



Growing into Christ – Course Manual

Introduction

The Growing into Christ Course is designed for the newly baptised - to help with the next steps and to establish them in the faith.

When someone is baptised, they have usually had specific lessons about basic Bible teaching. Also usually, these lessons stop when they are baptised. This is a pity since baptism is the start of a journey, not the end of one. The believer needs help entering this new life. There are many topics that need a different way of thinking – a Christian way of thinking. There are many lifestyle choices that need to be made. This course is designed for this.

The early Christians described the new life in Christ as a journey. It was called 'The Way' (Acts 24:14). Like any 'way', there is a right way and a wrong way. We must walk in the right way and then stay on the right way. It is particularly important at the start of our journey. If we start out in slightly the wrong direction, it can slowly grow into a big difference from the right way. This course aims to point you in the right direction.

In compiling the course, we have been through the New Testament multiple times to make sure we are covering the most important topics. And we have ended up with 30 lessons! We did not intend to have so many. However, they are all necessary.

This course is not about the first principles of Bible teaching. It is assumed that the believer already knows these. What this course is about is to help the believer change into a person who is like Christ. Or to put this more simply, to help you change into Christ.

We do not assume a deep knowledge about the Bible. The course aims to be understood by people of all abilities and backgrounds. The lessons will be translated into other languages. So simple, brief, and clear language is best for this.

The Content

The early lessons contain topics that the new believer needs to know immediately:

- Lesson 1 is about how baptism is a start of a new life. It is the beginning of a new way of thinking and living.
- We have a new spiritual family, and we need to understand how this works. This is what lesson 2 is about.
- The believer must have a strong prayer life. Lesson 3 is about this.
- Baptism is a great opportunity to share the reasons for our faith with others. We have become witnesses of Christ. Lesson 4 is how we do this.
- Lesson 5 closes this first part of the course and focuses on our new life in Christ in more detail.

The remaining lessons can be grouped into three areas.

- 1) Practically following Christ. There are lessons on wisdom, holiness, humility, controlling the tongue, loving your enemies and being the people of God.
- 2) Spiritual dangers and how to handle them. There are lessons on suffering, money, sexual immorality, alcohol, personal sin and forgiveness.
- 3) Christian roles and responsibilities. There are lessons on our attitudes to our spouse, our parents, our family, our friends, the needy, those at work and those we meet. There are lessons on marriage, family, the needy and work.

At the centre of Christian life is the Bible. It is our map.

The course covers the main parts of the Bible:

- We talk on the Law of Moses and its rightful place in the life of a Christian.
- The Exodus teaches us the principle of how to come out of the world and be different.
- We look at the Psalms to help us find comfort and encouragement.
- Nebuchadnezzar's dream is used as an example of prophecy where we can learn of God's control of the world and the future.
- We build on this with a lesson of Paradise Restored.

We look at some of the lesser-known characters. For example, Lot, Job, and Balaam because all have important principles to teach us.

As we read the Bible, we need to think about what it is says. We give examples of how we can find deeper meaning in God's word. We take the example of the Jewish feast of the Passover, which teaches us about Christ. The life of Joseph is used to see the pattern of Jesus' life. These are only examples of the way that Bible can be understood on many different levels. The Bible is so deep and rich and beautiful that the more we think about its message the more we see. As one writer said, "*Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law*" (Psalm 119:18).

Throughout the course, we keep coming back to Jesus. It is not enough for us to claim to be Christians. We must grow to be like him. This is what Peter tells the new believers:

"Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, now that you have tasted that the Lord is good" (1 Peter 2:2).

May we all grow up as Christians so that we become mature like Christ. This is the purpose of this course.

The first five lessons include a Spiritual Development section to help you get started in the most important areas. It is not so easy to do this for the other lessons, but you should think about how you might use the information you learnt in the lesson for your own spiritual development. You can ask yourself your own questions to help you do this.

Here is a full list of the lessons:

1. Growing into Christ
2. The Ecclesia
3. Prayer
4. Sharing your Faith
5. The New Life
6. Marriage
7. The Family
8. Caring for the Needy
9. Controlling the Tongue
10. Wisdom
11. Being the People of God
12. Coming out of the World
13. The Passover
14. The Law of Moses
15. Holiness
16. Pride and Humility
17. Guard your Heart!
18. Sin and Forgiveness
19. Unity in Christ
20. Love your Enemies!
21. Joseph - a man like Christ
22. Suffering
23. Comfort and Encouragement
24. Work
25. Money
26. Spiritual Dangers
27. God is in Control of the Nations
28. Paradise Restored
29. Thanksgiving and Praise
30. Let us go on from here!

Lesson 1: Growing into Christ

When you were baptized, you became a new person in Christ. The old person has gone. The new one has arrived. You may look the same to other people, but you are totally different to God. 2 Corinthians 5:17 says,

"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!"

The person in Christ is like a different creature. They were in the world, but they are now in Christ. They live differently. They have different ways of thinking, different ways of speaking and different ways of living.

Baptism was such a big change in life, that God describes it as a new birth,

*"For you have been **born again**, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God" (1 Peter 1:23).*

You heard the word of God. That word entered your heart and grew. It gave birth to a new person. And you became a baby in Christ.

Babies do not stay babies forever. They are designed to grow. In the same way the new spiritual baby needs to grow. Peter goes on to say:

"Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation" (1 Peter 2:2).

This is what you need to do. You need to crave spiritual milk like a baby. The spiritual milk is the word of God. You have been developing into a baby using the word of God. Now you need to continue to grow by taking the milk of the word.

Feeding on the Word of God

The most important thing that a newly baptized person can do is to feed on the word of God. This is the most important thing that we can say to you. Read God's word, the Bible. It is your spiritual food. Take it daily. Take it often.

Of course, to do this you need a Bible. If you do not have one, then you should do all you can to get one. If you do not have one, get access to someone else's. If you cannot read, get someone else to read to you.

When you have a Bible, you must take care of it. Make sure it is put in a box or bag to protect it from dust and water. Do not let children drop it or tear it. Do not let the wildlife get to it. Your Bible will not last unless you look after it.

The Christadelphians use the Bible Companion as a help to read the Bible daily. This is a list of Bible passages to be read on each day. It has 3 portions to be read daily. It takes you through the Old Testament once and the New Testament twice, every year. Even if you are used to reading the Bible, then we recommend that you use the Bible Companion to help you read the Bible. It is important that we do not just read the bits we like, but that we read all of it. If you do not have a Bible Companion, ask those who baptized you for one.

If you have not read much of the Bible before, you may find parts of it difficult. This would be like a baby trying to eat solid food straight away. We recommend that you do

not try and eat the difficult bits at the start. There will be plenty of time for this later. As you grow, you will find these get easier. Read the parts that you can understand and appreciate.

If you are new to reading the Bible, then we recommend you use a different reading plan to start with. "First Steps in Bible Reading" and "Second Steps in Bible Reading" will help you get familiar with the Bible, so that you will be able to use the Bible Companion. "First Steps in Bible Reading" has one chapter a day with notes, and the chapters are straight forward to understand and important. "Second Steps in Bible Reading" has two chapters a day and introduces all the books of the Bible in an approximate time order.

The Danger of not Reading the Bible

One danger of not reading the Bible is that you may forget what you have already learnt. Then you will not be able to tell others about what you believe. This is a problem.

1 Peter 3:15 says,

"But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect."

We are expected to be able to tell others what we believe and why we believe it. This is reasonable. We have become Christians, so we should be able to tell our family and friends why we have. We need to make sure we remember what we have been taught.

There is a danger worse than forgetting what you have learnt. When someone else says something different, you could be misled. There are many verses that can be misunderstood, and it would be easy for us to misunderstand them if we are not careful.

So, the first part of our being a new person in Jesus is to stand firm in what we believe. We need to know Bible teaching and be able to teach others.

The book of Hebrews speaks of these problems,

"In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil"
(Hebrews 5:12-14).

This passage explains that there are two parts to the Bible. Firstly, there are the elementary truths of God's word, which is the 'milk'. Secondly, there are the other parts, which are the 'solid food'. Believers need to progress from the 'milk' to the 'solid food'.

The passage says that there was a problem with the original readers. The believers had forgotten the elementary truths and they had to be taught them again.

We must not forget the elementary truths. We must remember them, so we can grow from that level of knowledge and understanding.

Whatever we learnt for our baptism; we should retain. If we made notes, we should keep them. If we read explanations, we should keep these references. We need them because we should not forget them.

What is the 'Milk'?

The book of Hebrews gives us more information on what is milk and what is solid food. We read in Hebrews 6:1-3 about milk:

"Therefore let us move beyond the elementary teachings about Christ and be taken forward to maturity, not laying again the foundation of repentance from acts that lead to death, and of faith in God, instruction about cleansing rites, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. And God permitting, we will do so."

The 'milk' is the elementary teachings. Some of these are listed. We should not forget these things but move on from them.

If you need reminding about the elementary teachings, then speak to the people who baptized you. Alternatively, you will find written and video presentations on the elementary principles which can be found where you got this course manual from. Please ask for further help if you need it.

The Book of Hebrews tells us to move on from the elementary teachings and go on to "maturity." The original word in the Greek has the meaning of 'completeness'. We need to be complete Christians - not partial ones.

We need to stop being babies of God's word. We need to grow so that we become complete and mature. This does not come easily. It takes a lifetime of growing. But it does come by growing.

Hebrews 5:13 told us that,

"Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil."

Babies do not fully understand how to be right with God. They cannot fully tell the difference between good and evil. Maturity comes by "constant use" and by the person "training themselves".

Here is the challenge of Christian living - to continually train ourselves. We are required to make personal effort to turn ourselves into a Christian who is complete and mature.

A Complete Christian

We now come across a new question. How do we know what a complete and mature Christian looks like? How do we know what we need to become?

The answer to this is simple. We need to become like Christ. If you want to see a complete and mature Christian, then look at Christ. Read about him. Understand what he said and did and follow in his footsteps. 2 Peter 3:18 tells us,

"But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ."

The goal of a Christian is to become like Christ. This was the advice given to the Ephesians (4:13):

"until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ."

The passage tells us that as part of becoming like Christ, we need to be united with other believers of our faith. We do not go grow to maturity by ourselves. We need to grow in the company of our fellow believers, who God has given us.

Ephesians goes on to say that if we become mature in our faith, then we will no longer be disturbed by false teaching (4:14):

"Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming."

Here the infant is described as like a boat that is blown wherever the wind blows. He will be lost at sea. Instead, we should be firm in our faith. Instead of drifting in our lives, we have more important things to do. We are told this in the next verses,

"Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work" (Ephesians 4:15-16).

We need to concentrate on growing into Christ. We need to help our fellow believers grow into Christ too. We have a picture of the believers all helping each other to grow into Christ. Christian life was designed to be a communal walk, where we build each other up in love.

We need to be like Christ. This comes out in many passages,

*"and walk in the way of love, just **as Christ** loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God" (Ephesians 5:2).*

We note the words "as Christ". We need to love in the way Christ loved.

In Philippians 2:5 it says,

*"In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset **as Christ Jesus.**"*

We need to be "as Christ" to each other. This requires humility because we need to serve each other.

Ephesians 4:32 says,

*"Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just **as in Christ** God forgave you."*

Christ was kind and compassionate, and so should we be.

In the New Testament, we learn that the apostles tried to be like Christ,

"Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ" (1 Corinthians 11:1).

We need to be like the apostles in following the example of Jesus.

Consequences

Living like Christ brings consequences. Not everyone in the day of Christ liked Christ. Not everyone liked his teaching. Not everyone liked his godly behaviour because it made them feel bad. He was insulted and poorly treated by certain types of people.

The apostle Paul tells us that if we try to follow Christ, then there will be similar consequences,

"In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Timothy 3:12).

We will face a degree of problems from being like Christ. If we are to live like Christ, then we can expect to suffer. As we read in,

"To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps" (1 Peter 2:21).

James put this topic in a different way,

"Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything" (James 1:2-4).

There is a benefit from suffering like Christ. It produces perseverance. And we need perseverance if we are to be mature and complete Christians. If we withstand suffering from Christ, then it proves that we are genuine Christians and not half-hearted. In our lives, we need it to prove that we are like Christ.

Summary

Now we are baptized we need to grow. We do this by reading the Bible daily and thinking about its message.

We must not forget the basic Bible teachings. We need to stand firm in our faith and grow. We need to be able to explain it to others. We need to add to these teachings the other teachings in the Bible. We need to move from milk to solid food.

Our target is to grow and become like Christ. This is the work of a lifetime. We need to become like Christ – in understanding, in wisdom, in character, in perseverance.

As we grow into Christ, we can expect some opposition. We need this to show that we are like Christ. Then when Christ returns in glory, we will see him and be welcomed into his kingdom.

So dear brother or dear sister, let us grow in Christ and continue in him. And when Jesus comes back to the earth, he will recognize us as being like him,

"And now, dear children, continue in him, so that when he appears we may be confident and unashamed before him at his coming" (1 John 2:28).

Spiritual Development Section

1. Plan how you are to read/hear the Bible every day.
2. Start reading/hearing the Bible daily. The hardest part is getting started.
3. Get a notebook so you can write down questions you have or useful points you read.
4. Where do you keep the information on the basic Bible teachings?
5. How can you make this information easily available so you can teach others?

Lesson 2: The Ecclesia

Christian life has always been designed to be lived in a community. Jesus taught his disciples to love each other,

"My command is this: Love each other" (John 15:17).

We cannot keep this command if we deliberately choose to be on our own. Peter put the command like this,

*"Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for your brothers, love one another deeply, from the heart"
(1 Peter 1:22)*

You obeyed the truth by being baptised. Now you are part of new family of brothers and sisters in Christ. You must love all these new brothers and sisters. This is one of your first challenges. You may not have known them beforehand but now you need to adopt them as your spiritual brothers and sisters. We are commanded to love these people deeply.

Your new brothers and sisters must love you deeply too, as you are now part of their spiritual family.

This changes everything. You are not alone. Instead, you share the road of life to God's kingdom. Like any journey, there will be obstacles and difficulties, but we are here to help one another. This is what loving each other is all about.

God tells us to love each other because that is how God treated us,

"This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another" (1 John 4:10-11).

When you were baptised, you were baptised into God's family of believers. We read what this family does in Acts 2:42,

"They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer."

God's family meets together for four things;

- The apostles teaching
- Fellowship
- Breaking of Bread
- Prayer

We will consider these one by one.

1) The apostles teaching

The believers share the teaching of the apostles. John calls this 'walking in the light,'

*"But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, **we have fellowship with one another**, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin" (1 John 1:7).*

If we walk in the light, we are automatically in fellowship with other believers who are also walking in the light. We have no choice in this matter.

We cannot say we do not need our fellow believers. Paul explains this using the image of the body,

*"The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ. For **we were all baptised by one spirit into one body**" (1 Corinthians 12:12-13).*

We are all baptised into one body. Just as a hand alone is not the body, so we alone are not the body. We are only in the body if we are part of it. We are in the body when we join with our fellow believers. Christ is the head of this body.

Believers who in the light are not to fellowship darkness,

*"Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what **fellowship can light have with darkness**? What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God" (2 Corinthians 6:14-16).*

Just as God does not want unbelievers to enter his temple, so we should not fellowship those who are in darkness. Our fellowship is only with those who are in the light.

2) Fellowship

Fellowship means sharing. In Acts 2:44, we are told,

*"All the **believers were together and had everything in common**".*

They shared everything. They did not consider their own possessions as belonging only to themselves,

"All the believers were one in heart and mind. No-one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had" (Acts 4:32).

Fellowship particularly means sharing with fellow believers who are in need. As says,

"Share with God's people who are in need. Practice hospitality" (Romans 12:13).

One example of needy people is the believing widows mentioned in Acts 6:1-6.

This sharing is not confined to material possessions, we can also share our time by providing a listening ear, a spiritual insight or practical help.

We are expected to love one another in these ways.

3) The breaking of bread

The early believers "*broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God*" (Acts 2:46).

Our Christian life started when we were baptised into the death and resurrection of Jesus. Once associated with Jesus' life, we continue to associate with his death and resurrection regularly in the breaking of bread. In this way our life is always associated with the work of Jesus.

A breaking of bread service must include,

- 1) Meditation on the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.
- 2) A prayer for the bread and then the breaking and eating the bread.
- 3) A prayer for the wine and then the drinking of the wine.

There are other activities which, while not critical, are mentioned in the Bible. These are usually added to the service are:

- 1) an exhortation (Acts 20:7)
- 2) hymns (Mat 26:30; Mark 14:26)
- 3) a collection (1 Cor 16:1)
- 4) additional prayers (Acts 2:42)

In the New Testament they broke bread once a week (Acts 20:7, 1 Cor 16:2, Acts 2:42,46, Heb 10:24-25), usually on the first day of the week (Sunday). It could take place more frequently if desired and on other days.

4) Prayer

The pattern of praying together began immediately. We read in Acts 1:14; "*They all joined together constantly in prayer*". Praying together is an important part of sharing our lives in Christ. We will consider personal prayer in the next lesson.

The place where believers meet together to teach, fellowship, break bread and pray is the Ecclesia.

The Believers and the Ecclesia

In the New Testament, the word translated 'church' is the Greek word 'ecclesia'. 'Ecclesia' means an 'assembly of called out ones.' It refers to the believers who have been called out from the world and meet together.

It is important to understand that the ecclesia is the people - not a building. God is concerned about people not buildings.

The most common meeting place in the New Testament was not a specific church building but the home of individuals.

Many believers will live in areas where there is a local ecclesia. The believer automatically becomes a member of an ecclesia, usually the one closest to them.

Sometimes a believer may live too far from an ecclesia to meet with them regularly. This is often called 'being in isolation'. In this case, they should travel there as often as they can to an ecclesia. Occasional personal contact with an ecclesia is better than no contact. The ecclesia should keep in touch with those in isolation by whatever means available (eg, phone, email, WhatsApp, letter and visit).

Those in isolation must stand in faith on their own. They need to read the Bible daily so they can grow spiritually. If they can share Bible readings with their family and teach any children that is good. Ideally, prayer will be a regular feature of their personal and home life. If they can access materials such as Bible lessons, books, exhortations, talks or videos, these will be a great help.

If a brother has a non-believing wife, he should teach her and set a good example. Maybe she will become interested in the gospel.

If a sister has a non-believing husband, she should try to win him over by her behaviour (1 Peter 3:1-2).

The believer in isolation must break bread and drink wine in memory of the death and resurrection of Jesus each week.

The believer may not be able to care for fellow believers, because of distance but can still pray for them. They also, of course, have a responsibility to help the needy in their family and community. They should preach the gospel, so that other people can be saved. If God allows, others will come to the faith and the believer will no longer be in isolation.

Developing the Ecclesia

God helped ecclesias develop spiritually by providing the members with different gifts. We read in 1 Cor 12:28,

"And God has placed in the church first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, of helping, of administrating, and of different kinds of tongues."

We do not have apostles, prophets, miracle workers or speakers in tongues today. However, this list tells us about different activities and their importance. Firstly, there is teaching. Then helping - which is fellowship or sharing. Then administration.

Teaching God's word is the most important element, then helping the needy and then administration.

Ecclesias must give the right level of time and attention to each of these areas.

An ecclesia that concentrates on Administration will be well organized. But it may lack Scriptural focus and loving care among its members.

An ecclesia that focuses on Teaching alone may be disorganized. And it may lack the sincere love members should have for each other.

An ecclesia that focuses on Helping will be an ecclesia of love. But it may lack the spiritual foundation and organisation.

An ecclesia needs to be nourished by God's word, full of love for one another and organised to meet God's requirements for an ecclesia.

Hebrews 10:22-25 lists some activities we should be doing as part of an ecclesia,

1. *"Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith."*
2. *"Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess."*
3. *"Let us consider how we may spur one another on towards love and good deeds."*
4. *"Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing."*
5. *"Let us encourage one another – and all the more as you see the Day approaching."*

The ecclesia should be a place of faith, hope, and love. It should be a place of encouragement. It should be a positive spiritual place. It should be a place of peace in a troubled world.

Summary

An ecclesia is a group of believers who meet together regularly. They devote themselves to the apostles teaching, fellowship, the breaking of bread and prayer.

Because the ecclesia **is** the believers, you are part of the ecclesia. You are as important as anyone else. You have a responsibility to help make it an encouraging place full of faith, hope and love. You must do your part to make it the spiritual place God wants it to be. You do this by growing into Christ. You must demonstrate the qualities we are exhorted to show in Colossians 3:12-14:

'Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.'

Then these words written in 1 Thessalonians 1:3 could be written to you:

"We remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labour prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ."

Dear brother, dear sister, may God be with you as you start your ecclesial life with your new brothers and sisters.

Spiritual Development Section

1. If you have an ecclesia nearby, you should make it a priority to get there for its meetings. You must plan this.
2. If you do not, you should make it a priority to get to as many as possible. You should plan this too.
3. If you are in isolation, you must follow the steps mentioned earlier. You must plan how you will stay in touch with your brothers and sisters in other places.
4. What are the most important ways you can develop yourself spiritually? Can the ecclesia help?
5. How can you develop yourself spiritually? How can the ecclesia help?

Lesson 3: Prayer

Prayer is an important part of a Christian's life. Jesus prayed. He taught his disciples to pray.

We know from Acts 2:42 that the early disciples of Jesus, "*devoted themselves to the apostle's teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to **prayer.***"

Prayer is something that Christians do. God wants believers to pray. We read in Proverbs 15:8,

*"The Lord detests the sacrifice of the wicked, but the prayer of the upright **pleases** him."*

God is pleased to hear the prayer of believers.

When we pray, we talk to God. It is a one-way conversation with the God of the Universe.

Why should the God be interested in us? Because He cares about people. He made the world for people like us.

The Lord's Prayer

There are many reasons why we should want to pray to God. Just think about the model prayer Jesus gave us, which we call 'the Lord's prayer'. This prayer includes:

Addressing God.

Praise to God.

A request for His kingdom to come.

A request for forgiveness.

A request for daily food.

A request for protection from temptation and evil.

Let us think about each of these elements.

We address God with respect to request His attention.

We praise God in prayer because of His great power and love and other wonderful qualities.

We ask for God's kingdom to come because this is the fulfillment of His plan of salvation. In this world we have trouble, but the kingdom brings an end to this trouble.

We request forgiveness. There is no other way we can receive forgiveness apart from through prayer in Jesus' name. We need to understand that we need to forgive others if we wish God to forgive us.

We request our daily food. We may think daily food comes from our own resources, but we have food because it is a blessing from God.

We request protection from temptation and evil. Surely, we want the Almighty God to guide us and shield us from the troubles?

We should also pray for the needs of others. This is mentioned many times in the New Testament letters. So, we may simplify our prayer structure to:

- 1) Address God.
- 2) Honour God for His qualities and His plan.
- 3) Request things for other people to help them (particularly spiritually).
- 4) Request things that we need to help us (particularly spiritually).
- 5) Offer the prayer in the name of Jesus (John 16:23-24).

We do not need to pray to God in a particular language, because God knows all languages. Neither do we need to pray with educated words, because God understands all levels of education. We need to pray sincerely from the heart in the way we speak.

The Need for Prayer

God knows all our needs even before we ask Him. But He wants **us** to know that we need these things. He also wants us to **recognise** that every blessing we receive comes from Him and to pray for them.

He wants us to pray when we are in trouble,

"Is anyone among you in trouble? Let him pray" (James 5:13).

"and call on me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you will honour me." (Psalm 50:15).

God expects us to come to Him in prayer when we are in trouble.

We could all do with the Almighty God at our side helping us through our troubles. Let us pray and get help. Then when we are helped, let us give honour and thanks to God.

If God is on our side, we do not need to worry. Imagine that! Living a life with no fears! This is what is said in Hebrews 13:6,

"So we say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can mere mortals do to me?""

With God on our side, we can go through life with a peace of mind that cannot be found anywhere else in the world.

Paul explains what prayer can do for us.

"Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:6-7).

This peace is attainable through prayer. To obtain it, we must trust God with our problems and believe He is able to help us.

Psalms 55:22 gives similar advice,

"Cast your cares on the Lord and he will sustain you; he will never let the righteous be shaken."

We can pass our problems over to God. Let us pray about our problems, unburden ourselves and find peace.

Keep on Praying!

When we pray, we may expect an immediate answer from God. But God does not work like that. God works to His own timetable.

There is a danger in this for us. We may be disappointed and stop praying. This is not what God wants to see.

The need to keep on praying is a major teaching of the New Testament,

"Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up" (Luke 18:1).

The parable was about a widow who kept calling on a judge for justice. In the end, the judge became tired of her calling and gave her what she wanted. That is how we should pray. We should try and wear God out with our prayers – if that were possible!

God is not bothered if we pray to Him about the same thing. However, He is bothered if we give up and stop praying!

Faithful people develop good prayer habits. David prayed seven times a day. Daniel prayed three times a day. Nehemiah prayed a spontaneous silent prayer.

It is good to pray at set times as well as praying spontaneously. For example, many will pray first thing in the morning and last thing at night. Many pray and offer thanks before every meal or before a journey. There may be other set times that work for you.

Then there are the spontaneous prayers. For example, when you hear of someone who is sick or in trouble. You may want to say a short prayer immediately before you get distracted and forget about it. If a worry comes into your mind, offer a prayer immediately. In this way you cast your worry on God.

When we pray, we think of God. This means we are suddenly in His presence. If we think of Him regularly through our day, then we are regularly in His presence. This encourages us to have spiritual thoughts throughout the day. It helps us be careful about what we do or say.

When we pray, God comes closer to us,

"The Lord is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth" (Psalm 145:18).

If God is near us, then He is more likely to help us when we are in difficulties.

The alternative is like having God as a distant Father who has nothing to do with us. This is like children having a father they never see. They must make their own way through life, without the care and protection of a loving father. Surely, we do not want that.

What not to pray for

There are some things we should not take to God in prayer.

We should not pray to be rich. Riches and possessions will take us away from God and God does not want that. James 4:3 puts it like this,

"When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures."

When we pray, we should consider our motives. God is thinking about our motives.

If we pray against the purpose of God, then God will not listen to those prayers,

"This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us – whatever we ask – we know that we have what we asked of him" (1 John 5:14-15).

We need to think about what the will of God is.

It may not be clear to us how God works in our lives. We need to leave that to God. God knows what He is doing in our lives. Deuteronomy 32:4 says about God,

"He is the Rock, his works are perfect, and all his ways are just. A faithful God who does no wrong, upright and just is he."

God does no wrong even in our own lives. When we pray, we should trust God to respond in the right way and at the right time. God always does what is right.

God has the choice as to whether He acts on our prayers. We cannot force God to do what we want. We are not the master and God is not our servant.

Neither should we give God no choice. For example, 'God must do what I want or I am going to leave the faith.' This is testing God and it is wrong. God decides if, when and how He responds to our prayers. That decision remains with Him alone.

Our attitude should be like the attitude of Jesus. When he prayed to be delivered from the cross in Matthew 26:39 we read,

"Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will."

We should say 'God willing' and this should be part of our general communication. As James 4:15 tells us,

"you ought to say, "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that."

Let our speech and prayers show that God is in control of our lives.

Our Attitude in Prayer

Our prayers should be offered in humility.

"These are the ones I look on with favour: those who are humble and contrite in spirit, and who tremble at my word" (Isaiah 66:2).

Jesus told a parable about the Pharisee and tax collector in order to teach us to have the right attitude when we pray to God. The conclusion is given in Luke 18:14,

"For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

Some people try to make themselves look good when praying. God is not pleased if we turn the privilege of prayer into a means of 'showing off' to other people.

Long show prayers do not impress God. Ecclesiastes 5:2 gives us this advice,

"God is in heaven and you are on earth, so let your words be few."

For similar reasons, you do not have to pray using clever words or educated speech. Sincere words from the heart are what God wants to hear.

Why God may not Listen

God hears every prayer. But He does not respond to every prayer.

God will not listen to us if we do not listen to Him,

"When I called, they did not listen; so when they called, I would not listen," says the Lord Almighty" (Zechariah 7:13).

God speaks to us in the Bible, and we need to listen to Him. If we do not listen to God, then why should God listen to us?

Proverbs 28:9 also makes this clear,

"If anyone turns a deaf ear to my instruction, even their prayers are detestable."

Sin can also prevent our prayers from being heard. In we read,

"If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened" (Psalm 66:18).

Summary

Prayer is an important part of the believer's life. We should pray often and be humble.

Prayer pleases God. God will decide how to respond to our prayers. We must accept His answers and timing because He knows what is best. We need to keep listening to God in the Bible and do what He says.

Prayer can be a great help to us in our lives. It can give us peace of mind in a troubled world.

We pray because prayer works,

"The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective" (James 5:16).

God wants to listen to your prayers. Let us have an active prayer life and make sure that God is with us in our lives.

Spiritual Development Section

- 1) Plan a prayer by writing it down using the structure above.
- 2) Offer the prayer.
- 3) Think about other ways you may say a prayer, so that your prayers do not get repetitive.
- 4) Plan a prayer for when you eat, when you get up and when you go to bed.
- 5) Offer these during the day. Keep up this practice as best you can.
- 6) Say spontaneous prayers when you come across a personal need or a need for others.

Lesson 4: Sharing your Faith

Your baptism is a special opportunity to share your faith with your friends and family. They will want to know why you took that decision and what it means in practice. Will you still be friends? Will you still see your family? How have you changed?

They may never ask these questions again, so we encourage you to take this special opportunity to share the good news with them. This is the advice from 1 Peter 3:15-16,

"But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give a reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behaviour in Christ may be ashamed of their slander."

Those who question you deserve an answer. Notice the advice on how to answer them. We must answer with gentleness and treat them with respect. They are more likely to listen to us if we are careful in the way we give the message.

2 Timothy 2:23-25 gives further advice on speaking to others,

"Don't have anything to do with foolish and stupid arguments, because you know they produce quarrels. And the Lord's servant must not quarrel; instead, he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Those who oppose him he must gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth."

We will not win others for Christ by having quarrels. We must be kind and teach in a gentle manner.

Our behaviour is an important part of our message. In fact, it can be as much a witness as the words we speak.

Even if your friends do not ask questions, an opportunity still exists. You can ask to have a chat with them to explain why you were baptised. If you would like support in this, ask another baptised believer to help you.

God wants to save others

There is much more to this opportunity than just explaining why you were baptised. The gospel can save lives by giving them the hope of the resurrection. What better act of love can we give our family and friends than to try and save their lives?

God sees things from this point of view as well,

"This is good, and pleases our God our Saviour, who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth" (1 Timothy 2:3-4).

God wants to save everyone. Your conversion is an opportunity to give your family and friends a knowledge of the truth so they too can be saved.

God says those who convert others are like stars,

"Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever" (Daniel 12:3).

If we have a husband or wife who is not a believer, then we particularly need to share our faith with them. We do this because we love them and want them to be saved too. We also do this because until that happens, we have a divided family. One partner is part of the ecclesia and the other may refuse to get involved. This brings tensions over the use of time and resources.

A divided family makes decision-making difficult. A decision should be a God-centered one, but if the family is divided it becomes person-centered instead.

A divided family is a particular problem for the children. Parents should teach their children about God. It is harder for the children to believe if one parent does not.

If the husband has a non-believing wife, he has a responsibility to teach her. The husband must behave like Christ to her. God wants both husband and wife to be united on the matter of faith,

"Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers" (1 Peter 3:7).

We note that the way husbands treat their wives affects their relationship with God. If the husband mistreats his wife, God is less likely to listen to their prayers.

If the wife has a non-believing husband, she has a responsibility to him,

"Wives, in the same way submit yourselves to your husbands so that, if any of them do not believe the word, they may be won over without words by the behaviour of their wives, when they see the purity and reverence of your lives" (1 Peter 3:1-2).

The wife must try and win the husband for Christ through her behaviour. We note that it does not say she should consistently 'nag' him into faith.

Sharing our faith is part of a wider command to teach the gospel to the world. Jesus' words in Mark 16:15-16 make this clear,

"He said to them, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned."

This is a general command to all believers. How will the gospel go into all the world unless someone teaches them? Romans 10:14-15 says this,

"How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!"

It is a beautiful thing to take the gospel to others. The book of Revelation (7:9) has a picture of saved believers from every tongue, tribe, nation, and language. God wants His gospel to go to every place and in every language. Every believer is called to be part of this effort.

The Message

We should give the message Jesus and his disciples taught. This is the good news of the kingdom of God. We read this in Matthew 4:23 at the start of Jesus' ministry,

"Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people."

Jesus continued to preach about God's kingdom and sent his disciples out to do the same. Even after his resurrection Jesus spent time talking about the kingdom of God.

The kingdom of God is the answer to all the world's problems. It is the answer to war, oppression, injustice, crime, famine, disease, ignorance, poverty, and death. Man cannot solve any of these problems, but God can. This is why the kingdom is such good news and why we should tell people about it. It should make the people happy.

To teach this message, we need to understand the topic ourselves and where to find the relevant Bible passages. If you need help finding these, you can refer to the video called "Are you ready for the kingdom of God? Part 1" (which is available on the cbmmedia.org website)

The kingdom is coming. God has promised it, and nothing can stop it. When it comes, it will come suddenly. The question is 'Will people be ready?' We need to help them get ready.

How to Preach

Jesus sent out his disciples with the message in pairs. This is good practice. Each one can support the other. As it says in Ecclesiastes 4:9-10,

"Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work. If one falls down, his friend can help him up."

If one disciple is new and nervous, the second can be more experienced and supportive. The two together can provide two reliable witnesses to the truth of the message. Two people are better able to answer questions that the people have.

It is important not to give the appearance of evil, so it is best to go on preaching trips with someone of the same sex, not with another person's wife or husband.

When preaching God's message, it is important to show that the teaching comes from the Bible itself. The listener should read the verses themselves. The teacher needs to present the word of God faithfully without twisting it,

"Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth"
(2 Timothy 2:15).

A teacher must teach with patience and understanding,

"Preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage - with great patience and careful instruction" (2 Timothy 4:2).

A teacher's behaviour and character are important. Think back to your school days. What were the good teachers like? Good teachers care about their students. They encourage. They listen to questions and no question is a silly question. They are patient. If one teaching method does not work, they spend time with the student and instruct them in a different way.

A good teacher knows their subject well and can answer the questions. They are humble and do not belittle the student. They are honest, trustworthy, and consistent. They show integrity in the way they live.

We need to have these qualities if we are to teach God's word to others.

What were the bad teachers like? Bad teachers are arrogant, highlight their own superiority and belittle their students. They are angry, impatient, and unkind. They do not care about their students. They are untrustworthy and inconsistent in their behaviour. You would not listen to someone like that!

When we teach the gospel, we need to be careful that our behaviour matches our message,

"Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers" (1 Timothy 4:16).

Summary

Our baptism provides an opportunity to tell others about the reasons for our faith and the good news of God's coming kingdom.

God wants us to spread His gospel message throughout the earth. He is calling people to His kingdom.

Our behaviour is important when we teach God's message. We must set a good example. Sharing our faith can save lives. The best thing we can do for anyone is to pass on the hope of eternal life in God's kingdom.

Preaching is like planting the seed of the gospel in people's hearts. We cannot tell whether the seed will grow and whether our preaching will be successful. The important thing is that we try. We may plant or water the seed but only God makes it grow. As we read in 1 Corinthians 3:7-9,

"So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. The one who plants and the one who waters have one purpose, and they will each be rewarded according to their own labour. For we are co-workers in God's service; you are God's field, God's building."

If it grows, then thanks go to God and the glory is to His name. Those who participate in this saving work will receive their reward. Everyone benefits from this process.

Let us use the opportunities we have to pass on the gospel message and save lives.

Spiritual Development Section

- 1) If you have a husband or wife that is a non-believer, how can you best help them to understand the faith?
- 2) If you have children, how can you best help them to learn about God and His message?
- 3) What family members and friends need to understand the change that has happened in your life?
- 4) Make arrangements to tell them one by one of your new faith and why you made the decision.
- 5) If anyone is interest, then find a way to develop their interest so that grow to understand the full gospel message.

Lesson 5: The New Life in Christ

When we were baptised, we left our old life behind and began a new life in Christ,

"We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life" (Romans 6:4).

God describes the difference between our old life in the world and our new life in Christ in Ephesians 2:1-5,

*"As for you, you **were dead** in your transgressions and sins ... All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath. But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, **made us alive with Christ** even when we were dead in transgressions - it is by grace you have been saved."*

Through baptism we went from a position where death was our final end to the prospect of having everlasting life. In Christ, even if we die, we will be raised and live again. As far as God is concerned, only living in Christ is truly living.

The passage highlights the difference between our old and new life. We used to live following the desires and thoughts of the flesh. Now we are different. We no longer follow the flesh, instead we follow Christ.

A New Way of Thinking

This change from the old life to the new requires a different way of thinking as Ephesians 4:22-24 explains,

"You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness."

We now have a new attitude - - a new way of thinking - a godly way of thinking.

We have discarded the old ways like old clothes. We do not want to wear them again. We have put on the new way like new clothes. In it we are told:

"clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh" (Romans 13:14).

And,

"Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience" (Colossians 3:12).

The difference between the old and new ways of thinking is so great that it is described as a 'transformation' or complete change in,

*"Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be **transformed** by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is - his good, pleasing and perfect will" (Romans 12:2).*

The word for 'transformed' is the word we use to describe the change from a caterpillar to a butterfly. We are like a totally different creature. In fact, those in Christ are described as a 'new creation'. We read in 2 Corinthians 5:17,

"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!"

Leaving behind the old ways

If we are part of the new creation, we must discard the activities and attitudes of the old. We cannot claim to be in the new if we continue in the old ways. Ephesians 5:3-5 tells us some of the things that must be left behind in the old,

"But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people. Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving. For of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person – such a person is an idolater – has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God."

This passage highlights three things that must be left behind: immorality, impurity, and greed. We will not be God's holy people if we carry on doing these things.

Colossians 3:8-10 describes the new life in a slightly different way,

"But now you must also rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator."

There are many things we need to avoid doing in our new life in Christ and Galatians 5:19-21 provides us with a fuller list of these activities and attitudes:

"The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God."

Depending on what we were like before baptism, we may need to make some significant changes to how we live and how we think. We may have to alter some of our habits, so that we can grow into the new person that God wants us to be.

We should not see these changes as losing our own character. The things we must change are those which were ungodly and selfish. Titus 3:3 says,

"At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another."

These behaviours belong to the old way of life. They are not a pleasant list. The people who behave like this are not pleasant people.

As we become a new person in Christ, we will be transformed into someone who does what is right and good. We will be an easier person to live with and we will enjoy life more,

"For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people. It teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age" (Titus 2:11-12).

The new life in Christ requires us to be self-controlled. We need to control our passions and desires. We need to control our greed and our tongue. The old person of the flesh must be restrained. We do not want to be like that anymore.

Promoting the New Way

The new person in Christ must be encouraged to develop and flourish. There are certain behaviours we need to cultivate. We are told about these in Galatians 5:22-24,

"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passion and desires. Since we live by the spirit, let us keep in step with the spirit."

Jesus had all these qualities. Now that we are in Christ, we need to develop these qualities in our character too.

If we truly embrace our new life in Christ, then we will live like Christ, and this should be obvious to others. James 3:13 says,

*"Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them **show it** by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom."*

We have to show our faith in practice. Other people should be able to see that our faith has made a difference to our everyday life.

It is such a big difference that Philippians 2:14-15 describes it like the difference between light and darkness,

"Do everything without grumbling or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, "children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation." Then you will shine among them like stars in the sky."

A Problem

When we are living the new life in Christ, we are different to those who are still living the old way of life. This creates a problem which is explained in Ephesians 5:7-12,

"Therefore do not be partners with them. For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) and find out what pleases the Lord. Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them. It is shameful even to mention what the disobedient do in secret."

We cannot join with people in doing the deeds of the old way,

"Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? Or what does a believer have in common with an unbeliever?" (2 Corinthians 6:14-15).

We need to be careful about how close we are to people who live in the ways of darkness.

1 Peter 4:3-5 explains what will happen,

"For you have spent enough time in the past doing what pagans choose to do – living in debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing and detestable idolatry. They are surprised that you do not join them in their reckless, wild living, and they heap abuse on you. But they will have to give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead."

When we stop joining in with activities of the old life, we will attract some adverse comments. But do not let that deter us from following the new life.

We would be fools to return to the bad old ways which lead to death. 2 Peter 2:20-22 describes what this would be like,

"If they have escaped the corruption of the world by knowing our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ and are again entangled in it and are overcome, they are worse off at the end than they were at the beginning. It would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than to have known it and then to turn their backs on the sacred command that was passed on to them. Of them the proverbs are true: "A dog returns to its vomit," and, "A sow that is washed goes back to her wallowing in the mud.""

Returning to the old ways of the flesh is worse than having never left.

Let us not be fools – rather let us be wise, stand firm in our faith and continue to follow the new life so that it may be said of us as it was said of the Hebrews,

"we do not belong to those who shrink back and are destroyed, but to those who have faith and are saved" Heb 10:39

Summary

When we were baptised, we started a new life in Christ. We changed from the old way of the flesh to the way of Christ. This was a huge change – a complete transformation which requires a change in the way we think.

We need to choose carefully what we think about - as our thoughts determine our words and actions. Philippians 4:8 tells us what to think about,

"Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about these things."

Let us choose the right and good and live in a way which demonstrates that we are new creatures in Christ.

Lesson 6: Marriage

It is important to understand what the Bible says about marriage, whether you are already married, hoping to be married one day, or would like to help marriages in difficulty.

The quality of a marriage relationship has a major impact on the physical, mental and spiritual wellbeing of the man and woman involved.

Jesus endorsed the Genesis model of marriage. In Matthew 19:4-6 we read,

"Haven't you read," he replied, "that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female,' and said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh'? So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate."

God designed marriage. God designed marriage as a relationship between one man and one woman for life. He did not design it with more than one wife. He did not design it as a temporary relationship.

Ecclesiastes 9:9 tells that this relationship was designed to give joy to both parties,

"Enjoy life with your wife, whom you love, all the days..."

Marriage should give enjoyment and love all our life. If the husband and wife follow God's advice, they can be blessed with love and joy.

Roles within Marriage

God made man first. Adam was made from the dust. The woman was made from the man. This was different to the animals where male and female were both made from the dust. There were good reasons for this. Adam was not to see the woman as a separate creature. He was to see her as part of himself. This has important consequences for his relationship with his wife. Ephesians 5:28-29 says,

"In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated their own body, but they feed and care for their body, just as Christ does the church."

The role of the husband is to love and care for his wife as if she was part of his own body - to love her as he does himself. Loving his wife in this way may be quite contrary to the culture in which he finds himself. This does not excuse him from his duty under Christ to love his wife.

The relationship between a husband and his wife is compared to the relationship between Christ and the church. We will read again from Ephesians 5, this time verses 25-27:

"Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless."

A husband is to love his wife as Christ loved the church. This is a very high standard indeed. He has a lifelong responsibility to love and serve his wife in this way. He must do everything he can to encourage her spiritually.

The role of the wife is described in Ephesians 5:22-24,

"Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Saviour. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything."

The wife is to submit to her husband as the church submits to Christ. As the church takes its lead from Christ, so the wife takes her lead from the husband.

1 Peter 3:3-6 gives similar teaching on submission and also highlights the beauty of this behaviour,

"Your beauty should not come from outward adornment, such as elaborate hairstyles and the wearing of gold jewelry or fine clothes. Rather, it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God's sight. For this is the way the holy women of the past who put their hope in God used to adorn themselves. They submitted themselves to their own husbands, like Sarah, who obeyed Abraham and called him her lord. You are her daughters if you do what is right and do not give way to fear."

The woman was made beautiful by God, but should not be overly concerned with her outward appearance. She should concentrate on developing the gentle and quiet spirit that God wants.

It should be noted from the description in Proverbs 31 that the submissive wife is also creative, energetic, able to make decisions, enterprising, nurturing and wise. She uses her God-given talents for the good of her husband, family and all those with whom she comes into contact both materially and spiritually.

These behaviours will bring love, joy and peace to the marriage. The closer the husband and wife can live to these ideals, the happier their marriage will be.

Problem Behaviours

If the husband behaves like a boss and ruler, he is not behaving like Christ. The husband is not to treat the wife like a servant or a piece of property,

"Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them" (Colossians 3:19).

This is emphasised in 1 Peter 3:7,

"Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers."

The husband may be stronger, but he **must not abuse his power**. A husband who abuses his position is a grief and a burden to his wife.

The husband must think about how Christ behaved. Christ took the role of a servant. The act of washing the feet was an act of service. He cared like a shepherd cared for the sheep. He cared for the church as he cared for his own body. Laying down his life was Christ's ultimate act of service for the church. He did everything he could to save the church.

The husband must do all he can to follow Christ's example of love and self-sacrifice. He must care for his wife's spiritual welfare so that they can inherit eternal life together.

If the wife behaves like a boss or ruler, she is not behaving like the church. Can you imagine the disciples bossing Christ around?

Proverbs 21:19 speaks of the trauma of living with an argumentative wife.

"Better to live in a desert than with a quarrelsome and nagging wife".

And,

"A quarrelsome wife is like the dripping of a leaky roof in a rainstorm; restraining her is like restraining the wind or grasping oil with the hand"
(Proverbs 27:15-16).

These are not examples of a submissive wife. Such a wife is a grief and a burden to the husband.

If a husband bosses his wife around or beats her, he cannot expect a happy marriage.

If a wife bosses her husband around, she cannot expect a happy marriage.

Marriage should be a partnership - not a power struggle. Each partner should help the other through the ups and downs of life as they journey together to God's kingdom.

God expects us to play our role in marriage as He designed it, whether we are husband or wife. We are blessed if we follow His instructions. We will suffer if we do not.

No Divorce

It will be obvious God does not want couples to divorce. If a husband divorces his wife, it is not an act of love and care. If a wife divorces her husband, it is not an act of submission.

Malachi 2:16 makes God's position clear,

"The man who hates and divorces his wife," says the Lord, the God of Israel, "does violence to the one he should protect," says the Lord Almighty. So be on your guard and do not be unfaithful."

Jesus supports this,

"So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate" (Matthew 19:6).

Those who divorce, try and undo what God has brought together. They work against the will of God.

There are two situations in which divorce is tolerated but not encouraged. One is the exceptional case where one partner is baptised and the unbelieving partner divorces them,

"But if the unbeliever leaves, let it be so. The brother or the sister is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace" (1 Corinthians 7:15).

In this case, it is not the believer who gets the divorce but the unbeliever.

The second occasion is sexual immorality. Jesus says this in Matthew 5:31-32,

"It has been said, 'Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.' But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, makes her the victim of adultery, and anyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery."

The question is what does it mean by sexual immorality. Is it a single act, an occasional act or a way of life? Let us look at the example of Hosea. Even though his wife was living with another man, God instructs Hosea to:

"Go, show your love to your wife again, though she is loved by another man and is an adulteress. Love her as the LORD loves the Israelites though they turn to other gods and love the sacred raisin cakes." (Hosea 3:1).

God did not give up on Israel. Hosea did not give up on his wife. So, we should not give up on our partner.

In conclusion, divorce is not something a believer should consider doing. Divorce is against God's intention for marriage. It is against the roles that He has given to the husband and the wife.

One Wife

Many cultures allow a man to take more than one wife. God did not design marriage this way. Taking more than one wife is against God's plan for marriage.

Having more than one wife causes big problems. For example, Jacob found that his two wives argued most of their lives and there was jealousy between the two sets of children. Jacob had a divided family.

If a man has more than one wife when he is baptised, he should not send any of them away. 1 Corinthians 7:17 says,

"Nevertheless, each person should live as a believer in whatever situation the Lord has assigned to them, just as God has called them. This is the rule I lay down in all the churches."

If a man has two wives when God calls him, he should stay with these two wives but not take any more. If a man has one wife, he should not take another.

Marriage lasts for life and only ends when one partner dies. Only at that point is the remaining partner free to marry again.

Not everyone can or should get married. If a believer is not married, they can dedicate their life wholeheartedly to God without personal distractions. The apostle Paul and Jesus were like this.

Some people are so keen to get married, they end up marrying for the wrong reason and are then trapped in an unhappy relationship for the rest of their life. It is better to remain single than be in such a marriage.

God designed marriage to be a loving relationship which brings joy and peace and fulfilment to both husband and wife for the whole of their lives. It should be a godly union where each helps the other on their spiritual walk.

Each should do their best to live out their roles, so they can enjoy the many blessings which God intended this relationship to give them.

Lesson 7: The Family

The Choice of a Partner

God has set us in families, and He wishes our families to be spiritually strong.

The choice of a marriage partner is critical to the spiritual health of a family. If this decision is made wisely, family life can be great. If the choice is made without proper care, it could be quite bad. Proverbs 12:4 tells us of these two outcomes,

"A wife of noble character is her husband's crown, but a disgraceful wife is like decay in his bones."

For believers it should be obvious that their marriage partner needs to be someone who shares their faith. If they do not love God, they will always be pulling us in a different direction. God says that we should 'marry in the Lord' (1 Corinthians 7:39).

A lot of information on the choice of a good wife can be found in Proverbs 31. The man should not choose a wife based on how she looks or how she smiles. As it says in verse 30,

"Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting; but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised."

The most important thing is their faith which is put into practice.

A lot of information on the choice of a good husband can be found in Job 29. Again, the choice should be based on his faith and what he does, not on what he looks like or the amount of money he makes.

In both cases, the partner needs to be God-fearing, wise, active in their faith, a good teacher and someone who cares for the needy. They should not be proud, selfish, uncaring nor indulge in drink, drugs or lust.

Any children from the marriage are likely to copy the behaviours of their parents, so any problem behaviours in a partner are likely to be emphasised in the children.

Parents and Children

The key relationship in a family is that between the husband and wife. After that comes the parent-child relationship.

God gave a special command about parent-child relationship in Exodus 20:12,

"Honour your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you."

It is repeated in Ephesians 6:2-3,

"Honour your father and your mother" – which is the first commandment with a promise – "so that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth."

This is a fundamental command to keep the family faithful and united. The command is so important that God promises blessings if people keep it.

This command is not dependent on parents being perfect. Parents deserve honour because they are parents.

Neither does this command stop when we become adults. Our parents remain our parents throughout our life. Proverbs 23:22 emphasises the need to keep honouring them even when they are old,

"Listen to your father, who gave you life, and do not despise your mother when she is old."

Those of us who are parents still need to honour our own parents.

If parents honour their parents, then their children would respect this giving of honour by their parents. It means that grandchildren will honour their grandparents. Honouring grandparents is one way of honouring our parents.

One of the ways children honour their parents is by listening to them. A child who refuses to listen to their parents dishonours them. The need to listen to parents is taught in Proverbs 1:8-9,

"Listen, my son, to your father's instruction and do not forsake your mother's teaching. They are a garland to grace your head and a chain to adorn your neck."

The father and mother have clear roles in educating the child in matters of God and life.

The child has a God-given role to listen to their instruction and follow it. Proverbs 4:1-4 refers to this,

"Listen, my son, to a father's instruction; pay attention and gain understanding. I give you sound learning, so do not forsake my teaching. When I was a boy in my father's house, still tender, and an only child of my mother, he taught me and said, "Lay hold of my words with all your heart; keep my commands and you will live."

The apostle Paul picks up the command and states it clearly in Ephesians 6:1,

"Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right."

Parents must teach their children about God. There are many commands to Israel on this subject. For example, Deuteronomy 11:18-19,

"Fix these words of mine in your hearts and minds; tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Teach them to your children, talking about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up."

Parents should take every opportunity to teach their children about God and His ways.

Not only are the parents to teach the children, but the grandparents should do so as well,

"Only be careful, and watch yourselves closely so that you do not forget the things your eyes have seen or let them fade from your heart as long as you live. Teach them to your children and to their children after them" (Deuteronomy 4:9).

Bringing the commands together

God told children to honour their parents. This means children need to listen and follow their instructions.

God told parents and grandparents to teach their children about God's ways, the good news of the kingdom and salvation through Jesus.

Ideally, we have two parents and four grandparents teaching the children about God. We have the children listening to their parents and grandparents, and we have the children acting on what they learn. This is how God designed the family to pass on faith to the next generation.

If parents and grandparents do not teach their children about God, then faith will die out. At stake is the salvation of future generations of God's people.

Children must be consistently taught about God, so that faith does not die out. Psalm 78:4-7 highlights this,

"We will not hide them from their descendants; we will tell the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the Lord, his power, and the wonders he has done. He decreed statutes for Jacob and established the law in Israel, which he commanded our ancestors to teach their children, so the next generation would know them, even the children yet to be born, and they in turn would tell their children. Then they would put their trust in God and would not forget his deeds but would keep his commands."

Believing parents have the prime responsibility for passing God's teachings on to their children,

"Start children off on the way they should go, and even when they are old they will not turn from it" (Proverbs 22:6).

If the child is consistently instructed through childhood, then by God's grace, they will remain faithful to God as an adult.

Both parents are vitally important in teaching the children, but fathers are given a specific instruction in Ephesians 6:4,

"Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord."

The ecclesia can help in teaching children by running a Sunday School and youth group.

A Sunday School is particularly important in ensuring that orphans and children with unbelieving parents are given the opportunity to learn about God.

When Parents are old

Another way for children to honour parents is by caring for them when they are old. 1 Timothy 5:8 states this very strongly,

"Anyone who does not provide for their relatives, and especially for their own household, has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever."

It is fundamental that if we are a believer, then we must look after our needy parents.

Often the woman is left alone and is elderly and vulnerable. 1 Timothy 5:4 makes it clear that these widows should be looked after by her children,

"But if a widow has children or grandchildren, these should learn first of all to put their religion into practice by caring for their own family and so repaying their parents and grandparents, for this is pleasing to God."

The burden of care should fall on the family rather than the church,

"If any woman who is a believer has widows in her care, she should continue to help them and not let the church be burdened with them, so that the church can help those widows who are really in need" (1 Timothy 5:16).

The widows who are 'really in need' are those who either have no family or whose family refuse to help her.

God in the Family

The family unit is strong if the parents and grandparents are believers. They ensure God's message is taught and the Bible is read. If one or more of them are unbelievers, this becomes progressively more difficult.

If one of the parents is an unbeliever, this may cause real problems. The parents may disagree over Bible teachings and one parent may try to prevent the children being taught God's principles or being baptised.

When an adult child hears the gospel call, they must decide whether to obey God despite the family saying otherwise. Clearly in such situations they should obey God.

In Matthew 10:37 Jesus taught,

"Anyone who loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves their son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me."

We are to obey our parents unless their wishes conflict with the wishes of God. Our faith may require us to make a stand against our father or mother. If this happens, Jesus tells us,

"And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life" (Matthew 19:29).

It is very hard if we must separate from those who are important to us. However, if we do, we will be well rewarded by our heavenly Father. Psalm 27:10 says,

"Though my father and mother forsake me, the Lord will receive me."

If we must live without a father, God will be our Father and He will not leave us.

A father who manages his own family in a godly manner can be an asset to the ecclesia. In 1 Timothy 3:4-5 we learn that elders in the ecclesia:

*"... must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him, and **he must do so in a manner worthy of full respect.** (If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?)"*

Many of the qualities of the elder are the same qualities found in the godly family,

"Now the overseer is to be above reproach, faithful to his wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money" (1 Timothy 3:2-3).

When we choose elders for our ecclesia, we need to keep these qualities in mind.

Summary

The family unit relies on two commands. Firstly, children must honour their parents. Secondly, parents must teach their children about God.

If children honour their parents, they are blessed by God with wellbeing and life.

If parents teach their children, they benefit from the godly behaviours of their children.

The godly family will be blessed by God and pass on the faith to the next generation. The ecclesia also benefits because it has godly members who are committed to following God's ways.

May God be with you as you seek to create a spiritually strong family unit.

Lesson 8: Caring for the Needy

Caring for the needy is a fundamental part of being a Christian. James 1:27 puts it like this,

"Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world."

This passage highlights the needs of the widows and orphans. These people typically have a hard and distressful life.

In some cultures, the state takes the lead in looking after widows and orphans. But in many cultures there is no state support. Widows struggle to provide the basics of food and clothing for her family. Often her family has poor nutrition and poor health.

A woman was not designed to do hard physical work. If she is in a farming community, she will struggle to work the land, especially if her health is compromised. She may be in debt due health care costs in trying to keep the husband alive and from his funeral.

A widow may be oppressed because she is an easy target. The husband's family may try and take over her house. Debtors may try and take her assets.

These people are the poorest of the poor. Life is a constant struggle. They have not wanted to be in this position, but they have no choice in the matter. It is people like this God wants us to help.

Christian Help

Helping the plight of the widow was one of the first activities addressed by the first Christians,

"In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Hellenistic Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food" (Acts 6:1).

This matter was quickly resolved by the apostles and procedures were put in place to help. Here was true religion in action.

We are told that the first Christians took care of the needy, even selling property for the sake of others,

"All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need" (Acts 4:32-35).

Here was a high standard of Christian living. They made sure that all the believers had food to eat.

These verses tell us that among the early Christians, there were *"no needy persons"*. All their basic needs had been met by their fellow-believers.

This was the culture that God intended for His people - that there should be no needy among the people. This was God's plan for His people from early times,

"there need be no poor people among you, for in the land the Lord your God is giving you to possess as your inheritance, he will richly bless you" (Deuteronomy 15:4).

It was not that Israel was so wealthy that there were no poor. There were poor people - but they were helped by others. Verses 7-8 explain,

"If anyone is poor among your fellow Israelites in any of the towns of the land the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward them. Rather, be openhanded and freely lend them whatever they need."

God's people were required to share what they had with the poor in their need. It is the same with God's people today. God does not want any of His believers to be in real need. It does not mean that we only help believers. We need to especially help believers,

"Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers" (Galatians 6:10).

What Needs should be met?

The needs of the poor that we are to meet are principally the basic needs of food and clothing.

When the people asked John the Baptist what they should do, he said,

"John answered, "Anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none, and anyone who has food should do the same" (Luke 3:11).

John did not say we should give so much so that we have none ourselves. Instead, we should share what we have.

Jesus makes it clear that this behaviour is fundamental to being a Christian. We read in this in the parable of the sheep and the goats. In the judgment, the believers will be separated into sheep and goats according to their care for the needy. Concerning the righteous, we read,

"Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty

and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me” (Matthew 25:34-36).

We notice that there is the same requirement to provide food and clothes for those without them. There are also other ways we can help the needy. We can give the traveller a place to sleep. We can visit the sick and look after the sick. We can visit and care for the prisoner.

The parable is very clear. We will not make it into the Kingdom of God unless we care for the needy.

The Needy

There are many types of needy people. There are the widows and orphans. There are the sick, the disabled, the traveller or foreigner, the poor and the weak.

These people may not have food and clothing even in normal times. But at times of food shortage, when the prices rise, it is these people who are the first to suffer. We need to look out for them, especially in the hard times. What would God think if there were believers suffering hunger near us and we did not help?

It is not just food and clothing they might need. They may need someone to protect them. Needy people are at the mercy of the oppressor. The oppressor may be after their money, their animals, their houses, their children and even their lives. The needy have no one to defend their cause in the community or in the courts.

Speaking up for the Needy

Someone must speak up for the poor and ensure that justice is done.

God Himself looks after the poor,

“He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the foreigner residing among you, giving them food and clothing” (Deuteronomy 10:18).

Looking after the needy is the work of God. Those who do this are godly people.

God says that if we help the poor then we will be blessed,

“The generous will themselves be blessed, for they share their food with the poor” (Proverbs 22:9).

And,

“Blessed are those who have regard for the weak; the Lord delivers them in times of trouble. The Lord protects and preserves them - they are counted among the blessed in the land - he does not give them over to the desire of their foes. The Lord sustains them on their sickbed and restores them from their bed of illness” (Psalm 41:1-3).

An example of this is Tabitha in Acts 9. She died. Yet her giving to the widows resulted in her being raised to life.

Another example was Cornelius, who gave gifts to the poor in Acts 10. Because of his generosity to the poor, Peter was sent to him to baptise him and welcome him into the fellowship of believers.

Not helping the needy

If the giving to the needy results in blessing, then not giving results in problems,

"Those who give to the poor will lack nothing, but those who close their eyes to them receive many curses" (Proverbs 28:27).

And,

"Whoever shuts their ears to the cry of the poor will also cry out and not be answered" (Proverbs 21:13).

If we do not help the poor, then this will hinder our prayers and our well-being.

If people go even further and make the lives of the poor worse, then God will rise up and show His displeasure.

We all have the command to look after the poor. We must do this individually, but we must also do this communally. The apostles told even the apostle Paul that he needed to remember the poor,

"All they asked was that we should continue to remember the poor, the very thing I had been eager to do all along" (Galatians 2:10).

Paul did this himself, making sure he had worked enough for himself and for others. He even arranged for the Gentile ecclesias to collect for the poor at Jerusalem,

"Now about the collection for the Lord's people: Do what I told the Galatians churches to do. On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with your income, saving it up, so that when I come no collections have to be made" (1 Corinthians 16:1-2).

Ecclesias follow this practice of collecting for the poor. The poor may be in their own ecclesia or they may be elsewhere in other ecclesias. An ecclesial collection is one way of making sure our brothers and sisters have their necessary food and clothing.

Principles in Giving

There are some principles of giving that should be followed.

Firstly, God is not trying to make you poor while you make others rich. He wants all His people to have enough,

"At the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. The goal is equality" (2 Corinthians 8:14).

Secondly, we must do it willingly,

"Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver" (2 Corinthians 9:7).

Thirdly, we will receive in proportion to what we give,

"Remember this, Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously" (2 Corinthians 9:6).

Summary

Helping the needy is an important part of our Christian life. If we do not help the needy, we cannot expect to get into the kingdom of God. And it will hinder our relationship with God.

Isaiah spoke about those who fasted and prayed to God. Under Christ, we do not have to fast. But we can take a lesson from God's advice to them,

"Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter – when you see the naked, to clothe them, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard. Then you will call, and the Lord will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I" (Isaiah 58:6-9).

If we care for the needy then God will listen to our prayers and bless us.

Let us have a heart of compassion for the needy and care for them in the way Christ would.

Lesson 9: Controlling the Tongue

In our last lesson, we learnt that we cannot claim to be true Christians unless we care for the poor and needy. The same is true of controlling our tongues.

"Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves, and their religion is worthless" (James 1:26).

James also warns us that the tongue is dangerous,

"Likewise, the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one's life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell. All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and sea creatures are being tamed and have been tamed by mankind, but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison" (James 3:5-8).

The tongue is as dangerous as fire or as a poisonous snake.

If we light a fire in our home, we make sure it is kept under control so that it does not burn our house down. It is the same with our tongue. The tongue can destroy, so we need to keep it under control.

If we had a poisonous snake in our house, we would make sure it was kept in a secure cage, so it does not hurt anyone. It is the same with our tongue. We must control our tongues so that it does not harm others.

Godly people control their tongue. David says this in Psalm 39:1,

"I said, "I will watch my ways and keep my tongue from sin; I will put a muzzle on my mouth while in the presence of the wicked."

Silence is a good option if we cannot say something good.

Controlling our tongue is especially important in times of challenge and stress. If our emotions are not under control, how will we be able to keep our tongue under control?

James 1:19-20 gives us this advice,

"My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires."

When we are angry, we will struggle to control our tongue. It is better to remain silent than to speak rashly and hurt others,

"The words of the reckless pierce like swords, but the tongue of the wise brings healing" (Proverbs 12:18).

If we speak spontaneously and lash out, it is like stabbing someone with a sword. We cannot live in harmony with others if we speak like this. Let us think carefully before we speak.

Changing how we speak

A change in the way we speak may be the biggest change people see in us after our baptism. People can easily see the difference between those who control their tongues and those who do not.

Firstly, we must be honest and speak only the truth.

Ephesians 4:25 gives us advice on how to use our tongues,

"Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to your neighbour, for we are all members of one body."

The people around us will know how honest we are. They will learn whether we tell lies, or half-truths, or whether we always tell the full truth. They will know if we blame others for our problems. They will know if we make excuses, so we do not suffer for our mistakes.

In many cultures, lying and half-truths are common - or even expected. But we must not be like this. We are no longer people of the world; we are people of God. God does not lie, so we must not lie. We may not have been fully honest in the past, but now we must be different.

One form of dishonesty is gossip – passing on bad things about others. Gossip spreads bad things around, without knowing whether they are true or not. Gossip only hears one side of the story and does not check whether it is true.

We should not indulge in gossip, because it often causes damage,

"Without wood a fire goes out; without a gossip a quarrel dies down. As charcoal to embers and as wood to fire, so is a quarrelsome person for kindling strife."
(Proverbs 26:20-21).

The tongue is a fire. It kindles quarrels and causes much upset. We must quench the fire and stop our tongue causing damage.

If the information does not build others up or encourage them, we should not pass it on.

Ephesians 4:31-32 says we must,

"Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you."

The bad behaviours listed are primarily expressed by the tongue. We should not use our tongue for such purposes. Instead of spreading bad things, we should be kind and forgiving. That is how Christ would react if he heard something bad about us!

Ephesians 4:29 gives additional advice about our speech,

"Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen."

Ephesians 5:4 defines some other things we should not use our mouths for,

"Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving."

We should not be using our tongues to talk about anything immoral, impure, or evil.

Instead, we should use our mouths for thankfulness and building up.

Our voices should not be instruments of destruction. They should be instruments of construction and goodness.

You can test yourself on this. Listen to yourself and reflect on what you say. Is it language that Christ would use, or do we sound as if we are still in the world?

The use of the tongue to wish harm on another is a misuse of the tongue,

"With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God's likeness. Out of the same mouth come praising and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be"
(James 3:9-10).

It is obvious that we are not to speak badly of God. In the same way we should not curse people who are made in God's image.

Speaking badly of God is wrong. This is called blasphemy. The original command said that we are not to consider God or His name as being of no importance.

In many cultures, the name of God is misused as part of everyday conversation. They do not consider His name as important. This is wrong. We must not do it. We must be different from the people around us.

Being judged for what we say

How we use our tongue makes a world of difference to ourselves. Jesus tells us that we will be judged on the words we speak,

"But I tell you that everyone will have to give account on the day of judgment for every empty word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned" (Matthew 12:36-37).

Even our casual remarks to others will be considered when we are judged. Therefore we must be careful about what we say. We should imagine that God is at our side listening to our words. If God was physically in the same room, we would be much more careful about what we say.

Proverbs 18:21 gives the warning,

"The tongue has the power of life and death, and those who love it will eat its fruit."

The tongue has the power to give life if we use it wisely or death if we misuse it.

God hears all our words. Our words reveal what is in our heart. Other people can only hear what we say, but God knows what we think before we speak,

"You have searched me, Lord, and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways. Before a word is on my tongue you, Lord, know it completely" (Psalm 139:1-4).

God can read our minds. We cannot hide our thoughts and words from Him. We need to make sure our thoughts as well as our words are pure.

God gave people the ability to communicate with each other. He expects us to use this gift to encourage and build up, not to misuse it - as the serpent did.

Speaking with grace

Our speech should be gracious, just as the words of Christ were,

"All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips" (Luke 4:22).

This is the standard of speaking we should be aiming for.

Ecclesiastes 10:12 says,

"Words from the mouth of the wise are gracious, but fools are consumed by their own lips."

How do we make our words gracious?

The word 'gracious' also means 'favour'. We are to use words to give favour to those we speak to. Like the gift of grace, our speech should be a pleasant gift to those who are listening.

We may not think the person we are talking to deserves this gift of grace. That is not the point. Grace is a gift given to someone who is undeserving. We need to speak graciously because Christ did.

Speaking with grace is a choice. If we make that choice, our words will be pleasant and bring encouragement to the hearers. Colossians 4:6 advises us to be like this,

"Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone."

Your words should taste good to those who hear them.

God is also gracious - especially when He deals with people. Let us talk like God does. We do not want God talk to us with arrogance, bitterness or anger. Let us make sure we do not talk to others that way.

Summary

The tongue is very dangerous and can cause great damage. We need to control our tongues.

Our speech should be different from those in the world. We should be honest. We should not gossip. We should avoid using our tongue for evil. People should be able to tell that we are different by the way we speak.

God hears everything. He can even read our thoughts. This should make us very careful about what we say. Our words should be gracious and should build people up, not pull them down.

There is a great blessing promised to those who control their tongues,

"Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult, but with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing. Whoever would love life and see good days must keep his tongue from evil and his lips from deceitful speech."
(1 Peter 3:9-10).

May God be with you as you try to honour God and man with the way you speak.

Lesson 10: Wisdom

Wisdom is 'skill in living'. With wisdom we can live better lives, make fewer mistakes, and obtain a blessed life. We all need wisdom to live.

Proverbs 3:13-18 says,

"Blessed are those who find wisdom, those who gain understanding, for she is more profitable than silver and yields better returns than gold. She is more precious than rubies; nothing you desire can compare with her. Long life is in her right hand; in her left hand are riches and honour. Her ways are pleasant ways, and all her paths are peace. She is a tree of life to those who take hold of her; those who hold her fast will be blessed."

Wisdom is more precious than the things man values. It is worth more than gold and precious stones. It can give us long life, honour, and peace. Money does not give us these things.

Wisdom from God

The wisdom that God is talking about comes from God Himself. God used this wisdom to make the world and He uses it to rule. To find this wisdom, we need to go to God.

Proverbs 2:6 says,

"For the Lord gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding."

We find the wisdom of God in the Bible. We need to think about what it says so that we get its wisdom and find 'skill for living.'

The world has its own type of wisdom. It is not the same as God's. In fact, God calls man's wisdom 'foolishness,'

"For the wisdom of this world is foolishness in God's sight" (1 Corinthians 3:19).

This means there are two types of wisdom – God's wisdom and man's wisdom. God calls man's wisdom 'foolishness'. So there is really only one type of wisdom - God's.

The Path of Wisdom

Wisdom and foolishness are two paths that exist in life. We can choose either to follow the path of God's wisdom or we can follow the path of foolishness. We have the choice.

Jesus speaks of this choice in Matthew 7:13-14,

"Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it."

There are two ways. The way of foolishness is easy to find, and many do. But the way of wisdom that leads to life is not easy to find. We must search for it to find it. We must search for it in the Bible.

We have a choice on how to live. But by whose standards are we going to live? Whose advice will we listen to - God's or man's?

There is a path which leads in the right direction. We need to find it,

"The path of life leads upward for the prudent to keep them from going down to the realm of the dead" (Proverbs 15:24).

The path of wisdom leads upwards to life and the path of foolishness leads downwards to death.

The first step in going on the path of wisdom is repeated several times in the Bible. One example is in Psalm 111:10,

"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; all who follow his precepts have good understanding."

We must fear God. If we fear God, then we will do what God wants. Ecclesiastes 12:13 tells us to do both,

"Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the duty of all mankind."

We must fear God, but we must not fear man. If we fear man, then we will do what man wants,

"Fear of man will prove to be a snare, but whoever trusts in the Lord is kept safe"
(Proverbs 29:25).

We either fear man or God. We must choose to fear God. That is step one on the path to wisdom. The wise fear God. The fool fears man.

Wise Friends

Someone who fears God has made a choice to avoid foolishness. They also need to choose their friends wisely. They must choose friends who think like them. The writer of Psalm 119 chose to be a friend of those who fear God,

"I am a friend to all who fear you, to all who follow your precepts"
(Psalm 119:63).

The Christian must be careful in their choice of friends. A good friend can help them in their walk along the right path. A bad friend can lead them in the wrong direction. Proverbs 13:20 says,

"Walk with the wise and become wise, for a companion of fools suffers harm."

Our choice of friends makes a big difference to our direction in life. If we are wise, we will choose friends who are on the same path as us. If we are wise, we will avoid friends who lead us in the wrong direction.

We need to think about this now that we have been recently baptized. Do the friends we had before baptism help us along the right path or not? Proverbs 12:26 advises us,

"The righteous choose their friends carefully, but the way of the wicked leads them astray."

Listening

An important feature of the wise is that they listen. Proverbs 9:8-9 says,

"Do not rebuke mockers or they will hate you; rebuke the wise and they will love you. Instruct the wise and they will be wiser still; teach the righteous and they will add to their learning."

The wise listen and learn. The fool does not listen and does not learn. The wise will even listen to a rebuke, because by learning from a mistake they become wiser. They even love the person who helps him become wiser. The fool hates anyone who rebukes them.

Someone who listens and learns is destined to become wiser.

Someone who does not listen is destined to become no wiser.

Proverbs 1:5 says,

"Let the wise listen and add to their learning, and let the discerning get guidance."

We need to listen and learn throughout our lives so that we grow upwards in our wisdom. One way we do this is by helping others learn the wisdom that is found in the word of God.

Applying Wisdom

The wise not only listen but they put into practice what they have heard. The book of Proverbs was given, so that the wise learn and then do. Proverbs 1:1-3 tells us this,

"The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel: for gaining wisdom and instruction; for understanding words of insight; for receiving instruction in prudent behaviour, doing what is right and just and fair."

The words of Proverbs and of Scripture are so that we do what is right and just and fair. The wise are not wise because of their knowledge. They are wise because of their wise deeds. When a person does what they learn, then they are wise.

By learning wisdom, we learn to become more like God. This is not just knowing what God wants us to know. It is doing what is right and just and fair, just like God does. It changes our character into being more like God's.

Jesus told several parables about wisdom. One was about house building. There were two men who built their houses: one on the sand and the other on the rock. The difference between the two men was not in knowledge. Both knew how to build a house. The difference was that only one put the words into practice,

"Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the wind blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the wind blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash" (Matthew 7:24-27).

We are all like builders building a house. Our house will only survive if it is built on a rock. In the same way, our lives will only pass the test if we have put into practice what we learn. Knowing the words of Christ is not enough. If we only know the words and do not do them, then we are fools.

Jesus taught another parable about five wise and five foolish virgins. They were all waiting for the bridegroom to appear. The wise were ready and the foolish were not. In the same way, we are wise if we are ready for the return of Jesus,

"Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour" (Matthew 25:13).

If someone is not ready, then they are foolish. They knew what to do. They knew why they needed to do it. But they did not do it.

The parables teach us that wisdom can be seen. It can be seen in the wise deeds that wise people do. If it is not seen, the person is a fool.

James 3:13 tells us that wisdom is seen,

*"Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them **show it** by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom."*

It then goes on to describe a different form of wisdom which does not come from God. This is the wisdom of the world – we read in verses 14-17.

"But if you harbour bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. Such "wisdom" does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice. But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere."

We show our wisdom by the way we behave. It is the wisdom of God that we must show, not the wisdom of this world.

Summary

God knows who are wise. He sees a person's wisdom by what they do. If we practice what is described in the Bible, then we are truly wise. But if we only listen and do not do what is right, then we are foolish.

We need to fear God and keep His commands. God's wisdom comes from the Bible, which we must keep reading and the put into practice.

The words of 2 Timothy 3:14-17 remind us of how the Bible can make us wise and this can save us,

"But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures. Which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work."

Let us prove we are wise, by listening, learning, and living the word of God. God's word of God can make us wise and give us God's skill for living.

We recommend you particularly read the book of Proverbs. This was written by King Solomon, the wisest man in the Old Testament. Of course, the wisest man of all was Jesus, and we can read his words in the gospels.

May you add to your wisdom throughout your life, as you put into practice what you have learned.

Lesson 11: Being the People of God

In this lesson we will think about what it means to be one of God's people. We will use the example of Israel to help us understand this.

When you were baptised, you became one of God's people. Peter tells us this,

*"But you are a **chosen people**, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy" (1 Peter 2:9-10).*

You were nobody special, but now you are one of God's own people. You were in darkness, but now you are in light. God chose you and was merciful to you. There is now a special relationship between you and God.

God is the creator of the universe and yet you are special to Him! He cares about you. He is on your side in the difficulties of life. He wants the best for you. He wants to forgive your sins and give you eternal life. He wants to put you in His Promised Land and bless you.

Now that is special!

The Blessings that come from being God's People

Being the people of God is a position of great blessing. God tells us this in Psalm 33:12,

"Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord, the people he chose for his inheritance."

Then God describes this blessing in verses 18-21,

"But the eyes of the Lord are on those who fear him, on those whose hope is in his unfailing love, to deliver them from death and keep them alive in famine. We wait in hope for the Lord; he is our help and our shield. In him our hearts rejoice, for we trust in his holy name."

Here are some of the blessings:

- 1) God will protect you.
- 2) God will provide your daily bread.
- 3) God will help you in your difficulties.

Because of these blessings, you can rejoice.

This relationship between God and His people is beautifully expressed in Romans 8:28-31,

"And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified. What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?"

Being a member of God's people is a position of great privilege. God planned to make you part of His people from the beginning. He called you so that He can justify you and glorify you. No-one can stop Him carrying out His plan. With God on your side, you do not need to be afraid.

God's People in the Old Testament

Let us now look at God's people in the Old Testament to learn more about this special relationship.

The original people of God were the descendants of Abraham. Abraham had a son called Isaac and a grandson called Jacob. Jacob's name was later changed by God to 'Israel'. Jacob did not really follow God until he got into difficulties. He realised he needed God by his side and so chose to follow God. Jacob did this by making a vow to God,

"Then Jacob made a vow, saying, "If God will be with me and will watch over me on this journey I am taking and will give me food to eat and clothes to wear so that I return safely to my father's household, then the Lord will be my God and this stone that I have set up as a pillar will be God's house, and of all that you give me I will give you a tenth" (Genesis 28:20-22).

There are similarities between Jacob's vow and your baptism. When you were baptised, you agreed that God would be your God.

Jacob asked God to provide him with food and clothing. God provides this for you as well.

Jacob made a commitment to give something back to God from the blessings he received. It is appropriate that you also give back to God some of the blessings He has given you. You do not need to give a tenth, but you must give something.

The Israelites were slaves in Egypt for four hundred years and then God freed them. He took them on a journey to the Promised Land under the leadership of Moses. On this journey God told them what He expected from them,

"Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exodus 19:5-6).

God considers His relationship with His people as a binding covenant. On the one side, the people will be God's special people. God committed to looking after all their needs.

On the other hand, the children of Israel agreed to keep God's commands which were the terms of the covenant. We read this in Exodus 24:7,

"Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read it to the people. They responded, "We will do everything the Lord has said; we will obey."

Both parties agreed to the covenant. The covenant was confirmed with spilling of the blood of an animal.

The covenant of Israel with God is like your own covenant with God. Ephesians 2:13 and 19 explains this,

"But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ ... Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household."

Through the work of Jesus Christ, you are a fellow citizen with God's people, the Israelites.

This work of Jesus is called the 'New covenant'. This covenant was confirmed by his blood. His blood is much better than the blood of any animal. In the same way, the New Covenant in Jesus is much better than the Old Covenant given through Moses.

We remember this new covenant when we break bread and drink wine each week. 1 Corinthians 11:25 makes this clear,

"In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me."

Like the children of Israel, we must keep God's commands,

"Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and everyone who loves the father loves his child as well. This is how we know that we love the children of God: by loving God and carrying out his commands. In fact, this is love for God: to keep his commands. And his commands are not burdensome." (1 John 5:1-3).

A Place of Meeting

When Israel became God's people, they set up a tent where God could meet with them. This was known as the 'Tent of Meeting' or 'Tabernacle'. This tent became a temple at the time of King Solomon. Both were places where God could live close to His people.

Christians do not have a building where they can meet with God. We are told that it is we ourselves who are the temple of God. 1 Corinthians 3:16 says,

"Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's spirit lives in you?"

Since we are the temple of God, God is close to us wherever we are. This means we need to be careful who we are with. 2 Corinthians 6:14-16 says,

"Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? Or what does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God."

Because we are God's holy temple, we must be holy in the way we live. We must not allow God's temple to become a place of evil.

God is our Shepherd

When Jacob was old, he looked back over his life and considered his relationship with God. In Genesis 48:15 we read:

"... the God before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked faithfully, the God who has been my shepherd all my life to this day."

God had been a shepherd to Jacob all his life. God had guided him, protected, and cared for Him.

God will also be your shepherd throughout your life if you walk faithfully before Him.

The words of Psalm 23 describe beautifully how God is our shepherd, and how He looks after us.

"The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he refreshes my soul. He guides me

along the right paths for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

Jesus is also our shepherd. Jesus said in John 10:14-15,

"I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me – just as the Father knows me and I know the Father – and I lay down my life for the sheep."

The good shepherd was not only willing to die for the sheep but actually did give his life to save us.

If Jesus is our shepherd, we must behave as his sheep,

"The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice" (John 10:3-4).

The sheep recognise the shepherd's voice and follow him. In the same way we must listen to Jesus' words and follow him.

Summary

When you were baptised, you became one of God's people. This was a vow you made to follow God. You vowed to keep His commands for the rest of your life.

This is a position of great blessing because God commits to care for you throughout your life. This care is seen in the role of a shepherd.

God will keep His covenant. There is no doubt about that.

We must keep our part of the covenant. We must continue to listen to His instructions and follow them.

God will be close to His people if His people are close to Him. May this be true for all of us.

We will finish with the blessing for you of Hebrews 13:20-21,

"Now may the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen."

Lesson 12: Coming out of the World

When God made the world, He made it very good. This did not last. God watched the world turn bad. We read what happened in Genesis 6:12,

"God saw how corrupt the earth had become, for all the people on earth had corrupted their ways."

The people chose to do evil until there was only one good family left. All except Noah's family were destroyed by the flood.

This is what happens when the world is left to itself. It turns away from God and becomes corrupt. If we remain in the world, this is what will happen to us.

When you committed your life to God through baptism, you turned away from the world. 2 Peter 1:3-4 speaks about this,

*"His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature, **having escaped the corruption** caused by evil desires."*

You have turned away from corruption of the world and towards God. You chose God - not the world. When you did this, you chose life - not death.

Leaving the ways of the world

Everyone who turns to God must leave behind the ways of the world. Romans 12:2 makes this clear,

"Do not conformed to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind."

This call to be different is seen in the lives of many faithful people in Scripture. For example, Abraham was told to leave his people and his father's house. (Hebrews 11:8-10). tells us,

"By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. He was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God."

Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob lived as strangers in a foreign country. They did not become integrated into the society around them. They were different.

The people of the world worshipped idols and lived in ways that were not good. An example of this is the words of Isaac's wife in Genesis 27:46,

"The Rebekah said to Isaac, "I'm disgusted with living because of these Hittite women. If Jacob takes a wife from among the women of this land, from Hittite women like these, my life will not be worth living."

There is clearly a big difference between living as God's people and living as a person of the world.

The Exodus

The best example of the need to come away from the things of the world is 'The Exodus' of Israel from Egypt. The children of Israel lived in Egypt from the time of Joseph to the time of Moses. They had to obey the laws of Egypt. But God did not want His people to be Egyptians. He wanted them to follow His own righteous laws.

God sent Moses to bring the Israelites out of Egypt and told them in Exodus 15:26,

"He said, "If you listen carefully to the Lord your God and do what is right in his eyes, if you pay attention to his commands and keep all his decrees, I will not bring on you any of the diseases I brought on the Egyptians, for I am the Lord, who heals you."

The Pharaoh of Egypt was not willing to let the children of Israel leave his land. So, God brought about the ten plagues on Egypt until Pharaoh agreed.

God showed Pharaoh and Egypt that the God of Israel was the only real power in the world. The greatest nation in the world at the time was nothing compared to Him. Only a fool would remain with the gods of Egypt. Anyone with sense would leave and follow the one true God.

The Exodus of Israel from Egypt is a pattern for the people of God. Just as Israel came out of Egypt, so God's people must come out of the worldly societies around them. 2 Corinthians 6:17 appeals to us,

"Therefore, "Come out from them and be separate, says the Lord. Touch no unclean thing, and I will receive you."

Christians are called to be different to the people in the world. We need to avoid the uncleanness of their ways.

The book of Revelation gives us the same appeal to be separate from the world,

"Then I heard another voice from heaven say: "'Come out of her, my people.' So that you will not share in her sins, so that you will not receive any of her plagues; for her sins are piled up to heaven, and God has remembered her crimes.""
(Revelation 18:4).

God's people must not indulge in the ways of the people in the world around them, which lead to sin. The world does not follow God's laws and it will be punished.

If the people of God are separate from the world, they will avoid the fate of those in the world.

Avoiding the fate of the world is best seen in the example of Lot in Genesis 19. Lot chose to live in the city of Sodom. At the time, the area was a beautiful place and very fertile. From a worldly point of view, it was a nice life.

But Lot was not happy in Sodom. We read in 2 Peter 2:8,

"for that righteous man, living among them day after day, was tormented in his righteous soul by the lawless deeds he saw and heard".

This is the problem with living in a world that is godless. It thinks, says, and does things that are contrary to God's commandments.

There is another problem. It is easy to copy the world and the things it does. As 1 Corinthians 15:33 says,

"Do not be misled: "Bad company corrupts good character.""

If we get close to the world, we risk copying its habits and turning back into worldly people. If we become worldly then we will suffer the fate of worldly people.

We can see this in the story of Lot. Sodom became so corrupt that God decided to destroy it.

But God did not want to destroy righteous Lot or his family. He sent His angels to bring them out of the Sodom. Only Lot and his two daughters were saved. Lot's wife was not saved because she looked back at that sinful city as if she loved it and still wanted to be there. We must not be like Lot's wife!

Jesus says the same thing in Luke 9:62:

"No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God."

Do not love the ways of the world

The apostle John says that we are to avoid loving the ways of the world. In 1 John 2:15-17 we read,

"Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, love for the Father is not in them. For everything in the world – the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life – comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but whoever does the will of God lives forever."

The world will be removed by God. When we say that the world will be removed, we do not mean the physical world. We mean the desires and the ways of the world. If we follow the will of God, then we will not be removed.

James also warns us against getting too close to the world. says,

"You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world means enmity against God? Therefore, anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God" (James 4:4).

This is strong advice. God says that we can only be a friend of one or the other. We cannot be a friend of both the world and Him.

The examples of Lot, the people of Israel in Egypt and Noah show what happened to the world when it's time of judgment came. The world was destroyed. This did not mean the planet was destroyed, but it meant that the people in it were destroyed. In all these cases, God saved the righteous. In all cases, God saved as much of their family as possible.

When thinking about these examples, Peter concludes,

"the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trials and to hold the unrighteous for punishment on the day of judgment" (2 Peter 2:9).

Our God is a God who saves the righteous. Our God wants us to save us too.

Children of God

We must live in the world. We cannot avoid this. But we must not live like the people in the world.

Instead, we must live like Jesus and be like him. John talks about this position in 1 John 3:1-3,

"See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Dear friends, now we are the children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. All who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure."

We are children of God! If we try to live pure lives and follow Jesus' example then, when Jesus returns, we will be made like him. We will be given eternal life and be made free from sin, death, sorrow, and pain forever.

The people in the world do not understand the children of God. We should not expect them to. We think differently and we behave differently. We should not worry about this. Jesus explains this,

"If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you" (John 15:18-19).

Summary

The world follows its own evil desires and will become more and more corrupt. It cannot stop itself. It ignores God's instructions on how to live. God will judge the world for doing this. The world – that is, the people who follow their own evil desires – will pass away.

We are called to be different. We must come 'out of the world'. That is, we must not follow these evil desires. We must follow the example set by Jesus.

We need to live as though we are citizens of God's kingdom now and display those qualities that God looks for in his people. Then when Jesus comes, we will become citizens of God's kingdom.

May God be with you, as you live in this world but avoid its evil ways.

Lesson 13: The Passover

The Passover is an example of how studying the Bible gives us greater understanding and teaches us more about Jesus.

The Israelites had been made slaves by the Egyptians for many years before God appointed Moses to ask Pharaoh for their release. Because Pharaoh refused, God sent a series of plagues on Egypt. Even though his country had been devastated by 9 different plagues, Pharaoh stubbornly refused to let the Israelites go.

In Exodus 11 and 12 we read about the final plague on Egypt, which caused Pharaoh to change his mind.

God told Pharaoh that His angel would go throughout the country killing every firstborn son in Egypt. He gave the Israelites instructions on what they must do to save their own firstborn.

If they followed God's instructions the destroying angel would **pass over** their houses. If they ignored these instructions, then their firstborn would die just like the firstborn sons of the Egyptians.

God's ability to save those who kept His commands was dramatic. Among the people of Israel, there would be no disturbance when the angel of death passed over. Not even a dog would bark!

The Passover Lamb

The key part of the Passover was the lamb. On the tenth day of the first month, each family was to select a year-old male lamb without any defect (Exodus 12:5) and care for it until the fourteenth day. As the sun dipped below the horizon, and before full darkness, the lamb was slaughtered. The Hebrew language describes this as the time "*between the evenings*". If a family was too small to eat a whole lamb, then they were to invite their neighbours to share it.

The lamb's blood was to be collected in a bowl and put on the tops and sides of the doorway using a small plant called a hyssop.

The Passover was not like a typical pleasant family meal for the following reasons:

- The lamb was roasted and eaten with bitter herbs and unleavened bread.
- They were to eat wearing their coats, with sandals on their feet and a walking stick in their hand.
- They were to eat quickly so they were ready to leave as soon as Moses told them to.

It was the blood of the lamb saved Israel from the destroying angel. When the angel saw the blood round the doorway, he would 'pass over' that house and not kill the firstborn. The people in the house were only saved if they remained inside the house, which was protected by the blood of the lamb.

The people were told that the Passover was not to be held only once. They were to perform the service annually as a reminder of the events of the Passover. The bitter herbs reminded them of the bitterness of slavery. The unleavened bread reminded them of leaving Egypt suddenly.

The Passover became the first 'feast' in the Jewish year, occurring in late March/early April.

The original Passover took place in Egypt. Later the Israelites were told to kill the Passover lamb at God's temple in Jerusalem. This meant that every year the Jews had to travel to Jerusalem to keep this feast.

The Meaning of the Passover

The Passover was about saving life and about freedom. But salvation and freedom were only possible if the Israelites followed God's instructions carefully.

If we look at other parts of the Bible, we discover that the Passover has a deeper meaning.

The centre of the Passover was the Lamb. We are told what the Passover Lamb represents in 1 Corinthians 5:7,

"For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed."

The Passover lamb represented Jesus and the sacrifice of the lamb teaches us about the sacrifice of Jesus.

Jesus was the perfect young male who was sacrificed to save us. Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey on the 10th day of the first month. This was the day that the Passover Lamb was selected for sacrifice.

Jesus was put to death on the day that the Passover lamb was killed and at exactly the same time of day.

There was three hours of darkness when Jesus was on the cross. Then it got light, and *"between the evenings"*, Jesus died.

Jesus died at the same place where the Passover Lamb was to be killed – Jerusalem. He died in the same place and at the same time as the Passover Lamb. As others were killing their Passover lambs around the temple, Jesus was killed outside the city.

Jesus died on a cross. His hands and legs were pierced by nails. This meant that his blood went on the wood of the cross. His blood was on the vertical and horizontal wood of the cross. This is like the blood of the Passover Lamb that was on the vertical and horizontal wood of the door frame.

The Passover Lamb was eaten with bitter herbs. It was a symbol of the bitter suffering that Jesus experienced. The hyssop plant that was used to spread the lamb's blood on the door frame was also present at Jesus' death.

No bone of the Passover lamb was broken. In the same way, none of Jesus' bones were broken. This was a feature of a righteous man,

"The righteous person may have many troubles, but the Lord delivers him from them all; he protects all his bones, not one of them will be broken"
(Psalm 34:19-20).

Jesus was a righteous man, so not one of his bones was broken.

We are told that none of the meat from the Passover lamb was to be left to the morning. In the same way, the body of Jesus was not left out on the cross overnight but taken down and put into a tomb.

The Passover Meal

The Passover meal was to remind God's people that God had freed them from slavery. The Passover meal is similar to our breaking of bread meal. The breaking of bread reminds us that we have been freed from slavery to sin by the sacrifice of Jesus.

For Israel, the Passover taught the need for sacrifice before they knew what it was about. The Passover meal pointed forward to the death of Jesus, even though they did not know Jesus.

For us today the breaking of bread service looks back to the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Whether it is Israelites keeping the Passover, or disciples of Christ breaking bread, all God's people are required to remember the cause of our freedom through the sacrifice of Jesus.

Christians do not need to keep the Passover feast as set out in the Old Testament. This is because they remember Jesus' sacrifice each week through breaking bread and drinking wine.

What was needed to eat of the Passover Meal

Any nationality could take part in the Passover - but there was one condition (Exodus 12:48),

"A foreigner residing among you who wants to celebrate the Lord's Passover must have all males in his household circumcised; then he may take part like one born in the land. No uncircumcised male may eat it."

Anyone who wanted to participate in the Passover needed to show their commitment to God by being circumcised.

In the same way, those wishing to participate in the breaking of bread service need to show their commitment to God by being baptised.

This makes sense. If someone wishes to benefit from Christ's sacrifice, they need to be baptised into his death and resurrection. Once someone is committed to following Christ, then they continue to remember Christ in the breaking of bread.

God only wants committed people to be His people.

Old Testament teaching about Jesus

The Passover is just one example of many in the Old Testament which point forward to the work of Christ. The Law of Moses has many links with Christ. You can see Christ in work of the High Priest, the altar, the sacrifices, the feasts, the Nazarite vow, the cleansing laws, and many other laws.

This is to be expected, because Jesus told us that he and the Law of Moses were linked. We read in Matthew 5:17,

"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish but to fulfil them."

The law taught about the work Christ would do and Christ fulfilled it in his life.

When we look at different things in the Law of Moses, we see the work of Christ explained. Galatians 3:24-25 puts it like this,

"So the law was our guardian until Christ came that we might be justified by faith. Now that this faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian."

A Pattern of Saving

The Passover provides a pattern as to how God would save His people through the sacrifice of Christ. This pattern of saving is repeated many times in Scripture. Noah's ark was another pattern of saving the righteous. You can look out for these patterns as you read your Bible.

When you read about an event, ask yourself: "Does this remind me of Jesus?" Look out for key phrases like "three days", which often links to Jesus' death and resurrection.

The Old Testament not only provides patterns of Christ's sacrifice but also patterns of his setting up of God's kingdom. These particularly occur in Joshua, Judges and the books of Kings and Chronicles.

When we see a pattern of Christ in an event, it confirms that God planned Jesus from the beginning and established a pattern which would be fulfilled in Jesus' life.

The patterns of the work of Jesus are God's way of teaching the gospel message even before the time of Jesus. It is a beautiful thing to see these links throughout the Bible and to learn from them.

For example, Isaiah 53 teaches us about the suffering of Jesus. Psalm 22 teaches us about the thoughts of Jesus on the cross. Psalm 118 teaches us about the confidence of Jesus as he nears his death.

We cannot learn all there is to learn by only reading the New Testament. To get a full picture, we need to learn from the Old Testament as well.

When we understand links between a certain passage and Jesus, it will help us understand other passages as well. For example, learning about the Passover helps us understand parts of the gospel of John and Revelation.

John's gospel tells us about John the Baptist and how he understood the work of Jesus. We read in John 1:29,

"The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"

John knew that Jesus was the Passover lamb and that he would die as a sacrifice for his people.

In Revelation 5:6, we have another reference to the Passover Lamb:

"Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing in the centre of the throne."

The lamb is Jesus, who was killed. He takes centre stage in the visions of Revelation. God's plan with the world is dependent on the sacrifice of Jesus.

In the gospels, we have many references to the Passover. We can now understand why!

Summary

We have learned about the Passover, which teaches us about the death of Jesus over a thousand years before it happened. We have learned that much of the Bible teaches us about the work of Jesus. This is the beauty of the Bible – it all connects like a master plan. God wrote the Bible and will ensure His plan happens.

When we learn such things, we become wiser. We also are in awe of God, who put so many beautiful patterns in the Bible for us to learn from.

The writer of Psalm 119:18 said,

"Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law."

Let us ask God to open our eyes as we read our Bibles. May we understand more about the good news of the kingdom and the name of Jesus Christ. Then we can give glory and thanks to God.

May God bless you as you seek to understand His word more fully.

Lesson 14: The Law of Moses

When Israel became the people of God, God made a covenant with them. God would look after them **if** they obeyed His commands. We read of this in Exodus 19:4-6,

"You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites.

The people agreed. We have their reply in verse 8,

"The people all responded together, "We will do everything the Lord has said." So Moses brought their answer back to the Lord."

God then gave the people the Ten Commandments in Exodus chapter 20. Ultimately God gave Moses about 600 specific commands. God also gave instructions on how to make the Tabernacle, the duties of the priests and how to carry out the various sacrifices. Together these are known as the "Law of Moses".

The Law of Moses was the agreement between God and the Israelites. It contains the commands and instructions that God wanted them to keep.

The Law of Moses taught the people the wisdom of God including the difference between right and wrong. The Law was their teacher.

For example, the Law of Moses taught about love. We read in Matthew 22:37-40,

"Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the

second is like it: 'Love you neighbour as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

As Jesus said, the Law of Moses is summed up in these two commands. Both are to do with love. Therefore, love is the basis of the Law of Moses.

If Israel kept the Law of Moses, they would have a better life and be blessed. For example,

- the cleanliness laws taught them to isolate infection and keep themselves clean. This meant they would be a healthy nation.
- The Sabbath laws taught them about the benefits of taking a rest.
- The marriage laws taught them the benefits of faithfulness to one partner.

There were many practical benefits of keeping the law.

On the other hand, if they did not keep the Law, then they would be cursed. God would punish them with events like famine, disease, and invasion by foreign armies.

Much of Israel's history can be understood from the point of view of whether they kept the Law of Moses or not. At times God sent judges or prophets to the disobedient nation to encourage them to keep these commands. Sometimes this worked - often it did not.

If the people broke one of God's commands, it was called 'sin'. This is like Adam. When Adam broke the God's command and ate of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, it was called 'sin'.

Jesus was the only person who kept the Law of Moses perfectly by keeping the commandments. Everyone else failed to live this way and sinned.

The Deeper Meaning of the Law of Moses

The Law of Moses taught about the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. We saw this last session when we learned about the Passover. The law led the people to Christ.

The Law taught the people to look out for a special prophet, who would be like Moses,

"The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your fellow Israelites. You must listen to him" (Deuteronomy 18:15).

Just as Moses taught them the words of God, so would this prophet. As Moses performed signs as evidence that his message was from God, so would this prophet.

The prophet 'like Moses' who was predicted in the Law was Jesus. When Jesus came, Israel was to listen to him. The people of Israel were on the lookout for this prophet at the time of Jesus. This is why Israel kept asking him to give them a sign.

The End of the Law

In the end, the leaders of Israel did not recognise Jesus as the prophet like Moses, despite the many miracles he performed. Instead of listening to Jesus, they killed him.

God knew they would. Many aspects of the Law predicted this, such as the Passover.

Through these events, God brought about His plan to replace the Law of Moses. This is explained in Galatians 3:19,

"Why, then, was the law given at all? It was added because of transgressions until the Seed to whom the promise referred had come."

The law was given until the promised seed of Abraham had come, that is, until Jesus came.

The Law of Moses pointed to the blessings of Christ,

"The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming – not the realities themselves. For this reason it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship"
(Hebrews 10:1).

The law of Moses was like a shadow. It gave the outline of God's purpose with Jesus, but it was not Jesus. Now Jesus has come, we do not need to keep the Law of Moses. The reality of Jesus is better than the shadow.

The Law of Moses and the first Christians

The early Christians were all Jews who kept the Law of Moses. But the gospel was also preached to the 'Gentiles' - that is, to non-Jews.

The early church leaders met to discuss whether Gentiles needed to keep the Law of Moses or not. We are given the details of their discussion in Acts 15. We read about their conclusion in Acts 15:19-20,

"It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from meat of strangled animals and from blood."

They agreed that Gentile Christians did not need to keep the Law of Moses. The church leaders wrote to the Gentiles instructing them not to do four specific things, because of the sensitivities of the Jewish Christians. Gentiles were asked:

- 1) **Not to** eat food that had been sacrificed to idols.
- 2) **Not to** indulge in sexual immorality. Christ also asks us to avoid this.
- 3) **Not to** eat meat of strangled animals. This is meat with blood in it. Eating this type of food would prevent Jewish Christians eating with Gentile Christians. This does not apply to us today.
- 4) **Not to Murder.** Christ also asks us to avoid this.

We do not need to follow the Law of Moses today. We do not need a temple or priests or sacrifices. These have all been replaced by the coming of Jesus.

People who still want to keep the Law of Moses

Not all Jewish Christians were happy about the end of the Law of Moses. Many of them taught that Gentiles should keep the Law and needed to be circumcised. Paul's letter to the Galatians particularly addresses this issue. It explains why it is not necessary for Christians to keep the Law of Moses.

Today there are various Christian groups who take things from the Law of Moses and argue that we should keep them now. We will give three examples of this.

1) Tithing

Tithing is where you must give 10% of your income to the church. This is found in Leviticus 27:32. Under Christ, we should give to the work of the Lord, but we do not have to give 10%. However, we decide what to give, which may be more or less than 10%. 2 Corinthians 9:7 says,

"Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver."

Whatever we decide to give we should give it cheerfully not reluctantly.

2) Priests

God ordained priests to present the sacrifices required by the Law of Moses. Under Christ there is no need for priests because Jesus gave his life in sacrifice once and for all.

Jesus said in Matthew 23:8,

"But you are not to be called 'Rabbi', for you have only one Master and you are all brothers."

We are all brothers. No one is above another. No one should have a special title. There is no description of the need for priests in the New Testament.

3) The Sabbath day

Under Christ, the Sabbath laws do not need to be kept. We are told this in Colossians 2:16-17,

"Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ."

It does not matter whether we keep the sabbath day or not. There are no special days in Christ. In Christ, we break bread each week. We usually do this on the first day of the week, which is Sunday, but there is no command to do it on a specific day.

We do not need to turn back to all or even parts of the Law of Moses,

"But now that you know God – or rather are known by God – how is it that you are turning back to those weak and miserable forces? Do you wish to be enslaved by them all over again? You are observing special days and months and seasons and years! I fear for you, that somehow I have wasted my efforts on you" (Galatians 4:9-11).

If anyone wants to keep the Law of Moses, they must keep the whole of the law not just parts of it. But why would anyone want to go back to the Law, which is a shadow, when we have the real thing in Christ?

God wants us to worship Him in truth, not with incomplete understanding,

"God is a spirit, and his worshippers must worship him in spirit and in truth" (John 4:24).

Freedom in Christ

Christ gives us freedom, which is wonderful, but it also comes with a danger. We could misuse our freedom. Galatians 5:13 warns about this,

"You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love."

We are free. But this does not mean we are free to do anything. Following the desires of our flesh is not what Christ wants us to do.

We are told what we should be doing in verses 16-18,

"So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law."

Those who are in Christ walk in the spirit and do what is described in verse 22-25,

"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit."

Another way of saying this, is that we need to behave like Christ. This is not easy. In many ways, this is harder than keeping the Law of Moses. We cannot just tick things off as being done on a checklist – we must do the Christ-like thing in every situation.

We will end with the final advice given in Galatians 6:15-16,

"Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is a new creation. Peace and mercy to all who follow this rule, even to the Israel of God."

We are not under the Law of Moses. We are new creatures in Christ. May God be with you as you live out your new life in Christ, so that you produce the fruit of the spirit.

Lesson 15: Holiness

In lesson 11, we learned that we became part of God's people when we were baptised. This means we need to be different from the world, as we learned in Lesson 12. This difference is summed up in the word 'holiness'.

We are told we must be holy,

"But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: "Be holy, because I am holy"" (1 Peter 1:15-16).

Peter goes on to say in 1 Peter 2:9-10,

*"But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a **holy nation**, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are*

the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy."

We are part of God's holy people. We have been chosen by God and must be holy because God is holy.

We need to be holy because Hebrews 12:14 warns,

"without holiness no one will see God".

Being Different

The word "holy" means "set apart, separate". We must be separate from the ways of the world. We read in Romans 12:1-2,

*"Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, **holy and pleasing to God** – this is your spiritual act of worship. **Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind**".*

We are not to be like the people in the world. Instead, we need to be transformed through God's word and become 'holy ones' who are pleasing to God.

We must live in the world, but we should NOT be like them. Peter tells us to live as if we are foreigners in this world,

*"Dear friends, I urge you, **as aliens and strangers in the world**, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us" (1 Peter 2:11-12).*

There must be a difference in the way we live, and this difference should be obvious to those around us. If we love the world, then we will not want to be different.

How can we live a holy life?

The book of Ephesians gives us many practical examples of what it means to be holy. Paul writes in Ephesians 4:22–24:

*"You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, **created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness**"*

Here is the change we need to make. We must change our way of thinking so that we become more like God.

Another way to think about "holiness" is to think of "godliness". We are to be like God, not like the world.

The word 'holiness' emphasises the difference we need to have from the world.

The word 'godliness' emphasises the likeness we should have to God.

We can break the practical advice of Ephesians down into four headings. If we follow this advice, we will go a long way to being holy or godly. Here are the four parts:

- 1) **Speech.** We must speak truth (Ephesians 4:25). We must use our speech to build people up (4:29). We must avoid foolish talk, obscenity, and bad jokes (5:4). We must be thankful (5:4).
- 2) **Self-control.** We must control our anger (4:26, 31). We must avoid bitterness, evil and fighting (4:31). We must avoid sexual immorality, impurity, and greed (5:3). We must avoid drunkenness (5:18).
- 3) **Love.** We must be kind, compassionate and forgiving (4:32). We must submit to others (5:21).
- 4) **Givers not takers.** We must not take other people's things. We must work. We must have enough to give the poor (4:28).

The first two points – speech and self-control - are about controlling the flesh. We must control our tongues and our bodies.

The second two points - love and givers not takers - are about walking in the spirit. We must show we live in the spirit.

If we only control the flesh, and do not walk in the spirit, we will not be like God. We will still be like the world but less so.

If we walk in the spirit, and do not control the flesh, then we will look like the world with bits of godliness. This is not like God either.

To be like God we need to both control the flesh and walk in the spirit.

God is holy. He is different from the world, and we must be like him.

Being like Little Children

Much of the above guidance is summed up in the example of being like little children. A little child does not know bad language. They speak the truth. They have not learned to lie.

A little child is not bitter, impure, immoral, and does not get drunk. A little child submits to others and tends to be kind. A little child does not steal and tends to share.

We must all be like little children if we are to inherit the kingdom. Luke 18:17 says,

"I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it."

We can summarise holiness as having 2 parts:

- 1) Controlling the flesh
- 2) Promoting the spirit

Controlling the flesh includes controlling what comes from the flesh, which is described in Galatians 5:19-21,

"The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God."

Promoting the spirit includes promoting the fruits of the spirit described in Galatians 5:22-25,

"But the fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit."

Someone who controls the flesh and promotes the spirit becomes a different person from one who follows their own desires. It is the difference between a godly person and a worldly person.

Differences between holiness and worldliness

We need to understand the differences between the holy person of God and the worldly person of the flesh. One way we can do this is to put their behaviours side by side and compare them.

Holy Person

Worldly Person

Patient

easily angered

Peaceful

argumentative, complaining, fights

Humble

driven by self-importance and pride

Faithful to partner

driven by poorly-restrained sexual desires

Self-control

gets drunk and overindulges

Happy at good things only

happy at all things including evil

Loves all including enemies

loves only friends

Kind to the poor

selfish

Speaks only good

speaks good and bad

Loves God's word

ignores God's word

Praises God

disrespects God

Gentle	harsh
Forgives	does not forgive
Does good even when it hurts	does whatever is necessary to avoid hurt/blame

There is a big difference between holy people and worldly people. Godly people are nicer people to be with.

God wants us to be like Him, as we read in Colossians 3:12-14,

*"Therefore, as God's chosen people, **holy and dearly loved**, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity".*

As God's people, we must choose to become holy and like God. It is not natural. We must take positive steps to become holy. It is like putting on clothes. We all choose which clothes we are going to put on each day. In a similar way we must choose the right behaviours and attitudes to put on each day.

Being Holy affects our future

How we behave makes all the difference when it comes to our future. A time is coming when God will reward everyone according to what they have done. God will judge the people in the world. Peter speaks of this time and tells us how to prepare for it,

*"But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything done in it will be laid bare. Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? **You ought to live holy and godly lives** as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming. That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat. But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness dwells" (2 Peter 3:10-13).*

Earlier in the chapter, Peter compares this future time with that of Noah. The world of Noah's day was destroyed. The literal world was not destroyed, but the evil people in it were. This is like how it will be in the future.

In the future, the world we are currently living in will be destroyed. The literal world will not be destroyed, but the evil people in it will be. This new age is coming. When it comes, it will come suddenly. If we are like the world, then we will pass away with the world. If we are like God, we will live forever.

We need to prepare for the day of the Lord by living holy and godly lives.

God knows whether we are holy or not. We cannot hide anything from Him. Just being a member of a community of holy believers is not enough. We must be holy ourselves.

We must ensure that we are holy when Jesus returns. This is one of the final messages of the Bible,

*"Let him who does wrong continue to do wrong; let him who is vile continue to be vile; let him who does right continue to do right; and **let him who is holy continue to be holy**. Behold, I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to everyone according to what he has done ...The grace of the Lord Jesus be with God's people. Amen" (Revelation 22:11-12, 21).*

May God be with you as you learn to live the holy and godly lives which He has called us to.

Lesson 16: Pride and Humility

Pride is a great danger for us. Pride is when people hold too high an opinion of themselves. It is a human weakness and appears unexpectedly among the best of people.

One example is King Uzziah, a good king of Judah,

"But after Uzziah became powerful, his pride led to his downfall. He was unfaithful to the Lord his God and entered the temple of the Lord to burn incense on the altar of incense" (2 Chronicles 26:16).

King Uzziah was not permitted to carry out the work of a priest. But in his pride, he went into the presence of God. God punished him by giving him leprosy.

We learn the following things about the pride of Uzziah:

- Pride developed when he was powerful.
- His pride meant he ignored God's instructions.
- He thought he was more important than he really was.
- In verses 7-8, we read that the reason Uzziah became powerful was because God had helped him win his battles. But Uzziah did not win through his own efforts. He forgot what God had done for him.
- This led to his downfall. He had leprosy until he died.

The words of Proverbs 16:18 were proved true,

"Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall."

God predicted that people would become proud when things went well for them. He warned the Israelites about this,

"Be careful that you do not forget the Lord your God, failing to observe his commands, his laws and his decrees that I am giving you this day. Otherwise, when you eat and are satisfied, when you build fine houses and settle down, and when your herds and flocks grow large and your silver and gold increase and all you have is multiplied, then your heart will become proud and you will forget the

*Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery”
(Deuteronomy 8:11-14).*

When things go well for people, they usually think they have achieved everything by their own efforts. They become proud and forget that all they have has been provided by God.

Paul gives Christians the same warning,

“Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment” (1 Timothy 6:17).

Riches can lead to people thinking they are better than those who are poor and make them forget that God has provided them with everything they have.

The danger of Pride

Pride develops under certain conditions. If we are richer, stronger, cleverer, faster, more powerful, more beautiful, have more qualifications, etc this can lead us into thinking that we are better than other people and make us proud.

If we think of our opinion of ourselves as a ladder, then pride takes us up a few steps and we look down on others. Paul tells us to not be like this,

“Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited” (Romans 12:16).

Pride produces trouble and disunity,

“Where there is strife, there is pride, but wisdom is found in those who take advice” (Proverbs 13:10).

A proud person is likely to argue with others and cause trouble. This is not how a Christian should behave.

Pride can lead us into sin,

“Haughty eyes and a proud heart – the unplowed field of the wicked – produces sin” (Proverbs 21:4).

Pride is a characteristic of the wicked and pride produces sin. A proud person starts to think he can do what he likes, even if it goes against what God has said.

Where Pride leads

Pride leads to disgrace,

“When pride comes, then comes disgrace, but with humility comes wisdom” (Proverbs 11:2).

This is what we learned in the case of Uzziah.

When someone becomes proud like this, God says that He will intervene,

“The Lord detests all the proud of heart. Be sure of this: They will not go unpunished” (Proverbs 16:5).

There is only one way that a person who is proud can go. From his high position, he will be brought down.

We see proud people around us all the time. The world is full of them. They strut around, speaking proud words and look down on others. They boast about their possessions and achievements. They have no patience with those they regard as lesser people.

But their downfall is coming. This is the rise and fall of the proud. We often just see the rise of the proud and their exalted lives. But their downfall is coming. Isaiah 2:17 tells us that God will bring the reign of the proud to an end,

"The arrogance of man will be brought low and human pride humbled; the Lord alone will be exalted in that day."

When we see these arrogant people with their power and luxury there is a danger that we wish we were like them. This is the trap that David almost fell into,

"But as for me, my feet had almost slipped; I had nearly lost my foothold. For I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked" (Psalm 73:2-3).

When he thought about this, he was troubled. But when he thought about what would happen to them, he was no longer troubled. Verses 16 and 17 read,

"When I tried to understand all this, it troubled me deeply till I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood their final destiny."

We should not wish to be like the proud. The downfall of the proud is coming. We do not envy their decline and fall.

What we can be proud of

Proud people take pride in things they have no right take pride in. They have not gained these things because of how great they are. All their talents and possessions are from God,

"What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?" (1 Corinthians 4:7).

God in his love and wisdom has given us whatever possessions and skills we possess. We should be praising and thanking God for his kindness, not boasting about how great we are.

Jeremiah tells us what we can boast about in,

"This is what the Lord says: "Let not the wise boast of their wisdom or the strong boast of their strength or the rich boast of their riches, but let the one who boasts boast about this: that they have the understanding to know me, that I am the Lord, who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight," declares the Lord" (Jeremiah 9:23-24).

We can boast about the fact that we know God.

The only reason we are special is because of what God has done for us, what He is doing for us and what He has promised to do for us. Ephesians 2:8-9 makes this clear,

"For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not of works, so that no one can boast."

There is nothing about ourselves that we can boast about – everything comes from God.

A Principle about living

God turns human values upside down. What is valuable to man becomes worthless. What is high becomes low.

In Proverbs 29:23 says,

"Pride brings a person low, but the lowly in spirit gain honour."

The opposite is also true. With God, the despised becomes the most important. The least becomes the greatest. The last becomes the first.

According to God's assessment the humble person has a high position while the proud has a low one.

This is a general principle in Scripture. Jesus put this simply,

"For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted" (Luke 14:11).

We have a choice. We can become proud, in which case God will humble us. Or we can become humble, in which case God will exalt us. Which strategy are we going to follow in our lives?

Pride was a problem for the disciples of Jesus. He caught them arguing over who was the most important,

"An argument started among the disciples as to which of them would be the greatest. Jesus, knowing their thoughts, took a little child and had him stand beside him. Then he said to them, "Whoever welcomes this little child in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. For it is the one who is least among you all who is the greatest" (Luke 9:46-48).

We need to become like little children, to become the least so we can become the greatest.

Jesus gave his disciples a practical lesson in humility at the Last Supper when he washed their filthy feet. We are to do the same for each other,

"Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you" (John 13:14-15).

Let us follow his instructions and humbly serve our brothers and sisters.

Humility is needed

A time is coming when the humble will be exalted and the proud brought low. That time is when Jesus returns.

God values the humble and wants each of us to be humble,

"These are the ones I look on with favour: those who are humble and contrite in spirit, and who tremble at my word" (Isaiah 66:2).

The humble listen to God's words carefully and follow them. But the proud think they know better. They do not listen to God's words or follow them.

When we think about the great men in the Bible, we realise they were humble. Moses was very meek. David was a humble shepherd boy and despite becoming King of Israel remained humble throughout his life.

Then there is Jesus. He is the greatest example of humility this world has seen. He is the one we are trying to follow,

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."
(Matthew 11:28-30).

Let us take up his invitation and learn from him how to walk humbly with our God.

Summary

Pride is a danger for all believers. It is a great danger for those who think they are better than others. But pride leads to trouble, sin, and destruction.

We should not envy the proud. Their downfall is coming.

God sees things differently from man. According to God, the humble are in a high position. And the proud are in low position. The proud are foolish because they take pride in gifts that God gave them. They need to humble themselves before God humbles them.

To please God, we need to be humble. Peter tells us in,

"Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time" (1 Peter 5:6).

Let us remember God's advice to us and make sure that we stay humble.

May God be with you as try and live your life in that way.

Lesson 17: Guard your Heart

Our heart is who we are. It is how we think. We must look after our heart carefully.

Just as we must look after our beating heart, so we must look after our spiritual heart. Both can become diseased if we do not look after them. This lesson looks at two spiritual diseases we must avoid. We must keep our heart pure.

We will start by considering sexual purity and then we will consider alcohol. God has expectations around these two areas, and we must know what He expects.

The expectations are simple and reasonable. For sexual purity, we must not have sex with anyone except our wife or husband. For purity around drinking, we must not get drunk. There is a lot of advice in the Bible of both topics.

Those who are pure in heart will be blessed as Jesus told us,

"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God" (Matthew 5:8).

At stake is our fellowship with God.

Sexual Purity

Ephesians tells us that we must not get involved in sexual immorality in any way,

"But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people" (Ephesians 5:3).

Indulging in sexual immorality is not what God wants His holy people to do. If you want to learn about specifics, read Leviticus chapters 18 and 20. Although they are part of the Law of Moses, God's principles around sexual self-control is the same for Christians.

We read of God's general attitude to sexual immorality in 1 Thessalonians 4:3-7,

"It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; that each of you should learn to control your own body in a way that is holy and honourable, not in passionate lust like the pagans, who do not know God; and that in this matter no one should wrong or take advantage of a brother or sister. The Lord will punish all those who commit such sins, as we told you and warned you before. For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life."

God's people must control their sexual lust. We are not free to indulge in sex just to satisfy our desires. We must control ourselves.

We will look at several examples of sexual immorality. There was a case of sexual immorality in the Corinthian ecclesia. While the case itself was bad enough, the proud attitude of the ecclesia was even worse,

"It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that even pagans do not tolerate: A man is sleeping with his father's wife. And you are proud! Shouldn't you rather have gone into mourning and have put out of your fellowship that man who has been doing this?" (1 Corinthians 5:1-2).

The case of sexual immorality was wrong, but the ecclesia was proud of it! With that sort of attitude, sexual immorality would spread to others in the ecclesia. The apostle Paul highlighted this danger in verse 6,

"Your boasting is not good. Don't you know that a little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough?"

There was a real danger of sexual immorality spreading to others like leaven spreads through a batch of dough. The whole ecclesia could become corrupted unless action was taken. To stop the whole ecclesia being contaminated, the sexually immoral person had to be removed and the ecclesia needed to change its attitude towards sexual immorality.

Our bodies are not to be used for sexual immorality,

"You say, "Food for the stomach and the stomach for food, and God will destroy them both." The body, however, is not meant for sexual immorality but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body" (1 Corinthians 6:13).

The Corinthians were arguing that since the body was going to be destroyed, what the body did was not important. This logic comes from Greek philosophy and not from God. Paul makes it clear that our body is the Lord's, and we must honour Him with our bodies.

We must beware of false teachers who say that sexual immorality is OK. Sexual immorality is not OK with God and never has been.

Paul also gives an example of sexual immorality from the past. In this case, God acted immediately to punish those who committed it,

"We should not commit sexual immorality, as some of them did – and in one day twenty-three thousand of them died" (1 Corinthians 10:8).

Paul was referring to an incident which occurred during the Exodus which is recorded in Numbers 25:1-3,

"While Israel was staying in Shittim, the men began to indulge in sexual immorality with Moabite women, who invited them to the sacrifices to their gods. The people ate the sacrificial meal and bowed down before these gods. So Israel yoked themselves to the Baal of Peor. And the Lord's anger burned against them."

God intervened and destroyed those of His people who committed sexual immorality. Clearly God does not like sexual immorality.

The incident with Israel happened because there was a false teacher, called Balaam, who taught the people that sexual immorality was OK. We are told this in Revelation 2:14,

"Nevertheless, I have a few things against you: There are some among you who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin so that they ate food sacrificed to idols and committed sexual immorality."

These words were written to the Christian ecclesia at Pergamum. People in the ecclesia were following the teachings of Balaam and teaching others that sexual immorality was OK. Clearly Jesus did not think it was OK.

These letters are warnings to us about false teachers who teach that sexual immorality is OK for Christians. We must avoid such people and such behaviour. This is not the standard that God has set for His holy people.

Sex within Marriage

We all have sexual desires. They were given to us by God to enable the husband and wife to enjoy sexual pleasure within their marriage and to have children. They were never intended for man or woman to look for sexual pleasure outside marriage. Paul speaks about this in 1 Corinthians 7:1-3,

"Now for the matters you wrote about: "It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman." But since sexual immorality is occurring, each man should have sexual relations with his own wife, and each woman with her own husband. The husband should fulfil his marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband."

Sex was designed for marriage,

"Marriage should be honoured by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral" (Hebrews 13:4).

Sexual pleasure within marriage is pure. Outside marriage it is impure.

We must honour our marriage vows and remain faithful to our partner for life. If we find ourselves in a situation of temptation, then we must avoid these situations.

Control of Sexual Lust

Sexual desires come from within our heart. Jesus told us this in Matthew 15:19,

"For out of the heart come evil thoughts – murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander."

Whether we are married or single, we must control our evil thoughts.

Even if we do not commit the act physically, committing the act mentally is still a problem. Jesus makes this clear in Matthew 5:27-28,

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart."

This raises the standard of holiness to a very high level. This is the standard that has been set by Jesus and it is what we are aiming for.

Job gives us a good example to follow. Job 31:1,

"I made a covenant with my eyes not to look lustfully at a young woman."

We can help ourselves by avoiding images which cause us to lust. Better to not see the image, than to have to fight the image repeatedly once it is inside our heads. We need to be careful what we allow ourselves to watch.

Drunkenness

Now let us talk about alcohol. It should be clear that people who are drunk do not behave in a Christian manner. There are several problems which God highlights.

People who get drunk start shouting and using bad language,

"Wine is a mocker and beer a brawler; whoever is led astray by them is not wise" (Proverbs 20:1).

Then they start arguing and fighting,

"Who has woe? Who has sorrow? Who has strife? Who has complaints? Who has needless bruises? Who has bloodshot eyes? Those who linger over wine, who go to sample bowls of mixed wine" (Proverbs 23:29-30).

The passage continues to describe the increasing effects of being drunk in verses 32-35,

"In the end it bites like a snake and poisons like a viper. Your eyes will see strange sights, and your mind will imagine confusing things. You will be like one sleeping on the high seas, lying on top of the rigging. "They hit me," you will

say, "but I'm not hurt! They beat me, but I don't feel it! When will I wake up so I can find another drink?"

The drunk person has been poisoned by his drink. His mind is confused, and he does not know what is real and what is not. He cannot tell the difference between good and evil in this state. The same is true when people take drugs instead of drinking alcohol. Drugs cause the same problems.

When people are drunk, they do not know what they are doing and will not keep God's laws. They forget their poverty, traumas, and problems but they forget everything else as well. They distress their family and community. God does not want this type of behaviour.

Impurity

Drunkenness and sexual immorality are two examples of behaviours which cause believers to become impure and unholy. God is clear that believers who do these things are not really His people. We read in 1 Corinthians 5:9-11,

"I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people – not at all meaning the people of this world who are immoral, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters. In that case you would have to leave this world. But now I am writing to you that you must not associate with anyone who claims to be a brother or sister but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or slanderer, a drunkard or swindler. Do not even eat with such people."

God is instructing those who are truly His people to separate from people like this.

The most important thing we can do is to guard our hearts and keep it pure. As the wise man said,

"Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it. Keep your mouth free of perversity; keep corrupt talk far from your lips. Let your eyes look straight ahead; fix your gaze directly before you. Give careful thought to the paths for your feet and be steadfast in all your ways. Do not turn to the right or to the left; keep your foot from evil" (Proverbs 4:23-27).

My dear brother, my dear sister. Guard your heart. Keep it pure. Protect it. Your heart is who you are. Do not let anything spoil it.

May God be with you.

Lesson 18: Sin and Forgiveness

Sin is a problem that does not end at baptism. Our sins are washed away at baptism, but that does not stop us sinning. We will sin again and that means we will require forgiveness again.

Forgiveness for these sins comes in prayer through Jesus. Jesus taught his disciples to pray for forgiveness in the Lord's prayer,

"And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one" (Matthew 6:12-13).

We should pray for help with our temptations, but the sad reality is that despite our best efforts we will sin. We must pray for forgiveness when this happens.

Confessing our sins is something we must do. 1 John 1:8-10 says,

"If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word is not in us."

We all sin. Even Christians sin.

Wrong Attitudes

There are several wrong attitudes we can have with sin and forgiveness.

Firstly, because the process of forgiveness seems easy, we may not consider that the sin itself as much of a problem. This would be a big mistake. Sin brings trouble and death.

Secondly, because forgiveness seems easy, we may be tempted to commit sin because forgiveness is so easy. Someone who thinks like this, does not understand God,

"If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God" (Hebrews 10:26-27).

As followers of Christ, sinning is not something we choose to continue to do. It says in 1 John 3:9,

"No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God's seed remains in them; they cannot go on sinning, because they have been born of God."

We must choose not to sin, because we have chosen to follow God's word. Because that is what we choose to do, any sin will be a mistake and not what we wanted.

The third wrong attitude is thinking that our sin is not as bad as someone else's. This leads people into thinking that they are better than other people. To think we are good because we have only done small sins is poor thinking. All sin is against God and all sin will lead to death.

Within the Ecclesia

Within the ecclesia, we are all forgiven sinners. We are all equal. We are all people who have chosen not to follow the way of sin but to follow Christ.

Many brothers and sisters in Christ are disappointed when they come across other brothers and sisters who sin. Somehow, they expect them never to sin! This is not what we are told. Nowhere does it say that our brothers and sisters have already become perfect. They are human like we are. We will sin and so will they. The real question is what we will do when we come across others who sin?

In order to answer this question, let us think about God and His attitude to sin. God knew man would sin. He does not like this, but He accepted the reality of the situation. He provided a means by which man could be forgiven. Ultimately, He provided Jesus.

And think about Jesus and his attitude to sin. Jesus was willing to die to enable the forgiveness of sinners.

To be like God and Jesus, we too must seek the forgiveness of the sinner. Jesus taught us this,

"If your brother or sister sins against you, rebuke them; and if they repent, forgive them. Even if they sin against you seven times in a day and come back to you saying 'I repent,' you must forgive them" (Luke 17:3-4).

In this example, we have the example of a sin against ourselves. When this happens, we can rebuke them for it. When they repent, we must be prepared to forgive them. Even if this happens numerous times in a single day, we must be prepared to forgive them.

Note it does not say we just ignore the sin. Sin still needs to be recognised as sin so it can be repented of. And if it is repented of, it must be forgiven.

Colossians 3:13 puts it this way,

"Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you."

The need to forgive others is very important for us – not just for the sinner. Jesus said,

"For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others sins, your Father will not forgive your sins" (Matthew 6:14-15).

We must forgive others, so that our own sins are forgiven.

God will treat us as we treat other people. If we forgive, we will be forgiven. If we do not forgive, we will not be forgiven.

Jesus taught the importance of mercy and forgiveness in the parable of the unmerciful servant at the end of Matthew 18. In this parable, a servant owed a lifetime of wages to a king. The king threatened to sell the servant and his family as slaves to pay the debt. When the servant pleaded, the king was merciful and released him from all his debt.

A little later, that same servant found another servant who owed the first servant a day's wages. The other servant pleaded for mercy. However, the first servant was not merciful and threw the second into prison.

In the final twist to the parable, the king found out what had happened and threw the first servant into prison. The parable ends with the words,

"This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart."

God is the king of the parable who forgives us so much. In view of this, we should forgive the little that others owe us. We must forgive each other and when we forgive it must be *"from the heart"*.

Forgiven Sinners

King David was a faithful man who followed God with all his heart. Even he sinned. And his sin was significant. He committed adultery with his neighbour's wife. He then arranged for her husband to be killed. Even with these sins, God forgave him.

We read about David's thoughts on his own sin in Psalm 51. He appealed to God for mercy,

"My sacrifice, of God, is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart you, O God, will not despise" (Psalm 51:17).

David admitted his fault and humbled himself. All sinners need to admit fault and humble themselves. David teaches us something from his experience in verse 13,

"Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will turn back to you."

David tells us, if I can be forgiven, then all sinners can be forgiven. Even significant sins can be forgiven, because God is very merciful. Sinners **can** come back to God. We should not despair if this happens to us. Nor should others despair if it happens to them. We must help them see this.

The apostle Paul also made big mistakes. He supported the death of Christians and so was guilty of murder. When speaking about this, he says,

"Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners – of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his immense patience as an example for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life" (1 Timothy 1:15-16).

If Paul can be forgiven, and if David can be forgiven, the brothers and sisters can be forgiven. We all need to remember this.

Finding the Lost

When someone thinks about their sin so that they despair, they can become lost. God does not want to lose anyone.

Jesus teaches this in the three parables in Luke 15 – the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost son. He did this because the Pharisees and teachers of the law were complaining about Jesus associating with sinners. The parables teach that heaven rejoices when a sinner repents. For example, in Luke 15:10,

"In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

Some of Jesus' followers were greedy tax collectors and prostitutes. They forsook their sin, repented and followed Jesus. Forgiveness and repentance is possible for all.

Our role is to help God in keeping people right with God, even if they have sinned. Paul makes this clear,

"All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God

were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God" (2 Corinthians 5:18-20).

God's work is to make people right with God. This can only happen if sin is recognised as sin, and is repented of. We need to help those who sin to understand that they have sinned, so they can repent and stop it. Forgiveness is available for those who admit sin, repent of it and stop it.

How to Approach a Sinner

Jesus tells us how to approach the problem of sin with others. This is the model we can use as well,

"If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over. But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church; and if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector" (Matthew 18:15-17).

When we notice sin, we should help our brother or sister by pointing it out privately. We do not want them to get into trouble with God. We should not go around telling other people about it.

If that does not work, then we should take one or two others along.

If that does not work, then we involve the whole ecclesia. The ecclesia can then use its collective wisdom to decide what to do. Among the options there is the possibility of stopping fellowship with them for a time. If this does occur, the aim is to win them back for Christ through repentance.

Summary

Sin causes trouble and brings death.

God does not want people to remain in a state of sin. He wants them to understand their sin and repent. He does not want them to become lost. An important part of the work of God is to seek the lost. If they repent, then there is joy in heaven.

God wants us to forgive others so that we too can be forgiven. In this way, we can all have a right relationship with God.

We hope that this lesson will help you and others if and when you face these situations.

May God give you the wisdom you need at these times.

Lesson 19: Unity in Christ

Brothers and sisters in Christ must be united. We have come out of the world to be together as God's united people. Unity is a strong theme throughout the New Testament. For example, in Ephesians 4:3-6,

*"Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is **one** body and **one** spirit, just as you were called to **one** hope when you were called; **one** Lord, **one** faith, **one** baptism; **one** God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all."*

Living in unity with our brothers and sisters is not some minor guideline we can follow or not – we are instructed to make "**every effort**" to live in this way.

Unity among believers was God's intention in the Old Testament as well, for example,

"How good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity!"
(Psalm 133:1).

God likes it when His people live together in unity.

Examples of Unity

God gives us many different illustrations to help us understand the need for unity.

Paul used the example of the body in 1 Corinthians 12:12-14,

"Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. For we were all baptised by one Spirit so as to form one body – whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free – and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. Even so the body is not made up of one part but of many."

We are all important parts of the body. Just as the body works together in a united way, so should believers. Even the less pleasant parts of the body are important to the overall function of the body. Christ is the one head of this body.

Jesus used the example of the vine in John 15:5-6,

"I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned."

The true believers make up the branches of the single vine which is Jesus.

The New Testament gives other examples to teach us the need for unity.

We are one building with Jesus as the chief corner stone.

We are one flock with Jesus as the shepherd.

Unity in Christ is a fundamental teaching. We must be united with our fellow brothers and sisters.

You may think that being united is easy. We all believe the same gospel and follow God's commandments so it should be easy. But this is not what happens in reality.

We all come from different families, different backgrounds, different cultures. We all think in different ways.

Consider marriage. It is not always easy for two people to agree, even though they have chosen to live with each other. Now consider the ecclesia. When there are many people in the ecclesia, people we have not chosen to share their lives with, it is much harder.

The Corinthian ecclesia was an example of this. Paul wrote,

"For I am afraid that when I come I may not find you as I want you to be, and you may not find me as you want me to be. I fear that there may be discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, slander, gossip, arrogance and disorder" (2 Corinthians 12:20).

Because of their lack of unity, Paul was going to have to come with some strong advice. He had already warned them in the first letter,

"You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarrelling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere humans?" (1 Corinthians 3:3).

We must not behave like this in our ecclesia. The ecclesia is supposed to be spiritual not worldly. We are called to be united, not divided.

How to be United

The key to unity is our attitude towards each other. Paul begins the practical half of his letter to the Ephesians with this most important instruction,

"Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:2-3).

If brothers and sisters are humble, gentle, patient and loving then there can be unity and peace. We need to overcome our natural tendencies and love all our brothers and sisters.

The Philippian ecclesia had a problem with unity as we read in Philippians 2:1-5,

"Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus."

Humility and love. We have those two words again. Humility means we are not trying to get what we want. Instead we are willing to listen to others and consider their wishes. Love means we want the best for other people. These are the attitudes Jesus had.

If we are humble and loving, we are not worldly and we will live in unity.

We have written about humility in a previous lesson, so we will not say any more on this. Here, let us speak more about love. The greatest chapter on love is 1 Corinthians 13. Reading from verses 4-7,

"Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonour others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres."

Bible love is more than just a warm emotion. It is an active choice to behave in an unselfish manner out of love for others. If we behave in these ways towards each other, then we will live in harmony and unity with our brothers and sisters.

Notice that this type of love does not give up - whatever happens, love perseveres.

As Christians, these behaviours need to become part of our character. The ecclesia is a great place to show that we are followers of Jesus by developing his characteristics.

Living in the Ecclesia

Being a member of an ecclesia requires us to follow the wishes and actions of the ecclesia. These will not always be the same as our wishes. Out of love we will change our wishes for the sake of the ecclesia. For example, if our ecclesia agrees to meet to break bread at a certain time, then we will need to accept this even if it is not our preferred timing.

We all need to change if there is to be unity in our ecclesia,

*"We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and **not to please ourselves**. Each of us should please our neighbours for their good, to build them up. For even Christ did not please himself but, as it is written: 'The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me'. For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they might have hope"*
(Romans 15:1-4).

We need to please our brothers and sisters and not to please ourselves. This is the Christ-like way of behaving. Our aim is not to get our own way, but to make sure that our way is like Christ.

Our aim is not to push our opinions on others and make them do what we want, but to think and act like Jesus.

Paul prayed that the Romans would be like that in Romans 15:5-6. He would pray this prayer for us too,

"May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had, so that with one mind and one voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ."

God wants us all to be united in Christ. He does not want us to be divided.

Division is a Sin

Division is a sin. We must not be divisive, and we must avoid people who behave like this. We read this in Romans 16:17-18,

"I urge you, brothers and sisters, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them. For such people are not serving our Lord Christ, but their own appetites. By smooth talk and flattery they deceive the minds of naïve people."

Anyone who tries to cause division is not working for Christ but for themselves. The ecclesia must avoid division. If this means avoiding divisive people, then that is what we must do.

Titus 3:9-11 says a similar thing,

"But avoid foolish controversies and genealogies and arguments and quarrels about the law, because these are unprofitable and useless. Warn a divisive person once, and then warn them a second time. After that, have nothing to do with them. You may be sure that such people are warped and sinful; they are self-condemned."

We should avoid useless arguments and we should avoid the people who cause them.

If a false teacher tries to divide the ecclesia, it is better for the ecclesia to remove fellowship from this person than for the whole ecclesia to be divided.

God has some strong words for those who cause arguments among brothers and sisters. Proverbs 6:16 tells us about things God hates, two of which are given in verse 19,

"a false witness who pours out lies and a person who stirs up conflict in the community."

God hates people who cause conflict among brothers and sisters.

On the other hand, those who promote peace among the brothers and sisters will be blessed by God,

"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God"
(Matthew 5:9).

And,

"Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness" (James 3:18).

Let us be peacemakers so that our ecclesia is a place of peace.

Summary

We should live in unity with the brothers and sisters in our ecclesia. This is how God wants us to be and requires us to actively behave with humility and love towards each other.

We will end with a quotation from 2 Corinthians 13:11,

"Finally, brothers and sisters, rejoice! Strive for full restoration, encourage one another, be of one mind, live in peace. And the God of love and peace will be with you."

May God be with you in the challenges of ecclesial living.

Lesson 20: Love your Enemies

This instruction is probably the hardest of all for Christians to follow. We must love our enemies! This is certainly not our natural reaction when we are hurt or persecuted.

Jesus tells us this principle,

"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbour and hate your enemy.' But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 5:43:44).

The Jewish religious leaders taught that you did not need to love your enemy – you could hate them instead. This was a misunderstanding of the teaching of the Old Testament. For example, Proverbs 25:21 clearly states:

"If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat; if he is thirsty, give him water to drink."

Further teaching of Jesus can be found in Luke 6:27-31,

"But to you who are listening I say: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. If someone slaps you on one cheek, turn to them the other also. If someone takes your coat, do not withhold your shirt from them. Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back. Do to others as you would have them do to you."

Our love for our enemies must be shown in practical ways.

1. We must bless them when they curse us.
2. We must pray for them.
3. If we are mistreated, we should not retaliate.
4. Give your enemies what they ask.
5. Do not ask for them to return what has been taken.
6. Treat them as you would like to be treated.

This is an extremely high standard. We must not respond to their bad behaviour with our own bad behaviour. Instead, we must be kind to them.

Good Examples

Jesus loved his enemies. He knew that his close friend Judas would betray him. He knew Judas was a thief and was stealing from them. Even so, Jesus treated Judas as a friend. He shared his last meal with him – and washed his feet. He allowed Judas to betray him with a kiss.

While Jesus was dying on the cross, he prayed to God for those who were killing him,

"Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." And they divided up his clothes by casting lots" (Luke 23:34).

Jesus prayed for his enemies. This is how Jesus wants his followers to behave.

Another example is Stephen. We read the last words of Stephen as he was being killed.

*"While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit."
60 Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against
them." When he had said this, he fell asleep" (Acts 7:59-60).*

Stephen and Jesus behaved like God. God also loves His enemies,

*"But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you
may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil
and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous"
(Matthew 5:44-45).*

The world contains many people who ignore God and say bad things about Him. Even so, God continues to give them the sun and rain they need for their harvest. God cares for all people, including his enemies. Therefore, we need to love our enemies and pray for our persecutors.

How to love your enemy

The first step in loving our enemies is not to fight back. They may do evil to us, but we are not to do evil to them in return. 1 Peter 3:9 says,

*"Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult. On the contrary, repay evil with
blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing."*

We must respond to evil with blessing. If we do this, then we will receive a blessing.

1 Thessalonians 5:15 says,

*"Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always strive to do what
is good for each other and for everyone else."*

If we fight back with insults, we become someone who insults. If we fight back with evil, we become someone who does evil. We should not descend into the behaviours of our enemies. God wants us to be different. God does not want us to take revenge.

If we are finding it difficult to respond in this way let us remember the example of Jesus given to us,

*"When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he
made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly"
(1 Peter 2:23).*

We should not worry that evil people get away with doing evil. They will be repaid for their evil ways. But **we must not repay them** – that job belongs to God. We read this in Romans 12:17-21,

*"Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of
everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with
everyone. Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath,
for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay" says the Lord. On the
contrary: "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something
to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head." Do not be
overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."*

We should not be "overcome by evil," we should not do evil as well so that evil is done by all. Instead, we need to do good to our enemy, so we help turn them away from their evil deeds.

God will fight for us, but we must trust in God to do that. We must be patient and pray. An example of this is Psalm 13, where David was praying for help against his enemies. Psalm 13:1-2,

"How long, Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and day after day have sorrow in my heart? How long will my enemy triumph over me?"

While he waited for God's answer, David was in great distress. However, we know that God did help him and answer his prayers. We must also trust in God and patiently wait for His help.

While we are waiting, we can take comfort from scriptures such as James 1:12 knowing that our trials have a purpose,

"Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him."

A good example of loving your enemies is David. When Saul was king, David helped Saul by fighting his battles. In time Saul became jealous of David's victories. Saul started to hunt David down like an animal. David had to run for his life.

David had several opportunities to kill Saul. If he had done so, he would have been fighting evil with evil. On every occasion, David refused to harm Saul. One occasion is recorded in 1 Samuel 24:10-13 where David said to Saul,

"This day you have seen with your own eyes how the Lord delivered you into my hands in the cave. Some urged me to kill you, but I spared you; I said, 'I will not lay my hand on my lord, because he is the Lord's anointed.' See, my father, look at this piece of your robe in my hand! I cut off the corner of your robe but did not kill you. See there is nothing in my hand to indicate that I am guilty of wrongdoing or rebellion. I have not wronged you, but you are hunting me down to take my life. May the Lord judge between you and me. And may the Lord avenge the wrongs you have done to me, but my hand will not touch you. As the old saying goes, 'From evildoers come evil deeds,' so my hand will not touch you."

Here is an example of how not to fight back, even when the opportunity is there, even when others are encouraging you to take it. God is the one who fights our battles and will take revenge. We do not need to fight back.

If we fight back, then we become evil doers ourselves and are little better than our enemies.

If our enemy falls, we must not rejoice.

God does not rejoice when His enemies are removed. He only rejoices when they repent. We read this in Ezekiel 18:23,

"Do I take any pleasure in the death of the wicked? declares the Sovereign Lord. Rather, am I not pleased when they turn from their ways and live?"

We must follow God's example, because there are consequences if we do not,

"Do not gloat when your enemy falls; when they stumble, do not let your heart rejoice, or the Lord will see and disapprove and turn his wrath away from them" (Proverbs 24:17-18).

The downfall of our enemies is a sad event. It means they have not learnt. If they die without repenting, they are lost to God. This is not something to celebrate.

There will always be wicked people doing wicked things. Sometimes they will do them against us. We should not get upset about them. Psalm 37:1-2 says,

"Do not fret because of those who are evil or be envious of those who do wrong; for like the grass they will soon wither, like green plants they will soon die away."

The whole Psalm gives us advice on our attitude to evil people and how God will deal with them. We must rely on God to take control in our lives as verses 5 and 6 tell us;

"Commit your way to the Lord; trust in him and he will do this: He will make your righteous reward shine like the dawn, your vindication like the noonday sun."

Summary

We must not hate our enemies. God requires us to be different from people of the world and be like Him instead. God loves his enemies.

Loving our enemies is not weakness, it is a position of trust in God. It is a position of self-control.

If we fight back with evil, then we become evil ourselves. We must avoid this. We must do good to those who are doing evil to us so that we overcome the evil with good.

Whether we succeed in stopping the evil or not, we must rely on God to fight our battles. We must not fight ourselves. God is in control, and He will bring about revenge if it is needed. We need to wait for God to help us.

Loving our enemies is extremely hard. We do not underestimate how difficult it is to do. However, we will have a more peaceful life if we follow God's advice. May God be with you as you try to deal with those who hate you in the way He has asked you to.

Lesson 21: Joseph – a man like Jesus

When we learned about the Passover, we learned there was a deeper meaning. The Passover taught us a lot about Jesus. The lives of different Bible characters can also teach us a lot about Jesus.

Jesus himself gives us an example of someone who can teach us about Jesus,

"For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now something greater than Jonah is here" (Matthew 12:40-41).

The prophet Jonah was like Jesus in certain ways. Just as Jonah was inside the fish for three days, so Jesus would be in the tomb for three days. There is also a contrast in their lives. Nineveh repented at the words of Jonah, but the people of Israel did not repent at the teaching of Jesus. When we look at characters in the Bible, we can see likenesses or contrasts which teach us more about the greatness of Jesus.

In this lesson we will look at the life of Joseph which has many similarities to the life of Jesus. You can read the story of Joseph in Genesis chapters 37-50.

The Beginning

Joseph was Jacob's favourite son and Jacob gave him a special coat.

Jacob's love for Joseph caused Joseph's brothers to become jealous. They threw Joseph into a pit and then sold him to some Ishmaelites who took him to Egypt to be a slave. To cover up their crime, they killed a goat and smeared Joseph's coat with its blood. They presented the blood-stained coat to Jacob and claimed that a wild animal had killed him.

The first part of Joseph's life has several parallels with that of Jesus. They were both the firstborn of their mother. Both mothers were not naturally able to give birth – Mary because she was not married and Rachel because she was barren.

Both Joseph and Jesus were especially loved by their father. Both were sent by their fathers to their brothers. Both were hated and rejected by their brothers. Both were born in Israel but went down into Egypt and escaped death. As they grew, both were found to be wise and honest.

Both had the spirit of God. We read this about Joseph in Genesis 41:38,

"So Pharaoh asked them, "Can we find anyone like this man, one in whom is the spirit of God?""

Growing up

Joseph grew up to have a good character unlike his brothers. He told his father about his brothers' bad behaviour. This made his brothers hate him even more.

Joseph was tempted to sin, but he resisted. When in Egypt, Potiphar's wife kept wanting to commit adultery with him, but he refused. She falsely accused Joseph and he was put in prison.

Because Joseph did what was right, God blessed Joseph in all he did. In fact, there is no recorded sin by Joseph.

We can see the similarities with Jesus. Both were righteous compared to their brothers. And because they were righteous, they were hated by their brothers. Both suffered for their righteousness. Both suffered for the sins of others.

Both were betrayed for money by a man named Judas. Joseph was betrayed by his brother Judah, which is the Hebrew version of the name Judas who betrayed Jesus.

In both cases, people told a false story about what had happened at their death. Joseph's brothers said Joseph was dead when he was not. In the case of Jesus, the priests claimed that his disciples had stolen his body.

In Greatest Difficulty

In prison, Joseph came across two prisoners. One was the cupbearer and the other the baker for Pharaoh, king of Egypt. Both had dreams which disturbed them. God enabled Joseph to interpret their dreams. In three days, the cupbearer would again pour wine for Pharaoh and the baker would be put to death.

The words 'three days' remind us of Jesus being in the tomb for three days. We can see parallels between these men and Jesus.

After three days the baker was killed while the cupbearer was taken out of prison and restored to his job. If we think of prison as being like a death, then the cupbearer was raised to life after three days.

When we put the cupbearer and baker together, we have the death of one and the resurrection of the other. Together we have a death and resurrection after three days. This is like Jesus.

There is more. The cupbearer poured wine and the baker served bread. Between the two of them we have the symbols of the bread and the wine. These also remind us of the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Exalted

Sometime later Pharaoh also had some dreams which disturbed him. Joseph was called out of prison, and, with God's help, Joseph interpreted Pharaoh's dreams. Pharaoh was so impressed that he made Joseph the second most important person in Egypt. He was given the authority of Pharaoh, new clothes, and a new name. His new name meant "Saviour of the world." This title was given because Joseph's wise actions saved the Egyptians from the disastrous effects of a seven-year famine.

Joseph became the second highest ruler of Egypt at the age of thirty. All Egypt bowed down to him.

The links with Jesus continue. Like Joseph, Jesus had abilities from God. Both entered the service of their Lord at the age of thirty. Like Joseph, Jesus became the second highest ruler. Jesus carries the name and authority of the king, although in the case of Jesus the king is God. Jesus is also called the 'saviour of the world' because he saves his people from death. Like Joseph, Jesus provided his people with bread. In the case of Jesus, it was his own body because his body is represented by the bread and Jesus was the living bread.

Reunion

In the story of Joseph, Joseph met his brothers again. During the famine, his brothers came down to Egypt to buy grain. They had to buy it from Joseph. But they did not recognise him because he spoke through an interpreter and dressed like an Egyptian.

Joseph gave them the grain they wanted, but he tested them. Were his brothers as evil as they had been, or had they changed? His brothers were not naturally repentant, so Joseph led them to repentance. When tested, his brothers were prepared become slaves to help Joseph's younger brother Benjamin.

This changed everything. Joseph forgave them and revealed his identity to them. In one of the most moving parts of the Bible, we have Joseph's reconciliation with the family of Israel.

Even these parts of Joseph's life are like Jesus. It will take two meetings before Jesus reveals himself to the people of Israel. The first meeting was Jesus's first coming. The people of Israel did not recognise Jesus as their saviour. Jesus' second coming is still future. When Jesus comes back, he will reveal himself to Israel. We read of this in Zechariah 12:10,

"And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and supplication. They will look on me, the one they pierced, and they will mourn for him as one mourns for an only child, and grieve bitterly for him as one grieves for a firstborn son."

Like Joseph's brothers, the brothers of Jesus will finally realise how evil they were and be sorry. Like Joseph, Jesus will forgive them. Like Joseph, Jesus will give the honour to God.

God's Plan

Joseph understood that God had worked in his life, even in the hard times. God had a greater plan in mind to save many lives. Joseph told his brothers this in Genesis 50:20-21,

"You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. So then, don't be afraid. I will provide for you and your children." And he reassured them and spoke kindly to them."

Joseph did not return the evil that his brothers did to him. Instead, he overcame evil with good. He realised that even though his brothers had meant to harm him, God had a greater purpose and was working through it all.

Jesus was treated even worse than Joseph but still overcame evil with good. God had planned the suffering of Jesus in advance in order that our sins could be forgiven, and we could live forever in God's kingdom. It is a lesson to us that even when man appears to be in control, God is the one guiding the circumstances to achieve his purpose.

The future

The latter part of Joseph's life was predicted by dreams that Joseph had as a child. He was to be greater than his brothers and they were to honour him. This is like Jesus. Many parts of the Bible teach us about the future greatness of Jesus.

Joseph told the people of a future time of trouble from which he would save them. This is like Jesus. We have many prophecies in the Bible which tell us about future trouble. But we do not need to fear, because Christ will save us.

Joseph was honoured by the greatest man of Egypt. Through Joseph, his brothers were also honoured and given jobs in the kingdom of Egypt. Jesus was honoured by **the** greatest - by God Himself. Through Jesus, we can also be honoured by God and be given jobs in His kingdom.

We have seen that, from beginning to end, Joseph's life has many similarities with the life of Jesus. These are not coincidences. They are there because God directed the life of Joseph in a way to be like the life of Jesus. We can see the work of Jesus in the life of Joseph.

Joseph's story is not just about a person in history but also teaches us about the life, suffering and greatness of Jesus. When we are moved by the forgiveness of the brothers and the reuniting of the family, we can understand more fully our future forgiveness and being united with Jesus.

Jesus in the life of others

We can see the life of Jesus in the lives of many other characters in the Bible, either through the likenesses or contrasts. We should look for these as we read the Bible, because they help us understand more about Jesus. A few examples are David, Moses, Solomon, Joshua, Samson, and there are many others.

When you read the Bible, look for the additional meanings rather than just what is obvious. Look out for patterns which remind you of Jesus.

Reading the Bible is like crossing a lovely piece of countryside. You can enjoy its beauty and appearance on the surface. However, if you stop and dig you will find treasure.

No other writing in this world has such depth of meaning and so many layers. Each time we make a discovery it helps build our faith in this great book.

May you find the wonders of God's word and discover many hidden treasures.

Lesson 22: Suffering

Christians are not shielded from suffering. However, the difference with non-Christians is that Christians can see a point to suffering. Jesus tells us to expect difficulties,

"I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).

We will have trouble. But we can have a peace of mind that the world cannot have. Having this peace will help us get through our times of trouble.

The work of Jesus enables us to look forward to peace in God's Kingdom. Our troubles are compared to this in 2 Corinthians 4:16-18,

"Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal."

We need to realise that the troubles and suffering in our lives are preparing us for the time of peace and rest we will enjoy in God's kingdom.

Discipline for children

Living a life without any suffering is not desirable. Consider what happens when a child gets everything it wants. Proverbs 29:15 says,

"A rod and a reprimand impart wisdom, but a child left undisciplined disgraces its mother."

A similar thing is said of a servant in verse 21,

"A servant pampered from youth will turn out to be insolent."

Someone who has an easy life and is given everything becomes proud and selfish. This is not the sort of character God wishes us to have.

On the other hand, a child who is taught by their father learns from the discipline. This is the message of Hebrews 12:5-11,

"And have you forgotten this word of encouragement that addresses you as a father addresses his son? It says, "My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and he chastens everyone he accepts as his son." Ensure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as his children. For what children are not disciplined by their father? If you are not disciplined – and everyone undergoes discipline – then you are not legitimate, not true sons and daughters at all. Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of spirits and live! They disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it."

Even Jesus had to learn through suffering,

"Son, though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered"
(Hebrews 5:8).

In fact, it was through his suffering that Jesus was made perfect,

"In bringing many sons and daughters to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through what he suffered" (Hebrews 2:10).

Through the suffering of Jesus, Jesus learned obedience to God and became perfect. If that is what happened to Jesus, then it is reasonable that the same thing happens in the life of his disciples.

When we are suffering we can see it as a form of teaching and ask ourselves 'What does God want us to learn from this situation?'

What can we learn from suffering?

Paul knew a lot about suffering and gives us one answer,

"Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope" (Romans 5:3-4).

Sufferings teaches us perseverance. This is the quality of keeping going even though life is tough. We all need to have perseverance and this can **only** be developed through the sufferings we experience.

Secondly, suffering develops "character". This word really means a proven, tested or mature character. Someone new to Christianity is keen to serve Christ, but will they stand the test? Someone who is mature has continued in their Christian walk despite suffering. We need to show we can stand the tests of life and prove we are mature Christians.

Thirdly, suffering develops hope. Hope is the quality of looking forward to something better. No matter how good our life is now, it is nowhere near as good as eternal life in God's kingdom. Suffering teaches us not to settle into this life but to look forward to the kingdom.

So the Christian can find good in suffering. According to James 1:2-4 we can even rejoice in our sufferings,

"Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything."

If we persevere under trials, we prove we have perseverance and maturity. This is something to be joyful about. James gives further reasons to rejoice in verse 12,

"Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him."

If we persevere, we will be given eternal life when Christ comes back. This is definitely something to rejoice about!

Peter speaks positively about trials. Like James and Paul, he tells us about the good that comes from it. Reading from 1 Peter 1:6-7,

"In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith – of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire – may result in praise, glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed."

There is something better than faith. It is a faith that stands the test of trials - a faith that is proven genuine. Peter says this is better than gold.

Gold is tested with fire and refined to make it more pure. In a similar way, tested faith is even better than our original confession of faith. If we have a tested faith, then we will receive praise, glory and honour when Jesus returns and have great rejoicing in the Kingdom.

Testing

God tested Israel when they came out of Egypt. We read in Deuteronomy 8:2,

"Remember how the Lord your God led you all the way in the wilderness these forty years, to humble and test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands."

God found out what was in their hearts by their reaction to their trials. God works in the same way today as we read in 1 Thessalonians 2:4,

"We are not trying to please people but God, who tests our hearts."

It is by our response to our trials that we reveal what is truly in our hearts. So let us stand the test and show God that we are genuine and faithful disciples.

The book of Job is about the suffering of one man. Job was faithful but suffered some extreme trials. When he lost his children, his wealth and thought he was dying, his wife told him to give up his faith in God. Job replied in 2:10,

"He replied, "You are talking like a foolish woman. Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?"

God can give us good things and bad things. Job also recognised that there was purpose in suffering. When talking about God, Job 23:10 says,

"But he knows the way I take; when he has tested me, I will come forth as gold."

Job certainly did not like his suffering and complained to God about it. In fact, he complained so much he said God was wrong to make him suffer. God questioned Job about Job's attitude,

"The Lord said to Job: "Will the one who contends with the Almighty correct him? Let him who accuses God answer him!" (Job 40:1-2).

Job realised that he had gone too far with his complaining and repented. God forgave him and blessed him.

There are lessons for us from the life of Job. Firstly, God knew what He was doing all along. He did what is right in Job's life and he will do what is right in our own lives. Secondly, we should not complain that God has got things wrong - God does no wrong. Thirdly, what God is doing in our lives is for our eternal salvation which can give us great encouragement.

Humility

Sometimes God gives faithful people difficulties to keep them humble. Paul was given an illness for this reason as we read in 2 Corinthians 12:7-10,

"...Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong."

Paul's illness helped him stay humble. He could have become proud of all his work and boast about what **he** had done. Paul realised that such pride would not have been good and was grateful for his weakness.

We can also understand that our weaknesses teach us humility and the need to trust in God. God works through our weaknesses. When we are weak, then we are spiritually strong.

Summary

We have learned that all Christians suffer during their lives. However, the Christian is never abandoned by God or by Christ. It says in Romans 8:35 -39,

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written: "For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered." No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

None of these things can separate us from Christ's love. Even when we are suffering, we are still loved.

We have learned that there are many positive reasons to undergo suffering. It produces perseverance, maturity, tested faith and hope. We need these things to be complete Christians. Like Christ, we will all share in sufferings.

We will rarely understand the reason for our suffering. However, God has His reasons and He knows what He is doing in our lives. So let us trust in God as Proverbs 3:5-6 advises us,

"Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight."

May God be with you in your difficulties and in your suffering as He prepares you for the joys of His Kingdom.

Lesson 23: Comfort and Encouragement

In our last lesson, we learned that Christians go through times of suffering. There is a danger that we could become downhearted because of our suffering and even give way to despair. This is not God's desire for His people, and He gives us advice on how to help each other in times of trouble.

The principle of helping others is seen in Ecclesiastes 4:1,

"Again I looked and saw all the oppression that was taking place under the sun: I saw the tears of the oppressed – and they have no comforter; power was on the side of their oppressors – and they have no comforter."

The oppressed person was on their own. They were distressed and tearful. They had no one to share their burden.

However, if there was someone around to share their problems with, then life would not be so difficult. Ecclesiastes 4:9-10 tells us this,

"Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labour: If either of them falls down, one can help the other up. But pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them up."

If someone is on their own, they will struggle when life gets tough. Having someone else beside them can make a huge difference to how they cope with their troubles. This

is why God speaks about the need to comfort and encourage each other. It is an important part of Christian living.

Comfort

God Himself comforts His people,

"Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God" (2 Corinthians 1:3-4).

God will always comfort us whatever our troubles. And He expects us to comfort our brothers and sisters in their distress too.

Job was a man who suffered so much that he wanted to die. We are told his troubles came from God. Three of Job's friends came to comfort him,

"When Job's three friends, Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite and Zophar the Naamathite, heard about all the troubles that had come upon him, they set out from their homes and met together by agreement to go and sympathize with him and comfort him. When they saw him from a distance, they could hardly recognize him; they began to weep aloud, and they tore their robes and sprinkled dust on their heads. Then they sat on the ground with him for seven days and seven nights. No one said a word to him, because they saw how great his suffering was" (Job 2:11-13).

We can picture the scene. Job was so ill that he was hardly recognisable. The friends shared in Job's suffering by making their own appearance poor too. They sat in silence with him. After seven days Job spoke and released his anguish. His friends listened. This is how to comfort someone as we are instructed in Romans 12:15,

"Rejoice with those who rejoice, mourn with those who mourn."

However, what happened next is an example of what **not** to do. Rather than being sympathetic, they started to judge him. Since his troubles came from God, they reasoned that Job was a sinner. Then they invented crimes that Job was supposed to have committed.

Job complained to them,

"I have heard many things like these; you miserable comforters, all of you! Will your long-winded speeches never end? What ails you that you keep on arguing? I also could speak like you, if you were in my place; I could make fine speeches against you and shake my head at you. But my mouth would encourage you; comfort from my lips would bring you relief" (Job 16:2-5).

Job describes the role of a comforter – to comfort, encourage and bring relief to the one who is suffering. By contrast the three friends were oppressors not comforters and made Job's sufferings even worse.

The role of a comforter is to provide help in times of suffering. For example, we might visit someone who has had a member of their family die to console them. We might visit someone in prison and provide encouragement. We might visit a person who is sick and encourage them too.

A true brother or sister in Christ always helps when there is a difficulty. Proverbs 17:17 puts it like this,

"A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for a time of adversity."

A friend always loves, even in the bad times. Those who are not true friends will leave when problems arise. A brother or sister is especially needed in these bad times.

In many cultures, when someone dies people expect a huge funeral with plenty to eat and drink. Let us remember that the purpose of attending the funeral is to show sympathy and help. If we just go along and expect to get fed but make no contribution towards the food, then we are adding to the bereaved person's burden. Their distress over the loss of their loved one will be increased by anxieties over a large debt.

Visiting

Visiting is a key part of comforting and encouraging. It was an important part of the life of New Testament ecclesias. This was the best way to give comfort and encouragement. Even Paul needed comfort. We read of one example in 2 Corinthians 7:5-7,

"For when we came into Macedonia, we had no rest, but we were harassed at every turn – conflicts outside, fears within. But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus, and not only by his coming but also by the comfort you had given him. He told us about your longing for me, your deep sorrow, your ardent concern for me, so that my joy was greater than ever."

A visit achieves so much. The visitor(s) themselves can give comfort. And they can also bring news of the care of others. Paul often sent his fellow-workers to help and encourage other ecclesias. Likewise, ecclesias often sent their own messengers to help and encourage Paul. Today we can do this by visiting other ecclesias and building up their members.

It is a good practice for brothers to visit other ecclesias and give words of exhortation to encourage the brothers and sisters there.

Paul wrote letters to encourage and strengthen his brothers and sisters. If we are unable to visit or between visits, we should keep in touch with those who are struggling be letters, cards, text messages, email, phone calls, video calls or any other means available. We should not let our brothers and sisters face their struggles alone.

The Bible

One of the best sources of comfort and encouragement is the Bible itself. The writer of Psalm 119:50 says,

"My comfort in my suffering is this: Your promise preserves my life."

God's promises provided comfort to the sufferer and gives them hope for the future.

Romans 15:4 teaches us the same thing,

"For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope."

The Scriptures contain so much comfort. It helps us to be hopeful not hopeless. It encourages us to endure our sufferings. Let us read our Bibles and find this comfort for ourselves and to share with others going through hard times.

The Psalms

Many people find the Psalms a great source of comfort and encouragement. When they struggle with life, reading the Psalms helps them see life from God's point of view. Many Psalms show the anguish and pain of the writer, while others describe fear of death from different causes. Some of them are complaints against God and some of them pose questions they want God to answer.

Let us take one example. Many people who are suffering struggle to sleep because of their problems. David found he was able to sleep when he thought about God's protection. Psalm 3:3-6 says,

"But you, Lord, are a shield around me, my glory, the One who lifts my head high. I call out to the Lord, and he answers me from his holy mountain. I lie down and sleep; I wake again, because the Lord sustains me. I will not fear though tens of thousands assail me on every side."

If we trust in God and pray to Him, then we can sleep in peace because we know God is looking after us.

Another reason we may not sleep is because our emotions are in turmoil due to our circumstances. Psalm 4:4 has some helpful words for us,

"Tremble and do not sin; when you are on your beds, search your hearts and be silent."

We need to search our own hearts and calm ourselves down because God has given us these wonderful words in verse 3,

"Know that the Lord has set apart his faithful servant for himself; the Lord hears when I call to him."

The righteous are special to God. He looks after them and listens to their prayers.

When the sufferer examined himself, prayed and trusted in God, then he was able to sleep as verse 8 tells us,

"In peace I will lie down and sleep, for you alone, Lord, make me dwell in safety."

Psalms 3 and 4 are Psalms to help us sleep. Psalm 5 show us how to stay focused on God when we wake up. Psalm 5:3 says,

"In the morning, Lord, you hear my voice; in the morning I lay my requests before you and wait expectantly."

As you read the Psalms, you will find your favourites. You will find comfort and encouragement for different times and different occasions. God will become your refuge from the storm. He will become the rock you cling to. He will be the fortress that you run to when you have difficulties. He will be the high tower where you will feel safe.

Summary

An important part of Christian living is comforting and encouraging one another. This is what God does and we need to take on this role and help our brother or our sister bear their personal troubles.

Visiting is a key part of providing comfort and encouragement to those who are suffering. We need to listen to their concerns, share comforting words of Scripture with them, pray with them and for them and give practical help.

We will all go through difficult times where we need help. We need to look out for one another, so we can be there for each other at these times. Sometimes we will need to ask for help rather than assuming others know our situation. When we are asked for help, we need to respond with comfort, support, and compassion.

We will leave you with the words of 2 Thessalonians 2:16-17,

"May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word."

Lesson 24: Work

Work was part of punishment God gave to Adam,

"To Adam he said, "Because you listened to your wife and ate fruit from the tree about which I commanded you, 'You must not eat from it,' "Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat food from it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return" (Genesis 3:17-19).

Previously Adam had been able to obtain food easily by picking fruit from the trees in the Garden of Eden. From now on he would have a difficult time ensuring that he and his family had enough food to survive. Work has proved a struggle ever since.

The earliest forms of work were keeping flocks and growing crops, both of which require consistent hard work. The shepherd must care for his sheep day and night. The farmer must plough, sow, harvest and thresh throughout the year. If they do not work hard, then they will have nothing to eat.

A farmer's work teaches us a principle mentioned several times in the Bible – you reap what you sow. If you sow much, you will reap much. If you sow little, you will reap little. If you sow nothing, you will reap nothing, as Proverbs 20:4 says,

"Sluggards do not plough in season; so at harvest time they look and find nothing."

Man must work hard in order to have food to eat and stay alive. This is the pattern established from the time of Adam.

Laziness

God designed people to work. God is not pleased when someone chooses not to work when they are able to do so. This becomes clear in the letters to the Thessalonians where some members of the ecclesia were deliberately not working. We read in 2 Thessalonians 3:6-10,

"In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we command you, brothers and sisters, to keep away from every believer who is idle and disruptive and does not live according to the teaching you received from us. For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example. We were not idle when we were with you, nor did we eat anyone's food without paying for it. On the contrary, we worked night and day, labouring and toiling so that we would not be a burden to any of you. We did this, not because we do not have the right to such help, but in order to offer ourselves as a model for you to imitate. For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: "The one who is unwilling to work shall not eat.""

There were lazy people in the ecclesia at Thessalonica and Paul clearly explains that those who choose not to work should not eat.

The need to work is mentioned in other parts of the Bible – for example,

"One who is slack in his work is brother to one who destroys" (Proverbs 18:9).

That is, a lazy person is similar to person who destroys. Both are bad.

Someone who is lazy makes excuses for not working,

"The sluggard says, "There's a lion outside! I'll be killed in the public square!" (Proverbs 22:13).

There is no excuse for not working when we are able to work. Laziness is not what God wants to see.

God Himself and Jesus give us the example of working, as Jesus tells us,

"In his defence Jesus said to them, "My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I too am working" (John 5:17).

We must follow the example of God and Jesus and do our own work.

Employers and Employees

The Bible gives us advice on our relationships at work by using the example of the slave-master relationship. Colossians 3:22-25 says,

"Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything; and do it, not only when their eye is on you and to curry their favour, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord. Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving. Anyone who does wrong will be repaid for their wrongs, and there is no favouritism."

The advice given to slaves also applies to day workers and full-time employees. We must serve our employer faithfully and with all our heart, as if we are serving the Lord. We should serve them as if we are serving Jesus and he will make sure we are rewarded for our faithful service.

Titus 2:9-10 instructs us to respect our employers/bosses,

"Teach slaves to be subject to their masters in everything, to try to please them, not to talk back to them, and not to steal from them, but to show that they can be fully trusted, so that in every way they will make the teaching about God our Saviour attractive."

We should not argue with our boss or steal from them. If we behave like that we will bring dishonour to God. However, if we are respectful and trustworthy, we have the opportunity of showing them that the way of Christ is good.

Peter tells us to behave well even when our master is hard,

"Slaves, in reverent fear of God submit yourselves to your masters, not only to those who are good and considerate, but also to those who are harsh. For it is commendable if someone bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because they are conscious of God. But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps"
(1 Peter 2:18-21).

If we are an employer then we must also work as if we are serving Jesus himself,

"And masters, treat your slaves in the same way. Do not threaten them, since you know that he who is both their master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favouritism with him" (Ephesians 6:9).

As employers we must look after those who work for us, because God is watching the way we treat our employees. God does not want masters to be harsh,

"Masters, provide your slaves with what is right and fair, because you know that you also have a Master in heaven" (Colossians 4:1).

Just as God does what is right and fair, so should employers. They are accountable to God for doing this. The Bible particularly highlights the need for employers to pay their workers' wages at the right time.

Using our Wages

The wages we earn should not all be spent on ourselves. We have obligations to give some of it to others.

Firstly, we need to honour God with some of our wealth. Proverbs 3:9-10 puts this most clearly,

"Honour the Lord with your wealth, with the firstfruits of all your crops; then your barns will be filled to overflowing, and your vats will brim over with new wine."

We can do this by giving to God's work such as preaching or by sharing with God's people in need. If we follow this advice then we will be blessed for it.

The principle of giving to God continues in the New Testament,

"Now about the collection for the Lord's people: Do what I told the Galatians churches to do. On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with your income, saving it up, so that when I come no collections will have to be made" (1 Corinthians 16:1-2).

Another example of collecting for God's people is Philippians 4:14-16,

"Yet it was good of you to share in my troubles. Moreover, as you Philippians know, in the early days of your acquaintance with the gospel, when I set out from Macedonia, not one church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you only; for even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me aid more than once when I was in need."

These passages teach us the need to give of our material wealth to help God's people.

Secondly, we must give to those in need. We have already considered this topic in a previous talk. We are not genuine Christians unless we share with those in need.

In fact, we are told to work in order to provide for those in need, not just for ourselves in Ephesians 4:28,

"Anyone who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with their own hands, that they may have something to share with those in need."

Paul worked in this way so that he could give to others, including those travelling with him. Acts 20:34-35 says,

"You yourselves know that these hands of mine have supplied my own needs and the needs of my companions. In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive'"

The third and final way we must use our wealth is paying our taxes to the government. As Romans 13:6-7 says,

"This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing. Give to everyone what you owe them: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honour, then honour."

Summary

We have seen the need to work for our food. This is what God requires from us. If someone can work, but chooses not to, then they should not be permitted to eat.

When we work for others, we should work as though we are working directly for Jesus. If we have others working for us, we must be a good employer, remembering that Jesus is our master. Whatever type of work we do, we need to faithfully serve the Lord at work.

The money we earn from our work should not be only spent on ourselves. We have a duty to give some to the work of God, some to the needy and some to the government. This means we need to work hard enough to give to them all, in addition to our own needs.

May God be with you in your work. May you be diligent in your work and bring honour to God, so that He will reward you for it.

Lesson 25: Money

The world is chasing after money, riches, and wealth. This is all that matters to them. With money they can buy whatever they like and have the best of everything. Whatever problem they have, they answer it with money.

This is not the way God wishes His people to live. Think about the life of Jesus. God planned that Jesus was to be born into a poor family. Jesus remained poor throughout his life and died without any money.

As Christians, we must also make a choice to not make money a high priority. Jesus tells us,

"No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money" (Matthew 6:24).

Money can be like a master. It can take our devotion and time and love. When it does this, it takes us away from God. We must choose who we are going to serve. Since we cannot serve both money and God, we must only serve God.

Money itself is not the problem. Money is only pieces of metal or paper. It is the **love** of money that is the problem. The reason for this is given in 1 Timothy 6:9-10,

"Those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs."

Those who love money are tempted into evil. In the worst case, love of money can take us completely away from God. It can destroy our faith.

We must watch ourselves so that we do not let the love of money creep into our lives and take us away from God.

Problems with money

One of the problems with being rich is that rich people believe money is the answer to everything. Instead of trusting in God, they trust in their money. Instead of praying when they are sick, they pay for private doctors. Instead of turning to God for help with their problems, they pay for experts. This means the rich stop trusting in God. In fact, they replace God with money. As Proverbs 18:11 says,

"The wealth of the rich is their fortified city; they imagine it a wall too high to scale."

The rich take refuge in their wealth just as someone may take refuge in a protected city. They no longer take refuge in God.

The second problem with loving money is the behaviours that it can give rise to. The rich will be tempted to not be honest. When buying and selling, they can misrepresent the facts,

"It's no good, it's no good!" says the buyer – then goes off and boasts about his purchase" (Proverbs 20:14).

And,

"The LORD detests dishonest scales, but accurate weights find favour with him" (Proverbs 11:1).

A man who is eager to get rich may be tempted not to pay his workers' wages or his taxes. He may be tempted not to support God's work. He may be tempted to misuse the power that money gives him to pervert justice.

The love of money also leads to pride. The rich boast about their riches and possessions. But God wants us to develop humility not pride.

Someone who loves money is less likely to give money away to others, which means they do not help the poor and needy in the way that they should. Proverbs 28:22 speaks about this,

"The stingy are eager to get rich and are unaware that poverty awaits them."

What money cannot buy

Money does not buy happiness. The rich person is never satisfied with what they have because they always want more,

"Whoever loves money never has enough; whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with their income. This too is meaningless. As goods increase, so do those who consume them. And what benefit are they to the owners except to feast their eyes on them?" (Ecclesiastes 5:10-11).

Money cannot buy peace. In fact, it is a source of worry. Ecclesiastes 5 continues in verse 12,

"The sleep of a labourer is sweet, whether they eat little of much, but as for the rich, their abundance permits them no sleep."

We have learned that the love of money takes people away from God. It turns them into selfish and proud people. It does not make them happy or content.

Jesus met a rich man who did not want to leave his wealth and follow Jesus. Jesus used this as an opportunity to teach his disciples about riches,

"Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God! The disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said again, "Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God" (Mark 10:23-25).

The love of money took this man away from God. He missed out on the Kingdom of God. Psalm 49:20 describes the fate of these people,

"People who have wealth but lack understanding are like the beasts that perish."

We must understand the dangers that love of money bring and concentrate on loving God and Jesus so that we do not perish.

Our attitude to money

God tells us not to make becoming rich our goal in life,

"Do not wear yourself out to get rich; do not trust your own cleverness. Cast but a glance at riches, and they are gone, for they will surely sprout wings and fly off to the sky like an eagle" (Proverbs 23:4-5).

We should not work excessively hard to become rich. Someone who works all the time will neglect God, their family, and their ecclesia. Also being rich is not a secure position, because riches can be lost or stolen.

Loving money is a form of greed. Jesus told a parable about this,

"Then he said to them, "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions." And he told them this parable: "The ground of a certain rich man yielded an abundant harvest. He thought to himself, 'What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.' Then he said, 'This is what I'll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store my surplus grain. And I'll say to myself, "You have plenty of grain laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.'" But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself? This is how it will be with whoever stores up things from themselves but is not rich toward God'" (Luke 12:15-21).

The rich man decided to keep all his wealth for himself and take life easy. This is not how God wishes us to behave. Wealth is not to be spent on ourselves so that we can live a life of luxury. 1 Timothy 6:17-19 tells us what he should have done,

"Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life."

Contentment

Hebrews 13:5-6 gives us the antidote to the love of money,

"Keep your lives from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you." So we say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can mere mortals do to me?"

Instead of loving money, we should be content and trust that God will be with us in every circumstance.

Contentment is not a quality valued by the world. The world measures success by money or possessions. It is always pursuing more, bigger, better.

God's thinking is very different. He tells us to be happy with what we have. In this way we can find peace of mind and a healthy reliance on God. 1 Timothy 6:6-7 says,

"But godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that."

We should be content with food and clothing.

Paul tells us his view of life and explains the attitude we should have,

"I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all this through him who gives me strength" (Philippians 4:12-13).

Contentment is a state of mind which we choose to have. Paul could even be content when he was hungry because he relied on God.

Warnings from Examples

There are many examples in the Bible of the dangers of loving money. These are given to warn us not to be like them. The clearest example of this was Judas who betrayed Jesus for money.

Another example occurred shortly after Jesus had ascended to heaven. Ananias and his wife Sapphira sold a piece of property. They kept back some of the money for themselves and gave the rest to the apostles, claiming it was all the money from the sale. As a result of their lie, they died immediately. We are told how the new believers reacted,

"Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events" (Acts 5:11).

This incident was a graphic warning to the new church not to love money. They had to be different from the Pharisees and teachers of the law who loved money.

God sees money as a spiritual danger. In God's eyes, the rich are not in a high position but are in a dangerous position. On the other hand, the poor are in a high position,

"Believers in humble circumstances ought to take pride in their high position. But the rich should take pride in their humiliation – since they will pass away like a wild flower. For the sun rises with scorching heat and withers the plant; its blossom falls and its beauty is destroyed. In the same way, the rich will fade away even while they go about their business" (James 1:9-11).

We have seen that God's attitude to money is quite different to that of people in the world. The world measures success in the accumulation of money and goods. But God measures success by the development of godliness.

The world values the rich, who are often selfish, proud, and greedy. They rely on money and not on God.

God values those who have developed contentment and who trust in Him.

Those who pursue this world's riches will not be in God's kingdom. However, those who are content with their life and trust in God to look after them will enjoy the wonders of the kingdom forever.

In our lives, we may be tempted to love money. When this happens, let us turn away from it and pursue the love of God. May God be with us as you make choices in this area of your life.

We will conclude with the words of Matthew 6:33-34:

"But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be added unto you. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself."

Lesson 26: Spiritual Dangers

Living in Christ is a position of immense privilege. We have a close relationship with God and Jesus, which gives rise to many blessings. These include the forgiveness of our sins, peace of mind, a great hope for the future and assurance that God and Jesus are with us on our spiritual journey. However, we need to realise that we can fall from this high position, if we do not pay attention to how we walk our individual path to the Kingdom.

We can consider our spiritual life as like walking through mountains. When we go on such a walk, we must make sure we are prepared and take the right equipment with us. We must regularly check our route to make sure we stay on the right path to reach our destination. We need to pay attention to the ground we are walking on so that we do not trip. We must keep well away from the edge so that we do not fall.

It is the same with our spiritual journey. We must stay on the path and avoid the areas of danger. We must watch what we are doing. We must constantly refer to our guidebook - the Bible - and follow its instructions.

The Bible contains many warnings about the dangers we will face on our spiritual journey. Jesus told us about some of them in the parable of the sower. In this parable, a sower sows seed which lands on different types of ground.

The seed represents God's word. The ground represents the different type of people who hear the word. Not everyone who hears God's word will produce a harvest.

On the first type of ground, the seed is eaten by birds and does not even grow. These are people who hear the word, but do not believe it. The seed is taken away from them.

The next type of ground is rocky. Matthew 13:20-21 tells us what this is like,

"The seed falling on rocky ground refers to someone who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the world, they quickly fall away."

The third type of ground is full of weeds. Verse 22 tells us,

"The seed falling among the thorns refers to someone who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, making it unfruitful."

The last type of ground has good soil. Verse 23 says,

"But the seed falling on good soil refers to someone who hears the word and understands it. This is the one who produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown."

In each case, the seed was good and could have produced a crop. However, this only happened on one type of ground.

The parable of the sower warns us about some of the spiritual dangers we will face during our spiritual journey:

- 1) Our belief can be taken away.
- 2) Persecution or trouble because of our faith.
- 3) Worries.
- 4) Wealth.

By being aware of these dangers, we will be better prepared to deal with them when they come into our lives.

The danger of disbelief

The first danger is that our belief could be taken away. This type of danger is mentioned in the letters to Timothy,

"Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to your care. Turn away from godless chatter and the opposing ideas of what is falsely called knowledge, which some have professed and is so doing have departed from the faith"
(1 Timothy 6:20-21).

Some believers were listening to other people's wrong ideas, and this destroyed their faith.

Another example is 2 Timothy 2:16-18,

"Avoid godless chatter, because those who indulge in it will become more and more ungodly. Their teaching will spread like gangrene. Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, who have departed from the truth. They say that the resurrection has already taken place, and they destroy the faith of some."

Many people in the world claim to have knowledge which can take us away from God's teaching. Paul says we must avoid these people.

The only source of true knowledge is the Bible as we read in Proverbs 30:5-6,

"Every word of God is flawless; he is a shield to those who take refuge in him. Do not add to his words, or he will rebuke you and prove you a liar."

We need to keep reading and learning from the Bible as we go through life. If we stop doing this, we put ourselves in spiritual danger. Proverbs 19:27 warns us,

"Stop listening to instruction, my son, and you will stray from the words of knowledge."

If we stop listening to God's word, then we may leave the right path. The best thing we can do is to read the Bible regularly, meditate on its message and put it into practice in our daily life.

The danger of troubles

The second danger in our Christian walk is persecution. We will all face troubles because of our faith to some degree or another. This may be anything from disapproval from family or friends to systematic persecution from the culture we live in. It may come as a result of decisions we have to make because of our faith. Paul tells us in 2 Timothy 3:12,

"In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted."

When persecution and troubles come, we need the faith and determination to carry on regardless of these problems.

We said our life is like a mountain journey. On this journey some parts are relatively easy, others are steep and difficult. A journey requires us to make sacrifices to reach our destination. We will not reach our goal if we give up when the path becomes difficult.

Jesus tells us to see these difficulties on our Christian journey in a positive light,

"Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you" (Matthew 5:10-12).

If we suffer for Jesus, Jesus will see it and he will reward us.

The danger of worry

The third danger in our Christian walk is worry. The word used in the Greek means 'cares' or 'anxiety'. This is where someone gets so distracted by the things in this life that God is squeezed out of their life. They have not stopped believing, but are so occupied with the concerns of this life that they have no time for God and his ways.

Jesus tells us not to worry about such things,

"Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes?" (Matthew 6:25).

Jesus is not saying these things are not important. But he is saying not to worry about them. He gives the reason – God provides everything you need. God cares for the birds and flowers. And if He cares for them, He will care for you. Jesus concludes in verses 31-33,

"So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own."

We should not worry about food or clothing or anything else. Instead let us seek God's kingdom and His righteousness secure in the knowledge that He will supply all our needs.

The danger of wealth

The fourth danger is wealth. We have discussed this in detail in a previous lesson so will just give a couple of quotes on the subject. We need to not have too much or too little so that it is a problem,

"Two things I ask of you, Lord; do not refuse me before I die: Keep falsehood and lies from me; give me neither poverty or riches, but give me only my daily bread. Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you and say, 'Who is the Lord?' Or I may become poor and steal, and so dishonour the name of my God" (Proverbs 30:7-9).

It is wise to avoid extremes in life – both can be dangers for the Christian. We do not want the temptation of stealing, nor the temptation of everything that money can buy.

Let us live our lives faithfully, content with what we have and remembering the words of Proverbs 11:4,

"Wealth is worthless in the day of wrath, but righteousness delivers from death."

Learning from Bible Examples

The Bible gives us many examples of faithful and unfaithful people. Let us copy the examples of the faithful – and be warned by the examples of the unfaithful. We read this in 1 Corinthians 10:11-13,

"These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the culmination of the ages has come. So, if you think you are standing, be careful that you don't fall! No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it."

The examples in the Bible are there for us to learn from. We should not think that we cannot fall. If we think that way, we are in more danger than we need to be. We can be tempted like anyone else. But we must be determined not to give into temptation. God assures us that we will be able to get through any situation that we will face in life, provided we focus on Him and trust Him in every circumstance.

Summary

Living like a Christian is like walking in the mountains. We need to walk carefully. We must prepare for this journey by reading the Bible daily. We must avoid the positions of danger and keep away from the edge. We must keep to the right path.

We will leave you with the words from Proverbs 4:11-15,

"I instruct you in the way of wisdom and lead you along straight paths. When you walk, your steps will not be hampered; when you run, you will not stumble. Hold on to instruction, do not let it go; guard it well, for it is your life. Do not set foot on the path of the wicked or walk in the way of evildoers. Avoid it, do not travel on it; turn from it and go on your way."

If we take this advice, then we can take comfort from verse 18,

"The path of the righteous is like the morning sun, shining ever brighter till the full light of day."

May our Heavenly Father give you wisdom and courage when you face spiritual dangers on your walk to His kingdom.

Lesson 27: God is in control of the Nations

When we look at the world around us, we may be tempted to think that the world's leaders are in control. They make their own decisions and direct their national affairs. It looks as though they have all authority and power. Certainly, they think they are in control. But they are mistaken.

There is a higher authority who is controlling the affairs of the nations. Paul explained this to the great thinkers of his day in Athens,

"The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else. From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands" (Acts 17:24-26).

God is the Lord of heaven and earth. That is, He is the ruler of the world we live in. He has given everyone life and everything they have. God decides when and where the nations of the world will live.

Nebuchadnezzar's Dream

God's control of the nations can be seen in Daniel chapter 2. Here we read about Nebuchadnezzar, who was king of Babylon and the greatest king of his day.

Nebuchadnezzar had a dream that troubled him. We learn that God had given him the dream. God also showed Daniel the dream and its meaning.

Daniel explained the dream in Daniel 2:31-35,

"Your Majesty looked, and there before you stood a large statue – an enormous, dazzling statue, awesome in appearance. The head of the statue was made of pure gold, its chest and arms of silver, its belly and thighs of bronze, its legs of iron, its feet partly of iron and partly of baked clay. While you were watching, a rock was cut out, but not by human hands. It struck the statue on its feet of iron and clay and smashed them. Then the iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver and the gold were all broken to pieces and became like chaff on a threshing floor in the summer. The wind swept them away without leaving a trace. But the rock that struck the statue became a huge mountain and filled the whole earth."

Daniel then gave the explanation. The different metals represented different kingdoms. The head of gold represented the kingdom of Babylon. This would then be followed by a kingdom of silver, then one of bronze and finally one of iron. After that there would not be a single kingdom, but lots of strong and weak nations represented by the iron and clay feet.

God was revealing that each kingdom would have its time and place. God would decide which kingdom was in control - not Nebuchadnezzar. Daniel responded to this knowledge in chapter 2 verses 20-21,

"Praise be to the name of God for ever and ever; wisdom and power are his. He changes times and seasons; he deposes kings and raises up others. He gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to the discerning."

God is in control. He decides who reigns and who does not. He decides how long they reign and sets limits on their territory.

Nebuchadnezzar's dream spoke of four kingdoms or empires. These can easily be identified. The Babylonian Empire was followed by the Medo-Persian empire. This was followed by the Greek empire which was then followed by the Roman Empire. The Roman empire was not followed by another single empire. It slowly disintegrated as many nations took it over. This led into the time of the 'iron and clay' with a mixture of strong and weak nations, which still exists today.

God was in control of these changes, operating in an unseen manner to bring about His plan.

Nebuchadnezzar learned the truth of this as we read in Daniel 4:34-35,

"At the end of that time, I, Nebuchadnezzar, raised my eyes toward heaven, and my sanity was restored. Then I praised the Most High; I honoured and glorified him who lives forever. His dominion is an eternal dominion; his kingdom endures from generation to generation. All the peoples of the earth are regarded as nothing. He does as he pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth. No one can hold back his hands or say to him: "What have you done?"

Nebuchadnezzar was humbled by his experiences with God and realised that the God of Israel was the only one with real power and control.

Nebuchadnezzar's dream ended in an unexpected way. The statue was destroyed by a rock. This rock was not made with human hands, which means it was made by God. The rock struck the image on the feet. This means it will strike in the times of the strong and weak kings – and we are living in that time right now. The rock then became a huge mountain and filled the whole earth.

Daniel tells us what it meant in Daniel 2:44,

"In the time of those kings, the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed, nor will it be left to another people. It will crush all those kingdoms and bring them to an end, but it will itself endure forever."

The kingdom of God will replace the kingdoms of men, and God's new kingdom will last forever.

The rock is Jesus as Peter tells us,

"A stone that causes people to stumble and a rock that makes them fall"
(1 Peter 2:8).

When Jesus returns to the earth, he will set up God's kingdom. This will grow until it fills the whole earth and will last forever.

God's people and land

The Bible explains where nations come from but does not give the history of every nation. It particularly describes what happens to God's people and God's land. The reason the dream described these four empires was because they were the empires which conquered the land and the people of Israel.

God continues to be concerned about His people and His land, even today. He brought His people back in their land and the nation of Israel was reborn in 1948. God said that He would bring His people back to His land. Reading from Ezekiel 36:24,

"For I will take you out of the nations; I will gather you from all the countries and bring you back to your own land."

The return of the Jews to the land of Israel happened because God planned it 1000 years ago and has now made it happen. When we look at the nation of Israel, we can see that God is still in control.

The presence of the Jews today is evidence that God is in control and that He has looked after the Jews through the ages. The Edomites, Moabites, Philistines and other nations have all come and gone, but the Jewish people are still with us. God's prophecies are evidence of God and His power. God says in Isaiah 44:7-8,

"Who then is like me? Let him proclaim it. Let him declare and lay out before me what has happened since I established my ancient people, and what is yet to come – yes, let them foretell what will come. Do not tremble, do not be afraid. Did I not proclaim this and foretell it long ago? You are my witnesses. Is there any God besides me? No, there is no other Rock; I know not one."

God's Prophets

Nebuchadnezzar's dream accurately foretold a major part of the history of Israel. It came to pass because God has the power to bring it about.

God said that He will let His people know what will happen in the future,

"Surely the Sovereign Lord does nothing without revealing his plan to his servants the prophets" (Amos 3:7).

God gave messages to many different prophets who wrote down His words so that we can read them in our Bibles today. When we understand how many prophecies have been fulfilled already, we can have full confidence that prophecies about the future will also come true.

The Bible contains many prophecies. It is not always easy to put them together. Nor is always clear in what order the predicted events will happen. What is clear is that events will happen in the way God has planned.

It is good to know what God has planned, so that when it happens, we will know it is from God and our faith will be strengthened. This is what Jesus explained to his disciples before the events of his crucifixion took place,

"I have told you now before it happens, so that when it does happen you will believe" (John 14:29).

Many prophecies talk about what God is going to do with the world. God has promised to resolve the problems of the world such as sin, pride, and godlessness. Just as God intervened in Nebuchadnezzar's time, God will intervene with the world in the future. When God intervenes, there will be a time of trouble for the world.

This time of trouble will be followed by a time of peace and joy and holiness. This is the kingdom of God.

Summary

God is in control of the nations. He decides where they live. He decides their rise and fall and how long they exist.

His control is demonstrated through Nebuchadnezzar's dream, which foretold the future rulers of His people and the land of Israel. This dream came true, proving that God is in control.

Just as the other parts of the dream have been fulfilled, so will the future part. The return of Jesus will happen because God has planned it.

The return of the Jews to the land and the establishment of the nation of Israel in 1948 is another example of God being in control.

Bible prophecies tells us what God will do in the future. He has a plan. His aim is not to punish and destroy, although this will happen for the wicked – those who choose not to accept Jesus. His prime purpose is to accept the righteous into His kingdom. We will look at this in the next lesson.

Understanding the prophecies of the Bible strengthens our faith in God. It helps us not to be disturbed by troubles in the world.

May God be with you as you seek to understand the prophecies in His word.

Lesson 28: Paradise Restored

The Bible opens with man and woman living in harmony with God in the paradise of the Garden of Eden. The Bible concludes with the promise of a future paradise,

"Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God" (Revelation 2:7).

Paradise will be restored. The Bible prophecy also tells us that there will be a time of trouble before Paradise is restored.

When this time of trouble comes, believers must continue to trust in God. This is all part of God's plan. We need to think about the future Paradise to help us get through the times of trouble.

When we do this, we are doing just what Jesus did. We should,

"fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart" (Hebrews 12:2-3).

Jesus was able to endure the troubles in his life because he focused on the future joy of the Kingdom.

This lesson is about making sure we have a clear vision of the future, to help us through the difficult times.

The First Paradise

In order to understand this future paradise, we need to think about the first paradise in the Garden of Eden.

The Garden of Eden was God's special place where God lived with Adam and Eve. We know the garden was in a high place, because four rivers flowed from it. It was filled with trees, plants and animals.

It was not a wild place, but a carefully managed and fruitful garden. The whole landscape, and what was in it, was designed to be pleasing to man. The word 'Eden' means 'Delight'. It was a garden to delight mankind.

Adam and Eve had an easy life picking fruit whenever they felt hungry. They could stroke a lion or hug a bear. They had no fear of predators, as all the animals were not wild but tame, like pets.

The Garden was not just a place of beauty and safety. Adam and Eve had no worries. They were not worried about hard work, or pain, or famine, or other natural disasters. God protected them and they enjoyed communion with him every day. They didn't worry about what to wear – in fact, they were naked but not at all embarrassed.

Adam & Eve were not worried about physical or mental illness or getting old. The world they lived in had none of these issues. Nor were they worried about oppression or warfare. They lived as husband and wife, completely content with their life.

Adam & Eve did not worry about sin. Sin was not present in the Garden. This meant they were not worried about death. Nor were not worried about their relationship with God, as they enjoyed uninterrupted fellowship with Him.

Can you imagine a life like that? No worries. No frustrations. No bad memories. No tears. No pain. No death.

Only peace and fellowship with God. Beauty, delight and peace in the garden just enjoying every day of your life.

This is the life that Adam and Eve originally experienced. It was the paradise of God.

The Future Paradise

God will recreate a paradise for his believers to enjoy. Just think of that! Think of a life with no worries! All our needs satisfied. Peace and rest and joy. Fellowship with God.

Revelation 21:1-4 describes this re-creation of Paradise;

"Then I saw "a new heaven and a new earth," for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. 'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death' or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."

In our lives now, we experience pain and crying and death. But this is not what God has planned for those who love Him. Instead, He has promised us a joyful, trouble-free everlasting life in his kingdom.

These things are absolutely true. God confirms this in the next verse, Revelation 21:5;

"He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" Then he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true."

The last chapter of the Bible also describes this time,

"Then the angel showed me a river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever" (Revelation 22:1-5).

We notice many features are similar to the Garden of Eden, such as the river and the tree of life. But there are other features we did not find in the Garden of Eden. These make the future paradise **better** than the first. We discover that:

- people will see the face of God
- the Garden is actually a city - with the tree of life at its centre. A city is many people, not just one couple. God has planned for many people to enjoy this future paradise.
- there is no darkness, only light.
- this garden will never end.

The future paradise will be even better than the old one! We find it hard to imagine such a delightful place. This is because the world we live in has so much wrong with it. It is hard for us to imagine a world without the problems we currently experience. But the kingdom of God is so much much better than the world today.

In case we have trouble believing in such a great promise, God again confirms that it is true,

"The angel said to me, "These words are trustworthy and true. The Lord, the God who inspires the prophets, sent his angel to show his servants the things that must soon take place" (Revelation 22:6).

The words are true. These things will happen.

The need for a future hope

We need to think about this great future God has promised, so we can get through the difficulties in our lives. Paul put it like this,

"Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on the unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal" (2 Corinthians 4:16-18).

What we see and experience in our lives is not going to last for ever. Things will change completely. We need to fix our eyes on what is eternal. Our current troubles are temporary and will pass. We will be able to get through them.

We must live each day in hope of this better time. Romans 8:24-25 exhorts us,

"For in this hope we are saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently."

As Christians we are looking for the fulfilment of this hope. Our present life is nothing compared to the paradise that is coming. We need to wait patiently for it.

A Permanent Hope

The first paradise was lost because of sin. Mankind was sentenced to death. He was banished from the garden and the land was also cursed.

The second paradise will be achieved through the work of Jesus. Sin was conquered when Jesus died on the cross. When Jesus returns and establishes God's kingdom, the consequences of sin will be removed and paradise will be restored.

We are given many pictures of this paradise throughout the Bible such as Isaiah 35,

"Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy. Water will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert. The burning sand will become a pool, the thirsty ground bubbling springs. In the haunts where jackals once lay, grass and reeds and papyrus will grow" (Isaiah 35:5-7).

We learn that peace with the animals will be restored,

"The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them" (Isaiah 11:6).

We can look forward to enjoying this place of rest and beauty and fellowship with God, if we focus on seeking God's righteousness. Jesus assures us in Luke 12:32:

"Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom."

There is room for all of us

We need not worry about whether there are enough spaces in the kingdom for us. Revelation 7:9 describes this time when multitudes will be saved;

"After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands."

We learned in the lesson about the Passover that Jesus is the Lamb. Those in white are the believers from all ages who have been made righteous,

"Then one of the elders asked me, "These in white robes – who are they, and where did they come from?" I answered, "Sir, you know." And he said, "These are they who have come out of great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore, "they are before the throne of God and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence. 'Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat down on them,' nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd; 'he will lead them to springs of living water.' 'And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.'" (Revelation 7:13-17).

We hope this lesson has given you a clear vision of the future which will sustain you through times of difficulty. These difficulties are temporary but God's future paradise is eternal. Let us focus on things that are eternal, so we remain strong in faith and hope.

May God be with you each day until his paradise is established.

Lesson 29: Thanksgiving and Praise to God

Thanking and praising God has been an important part of a believer's life from Old Testament times. Psalm 100:4-5 says,

"Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise; give thanks to him and praise his name. For the Lord is good and his love endures forever; his faithfulness continues through all generations."

God's people approached God in the Temple with thanksgiving and praise because God was good, loving, and faithful.

God's character has not changed and so we continue to thank and praise Him for his wonderful qualities and loving provision.

We are thankful to God because He has given us so much. Think about the gifts we have received from God. Firstly, there are the things which other people also receive:

- 1) Life
- 2) Family
- 3) Health
- 4) Abilities
- 5) Possessions and shelter
- 6) Daily food

Then there are the specific things we have received as members of God's family,

- 7) Our calling to the gospel
- 8) The hope of eternal life in His paradise
- 9) Our brothers and sisters in Christ
- 10) Wisdom from the Bible
- 11) God's care for us

Finally, there are the things specific to God...

- 12) His amazing creation
- 13) His wonderful works with individuals and nations
- 14) His lovely character

The list could go on and on, but we cannot mention everything here. Because we have received so much, we follow the advice in Ephesians 5:20,

"Always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ."

Everything we have comes from God and so we respond with thanksgiving.

The greatest thing we have received is the gospel of salvation as Romans 7:25 says,

"Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!"

Being thankful and praising

The need to be thankful is taught in the incident of the ten lepers. Jesus told them to go to the temple and show themselves to the priests. As they travelled, they were all cleansed. We read what happened next,

"One of them, when he saw he was healed, came back, praising God in a loud voice. He threw himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him – and he was a Samaritan. Jesus asked, "Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? Has no one returned to give praise to God except this foreigner? Then he said to him, "Rise and go; your faith has made you well" (Luke 17:15-19).

The ten lepers had received something that no man could give them. They had been healed from a terrible disease yet most of them were not thankful.

We have received so much that no man can give us. We need to thank and praise God for all He provides. If we are ungrateful then He will notice.

Psalm 107 describes how God can save people from life-threatening situations. When they cried to God, God saved them. Psalm 107:31 advises them how to respond,

"Let them give thanks to the Lord for his unfailing love and his wonderful deeds for mankind."

How to be thankful

We can be thankful to God in many ways – one of which is through song,

"Come, let us sing for joy to the Lord; let us shout aloud to the Rock of our salvation. Let us come before him in thanksgiving and extol him with music and song" (Psalm 95:1-2).

Another way is through prayer,

"Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God" (Philippians 4:6).

Another way is to talk to others about all that God has done for us,

"I will give thanks to you, LORD, with all my heart; I will tell of all your wonderful deeds" (Psalm 9:1).

When we do this, we promote God's name and get others to think about God's greatness.

Thanksgiving should be a fundamental part of our lives,

"And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him" (Colossians 3:17).

Jesus set us the example of thanking God for our food. He gave thanks before feeding the five thousand as we read in Matthew 14:19,

"And he directed the people to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the people."

We read that he did the same when he fed the four thousand in Mark 8:6-7,

"He told the crowd to sit down on the ground. When he had taken the seven loaves and given thanks, he broke them and gave them to his disciples to distribute to the people, and they did so. They had a few small fish as well; he gave thanks for them also and told the disciples to distribute them."

By giving thanks whenever we eat, we recognise our dependence on God for our daily food and keep Him in our minds on a regular basis.

Praise

Now let us now consider praise. We praise someone when we admire something about them or what they have done.

God is worthy of praise for every aspect of his character and all his wonderful works,

"Fear the Lord your God and serve him. Hold fast to him and take oaths in his name. He is the one you praise; he is your God, who performed for you those great and awesome wonders you saw with your own eyes"
(Deuteronomy 10:20-21).

And,

"Sing joyfully to the Lord, you righteous; it is fitting for the upright to praise him. Praise the Lord with the harp; make music to him on the ten-stringed lyre"
(Psalm 33:1-2).

By praising God, we exalt him in our own eyes and those of the people who are listening.

God's surpassing greatness can be seen in His creation. We should admire it and praise God for it,

"For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse. For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened" (Romans 1:20-21).

This passage shows God's displeasure at those who do not recognise Him as the creator of the world and do not praise and thank Him for it.

We praise God because He deserves it. He is so much higher than man in every way. We praise Him because we value Him and the things He has done.

The book of the Psalms ends with this advice,

"Let everything that has breath praise the Lord" (Psalm 150:6).

We can praise God in word, as we read in Hebrews 13:15-16,

"Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise – the fruit of lips that openly profess his name. And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased."

Praise is like the sacrifices people offered in the Old Testament. It was a necessary part of their relationship with God. Notice that it is not enough to praise in word only. We must also do good and share with others. Praise is an essential part of our service to God and can be expressed by doing good to others.

Singing

Singing is an important part of our Christian worship. Ephesians 5:19-20 says,

"Speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ."

One of the reasons we sing is to praise and to thank God. Another reason is that it cheers us up when we think about what God has done for us. Singing is one way of reminding each other about God and His blessings.

The parallel reference in Colossians 3:16 says the same thing,

"Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts."

Singing is more than just a way of thanking God - it is also an important way of teaching ourselves and others.

It is therefore important that the words we sing are based on what the Bible says and not on the ideas of man.

Summary

We have learned that thanking and praising God are important aspects of the life of a believer.

When we give thanks, we recognise all the many things God has given us. We recognise that we are dependent on Him and that He is good to us.

When we praise God, we remind ourselves of his great character and mighty deeds. We exalt Him in our own lives and the lives of others.

Thanksgiving and praise should be part of the way we communicate. We can talk to others about the many reasons we are thankful to God. We can praise God's name to others. We can thank and praise God in our private and public prayers and through song. We can live lives of praise and thankfulness by doing good to others.

We will end with the words of praise spoken to God by the angels in heaven,

"Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honour and power and strength to our God for ever and ever. Amen!" (Revelation 7:12).

Lesson 30: Let us go on from here

Fix our eyes on Jesus

When we are baptised into Christ, we made a commitment to follow him. But it is not good just knowing about Christ, we need to live like him. We show we are Christian by showing the character and behaviour of Christ. Other people should be able to look at us and see that we are like Christ. We also need to look at ourselves and ensure that we become more like Christ.

All our lessons have considered the examples that Jesus set us. Whatever the issue, we have thought about what Jesus would do. We need to train our mind to think about what Jesus would do in each particular circumstance and then act in that way.

In one way, our task is easy.

When we face a decision – ask the question, "What would Jesus do?"

When faced with a choice – ask the question, "What would Jesus choose?"

These are the words of Hebrews 12:1-3,

"...And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him, he endured

the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart."

Whatever God has planned for us in our lives, let us keep our eyes on Jesus. In that way, we will be able to see his example, follow in his footsteps and be faithful disciples.

Growing into Christ

In lesson 1 we learned that we needed to grow into Jesus. We were not suddenly transformed into Jesus when we were baptised – this was a step on the journey. Over the course of these lessons, we have learned of many ways in which we need to grow.

Peter speaks about this growth. We start off with our faith in Jesus, and then we must add things to it. He tells us of seven things we need to add in 2 Peter 1:5-9,

"For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love. For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. But whoever does not have them is nearsighted and blind, forgetting that they have been cleansed from their past sins."

We cannot be true disciples with faith alone, we must add to it and develop the characteristics of Christ. If we do this, we will become more like Jesus and be productive and effective in our faith. If we do not, then we are a spiritually short-sighted or blind person.

The apostle Paul prayed that new believers would develop,

"And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes from Jesus Christ – to the glory and praise of God" (Philippians 1:9-11).

Like Peter, Paul wants believers to grow and abound in love and in understanding so that they produce the fruit of righteousness.

We can never say that we are perfectly Christ-like. Therefore, we need to continue to grow in love, knowledge and understanding throughout our lives.

Being Fruitful

When we think about growing and producing fruit, we can think about crops and fruit trees. Psalm 1:1-3 gives us a picture of a believer as a fruit tree,

"Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers, but whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and who meditates on his law day and night. That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither – whatever they do prospers."

The first thing we notice is that the righteous have chosen carefully where they walk, where they stand, and where they sit. They have chosen to avoid the place of sinners.

Secondly, they delight in reading and meditating on God's word so that they can understand it and put it into practice.

Choosing to read and think about God's word is like choosing to be planted by a stream. God's word will provide us with a constant supply of life-giving water even during dry periods. We can then remain strong in faith and produce spiritual fruit.

A tree is known by its fruit as Jesus tells us,

"No good tree bears bad fruit, nor does a bad tree bear good fruit. Each tree is recognized by its own fruit. People do not pick figs from thorn-bushes, or grapes from briars. A good man brings good things out of the good stored in his heart, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of" (Luke 6:43-45).

We are known by our fruit. So let us make sure we produce good fruit.

How to grow

During the lessons we thought about various things that help our spiritual growth:

- There is reading and thinking about God's word. When we read God's word, we can think about questions like: What practical lessons can we learn? What does it teach us about Jesus, about God and about His plan with the earth? We learned the benefits of looking more deeply into Scripture when we studied the Passover, the life of Joseph and Nebuchadnezzar's dream.
- Then there is the strength we gain regularly speaking to God in prayer. We can cast all our cares on Him and rely on Him to help us through any difficulties.
- Thanking God for all that He has done in our lives helps us realise our dependency on Him and respond by showing our appreciation in practical ways
- Praising God exalts Him in our own eyes and helps us be humble.
- Remembering Jesus in the bread and wine each week helps us to stay focused on his love and how we should love.
- Sharing fellowship with our brothers and sisters in Christ provides comfort and encouragement for all of us.
- Keeping the vision of God's kingdom in our minds helps us persevere.

The dangers to our spiritual growth

We also thought about things that do not help our spiritual growth. We need to beware of these spiritual dangers so that we can avoid them and protect ourselves from them.

- There is the danger of unbelief, especially through the false ideas of other people.
- There is the danger of persecution and suffering, where we may think that life in Jesus is too hard.
- There is the danger of worries, where we get distracted from our focus on Jesus.
- There is the danger of sin, where we may think our sin cannot be forgiven.

- There is the danger of money, which can take away our Christian love.
- There is the danger of pride, where we think we know better than God.
- There is the danger of immorality and indulging our human instincts, where we are tempted to enjoy temporary pleasure rather than waiting for the kingdom.

The world we live in has all these dangers and wants us to become like it. It does not like us being different.

We need to watch ourselves so that we do not join with the world. We do not want to pass away with it but to enjoy the wonders of God's kingdom forever.

We are not alone

We should not worry about these dangers on our Christian walk because God will look after us. As Paul tells us,

"No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it" (1 Corinthians 10:13).

Hebrews 13:5-6 instructs us,

"Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you." So we say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can mere mortals do to me?"

God is with us. No-one can take us out of His care. He will help us, and we do not need to be afraid.

Before Jesus ascended to heaven, he left a comforting message,

"Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matthew 28:18-20).

We are not alone. Jesus has promised to be with us, and we can picture him walking alongside us on our Christian journey.

Our journey is leading to a great reward

Even though our life in Jesus may not be easy, it is leading to a great reward. We need to make every effort to complete the commitment we made when we were baptized. Then, when we are at our journey's end, we will be able to look back on our life and say the words of the apostle Paul,

"I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award me on that day – and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing" (2 Timothy 4:7-8).

We must fight our own fight and run our own race. Each of us has a different fight to fight or a different race to run. Let us complete our fight or finish our race and help our brothers and sisters do the same.

If we fix our eyes on Jesus, this will help us overcome and persevere.

Jesus will come back soon. When he comes, he will reward us. He will make us like him in every respect – free from death, sin, pain and crying. 1 John 3:2 encourages us with these words,

"Dear friends, now we are the children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.

We end this course here. But it does not end our learning or growing into Christ.

Let us go on from here!

May the blessing of God's people be on you,

"The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; the Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace."

(Numbers 6:24-26)