

Bible Basics

First Steps of Life in Christ – Part Two

Instruction in what comes super-natural!

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Preface

Bible Basics is the second of a two part series, *First Steps of Life in Christ*. While anyone could benefit from studying it, the greatest benefit is gained when *Baby Steps* has been studied first. That is especially true for new Christians or for those who are simply examining the Christian life to see what it is all about.

As with *Baby Steps*, it's recommended that you do this study with a mentor and/or small group. You will have questions that come up along the way, and it's good to have someone who has been down the pathway in front of you to provide wise insights. Furthermore, as each Christian has the Spirit of God within, each one will have thoughts and observations regarding the teachings of the Bible that will benefit the others. You as well will be able to provide valuable input.

Through the study as you are in close fellowship with other believers, you will also find that 'body life' is taking place. Every believer is part of the body of Christ, and we are meant to be connected and interact with each other. That includes sharing each other's joys and pains, and supporting one another along the way. Allow time for that to take place as you go through the study – it's part of the practical learning experience!

To assist you in your study, there is a set of discussion questions at the end of each section. Prior to meeting together we encourage you to read the chapter and do your best to answer the questions. When you meet together that will then give you more time to deal with the questions of your own that arise and think through the implications.

You will note that we have not divided this book into sessions. Each time you meet you can go through as much material as your time allows. Some sections are deep enough that you may want to do them over two sessions. Others are brief and simple and you may be able to do more than one in a single session. Just 'go with the flow' and take it at the pace that suits your situation. There are 21 sets of questions for study and discussion.

For those leading the study, a leader's guide is available. You can find it on our website, www.first-steps.com.au.

Introduction

Growth is exciting. To see children born, and then rapidly develop and grow is amazing. As they get into adulthood and establish themselves in a career and then go on and, in many cases, start their own families, it's absolutely awesome.

We understand that growth involves a number of factors. There is the taking in of nourishment and the physical multiplication of body cells. As the brain grows and develops, it is able to take in, retain and process information. With that decisions can be made, and there is growth in maturity and wisdom regarding such decisions.

Thinking of taking in information, for a while I was in danger of being labelled a professional student. Since then it has been confirmed! Of course some might say I was just trying to keep up with my wife, but the simple fact of the matter is that I love to learn. But education isn't much good without practical application. Growth takes place when you have both.

My first career was that of an automotive engineer, and it began while I was still studying. Fortunately, the school that I was attending was a co-operative program with an automotive manufacturer. We went to school for six weeks, then we worked for the company for six weeks in engineering related roles. It was a great way to learn.

Studying for the ministry was a similar exercise. Working secular jobs and teaching a Sunday School class of teenagers while being fully involved in a local church gave my wife and I great

opportunities to put in practice the ministry training that we were receiving.

To participate in that sort of exciting growth you don't have to head off to Bible college or seminary just yet. You can do it right here, right now. In this study we will get you started.

Our goal is to provide you with something that too many Christians lack. Today's church is rightly trying to reach out to a lost world, and in so doing is seeking to make "church" very attractive and entertaining. It's great to have events like that to invite non-Christian friends to, but we've missed the boat if we think that the Christian life is all about being entertained. The problem today is that too many believers simply come to "church" for the enjoyment and heart warming experiences. Those are great, but we need to dig deeper. Any motivational guru can provide you with a moving experience. What Christ has to offer is no less exciting, but it has a depth to which none other can compare.

This depth that we speak of is measured in a variety of ways.

It is a deep relationship. That involves knowing Jesus Christ as a friend and sharing your deep concerns, yearnings and aspirations with Him. You have an understanding of what His interests are, and the focus of your life is on bringing glory to Him. This naturally flows on to having a connection with others who have that same sort of relationship with Christ.

That understanding of the mind and heart of Christ is fed by knowing the Word of God. More than knowing the content of the Bible, you have an understanding of the "whys and wherefores." It makes sense as you see the teachings and implications for your own life.

With that understanding comes an ability to live out the wisdom of the Word of God. We learn to live in ways that glorify God, and that brings about an unshakable joy and sense of purpose in our lives.

In this part of *First Steps* we are simply going to get you started on this pathway. The remainder of the journey will involve your entire life, but we will get you pointed in the right direction!

Because there are plenty of people out there who seek to twist the truth to suit their own self-centred purposes, we will do our best to lay a Biblical foundation of truth. By understanding these basics it will give you a framework to slot other truths in along the way. Should someone come along who denies one or more of these truths, you will know enough to steer clear.

This is also true regarding study aids. There's only one Bible, but there are a lot of books, videos, software packages and other teaching tools that talk about it. The bulk of them can be very helpful, but it would be rare for any one of us to find a book in which we agree on every single point. We learn to apply "filters." It's like eating fish. You learn to chew in a way where your tongue is feeling around for bones, and when you find one, you remove it! That doesn't keep you from eating fish, but if your practice is to gulp down fish without that careful approach, you may very well find yourself choking on a bone one day.

So, dig in to this study and learn those basic truths that will help you to sort out all of the others!

Growing in maturity

...but grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

2 Peter 3:18

Growth ought to be universal. If a person is not growing, something is wrong.

Naturally our physical bodies have growth limits. That's not what we are talking about. It's your inner person – your mind, soul and spirit – that's in focus.

Peter concluded his second letter with the admonition above. He was concerned about his spiritual children falling into error, but the way to avoid the negative was to put in place the positive: grow!

He said to grow in grace. Grace is a word that describes what Jesus Christ did in saving us. The free gift of salvation was a gift of grace.

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; *it is* the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.

Ephesians 2:8,9

Grace is a free gift. It means that God dealt with us according to the possibilities that He could bring about in our lives, not our past performance.

There are two ways that we need to grow in grace.

First of all we need to grow in putting into action those possibilities that He has put into our lives.

- He has given us a home in heaven. We should strive to live as citizens of that country, ones who have been placed as ambassadors here on planet earth.
- Furthermore he has gifted us with abilities to be able to effectively serve Him. We will learn more about that later. Those abilities need to be developed. A kid may be a child prodigy at the piano. That doesn't mean that he can do without lessons or practice. He takes to it like a duck to water, but it still involves hard work.

Secondly, we need to grow in our ability to act with grace towards others. How easy it is to be critical and judgemental regarding what others do and say. Our tendency as humans is to do that even when we really don't know all of the facts. God knew all the facts about us, and it didn't paint a pretty picture. Yet He still loved us and gave us His Son.

Some of us need to control our temper or our harshness toward others. All of us need to spend more time listening and seeking to understand others.

So then, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath...

James 1:19

Acting with grace also means that we see the potential in others for bringing glory to God, and we work with them patiently in seeking to bring that about. We are willing to coach them, and encourage them. When they fail us or react negatively to us, we do our best to avoid getting frustrated with them. We recognise that they have feet of clay just like we do, but that God loves

them and has gifted them, just as He has done for us. We give heed to the saying "Please be patient, God isn't finished with me yet;" and "Caution: work in progress!" We don't lose sight of the goal and their potential, and we continue to believe that it can be realised in their lives as in our own.

Peter said that we are to "...grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ." What does it mean to grow in knowledge of Jesus?

- We know Him as a person by spending time with Him and listening to Him. How does He speak to us? Through His Word, the Bible.
- We know Him as Lord by listening to Him specifically for instructions on what to do, then following through with those things.
- We know Him as Saviour by continually remembering what He did for us on the cross and thanking Him for it.
- We know Him as the Christ by looking forward to His coming again to planet earth. Again, we will learn more about this later. It's an exciting truth!

All of these things revolve around the Bible. We will next have a look at this marvellous Book and what it is all about.

Questions for study and discussion

Read 2 Peter 3:18

How can you tell if something is growing? List as many ways as you can.

How can you tell if a Christian is 'growing?'

Let's consider growing in grace. What does that mean?

In what ways is grace something that we have received? What have we received from God? Ephesians 1; 1 Corinthians 1:4-9
How do we 'grow' in those things?

What are ways in which grace is something that we give?

How do we grow in those?

Given that either you are a Christian or you are not, how do you grow in the knowledge of Jesus Christ?

The Bible

The Bible is an amazing book. It's a vital part of a Christian's daily life. Earlier we encouraged you to read Psalm 19. David gave a variety of phrases to describe God's Word, and then he said of them:

More to be desired *are they* than gold,
Yea, than much fine gold;
Sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb.

Moreover by them Your servant is warned,
And in keeping them *there is* great reward.

Psalm 19:10,11

We can hardly begin listing all of the wonderful and beneficial things that David said about God's Word in Psalm 119. Read it again!

Before we go to far, let's consider some 'lingo.' The Bible is often referred to with other phrases, some of which refer to certain parts. They include:

- God's Word
- The Word of Christ
- The Holy Bible
- Scripture
- The Law and Prophets (the Old Testament)
- The Epistles (letters in the New Testament)
- The Gospels (first four books of the New Testament)
- The Pentateuch (first five books of the Bible)
- The Major Prophets (most of the big books after Psalms)
- The Minor Prophets (little books following those big ones!)

Its nature and origin

You will note that we describe the Bible as “God’s Word.” That’s what it is.

All Scripture *is* given by inspiration of God, and *is* profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness

2 Timothy 3:16

“Scripture” is “writings.” Used in this way it is speaking of the sacred Scriptures – the writings that have been compiled into the book that we call the Bible. “All Scripture” equals every word in every verse of every book of the Bible.

“Inspiration” means “breathed out.” It’s a very clear and graphic image of words coming right out of someone’s mouth. You hear them so clearly from being close that you can hear the air coming out with them.

“Of God” is to say that it was God that was doing the speaking.

So, the entire Bible is as if it was spoken directly by God to us.

The next verse that we will look at tells us how this happened.

... knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke *as they were* moved by the Holy Spirit.

2 Peter 1:20,21

Clearly God used men to give us the Bible. But as the prophets of old, the words that they said came from God.

A prophet was a spokesman for God, and a prophecy was the message that he spoke or wrote down. Often prophecies had to

do with what was going to take place in the future, but always they were a message from God.

Sometimes God took control of the prophets and they spoke, hardly knowing what they were saying. That was the exception, not the rule, but it certainly took place with the seventy elders in Numbers 11:25, and with others as the Spirit of God came upon them.

At other times the prophet spoke clearly knowing what He was saying and knowing that he was simply delivering a message from God. Hence the expression, "Thus says the Lord..." You see that throughout the book of Isaiah and many other Old Testament prophets.

Sometimes the writer speaks simply as God's representative without quoting God but clearly giving a message from God:

Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, to the saints who are in Ephesus, and faithful in Christ Jesus.

Ephesians 1:1

Note that Peter acknowledged Paul as a writer of Scripture. Here's another verse from 2 Peter (remember the one above?):

... as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given to him, has written to you, as also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which untaught and unstable *people* twist to their own destruction, as *they do* also the rest of the Scriptures.

2 Peter 3:15,16

As you read the Bible you can see that the writers had different styles and levels of education. Their personalities came out in

their writing. Yet we know that the very words were as if they came out of the mouth of God. How can that be?

God used the writers of Scripture as instruments. God gave to each one the experiences and background that God wanted, in order to get the precise message across that He wanted to give in the way that He wanted to give it.

That's a great motivation for each one of us to simply be instruments in the Lord's hand that He can use to accomplish His purposes and bring glory to His name!

Preservation and inspiration

The above verses speak of how God gave us His Word, the Bible. That's inspiration – God 'breathing it' to mankind.

Preservation has to do with what we have today. How close are our present Bibles to what God originally gave?

First of all, as far as God is concerned, He hasn't lost a bit of it.

Forever, O Lord, Your word is settled in heaven.

Psalm 119:89

As far as down here on earth is concerned, we have two issues. One has to do with the manuscripts that we have today in the original languages: Hebrew for most of the Old Testament, Aramaic for portions of the Old Testament written around the time of the Babylonian captivity, and Greek for the New Testament. The other part of the equation has to do with translations that are available to us today.

It's understandable how people can be confused when we speak of every individual word being inspired as they were given, and yet visiting a Christian bookstore and seeing dozens of

translations that use a variety of different words. What's the answer?

- In a translation there hardly ever is one word in one language that is a precise match for one word in another language. Furthermore any one word typically has a variety of meanings depending on how it is used. Given that the inspiration took place in giving the word in the original language, it's up to good scholarship directed by God to come up with a good translation. But no matter how good the translation, the best understanding of God's word is going to come by studying the original language. That's one reason why we have preachers and Bible colleges!
- While a deeper understanding of precise meaning can be gained by digging deeper in study, the translations that we have today have been put together by teams of godly people who have spent the bulk of their lives studying the Bible in its original languages. Simply studying the English translations can give you a very good understanding of God's Word. They are not going to lead you astray.
- There are some issues regarding which group of original manuscripts one prefers, especially in the New Testament. We have literally thousands of copies of Bible portions that scholars compare with one another in order to work out the precise words of the original. For the most part the conclusion is absolutely clear. However, there are a few words that there are questions about. Those form a very small percentage of the total, and considering the overall teaching of each group of manuscripts; no Bible doctrine or event is put into question. These differences

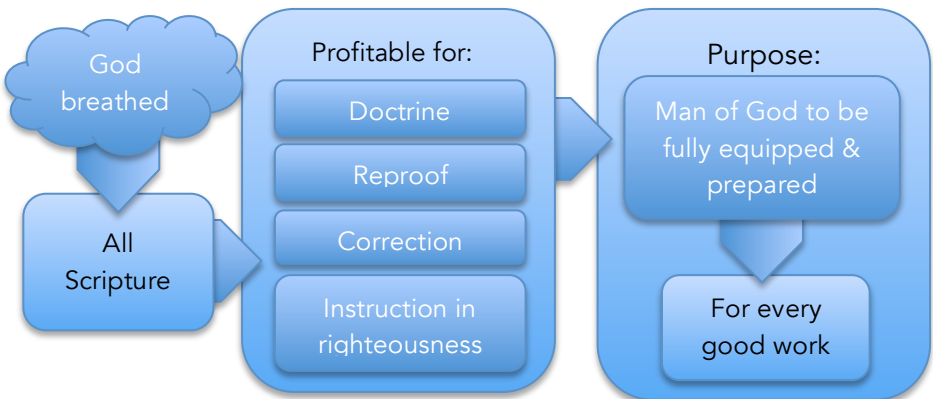
can be seen in the translations with most modern translations following one group and the King James family of translations following the other group. Often there are footnotes in your Bible that will also discuss them.

Questions for study and discussion

Psalm 19:10-11; 119

Consider the meanings of the words in 2 Timothy 3:16-17

- Scripture: literally, 'writings' – a word to describe the Bible
- Inspiration: literally, 'God breathed' – as if the words came right from God's mouth
- Profitable: useful, beneficial, advantageous
- Doctrine: teaching, instruction
- Reproof: pointing out something that is wrong and needs to be stopped
- Correction: showing the right way to do something
- Instruction: child training including disciplinary action
- Righteousness: right living
- Complete: mature, lacking nothing
- Equipped: prepared with all that's needed
- Work: something that you do



2 Timothy 3:16 Visualised

In light of 2 Timothy 3:16, what does God want you to do with the Bible?

What do you expect the result will be?

Which of the following phrases do you think best describes how God gave the Bible to us and why? Consider 2 Peter 1:20,21

- Seeing things in God given dreams and visions, and then providing an interpretation based on the prophet's own understanding
- Having Inspirational ideas, enabling the writers to put together some really good, practical concepts with their own 'spin.'
- Word for word dictation unaffected by the writer's personality, style and personal experiences
- Working through the lives of the writers in such a way that the very words that they wrote down were precisely what God wanted written

When did inspiration take place? Is inspiration different than preservation? Which are these verses talking about?

In case you were wondering, God has amazingly preserved His Word as well. Psalm 119:89

Let's now consider the parts of the Bible. As we do so, what are some names that you have heard that either describe the Bible as a whole, or various parts of the Bible?

The Old Testament

The Bible is divided into two parts, the Old Testament and the New Testament.

A “testament” is an agreement. In the Bible it is often called a “covenant,” where it involved an agreement between men and God, in each case initiated by God Himself.

There are a number of such agreements mentioned in the Old Testament, but the dominant one was God’s agreement with Moses, in which he gave “the Law” to the Jewish nation. This law had the Ten Commandments as its core. It provided for a very detailed system of civil law and religious worship involving animal sacrifices. This covenant with its law is referred to as the “Old Testament.” The Jewish Bible, which has this old covenant as central, is known as the Old Testament by Christians.

The Old Testament begins with “In the beginning...” – a good place to start! It describes the creation of the universe and everything in it within 6 days, God resting on the seventh. For those indoctrinated by certain segments of modern scientific thought, that may sound strange.

We will discuss more about this later, but for the moment let me just tell you about something that happened when I was studying engineering in a secular university. In my university physics course textbook, at the end of the chapter discussing the second law of thermodynamics, there was an article arguing for the existence of God based on that law of science. The law says that entropy (lost energy) is constantly increasing, which is to say that systems wear out and run down, and disorder comes from order, not the other way around. That certainly doesn’t fit evolution. There are great scientific minds that believe the Bible precisely as it is given, so don’t be quick to write it off thinking

that you know better. This is an exciting area of Christian and scientific study and we will give you a taste of it in due course!

Following creation the Bible tells us about the sin of Adam and Eve with its effects, and then goes on to give the history of their descendants leading up to Noah. Of course we are then told about the flood. It continues on and tells about Abraham and his children, from which the Jewish nation came. It goes through their struggles – 400 years spent in Egyptian bondage and then the return to their own land, Israel – part of which they occupy today. While the nation started out unified, first of all with “Judges” as leaders then with kings beginning with Saul and David, soon things turned sour and the kingdom split between northern and southern kingdoms.

We are told about how sin and idol worship became a cancer among them and they were sent off into captivity – the northern kingdom scattered all over the place by Assyria, and the southern kingdom taken en masse to Babylon. We are then told about how many from the latter group returned to the land to re-establish the nation that was present at the time of Christ.

In the middle of the Old Testament we have several books of poetry, including the Psalms, along with the books of wisdom, written by King Solomon - Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. The Jews called these “the Writings.”

The end of the Old Testament contains the major and minor prophets, the distinction being the sizes of the books. They were writings by prophets that God raised up at various times during the kingdom years.

By the way, prophecies are messages from God delivered by these men, the prophets. Sometimes the messages included

telling people about the future, but always it was God working through them to deliver a message to mankind.

From the end of the Old Testament to the time of Christ was a gap referred to as the 400 silent years.

The first time you read the Old Testament you might want to begin with the basic 'story line' of the history of God working with mankind. Here is a suggested approach:

- Genesis
- Exodus chapters 1-20
- Numbers chapters 9-32
- Deuteronomy chapters 1-3 and 29-34
- Joshua through Esther

Along the way, include portions of Psalms and Proverbs. They will provide practical wisdom and encouragement. After you have worked your way through all of that and the New Testament, then get yourself a Bible reading schedule that will take you through the whole thing.

Questions for study and discussion

What is a testament?

What do the Ten Commandments have to do with the "old covenant?"
(Exodus 19:3-6; 20:1-17; 24:3-8)

Why was God ready to destroy the people in Exodus 32:1-10? See also
Leviticus 26.

Is this different to how God deals with us today? Why? Colossians 1:20;
Galatians 3:13

Which book of the Bible is the book of beginnings?

What beginnings do you find there?

Why are beginnings important?

Consider creation. In light of what we learned about the inspiration of the Bible, is the story of creation true? Scientifically accurate? What is the benefit of knowing the truth about where everything came from?

What is a story from the Old Testament that comes to mind? How is it beneficial to know that story? (If you haven't heard any, start reading!)

Go through the table of contents for the Old Testament and see how much you know about the books listed.

The New Testament

In the Old Testament a prophecy was given by Jeremiah that God would make a new covenant with His people by writing his law on their hearts.

“Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah - not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day *that* I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, though I was a husband to them, says the Lord. But this *is* the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. No more shall every man teach his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them, says the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more.”

Jeremiah 31:31-34

While the complete fulfilment of this prophecy for the Jewish people is yet future, the foundation for it was laid at the cross, and the early church recognised that this new set of workings was now in place (2 Corinthians 3:6-9). So, starting with the time of Christ, the Scriptures that were given from that time on were known as the New Testament.

Four books that give their own perspective on the life of Christ begin the New Testament. They are known as the “Gospels.” The word “gospel” means “good news.” Matthew, Mark and Luke are known as the synoptics, because they are very similar.

John takes a totally different approach, starting out like the Bible itself with “In the beginning...” and focusing on visits of Christ to Jerusalem at the time of the Passovers.

Luke’s gospel is continued with the book of Acts, giving the history of the early church, including its growth from Jerusalem, through the Middle East and out through Asia Minor and into Europe. Early focus is on Peter and some key men from the Jerusalem church, and then Luke follows the journeys of the Apostle Paul around the Mediterranean. These are largely first-hand accounts, as Luke was a travelling companion of Paul through most of his journeys. Luke makes it clear when he was present as he changes from third person to first person: “he” and “they” changes to “we.”

All of the remainder of the New Testament, with the exception of the very last book is made up of the Epistles. That’s a fancy word for “letters.” Paul wrote most of them – they typically are named after the people he wrote to. The others, known as “General Epistles,” are mostly written by apostles, and they have the name of the writer as the name of the book. The one writer who was not an apostle was James, the half brother of Jesus and the pastor of the church in Jerusalem.

The very last book of the Bible, Revelation, was written by the Apostle John. He was an old man at the time, and he was a prisoner exiled to the island of Patmos. His crime? Simply that he was an outstanding Christian pastor and leader. Revelation is a unique book in the New Testament as it shares what John saw in a vision concerning events in the future – the end of the world as we know it today, and entry into eternity with the Lord. It ends with a warning not to add or take away anything from what he had written - a fitting close for the completed Bible.

Practical value

The New Testament is vital for the Christian. It gives admonitions on how to live as well as great truths concerning what Christ has done for us, how to relate to God, and how to relate to others around us.

Questions for study and discussion

Read Jeremiah 31:31-34. What is included in this “new covenant?” List all of the elements, or parts of it, that you can find in this passage:

Who is it made with?

Has it been fulfilled?

Is “The New Testament” a good name for the second part of the Bible? Why or why not?

Why are there four Gospels – books that tell us about the life and ministry of Christ?

Given that the book of Acts gives the history of the very beginnings of the early church in a time of transition, should we expect to see similar things to happen today? Why or why not?

Romans is a fantastic book of New Testament “doctrine.” “Doctrine” simply means “teachings.” It tells us all about how to come to Christ, how to live for Him, who we are in Him and a lot more. Have a look and pick out some verses that teach us a “doctrine.” Describe it in your own words.

Some have described the books of I and II Corinthians to be the “epistles of church problems.” Why would they say that, and what sort of things should we learn from them?

After Corinthians we have several smaller books or “epistles” of the Apostle Paul, and then others by different apostles and one by James, the half brother of Jesus. Paul’s epistles continue to hold a wealth of doctrine. Often he will begin by teaching the doctrine, then he moves on to talk about our “walk” – how we are to live out that doctrine. Where do you see the transition between these two things in the book of Ephesians?

Why do you think Revelation 21:18-19 were placed where they are?

God

The Bible begins with God: "In the beginning, God.." John begins his gospel by saying, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."

Whatever your philosophy, you have to begin with someone or something, and that is your God. The evolutionist says, "In the beginning was matter and/or energy and space, and everything there is came from it. Nothing came before it, it just was. The laws of physics and nature simply are there and always have been." But the universe is characterised by design, from the smallest particles to the biggest galaxies. There must be a designer. There is a cause for every other cause going right back to the uncaused cause: God Himself. A significant part of the order of the Universe is the law that governs it. There must be a lawgiver.

People in all cultures everywhere and of all time have a belief in a supreme being. Where did that universal sense of God come from? It's been passed down from our common ancestor, Adam, plus we all have a spirit which gives us an inbuilt sense of God's existence. It's related to an inner sense of what's morally right and wrong. See Romans 1 and 2.

As Christians we simply believe God is. That includes was and will be, because God existed before time, and in a sense exists above, or apart from, time. Remember, "In the beginning, God..." He created time, matter and energy, as we know it. He designed the laws of physics, laws of nature and everything else that 'naturally' governs our universe. It's all a part of His design and creation.

So, let's have a look at what the Bible says about God. He is:

- Real – John 17:3
- Eternal - Psalm 90:2
- The creator - Genesis 1:1
- All-powerful - Genesis 17:1
- All knowing - Acts 15:18
- All wise – Romans 11:33
- Everywhere present - Psalm 139:7-10
- Love -1 John 4:8
- Perfectly righteous - Psalm 11:7
- Sovereign (The boss of everything!) - Psalm 135:6
- Organised – He has a plan. Acts 15:18; Ephesians 1:11
- Truth – Titus 1:2
- One, yet three – The “Trinity.” Deuteronomy 6:4; Matthew 6:9; John 1:1, 14; Acts 5:3,4

Practical issues

You may have heard someone say, “If God can do anything, can He make a rock so big that He cannot pick it up?” Apart from being an ignorant way to deal with one’s relationship to the Creator, we need to acknowledge the obvious. There are some things that God cannot do even though He remains all-powerful:

- He cannot violate His own character. He doesn’t lie, cheat or act unjustly.
- He cannot do something that He has decided not to do. He did not spare His own Son.

Apart from that, most objections that you come across will simply be feeble attempts to dodge the real issues! There are, however, real heart felt questions that some people have from time to time. They are things that they cannot get their heads around, and the lack of an answer is keeping them from Christ.

Usually it's obvious as to what their attitude is from what sort of matter they bring up, but if you are unsure, ask them!

One such question that comes up from time to time has to do with miracles in the Bible, or even today, for that matter.

If what we have said is true about God, they aren't an issue. Whether it's preparing a fish with the ability to swallow a man, keeping that fellow alive for three days or simply letting him die and bringing him back to life again, none of those things are difficult at all for an all powerful God!

Questions for study and discussion

How do you know that there is a God? Each person has his or her own way of knowing. What is yours?

What is the first cause of all other causes?

What does the evidence of design in creation tell you?

Where did the relatively universal concept of God come from? (Romans 1:19-20)

The fact that all men everywhere and for all time have had morals tells us what? Romans 2:14-15

The Bible tells us about God, who He is, what our relationship to Him is, what He has done and a whole lot more. What does it mean that all the pieces fit and it makes sense?

The Bible begins acknowledging that God was at the beginning. (Genesis 1:1) Beginning of what? What does that tell you about God?

Why is a person a fool if he says that God doesn't exist? (Psalm 14:1)

What characteristics of God do you see in the following verses?

John 17:3

Psalm 90:2

Genesis 1:1

Genesis 17:1

Acts 15:18

Psalm 139:7-10

1 John 4:8

Psalm 11:7

Psalm 135:6

Titus 1:2

Deuteronomy 6:4; Matthew 6:9; John 1:1, 14; Acts 5:3,4

Jesus Christ

In the Old Testament, the Jews were promised a future King who would deliver them from their enemies and rule over them in a time of peace. He was referred to as the "Messiah," meaning "Anointed One." In the New Testament, from the Greek equivalent, He is the "Christ." Hence, "Jesus Christ" – equivalent to "Jesus the Messiah," or perhaps in our language, "King Jesus."

Near the beginning of His ministry, Jesus was called upon to read the Scripture (the Bible) in His synagogue (the local place where Jews worship). He read from Isaiah 61:1,2.

The Spirit of the Lord God is upon Me,
Because the Lord has anointed Me
To preach good tidings to the poor;
He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted,
To proclaim liberty to the captives,
And the opening of the prison to those who are bound;
To proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord...

You can read what happened in Luke 4:16-21. He finished by saying, "Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

Back in Isaiah 60:16 He is identified:

You shall know that I, the LORD, am your Saviour
And your Redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob.

In the Old Testament, where you see "LORD" like this in all capitals, it indicates that the Hebrew word behind it is "Yahweh," or as it is sometimes given, "Jehovah." It's one of the names used for God. Here it's clearly referring to the Messiah, and Jesus is the Messiah. With this His statement to the

Pharisees really makes sense: "Before Abraham was, I am." John 8:58

His Birth

Given that Jesus is God, all of the attributes of God are true of Him as well, and that includes the fact that He is eternal. What happened then at His birth?

Some people scoff at the matter of the virgin birth, but it's true. The supernatural entry of God the Son into the human race obviously required a supernatural conception. You can read about it in Luke 2:26-56. Being born of a woman, He was genuinely human. Not having an earthly father meant that His conception was not His origin. It also meant He was not affected by the sin of the human race. You can learn more about that from Romans 5.

As a man, Jesus went through all the normal trials and temptations of life, plus a fair bit extra. Yet, He never sinned.

For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin.

Hebrews 4:15

He was a man on a mission, and that mission was to provide the gift of salvation for mankind.

...for the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost.

Luke 19:10

His ministry

Jesus had many people who followed Him, but he chose 12 to be His core group of disciples. They are also known as “apostles,” which literally means, “sent ones.”

Of the 12, one of them, Judas, ended up betraying Him. Jesus was aware of that all along (John 6:70) but still allowed him to be part of the group.

Jesus did a lot of teaching, especially by using “parables” – stories from life that illustrate deeper truths, and He also performed many miracles. In the gospel of John, seven miraculous “signs” are recorded, along with seven “I ams.” John said:

And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name.

John 20:30-31

His death

The crucifixion was not a good plan gone wrong. It was the plan and purpose for Jesus’ entry into the human race. He told His disciples:

And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.

John 3:14,15

And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all peoples to Myself." This He said, signifying by what death He would die.

John 12:32

Way back in the Old Testament we were told of what Jesus would do on the cross:

All we like sheep have gone astray;
We have turned, every one, to his own way;
And the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.

Isaiah 53:6

In the New Testament, Paul put it this way:

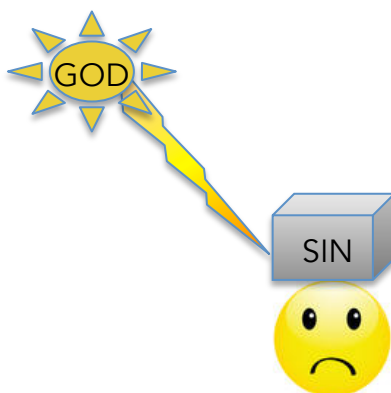
For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.

2 Corinthians 5:21

BEFORE SALVATION



JESUS

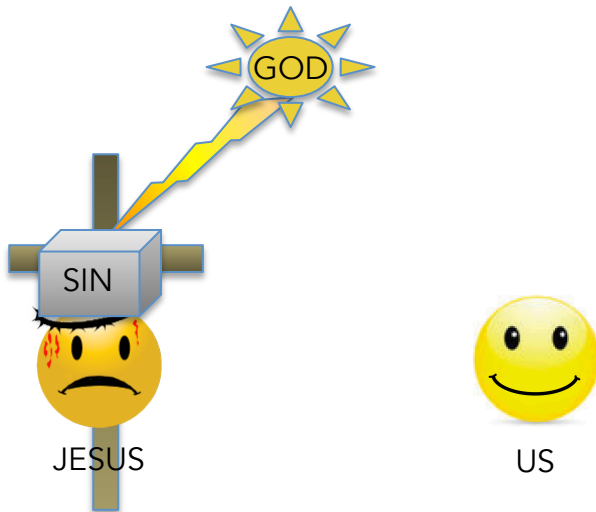


US

Before a person becomes a Christian by trusting in Christ, their situation is rather precarious. As the wayward sheep of Isaiah 53:6 we were guilty of sin, and the penalty was death (Romans 6:23).

But at the cross, Christ changed the picture:

AT THE CROSS



“...the Lord (God the Father) has laid on Him (Jesus) the iniquity (sin) of us all!” He was made to be sin for us, that we could be made the righteousness of God in Him! Amazing grace!

By the way, do you know what grace is? It’s a free gift, something that you don’t deserve. Grace is the flip side of mercy. Mercy is not getting what you do deserve. God has done both for us, and he brought it about through the cross. It was the only way he could be both just and merciful, loving and true.

His burial and resurrection

After Jesus died, he was placed in a tomb that was sealed and guarded. The third day He was made alive again and walked out of the tomb (Matthew 28). He initially appeared to two ladies, then to two disciples and after that to many other people over a 40-day period. On one occasion He appeared to over 500 believers (1 Corinthians 15:6). A large number of those people were still living when the gospels were first circulated.

Because Christ rose from the dead, we know that He was victorious over sin and death. As a result of that we know that there is a future resurrection for us as well (1 Corinthians 15:20).

Who (Jesus) was delivered up because of our offences,
and was raised because of our justification.

Romans 4:25

“Justification” is to be declared to be righteous. Our sins and offences were placed on Jesus, and He was punished for them, in our place, on the cross. Because that payment was deemed to be adequate, He rose again. He was raised to life because our justification was completed.

At the end of the 40 days of appearances Jesus once again met with his disciples, gave them the command to spread the good news along with the promise that He would send to them the Holy Spirit. With that He rose up into the air and disappeared, having returned to heaven (Acts 1:1-11).

His Lordship

It's great to know all about the historical Jesus, including His divine origin and nature. However, have you ever thought about the fact that Satan is fully aware of all those things as well?

(James 2:19) The big difference is that Jesus Christ is our Lord. Those who have accepted His call to 'take up their cross and follow Him' understand that. Salvation is not simply accepting a free ticket to heaven. It's entering into a relationship with Jesus where He is Lord and we are His disciples. He leads, we follow.

Then Jesus said to His disciples, "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it."

Matthew 16:24, 25

If your life is all about yourself you had better check out your relationship with Christ. A genuine Christian should be able to say with the Apostle Paul, "For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain." Philippians 1:21

Questions for study and discussion

Is it good or bad to have someone rule over you? Why?

In what ways is Jesus Christ your “ruler?”

Is the Lordship of Jesus Christ optional for a Christian? (Matthew 16:24-25)
Why or why not?

What is Jesus’ position with regard to the Jewish nation? What are the Bible words/terms for that position?

Where did Jesus come from? What was His origin? (John 1:1-5, 14; 8:58; Micah 5:2)

Was Jesus human? (Luke 1:31, 34-35; 1 Timothy 3:16; Hebrews 4:15)

Why did Jesus perform miracles? Is it important that they really were impossible from a human perspective? (John 20:30-31)

Was Jesus' death a good plan gone wrong? Why or why not? (John 3:14-15; 12:32)

What 'exchange' has been made possible by Christ's work on the cross? (Isaiah 53:6; 2 Corinthians 5:21)

When does a person gain the benefit provided for by the Lord Jesus? (John 5:24)

What are the similarities and differences between grace and mercy? (Ephesians 2:4-9) Look up those two words in the dictionary.

What happened to Jesus after He died? (Matthew 28:57-60; 28:6, 9; Acts 1:9; 1 Corinthians 15:3-8)

The Holy Spirit

Who is this Holy Spirit whom Jesus said He would send? He's the Spirit of God, the third person of the Trinity.

We made a brief mention of the "Trinity" when we listed the attributes of God. The word is one that Christians coined to make simple reference to a complex matter. You don't find the word "Trinity" in the Bible, but you do find the concept.

Here it is: There is but one true God. God the Father is truly God. God the Son, Jesus Christ, is truly God. And, the Holy Spirit, sometimes referred to as the Spirit of God and sometimes the Spirit of Christ, is truly God.

The three of them are distinct persons who speak to each other, interact with each other and have distinct relationships and interactivity with us. Yet they are one in essence.

People have sought to come up with illustrations such as water existing as liquid water, steam and ice, yet all being water. An egg has a yolk, whites and a shell, but it's all one egg. However, such illustrations really fall well short of any real comparison. To protest and say that it cannot be so because it is a concept that goes beyond our understanding is to limit God to our puny and incomplete comprehension. For me I am content to simply take the Biblical statements at face value. God exists in three persons and He is one God.

So, what about this person, the Holy Spirit? It may seem a bit odd to relate to one who is a spirit that you cannot see or touch, yet He is the one who empowers us to do God's bidding. However, while He is a spirit, He is also a person with intelligence, feelings and a will (1 Corinthians 2:10-11; Ephesians 4:30; 1 Corinthians 12:11).

We first see the Holy Spirit along with the other members of the Trinity at creation. "God" in Genesis 1 is the plural form of the word, yet it is used as if it was a singular word. In verse 26 it comes out clearly: "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness..." That included the Holy Spirit, because back in verse 2 it says: "...the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters."

In Old Testament times we see the Holy Spirit coming upon God's people for a particular task at a particular time. Through the book of Judges the Spirit of God came upon various people at appropriate times, enabling them to deliver the Israelites from their enemies (Judges 3:10; 6:34 etc.). This continued through Old Testament times.

There was a change, however, following the time that Jesus ascended to heaven. Prior to His crucifixion He had promised this to His disciples:

"If you love Me, keep My commandments. And I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever—the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him; but you know Him, for He dwells with you and will be in you. I will not leave you orphans; I will come to you.

John 14:15-18

We made mention earlier of how that at the time of His ascension to heaven, Jesus also promised that He would send the Holy Spirit to the disciples. That happened in a very dramatic way in Acts 2:

When the Day of Pentecost had fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. And suddenly there came a sound from heaven, as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. Then there appeared to them divided tongues, as of fire, and one sat upon each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.

Acts 2:1-4

“Tongues” here are “languages.” There were lots of Jews visiting Jerusalem at the time from other countries. They were familiar with a lot of different languages. As the Holy Spirit “filled” the Apostles, they started speaking in these different languages. Some of the people were amazed that these local Jews were speaking their language. Others, who apparently didn’t understand the language that they were listening to, said that those speaking were just drunk (verses 6-13)! Peter responded to that with a great message, and about 2,000 people trusted the Lord and were baptised.

We will discuss more about this spiritual gift later, but suffice it to say that it was a unique sign that earmarked a special event.

Following a brief time of transition in the book of Acts, when a person trusts the Lord Jesus Christ as their Saviour, they are immediately indwelt with the Holy Spirit.

But you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. Now if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he is not His.

Romans 8:9

Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own?

1 Corinthians 6:19

While the Holy Spirit is grieved when we disobey God, He permanently remains with us.

In Him you also trusted, after you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation; in whom also, having believed, you were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, to the praise of His glory.

Ephesians 1:13-14

And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.

Ephesians 4:30

God wants us to be “filled” with the Spirit (Ephesians 5:18), which is to say that we should let Him take control and lead us. As we do so the “fruit of the Spirit” becomes evident in our lives:

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law.

Galatians 5:22-23

Spiritual gifts

If you have trusted the Lord Jesus as your Saviour, you have the Holy Spirit living within you. Don't worry; you won't explode!

Remember, He's a spirit! As we mentioned, He is there to help you. One way that He does that is by giving you special abilities. When you were born physically you had natural gifts. At the time of your spiritual birth you were given spiritual gifts. These are described in 1 Corinthians 12 – 14; Romans 12 and Ephesians 4.

Each list of spiritual gifts is slightly different. That may be because God needs His people to use different ones at different times for different purposes. It also may be because you cannot put the Holy Spirit into a box. Our descriptions of the gifts that He gives may be limiting and inadequate in describing the enabling that He provides.

Some of the gifts were described as "signs." Like the miracles of Jesus recorded in John's gospel, they were signs to the Jews that Christianity was genuine and a fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy. The gifts of tongues, healing and miracles all fall into that category. With the sign being clearly shown there would be no further need for it. Certainly God still works miracles today, but that's different than having an Apostle Paul or Peter around who had the ability to heal and raise the dead by simply declaring it to be so.

Other gifts were related to the need to supernaturally enable the giving of God's Word to mankind: new revelation. Tongues coupled with the interpretation of tongues did that along with providing the sign, but the more utilitarian ones would be prophecy and knowledge. With God's Word being completed with the Book of Revelation, the need for those gifts ceased. That's emphasised with a warning at the end of that book about adding any more.

Then there are those gifts that are relatively timeless. Ones like faith, discernment, teaching, encouragement, serving, giving

and helps. A detailed study goes beyond the scope of our present purposes, but we would encourage you to work out what your gifts are. It will be an indication of what God wants to do through you. Keep in mind, though, that like natural gifts, they need to be developed.

You may think that God will use you in areas in which you were proficient prior to becoming a Christian. He probably will, but that's only part of the picture. Your natural gifts coupled together with your spiritual gifts are God's complete design for you. It's amazing what can come out of that.

God's gifts are there in your life for a purpose. He wants to accomplish certain things through you. As you come to an understanding of the specifics of how He has gifted you, you will better understand what He wants you to do.

Questions for study and discussion

What is the difference between the genuine Holy Spirit and the “force” as depicted in Star Wars? 1 Corinthians 2:10-11; Ephesians 4:30; 1 Corinthians 12:11

Speaking of differences, how was the ministry of the Holy Spirit different in the Old Testament as compared with New Testament times? Judges 3:10; John 14:15-18; Romans 8:9

How do you think a Christian can “grieve” the Holy Spirit? Ephesians 4:30

What does having the Holy Spirit mean with regard to your own personal security? Ephesians 1:13,14

In your own words describe spiritual gifts. 1 Corinthians 12

How can you know what your own spiritual gifts are?

Is that important? Why?

Angels

Perhaps you grew up hearing about fairies, elves and Santa Claus. It's easy for one to wrongly place angels in the same category. They, however, are real, but they are different than how many people picture them.

First of all, angels are not dead people. God created them as angels for a purpose (Psalm 148:5). That purpose is to serve God with regard to what's happening with us:

Are they (angels) not all ministering spirits sent forth to minister for those who will inherit salvation?

Hebrews 1:14

As created beings, angels are limited in power. As man is considered to be "...a little lower than the angels..." (Hebrews 2:7), they don't even approach God's power.

God created all angels to be good, but, as with us, He gave them a free will. Some of them chose to rebel against Him, including Satan, who led the revolt (2 Peter 2:4; Ezekiel 28:11-19).

Angels have a variety of different roles and appearances. Some have appeared as ordinary men to people (Genesis 18:1-2; 19:1). Others have a special function in the worship of God (Isaiah 6:2-7). Some appear to have responsibility with regard to key people of national influence (Daniel 10:13;12:1).

There are times that angels have appeared without people knowing that they were angels (Hebrews 13:2). Many have wondered whether an angel was involved in an experience in their own life. Perhaps you have had such an experience yourself. Recently I was doing some research on events where individuals have exhibited super-human strength in a crisis -

people picking up cars to rescue others, and things like that. As the events are looked into, there are many that cannot be explained by a surge of adrenaline, exaggeration of the accounts of witnesses or the laws of physics. Were angels involved? One day we can ask them directly!

You may have heard the concept of guardian angels. Certainly angels have been assigned tasks of looking after certain individuals. Daniel is an example, whom we mentioned above. But does every believer have a guardian angel? Consider what Jesus had to say:

Take heed that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I say to you that in heaven their angels always see the face of My Father who is in heaven.

Matthew 18:10

This would seem to indicate that children have angels assigned to them. Is it just the weak and vulnerable who get that service? It may be that we all fit into that category!

The only remaining question is, "will an angel break the highway speed limit to keep up with you?" We smile, but be aware of the fact that while you have the promise of the Holy Spirit staying with you, even when you are disobedient, I know of no such promise with regard to angels.

Questions for study and discussion

Of all the people that you know, which one of them would you consider the closest to being an “angel?” Why did you pick that one?

What are angels? Where did they come from? Are they the souls of dead people? Psalm 148:2,5

How does the power of angels compare with that of God or men? Hebrews 2:7; Genesis 24:40

What are the roles of angels?

Hebrews 1:14; Acts 12:7-10

Matthew 18:10

Genesis 3:24

Ezekiel 10:1, 7; Exodus 25:18

Daniel 6:22; 9:21-22; 10:10-21

Is it possible that you may have interacted with an angel at some point in time? Hebrews 13:2

Note that “the Angel of the Lord” is distinct from angels in general. What do we know about this one? Who is He? Genesis 16:7,13; 22:11,12; Hebrews 1:5-8

Satan

We mentioned above that Satan is an angel who led a revolt against God.

So the great dragon was cast out, that serpent of old, called the Devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world; he was cast to the earth, and his angels were cast out with him.

Revelation 12:9

And He said to them, "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven.

Luke 10:18

This is supported by the prophet Ezekiel's condemnation of the "prince of Tyre." As he begins, you might think that this prince is merely a proud man with grandiose ideas.

Son of man, say to the prince of Tyre, Thus says the Lord God: Because your heart is lifted up, and you say, I am a god, I sit in the seat of gods, in the midst of the seas, yet you are a man and not a god, though you set your heart as the heart of a god.

Ezekiel 28:2

But in Ezekiel's second segment it becomes clear that there is more to this man than the prince himself.

Son of man, take up a lamentation for the king of Tyre, and say to him, Thus says the Lord God: You were the seal of perfection, full of wisdom and perfect in beauty. You were in Eden, the garden of God; Every precious stone was your covering.... The workmanship of your

timbrels and pipes was prepared for you on the day you were created, till iniquity was found in you....

Your heart was lifted up because of your beauty; you corrupted your wisdom for the sake of your splendour; I cast you to the ground...

Ezekiel 28:12-15, 17

So, what do we know about this archenemy? As other angels, he is limited in power, but certainly he has far more power than man apart from God. He is referred to as the "prince of the power of the air" (Ephesians 2:2). It seems that he has a lot of control over nations of the world – or at least he thinks he does, because when he tempted Jesus, he offered them (Matthew 4:8,9). The Ephesians passage makes it clear that he has mapped out a course for the world that most people are following.

Satan has a variety of names, including Lucifer, the Devil and the deceiver. The latter is very appropriate:

...and that they may come to their senses and escape the snare of the devil, having been taken captive by him to do his will.

2 Timothy 2:26

Putting temptation in our path is undoubtedly part of Satan's technique, but we cannot say "the devil made me do it!"

Consider what James said about temptation:

Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am tempted by God"; for God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He Himself tempt anyone. But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. Then, when

desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death.

James 1:13-15

Furthermore, God has provided us with the means of not only being protected from Satan but turning the battle around and taking the offensive:

Put on the whole armour of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armour of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand.

Stand therefore, having girded your waist with truth, having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and having shod your feet with the preparation of the gospel of peace; above all, taking the shield of faith with which you will be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked one. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

Ephesians 6:11-17

One of Satan's techniques is a matter that you need to be very much aware of. He's going to try to turn you against your Christian friends, and them against you. How is that possible? One of you is going to offend the other. It happens.

The one offended will suffer hurt and loss, which can lead to bitterness and put distance between the two of you. The

tendency is to hold on to the bitterness, allowing it to burn in deeply and rot out your soul.

God has a better plan. It's called forgiveness. Release the offender from the sights of your defensive guns and free yourself to love and be loved.

Now whom you forgive anything, I also forgive. For if indeed I have forgiven anything, I have forgiven that one for your sakes in the presence of Christ, lest Satan should take advantage of us; for we are not ignorant of his devices.

2 Corinthians 2:10,11

Questions for study and discussion

Given that people dress up as Satan in costume parties and he is a character in children's cartoons, should he be taken seriously? Is he even real? 1 Peter 5:8

What sort of being is Satan? Where did he come from? Ezekiel 28:11-17; Luke 10:18

Note the angelic conflict in Daniel 10. Who are the ones fighting against God's angels? Revelation 12:9

What sort of strategies does the devil/Satan use against believers?

John 8:44

Ephesians 6:11

2 Corinthians 2:10,11

2 Timothy 2:26

Revelation 2:9,10

When fortune-tellers and followers of the occult do things that seem quite certain to be supernatural, does that mean that God is working through them? Why or why not?

When you do something wrong, can you reliably say, "The Devil made me do it?" James 1:13-15

What can you do to be protected from and have victory over Satan?

Ephesians 6:11-17; James 4:7; Jude 9

Sin

Having talked about Satan, it's natural to then discuss sin. Satan rebelled against God, and essentially that is what sin is all about.

There are two basic words in the New Testament for sin.

The first is the word "sin" itself, which means "missing the mark." There's a target to hit, and that is God's perfect righteousness. Anything less than that is a miss.

You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.

Leviticus 19:2

In baseball, getting a hit a third of the time is exceptionally good. A basketball player may think he's pretty good if he hits 80 per cent of his free throws. However with God, 100 per cent accuracy is the standard.

The other word is often translated "trespasses." Perhaps you have heard that before in the Lord's Prayer. A trespass is the same thing that happens today when someone goes where they are not supposed to be. They have stepped across the boundary.

And you He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins

Ephesians 2:1

So sin is not doing everything good that God wants you to do, and trespasses involve doing anything wrong – something that God doesn't want you to do. And the standard regarding doing wrong things is much the same as failing to do all the right things:

For whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all.

James 1:10

So why is God so demanding?

Let's answer that by asking some other questions:

- What's so bad about having one rotten potato in a bag with good ones?
- What's so bad about having a little bit of mould in your refrigerator?
- Isn't rat poison good to eat? After all, it's made mostly of good grain.

Given that God wants heaven to remain what it is, it's no surprise that no sin is allowed in those who enter there.

Questions for study and discussion

What is the difference between a sin and a transgression? Ephesians 2:1

Is it acceptable with God if our good deeds outweigh our sins? James 1:10

Who does Romans 3:9-18 describe?

Salvation

While the sin problem is immense, fortunately God's grace is greater.

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.

Ephesians 2:8,9

Your righteousness is lacking, but that which Christ provides for you is not.

Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt. But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness.

Romans 4:4-5

But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe.

Romans 3:21-22

Believers have been able to exchange their sin for the righteousness of Jesus Christ. What an exchange! That is what has made salvation possible.

All we like sheep have gone astray;
We have turned, every one, to his own way;
And the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.

Isaiah 53:6

For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.

2 Corinthians 5:21

With salvation comes a new life, new direction and new priorities. This is because the believer has turned from his or her sin to the Saviour, who has become their Lord.

Salvation has three aspects:

- We have been saved from the penalty of sin when we trusted Christ as our Saviour.
- We are being saved from the power of sin as Christ works in our lives to make us more like Him.
- We will be saved from the presence of sin when we are with Him in Heaven.

Questions for study and discussion

Why do some people try to get as close to sin as possible without going over the line? Would having an understanding of both words for 'sin' possibly help them? How?

What is the solution for sin? Romans 3:24

Define these words in that verse (look them up in the dictionary):

- Justified
- Freely
- Grace
- Redemption

Now, say in your own words what the solution for sin is:

What sort of exchange is spoken of in Isaiah 53:6 and 2 Corinthians 5:21?

What price has/had to be paid for your salvation? Romans 4:24,25; 5:6-10

Heaven

The Christian life would be worth living, even if it only involved our lives here on planet earth. But there's more! Not steak knives, but a heavenly home!

Jesus had a lot to say about heaven. The Lord's Prayer addresses "Our Father in Heaven..." (Matthew 6:9). He spoke of rewards in heaven (Luke 6:23). He related to us how Satan fell from heaven (Luke 10:18). He understood it to be a very real place.

Where is heaven? No one knows, but there is an argument for saying that it's not in three-dimensional space. Given that God lived in His heavenly home prior to creation, and that three-dimensional space was a product of his creation, then heaven would have to be in some other 'dimension.' That doesn't make it any less real, just don't expect any astronaut to find it!

Is there a place for you in heaven? Consider what Jesus said:

In my Father's house are many mansions; if it were not so I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you I will come again and receive you unto Myself; that where I am, there you may be also.

John 14:2,3

Before we leave the topic, we should point out that the word "heaven" or "heavens" is used of three different things in the Bible. Naturally there is the heaven, which is God's home, as we saw in the Lord's Prayer. There are also the starry heavens (1 Chronicles 27:23; Psalm 8:3. Rain and birds are in the heavens, or as we would say it, the atmosphere. With these last two, the word "heaven" can either be singular or plural, and just refer to

the one area. That's similar to how we can refer to the "stars of heaven" or "the starry heavens" and be speaking of the same place.

Questions for study and discussion

Is heaven real? How do you know? Matthew 6:9; Luke 6:23

Is there an interim place that you will have to go prior to going to heaven? Why or why not? 2 Corinthians 5:8

What was part of Jesus' activity when he returned to heaven? John 14:2,3

What are the three "heavens" spoken of in the Bible (the word is used in these three ways)? Deuteronomy 1:10; 11:11,17; 26:15; Psalm 104:12

The future

The above verse in John 14 may have surprised you. Jesus is coming again? He certainly is! Just as the Old Testament told us about Jesus' first coming so both the Old Testament and New Testament tell us about Him coming another time.

But I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you sorrow as others who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus.

For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will by no means precede those who are asleep. For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord. Therefore comfort one another with these words.

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

There's a lot more in the Bible about Jesus coming again and all of the events that follow. For the moment, be encouraged with that thought. With regard to the details, that's a whole new study for another day!

Questions for study and discussion

Is there something that you are especially looking forward to in the next few years? What is that, and why does it have that level of appeal?

Is there a person that you would really love to have come and visit you? Whom would that be and why?

Jesus said that He would come back for you. See how many details you can put down about what we know about that visit:

John 14:1-6

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

1 Corinthians 15:51-58

The church

You may have grown up thinking that churches were religious buildings. Or perhaps you have considered them to be national or worldwide denominations, such as the Lutherans or Catholics. Neither of those concepts fit what we see described in the New Testament.

The word that's translated "church" in the New Testament means "assembly." It can be used in a general sense, like Luke telling us about a "lawful assembly" in Acts 19:39. That would be something like a court of law. But most often in the New Testament it is used as a technical term denoting a group of Christians. Back then they didn't have purpose built buildings to meet in, but they could still get together to worship and be encouraged in things of God. By the way, whether they were assembled together at a given time or not, they were still the church. Keep in mind that where ever you go you take "the church" with you, including its head, the Lord Jesus Christ!

The church is an organised body with pastors as leaders and deacons who organise practical matters, freeing up the pastors for the ministry of the Word and prayer. While in leadership roles, both pastors and deacons are known as servants. The terms "minister" and "deacon" both have the underlying meaning of being a servant.

Most of the time 'church' is used to describe a group of believers in a particular place who meet together on a regular basis. But on a few occasions it looks at all believers everywhere, the body of Christ:

And He put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.

Of course one day in the future that church will also assemble, as we are caught up together into the clouds to meet the Lord! 1 Thessalonians 4:17

Several metaphors, or word pictures, are used to describe the church.

- It is a body, with many different body parts. Each part has a different function, and all of them are important, whether they are in the lime light or not. Colossians 1:18
- It is a nation, with leaders and citizens. Ephesians 2:19
- It is a family, with parents and children. Ephesians 2:19
- It is a building, with a foundation and building blocks. It can grow into a temple and be a place where the Spirit of God dwells. Ephesians 2:20-22

As you put together the concept of the church being a body and each of its members having spiritual gifts, it is clear that every single person in the church is vitally important.

For as we have many members in one body, but all the members do not have the same function, so we, being many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another. Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, let us use them...

Romans 12:4-6

Your spiritual gifts are going to be linked to your own role and ministry within the church. Perhaps you are wondering what that might be. How can you find out?

The place to start is by becoming an 'official' member. It may seem appealing to simply attend and not be a member. In actual

fact that is the lazy way out, and it is a failure to recognise God's purposes for yourself and the church. Remember in Ephesians 2 that Paul said we were members of the household of God. That's to be reflected in your being a member of a local body of believers. Your spiritual gifts are to enable you to function as a part of the body of Christ. In your local area that body is functioning through local churches. That's not man's idea. It's God's design.

Once you are a member, learn all you can about the ministries of your church. A 'ministry,' by the way, is anything that your church has organised to reach out to people or train them.

Ask permission to visit those ministries that you would not normally be included in. Make enquiries as to what is going on behind the scenes to make it all happen. As you do so, it may be that you feel drawn to a certain ministry. Find out if there are opportunities to be a helper in some way.

Be cautious about volunteering to do something simply because there is a need and no one else has volunteered. If someone asks you to be involved in a ministry, thank him (or her) for the invitation and ask him why he decided to approach you. If he responds with observations about you, your interests and abilities, then you should give it careful and prayerful consideration. If he simply focuses on the need and the lack of people to do it, then pray for the need, but follow Jesus' instruction to His disciples: "...The harvest truly is great, but the labourers are few; therefore pray the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into His harvest." (Luke 10:2)

In all that you do in the church, always have a servant's attitude. Don't expect to dive in, be in charge and have everything your way. Go in to help, to learn and to be a blessing to others.

Questions for study and discussion

What do people in general think a church is? Is that correct?

What did Paul mean by "church" in 2 Corinthians 1:1?

What would a "lawful assembly" as in Acts 19:39 have in common with a church?

Who is the head of your church? Ephesians 1:22

A variety of titles can be used for the person who leads your church here on planet earth. See how many you can find in Acts 20:17,28.

In Colossians 1:18 and Ephesians 2:19 a variety of "word pictures" are used to describe the church. See how many implications you can come up with regarding each. (Because the church is a _____, such and such must be true.)

The church is a body

The church is a nation

The church is a family

The church is a building (the group of people making up the church are like a building)

Given all the above, what does God want you to do that you haven't yet done?

Worship

What does God mean to you? When you think of the Lord Jesus Christ, what comes to mind?

The expression that goes along with the answers to those questions is what we call worship. It's recognising God and Jesus Christ for who they are.

Oftentimes the music portion of a church service is equated with worship. It certainly has that as a large part of its focus, but worship is more than music and it's more than what happens "at church."

Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do,
do all to the glory of God.

1 Corinthians 10:31

Living out that verse makes your whole life an expression of worship!

To get a good understanding of the facets of worship, read the Psalms. They are the songbook of the Jewish nation, and express their worship to God in all kinds of circumstances of life.

All of God's creation is expressing worship to God to the extent that it is reflecting God's design.

The heavens declare the glory of God;
And the firmament shows His handiwork.
Day unto day utters speech,
And night unto night reveals knowledge.
There is no speech nor language
Where their voice is not heard.
Their line has gone out through all the earth,
And their words to the end of the world.

There were times for the Psalmist when things were not looking terribly good out his palace window, yet he recorded words of praise. His praise didn't pretend that everything was wonderful, but it reflected on what he saw happening and who he knew God to be. Consider his approach to worship in Psalm 27:11-14:

Teach me Your way, O Lord,
And lead me in a smooth path, because of my enemies.
Do not deliver me to the will of my adversaries;
For false witnesses have risen against me,
And such as breathe out violence.
I would have lost heart, unless I had believed
That I would see the goodness of the Lord
In the land of the living.
Wait on the Lord;
Be of good courage,
And He shall strengthen your heart;
Wait, I say, on the Lord!

While music is not essential in order to worship God, it does enhance our worship when we are able to use it that way.

Rejoice in the Lord, O you righteous!
For praise from the upright is beautiful.
Praise the Lord with the harp;
Make melody to Him with an instrument of ten strings.
Sing to Him a new song;
Play skillfully with a shout of joy.
For the word of the Lord is right,
And all His work is done in truth.
He loves righteousness and justice;
The earth is full of the goodness of the Lord.

Note the pre-requisites of being “righteous” and “upright.” We are not talking about sinless perfection, but rather a heart that is right with God, being motivated by the desire to worship Him.

Melody very appropriately conveys worship. It tends to naturally lead into the next thing coming, and it’s memorable and pleasant. Harmony is another one of those ideal components. Multiple voices or instruments producing different notes and sound character, yet all blending together as one, providing depth and richness to the overall sound (Psalm 92:1-4).

The overall dynamics of the music should lead us to the conclusion of the above passage:

For You, Lord, have made me glad through Your work;
I will triumph in the works of Your hands.

Psalm 92:4

Worship music isn’t only intended for Sunday morning. Note in this passage that this worshipper is singing praise and playing instruments in worship in the morning and “every night.” What a great to start and finish each day!

Questions for study and discussion

How would you describe your feelings toward the most important person in your life apart from Christ Himself? Why do you feel that way about that one?

How do your feelings and understanding about God the Father and Jesus Christ compare with those towards the person you mentioned above?

Does it take words to worship God? Why or why not? Psalm 19:1-4

How can you worship God in a similar way to how the non-human part of His creation worships Him?

What can you add in your worship that goes beyond what animals, rocks and trees can do?

Does music add anything to worship? What and how? Psalm 33:1-5; 92:1-4

What is the distinction between “party music” and worship music? Isaiah 5:11-12

Teaching

One of Jesus' final commands before he went back to heaven is commonly known as "the Great Commission."

And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." Amen.

Matthew 28:18-20

Teaching is therefore vitally important in the ministry of a local church and to us as individual Christians.

Teaching can take place in both formal and informal ways. Sometimes we are even being taught when the matter of learning is the last thing on our minds. What we watch on TV is a powerful example. Fortunately that can also be done in good ways. Paul encourages us to use music to teach and encourage each other (Colossians 3:16).

Too often today we have the mentality that church is merely a religious form of entertainment. Our desire to attract people and share the good news of Christ can have the danger of training people to come when they feel like it. It's great to enjoy a church service, but we also need to get together with other believers with the purpose of being taught.

Lawrence Richards in his classic work, *Creative Bible Teaching*, pointed out that teaching is changing lives. Paul spoke of this happening with the believers in Thessalonica:

...as you know how we exhorted, and comforted, and charged every one of you, as a father does his own children, that you would walk worthy of God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory.

1 Thessalonians 2:11,12

He went on to say how they responded positively to this, following in the steps of the very first believers.

So, find out what your church has on offer with regard to groups that meet to be taught from the Word of God. Some may have more of a 'sit and listen' focus, such as preaching in a church service. Others can be very effective by utilising small groups where questions can be asked and interaction takes place to help you understand and contribute. You will receive benefits from both.

As you learn and grow, you will want to find avenues where you can share what you have learned with others. Being a mentor for others who are following along in your steps is important. You may even want to get together with them and go through this study one on one. One thing is clear; the teacher is often the one who is learning the most!

Questions for study and discussion

What do you think the world would be like if no teaching was taking place? What if there was teaching but no learning? Have you ever met someone who typically refused to learn?

What in particular does Jesus want us to teach and learn? Matthew 28:18-20

Who were some of the ones that the Jews were instructed to teach, and in what setting? Is that true for us today? Deuteronomy 6:6,7

The next two verses led the Jews to create “phylacteries” which they strap to their hands and head, as well as place in a niche in their doorways. Is that type of thing a help or a hindrance in keeping the command? Why?

Do Christians do similar things? What?

Identify ministries in your church that involve teaching and learning.

Has teaching taken place where there is no learning?

What sort of learning does God want to take place in our lives? 1

Thessalonians 1:5-10; 2:11,12; 2 Peter 3:18

Does an involvement in teaching help you as a teacher to learn? Is there a way that you can do that?

Ordinances

No, we are not talking about bombs and munitions! The ordinances of the church are baptism and the Lord's Supper. These are two things that the Lord commanded us to observe as a reminder of something that He did as well as something to cement certain things in place in our lives.

We've already spoken about Baptism early on in this book. It's included in the great commission that we recently mentioned. While it's voluntary, it's not an option – it's a command from the top! 'Order' and 'ordinance' have the same root word.

The Lord's Supper is sometimes referred to as 'Communion.' That's a nice religious word that simply means 'sharing.' Those who use it to describe the Lord's Supper are referring to getting together to share this symbolic meal.

Jesus had the first 'Lord's Supper' with his disciples in an upper room on the night of His betrayal and arrest. He gave the instructions to continue to do it to remember Him. Paul gave further instructions in 1 Corinthians 11:23-34 as to how it was to be conducted in the church.

This supper has two food elements: bread and wine. Wine in the Bible can be either wine similar to what we know or grape juice. Most churches today use grape juice. Jesus' supper with his disciples was a portion of the Jewish Passover meal. In that meal, bread with yeast was not allowed. Jews today use 'matzo' which is made in flat sheets, a bit like large crackers. Churches will often use something similar.

The grape juice is a reminder of Jesus' shed blood on the cross. The bread, broken during the observance, is a picture of his

broken body. Broken in the sense of death – it no longer was working, physically.

As we observe the Lord's Supper we are remembering what Jesus has done for us. That also causes us to remember the fact that we are sinners – that's why He had to die. Given that sin is something that caused Him to die, we don't want to have that in our lives, so it's also a time of self-examination (1 Corinthians 11:28). We pray with the Psalmist:

Search me, O God, and know my heart;
Try me, and know my anxieties;
And see if there is any wicked way in me,
And lead me in the way everlasting.

Psalm 139:23,24

Some religious groups include the Ordinances in something that they call the "Sacraments." Usually they will have a much longer list than just the two, and essentially they are means by which God dispenses His grace and spiritual life. However, the Bible tells us that God's grace is freely given and cannot be earned. Eternal life is a free gift.

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.

Ephesians 2:8,9

Questions for study and discussion

What are the two ordinances of the church?

What makes them "ordinances?" Matthew 28:18-20; Luke 22:19

What is it about an ordinance that makes it different than a "sacrament?"

Describe what it means to you to observe the Lord's Supper "in remembrance" of the Lord Jesus. 1 Corinthians 11:24,25

Is the admonition for us to examine ourselves related to that in any way? 1 Corinthians 11:28

Examining ourselves is also described in that passage as "judging" ourselves. What is the consequence of not doing so? Verses 30-32

How does the Lord's Supper "proclaim" the Lord's death? Verse 26

Mutual responsibility

Who are you responsible for? Certainly you are responsible for your own actions – at least we hope that you don't try to blame your choices and actions on others! If you are a parent, you have a degree of responsibility for your children and their actions. For those who are a supervisor of others at work there is also an element of responsibility for what those under you are doing.

Is that the extent of it? In what ways might we be responsible for others who are outside those traditional areas?

Cain was the first to shirk his responsibility towards his brother. OK, it was a bit worse than that – he murdered his brother. But his response to God's query about his brother's welfare was, "Am I my brother's keeper?" Yes, Cain, you were, and yes, Christian, you are!

Jesus took the concept of brotherly care and extended it to the care of neighbours, which basically includes anyone you come in contact with. Read the parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:29-37.

The early Christians were great examples of brotherly care, taking responsibility for each other's welfare. In Acts 2:44-46 we read of how they shared what they had together, even selling things when necessary to cover a need.

While it may seem daunting to share in order to meet physical needs, and even greater challenge is present. Physical needs may be the most obvious but there are much deeper needs that may be even more important.

What happens when you are down and out? You need encouragement, and perhaps a listening ear. It's the responsibility of your brother or sister in Christ to provide that.

They, in turn, need that type of support and encouragement from you.

And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching.

Hebrews 10:24,25

These verses speak of what is happening “at church,” but keep in mind that you are a body part of the church! You may be the hand that reaches out to another to move them from depression and defeat to “love and good works!”

“Exhorting one another,” referred to in verse 25 includes a lot of things. It’s the idea of coming alongside another to help them along. They have a need. It’s your responsibility to do what you can to meet it.

Questions for study and discussion

What parallels can you draw between boating and the Christian life?

In your particular life and situation, what specific people are you responsible for? In what way are you responsible for each? Why?

How would you answer Cain's question, "Am I my brother's keeper?" Genesis 4:9

In what ways did the early Christians demonstrate mutual responsibility? Acts 2:44-46

How much of Hebrews 10:24,25 takes place "at church?"

In what ways can you practice mutual responsibility outside of church activities?

Relationships

Mutual responsibility naturally brings us to relationships. Oftentimes it's a relationship with someone that brings us to Christ to begin with. However, too often it's a relationship problem that drives a person out of a church and leaves them in the gutter. That's not how it is meant to be, and you need to be part of the solution.

Will someone close to you hurt you? You bet. Will a Christian who loves the Lord Jesus and has a responsibility to love and care for you offend you? That's just as certain.

How is it that such things can take place? All people, including Christians, have a sin nature and sometimes succumb to the tricks of the devil. There will be times that you are the victim of such acts, and there will also be times when you are the perpetrator.

Are you thinking that you would never do such a thing? Consider Peter prior to his three prominent denials of his Lord (Matthew 26:33).

Solomon wisely cautioned us about taking to heart bad things that people may say about us. When we are really honest with ourselves, we have to realise that we may be just as guilty from time to time (Ecclesiastes 7:21,22).

So what do you do when someone hurts you or offends you? A good place to start would be to pray for them – not that God would zap them, but that they might come to a place where God can abundantly bless them. Jesus told us to pray for our enemies and those who persecute us, so it's certainly worthwhile to pray for those who offend us.

Next, get together with that person. Don't do that to condemn them and point your finger in their face, but to understand them and share with them what you are experiencing. It has been said; "first seek to understand, then to be understood." Of course, the concept didn't originate with man. James said, "...let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath..." (James 1:19).

What if you find that someone else believes that you have hurt them in some way? Jesus said in Matthew 5:23-24 that if you are presenting a gift to God at the altar and remember that your brother has something against you, that you need to leave your gift there and go get things right with your brother.

Don't get caught in the trap of thinking that the ball is the other person's court. It's always in both sides of the court – you both have equal responsibility to get together with the other person to sort things out (Matthew 18:15-17). Don't think that you tried it once, so it just isn't going to work. What if God gave up on you the first time you turned your back on Him?

You are probably aware that the people that are the closest to you have the ability to hurt you in the worst ways. Hopefully you have also learned that such relationships are worth far more than the cost of humbling yourself and getting things sorted out with the other person. That is a lesson that needs to continue to be reviewed and practiced!

Exercising Christian love is the best way to maintain good, healthy relationships. This type of love is distinct from what we see promoted in the world today. It involves desiring the highest good for another, even at one's own expense. That involves a choice, which is totally independent of your feelings.

But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Romans 5:8

Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails....

1 Corinthians 13:4-8

Questions for study and discussion

Who can hurt you the most?

Is it possible for a “good” Christian to do that? Matthew 26:33

Who can be the greatest help and blessing to you? Bill Gates?

What was Solomon trying to tell us in Ecclesiastes 7:21,22?

What is your first responsibility when you realise that there is a rift between you and someone else, especially a Christian brother or sister? Matthew 5:23-24; 18:15

How does James 1:19 apply in the process?

What should be characteristic of Christian relationships? John 13:34-35

How is Christian love different than the love that is portrayed in today's society? 1 Corinthians 13:4-8

Sharing the good news

It's bursting out!

Do you have a secret? Do you want to share it?

Sometimes we have news that is just bursting out to be told. Keeping a secret can be hard. We may feel like we're going to explode if we don't let it out!

When my most recent granddaughter was born, I wanted to immediately let the whole world know. Armed with smart phone photographs I was ready to notify my friends globally via Facebook, but my daughter-in-law put on the brakes. They hadn't decided on the name yet, and she didn't want her daughter to be identified as an "it." She deserved a name - so, grandpa, just hold your horses!

The news of Jesus Christ is that sort of news that is begging to be told. That works in two ways.

On one hand, it's good news that we are excited about. The word "gospel" in the New Testament means just that: good news!

On the other hand, it's a warning of a clear impending danger.

The Friday and Saturday of the 2007 Queens Birthday weekend saw Newcastle, New South Wales being hit with the remains of a tropical cyclone. It dumped water on us like there was no tomorrow - 200 mm (8 inches) in two days - and severe flooding was experienced throughout the region. Down in the Central Coast, a drain turned into a raging torrent and not only cut off the Pacific Highway, but created a huge crater. One family was lost as their car plunged into that chasm. But the brave efforts of

a few to warn others of the danger, including a truckie who parked his truck across the road, saved countless others.

The consequence of leaving this world without Christ is far greater. Warning of clear impending danger is needed.

The bursting out of the good news took place at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. John the Baptist pointed his disciples to Jesus. Andrew was one of those, and he immediately sought out his brother, Simon (Peter) and told him. In a similar way, Philip came to know the Lord and immediately told his brother, Andrew (John 1:35-51).

It's interesting how that works with brothers. My brother, John, was the one who shared with me as a teenager my need for Christ. As a result of his prodding and changed life, within a few months I trusted the Lord as well!

But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.

Acts 1:8

Jesus told the disciples that they would be witnesses of him beginning in their home territory, then in neighbouring places and ultimately to the whole world. This is a principle that applies to us as well. The place to begin with the gospel message is right at home, with the people that we are closest to. They may not accept it right away, but it will create a life bookmark for them to refer back to as they consider the change in your own life. That's powerful.

From there consider the others with whom you have influence. Share with them what has happened to you. Don't worry about

their questions or even mocking. Those who are the most vocally negative may be experiencing the greatest feelings of conviction, deep within.

Be aware that you are simply God's helper in this effort. The Holy Spirit is putting the pressure on, and God is tugging at their heart. You simply need to add your two bits worth to the 'million-dollar effort' that the Lord is putting in.

Take Henry Blackaby's advice from his book, *Experiencing God*. He pointed out that Jesus' example was to look to see where His Father was at work, then join Him in it. Watch for unusual things happening in people's lives around you. Where you see something happening that looks like God is at work, jump in and join Him in it! That may be people asking questions about God at work, someone sharing with you about a deep inner need or any number of other things.

How can I be effective?

No, you don't need to become today's Billy Graham or have a Super Christian suit in the closet. You just need to be you.

When I first saw my brother after his conversion, he stumbled through what it was that happened to him. He left me confused but seriously wondering. That was followed up with letters, giving me verses to look up in the Bible. I still didn't have a clue. Finally he invited me to a special day at his church. I understood the gospel for the first time and responded. His 'feeble' attempts were the preparation that I needed for that day.

I've led people to the Lord who afterward told me that I was so nervous and stumbled over things so much that they just knew I really believed it, or I wouldn't go through such things! That opened the door for them.

You don't have to know all the answers to be an effective witness. Should someone ask you something that you don't know the answer for, be honest. Tell them you will check with your pastor, but in the meantime there's a matter that's quite easy to understand, and that's Christ's love for you and what He did for you on the cross!

By the way, getting back to people with answers to their questions is a great way to keep a door open. They've asked a question, you have said you would find an answer so it's natural to come back to them with the answer and continue where you left off!

Questions for study and discussion

Think of an event that took place that had you absolutely bursting to tell others. What was it? How did you share the news?

Have you experienced a situation where you had to warn someone? What was that like?

How did Nathanael come to learn about Jesus? For each of the people involved, what were their motivations? John 1:35-49

In what ways were those guys different than Joseph of Arimathea and perhaps Nicodemus? John 19:38,39; 3:1-2; Mark 15:43

What was unusual about Philip's encounter with the Ethiopian treasurer? Acts 8:26-39

While that was an extraordinary event, what sort of things happen in a similar way today?

Name some people to pray for, that they may come to know the Lord, and that you will have some 'God-created' moments with them.

Where to from here?

Having got to this point, you deserve to be congratulated! We have just gone through an entire introductory course in basic Bible doctrine! Note, however, that it is “introductory.” There’s still a lot to learn.

As a core program to your ongoing learning, stay involved in the teaching ministry of your local church. Its ministries such will seek to cover a lot of bases, and over time you will learn a lot of practical Bible content and lessons for life.

Make sure you learn the basics of inductive Bible study. This is the type of study where you let the Bible speak for itself instead of you looking in the Bible for points to support your ideas.

Reading and studying the Bible should be a regular part of your everyday life, along with prayer. Set aside time for it, and make it a habit. Such habits are good and powerful.

I may not know you, but God does and I’m praying for you. I’ll look forward to meeting you in heaven, if not before, and hearing the story of the work of God’s grace in your life. In the meantime, thank you for sharing this time with me.

Questions for study and discussion

Consider whether the following are true in your life:

- I know, without a doubt, that if I was to die today, I would be present with the Lord in heaven
- I have been scripturally baptised
- I am a member of a Bible believing church
- I am involved in a group which studies the Bible together
- I have a daily personal time with God, praying and reading His Word
- Every week I learn something new about God and living for Christ
- I know at least one way that God has gifted me to serve Him
- I am involved in at least a small way as a worker or helper in a ministry of my church

For your next major step forward in learning, what would you like to do?

What church ministry would you like to eventually be involved in?