service, in giving and in whatever other way.

The ideal church is one where these things are not only instinctive to its members, but a way of life. They so love one-another that they delight to spend time together outside of formal meetings, encouraging, serving, and caring for one-another. Every church family is to give a taste of heavenly society here on earth.

SPEAKING TO GOD IN PRAYER

Thank God for providing your church and its leaders for your good.

Ask God for his help to make time for church and for playing your part in service.

(18) Why you are here

Commitment To Our Church Vision" :
To be an area church centred on Bolnore, from which every member so treasures Christ, that they reflect and speak of him in every part of their lives."

HEARING GOD SPEAK IN THE BIBLE

Read 1 Peter 2v9-12. Priests served God in the Old Testament by overseeing the work of the temple, teaching the people, and offering their gifts to him.

1) What do the titles of verse 9 say about how we should now live?
2) What has God specifically chosen us out of the world to do (v9)?
3) As we speak, how will non-Christians come to glorify God (v11-12)?
4) How can you more readily share the message of Jesus with non-Christians?

From the beginning humanity were called to fill and subdue the world in a way that images God (Gen 1v26-28). They were to display his likeness as they engaged in family life, raising children who would know and image him too. And they were to bring good order to what God had made through the structures of society – whether their communities, workplaces, politics or wider contribution to culture (Gen 1v28, 2v15, 4v20-22). God's kingdom was to encompass the entire world as people embraced his rule in all areas and devoted their gifts and efforts to his purposes. They were to rule the creation as mini-kings under him as King of kings.

It is in this sense that humanity was created to be a royal priesthood, overseeing the entire world as the place (like the temple) where God would live with them.

We've seen how the devil overturned this. Every area of life is now corrupted by sin. To various degrees they express the rule of

the "kingdom of darkness." But through Christ things are changing. As those of all nations respond to him, they are renewed into God's image. Their endeavours are therefore brought back under God's rule and become expressions of his "kingdom of light."

So, Jesus is the perfect second Adam – the head of a new humanity that is increasingly filling the earth and starting to subdue it as God intended. However, he was clear that until his return the kingdoms of light and darkness will remain in conflict (Matt 13v36-43). Only then, when he subdues and casts out all evil will "the kingdom of the world" become the "kingdom of our Lord and his Christ" (Rev 11v15). Now we are to express the reign of his kingdom in our hearts and lives. Then we will finally enter it as a realm that will encompass all things – filling and perfectly subduing this world made new.

All this explains why Christians are to engage in every legitimate vocation – shaping them as far as they can to the Bible's teaching. Whether as a bin man or banker, this benefits culture to the good of all. But it also expresses Christ's reign, providing a foretaste and pointer (though imperfect) to the "culture" he will establish at his return. That's why your study or work is so important. In it you serve and point to Jesus. We declare that in being slain he is worthy "to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honour and glory and praise" (Rev 5v12). Our station in life, our resources, our skills and our efforts, are all to be devoted to him.

Paul lists the fruit of the Spirit as "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control" (Gal 5v22). These attributes are to be displayed in our service of Jesus. But there is more. God promised that the Holy Spirit would "write his laws" on our hearts and

minds. The Ten Commandments (CS) are their essence. And so, we are to apply their principles to every sphere of life - to our own engagement with family, community, workplace, politics and culture.

In all these areas the Christian encourages true worship and reverence of God, and the restraint of busyness so that people can rest, remember him and enjoy his creation (CS1-4). They commend honouring and caring for parents and the raising of children in the faith (C5). They hold life as sacred, respecting all, and serving and speaking up for those who are oppressed – for the unborn, the elderly, the disabled, the immigrant, the poor, the ostracised, and any who struggle or are treated badly (C6). In what they do, think on and watch, they turn from violence, hatred and sexual immorality, affirming the importance of marriage and sexual purity (CS6-7). They are law-abiding and honest, even in the little things. They are

concerned for legal justice and they have learnt contentment (CS8-10).

Such whole life Christianity gets noticed, repelling some, but attracting others (Jn 3v20-21). It is why Jesus called the church a "city on a hill." The light of God's glory displayed in its members is intended to draw people to it, and so to God (Is 60, Matt 5v14-16).

Our second priestly work is therefore to share the gospel as we live out this life, so that those we engage with can be saved and serve Jesus too. We call this evangelism as the Greek word for gospel is "evangelion."

It really couldn't be more important that we speak of Christ to others and teach our children the faith. So, we should pray for opportunities to naturally do so - and actively make opportunities where we can – as churches and individuals. You might share you're a Christian and prompt conversation by asking whether someone has had much experience of church. You might tell of

something God has done for you, or describe how and why you came to faith. And it is good to follow up every spiritual conversation, however brief: Pray for God to be at work, give away a book, offer to chat further, read a gospel or book one to one, or invite the person to church or a course.

Many miss that we're saved in order to serve (Lk 1v74-75, 1 Pet 1v9, Rev 22v3). As a royal priesthood we are to image God by doing good and speak of Christ as we do. And in doing so we offer ourselves and others to God. Because Jesus will only return when the full number have come to faith (2 Pet 3v9), this is the only reason you are still here! This is to be your life's work. This is your mission.

SPEAKING TO GOD IN PRAYER

Thank God for choosing you for this great calling.

Ask God for opportunities to share the gospel with others.

Appendix : Catechism

Since the first days of Christianity, children or converts to Christianity have been asked to memorize key truths to benefit their faith. During the Reformation much was made of questions and answers as a way of helping this. The following seeks to help revise and remember what's been covered in the Rooted course. The most famous "shorter" catechism for children runs to 107 questions. So, this one is a lot simpler!

1. What does it mean to be a Christian?
To be a Christian is to so trust Jesus as God's Son and King that we call on him for salvation and submit to him as Lord.

2. Where do we gain our knowledge of Jesus?
We gain our knowledge of Jesus throughout the Bible which he taught to be God's inspired and trustworthy word.

3. What should our response to the Bible be?
We should trust in God as presented to us there, believing his promises and obeying his commands.

4. What assurance can those of such faith have?
Those of such faith can be fully assured that they are saved by God's free grace and not as a reward for religious or moral works.

5. Can you recite the Apostles Creed?
I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ,
his only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried;
he descended to the dead.
On the third day he rose again;
he ascended into heaven,
he is seated at the right hand of the Father,
and he will come to judge
the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy universal Church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting. Amen.

6. What does the Bible teach about God?
There is one true God, the Creator, who governs all things and is almighty, all wise and all good.

7. How many persons are there in God?
God is a Holy Trinity, who eternally exists in three distinct persons, the Father the Son and the Holy Spirit.

8. What does the Bible teach about God the Father?
The Father is to be obeyed by all things, and lovingly chose us before the creation of the world to belong to his Son and so be adopted as his children.

9. What does the Bible teach about God the Son?
Though truly God he took a human nature as Jesus to redeem human beings from the guilt, penalty and power of sin so that they could become God's children.

10. Who do we believe Jesus to be?
Jesus is fully God and fully man, to be acknowledged as Lord - our Creator, and Christ - God's promised Saviour and King.

11. Why did Jesus die?
Jesus died in punishment for our sins to satisfy God's justice so that we could receive every spiritual blessing through being united to him by faith?

12. What blessing leads to all others?
We are justified by God, which is to be declared righteous and so acceptable to him on account of Christ's perfect righteousness being credited to us.

13. What blessings flow from our justification?
We are forgiven our sin, reconciled to God, adopted as his children, filled with his Spirit, renewed into his image, and will be raised from death to reign over the world to come in the kingdom of God.

14. Did Jesus remain dead?
On the third day Jesus rose bodily from death, was seen for forty days, and then ascended to his Father's side in heaven?

15. What does Jesus now do in heaven?
From heaven Jesus reigns over all things, pouring out his Holy Spirit and building up his church as the present expression of his kingdom.

16. Will Jesus remain in heaven?
On the day his Father has appointed, Jesus will return to judge all people, condemning those who have not believed to everlasting destruction in hell and receiving those who have believed into his new creation.

17. What will the Christian experience at Christ's return?
They will be raised from death to live forever with God and his people, enjoying a renewed earth, free from all evil, suffering and pain.

18. Who is the Holy Spirit?
The Holy Spirit is the personal presence of God who draws people to faith in Christ, renews their hearts, unites them in the church, enables them to live as God's children, and keeps them for eternal life.

19. What fruit does the Spirit grow within the Christian?
The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

20. What does it mean to live a Christian life?
The Christian rejects the devil to call on Christ as Saviour and submit to him as Lord,

serving within the church, bearing witness to the world, and awaiting his return.

21. What does it mean to reject the devil?
To reject the devil is to turn from all views, beliefs and practices that are contrary to the will of Christ.

22. What does it mean to call on Christ as Saviour?
To call on Christ as Saviour is to ask his forgiveness when we do wrong and his help when in need, giving him thanks and relating to his Father in all things through prayer.

23. What has Jesus taught us to pray in the Lord's Prayer?
Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come, your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Lead us not into temptation
but deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours
now and for ever. Amen.

24. What does it mean to submit to Christ as Lord?
To submit to Christ as Lord is to value him and his will above all else, obeying and holding to his teaching even when it is hard.

25. What did Jesus teach the two greatest commandments to be?
"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: "Love your neighbour as yourself."

26. What are the Ten Commandments that these two commandments fulfil?

1. **You shall have no other gods but me.**
2. **You shall not make for yourself any idol.**
3. **You shall not dishonour the name of the Lord your God.**
4. **Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy,**
5. **Honour your father and mother.**
6. **You shall not commit murder.**
7. **You shall not commit adultery.**
8. **You shall not steal.**
9. **You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour.**
10. **You shall not covet anything which belongs to your neighbour.**

27. What is the church?
The church is the community of all who truly believe in Christ, and so is to be embraced and served by all who follow him.

28. What are the sacraments of the church?
The two sacraments are baptism and the Lord's Supper, acts that picture God's promises to us in Christ, mark us as his, and so strengthen and draw our faith to him.

29. What attitudes should we have to the church?
Giving a foretaste of heaven, we should submit to its leaders, attend its meetings, encourage and serve its members, and devote ourselves to its work and witness.

30. How do we bear witness?
In every area of life, we should display God's likeness, shape our activities to his word, and take every opportunity to speak of Christ and the gospel.

31. What do the beatitudes promise those who live such a life through faith?

Blessed are the poor in spirit,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Blessed are those who mourn,
for they will be comforted.
Blessed are the meek,
for they will inherit the earth.
Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
for they will be filled.
Blessed are the merciful,
for they will be shown mercy.
Blessed are the pure in heart,
for they will see God.
Blessed are the peacemakers,
for they will be called children of God.
Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.