

Living Life  
as a **Learner**



A DISCIPLESHIP COURSE FOR  
FOLLOWERS OF JESUS

NICK PARK

# **Living Life as a Learner**

**A Discipleship Course for Followers of  
Jesus**

**By Nick Park**

**SSI**



Success Services Ireland

Living Life as a Learner  
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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nick Park was raised in Belfast, Northern Ireland, and was won to Christ through the ministry of the Salvation Army. After graduation and ordination from the William Booth Memorial Training College in London, he and his wife, Janice, served as Salvation Army Officers in Leicester, and then in pastoral ministry with the Assemblies of God in Lancashire.

In 1994 they started the Solid Rock Church – known as ‘Ireland’s Multicultural Church.’ They also founded the ministry of the Church of God in Ireland. Nick still serves as Senior Pastor of the Solid Rock Church, while Janice serves as Worship and Prayer Pastor.

Nick Park is Administrative Bishop of the Church of God in Ireland and holds an MTh in Applied Theology from the University of Liverpool. He has been elected four times to the International Executive Council of the Church of God, is co-chair of the Western European Cabinet of Empowered21 (a movement uniting charismatic and Pentecostal Christians worldwide), and serves on the Presidium of the Pentecostal European Fellowship.

As Executive Director of Evangelical Alliance Ireland, Nick regularly represents Irish Christians in the national media.



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## INTRODUCTION

This course is designed to be used in three different ways. Firstly, you can read it by yourself, familiarising yourself with some of the basic ground we need to cover as we develop as followers of Jesus Christ. This is a useful exercise whether you have recently come to faith in Christ or if you have been a Christian for many years.

Secondly, it can be a useful tool for a small group to study. The discussion questions at the end of each Chapter will work better when you can chat them through with others.

Thirdly, it is designed for one-on-one discipleship. The schedule of modern society, with increasing flexibility demanded of shift workers, makes it difficult for many people to attend a course or a group on a weekly basis. This might be a blessing in disguise. Possibly the most effective kind of learning occurs when one person takes responsibility to meet with, and to help, someone else to grow in their faith.

I especially want to thank two 'Editorial Boards' which have worked with me on this book. Their patience and good humour, while I used them on a weekly basis as guinea pigs to try out much of the material, has taught me much. Many of their criticisms and suggestions have been incorporated into the finished product.

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# 1

## LEARNING AS A LIFE-LONG PROCESS

Matthew's Gospel was written primarily to Jews. They were expecting a King to come. This promised King would be known as the 'Messiah' (or, in the Greek language, the 'Christ'). He would kick the occupying force of the Romans out of their land, and restore the kingdom to Israel. And so Matthew spends his entire book demonstrating that Jesus is this promised King of the Jews.

At the very end of Matthew's Gospel, he reaches the final conclusion that all the previous 28 Chapters have been building up to:

*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me. (Matthew 28:18)*

At this point I can see all Matthew's readers waiting with bated breath. This is what they've been longing for. Their King, the Messiah, the Christ, has now reached His rightful position of holding all authority in His hands. He is now more powerful than the hated Roman soldiers who occupy their land.

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He is now more powerful than the Emperor Caesar himself! So what is He going to do with all this power and authority?

The next words of Jesus turn the world of those poor Jews upside down.

*Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. (Matthew 28:19-20)*

It turns out that God's plan was so much bigger than that one little piece of land in the Middle East called Israel. God is going to do something that will impact the entire world – and He's going to do it with disciples, not with weapons or divine thunderbolts striking His enemies. Jesus is not going to use His authority to start a war. He is not planning to get on a golden throne and start throwing His weight around. Instead he tells them that the reason why He has assumed all this authority is so that they can start travelling through the world and making disciples.

### **Discipleship – Not an Optional Extra**

Today, in the Christian Church, we often lay great stress on making converts. We measure the success of programmes by how many people received Christ and got saved. And certainly there's nothing wrong with that – every Christian should have a desire to share the Good News of the Gospel with as many people as possible. But the authority of Jesus isn't just there to help us make converts – it's there so that we can make disciples.

Sometimes I hear people talk as if discipleship was an optional extra. The important thing, it can seem, is to become a Christian – to ‘get saved.’ Then, if you want to be one of those Christians who really get committed, you can progress on to becoming a disciple.

It might surprise some of us, then, to discover that Christ’s followers were known as ‘disciples’ long before anyone was known as a ‘Christian.’

*The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch. (Acts 11:26)*

The Church at Antioch was started approximately thirteen years after the Crucifixion and Resurrection of Christ. So that means that for thirteen years of the Church, and indeed for three more years before that when Jesus walked and talked with His followers, no-one was known as a ‘Christian’ - they were known simply as ‘disciples.’

So any idea that you can be a Christian without being a disciple is totally back to front. In fact the term ‘Christian’ was probably invented to describe some of the disciples who were living so much like Jesus that onlookers began calling them ‘little copies of Christ’ – or ‘Christians.’

So, if we take the words of Jesus at the end of Matthew’s Gospel seriously, we need to start being disciples of Jesus. Once we start to get the hang of what it means to be a disciple, then we need to start helping others to become His disciples. And, if our discipleship starts to really make a difference in our lives, then just maybe others might look at us and say, “Hey! That person really lives like Jesus – they must be a Christian!”

### Living Life as a Learner

So what does it really mean to be a disciple? The word ‘disciple’ literally means ‘one who is learning.’ Its original idea was that of grasping hold of new truths and skills. Once we become a follower of Jesus Christ then we have to unlearn some of our old ways and habits, and to start learning how to live life the way God intended.

When I was a child I used to watch my Dad driving his car. Everything seemed so easy and natural. I imagined that when it came to learning to drive, then I would just get in the driving seat and let everything happen naturally. But that wasn’t how it happened.

The first time I sat in the driving seat, everything seemed strange. I had to try and concentrate on so many things at once. Coordinating the clutch and the gears occupied all my attention. But I still had to keep my eyes on the road ahead, keep checking my mirrors, and was still expected to remember things like using indicators when I was turning. Sometimes, after a driving lesson, I would despair of ever becoming a driver.

But gradually things changed. I began to grasp the basic skills I needed to become a driver. It took a while, and sometimes I felt like I was taking two steps forward and three steps back – but my driving began to improve and I grew in confidence. Soon I found that the things that had required so much concentration were coming to me naturally. I was no longer somebody trying to learn to drive – I was becoming a driver!

I will never forget the evening when I finally sat my driving test. I made a couple of really stupid mistakes, and was sure I had failed. So the moment felt all the sweeter when the examiner said, “Congratulations, Mr Park, you’re now a qualified driver.”

But I quickly discovered that being a qualified driver didn’t mean that I had stopped being a learner. I was no longer required by law to stick a big L-plate in my front and rear car windows, but every day seemed to bring new lessons that would help me become a better driver. Sometimes these lessons were learned by adapting to new driving conditions. My first experience of driving in heavy snow showed me I still had new skills to learn. Other lessons were more painful. Paying my first speeding ticket was an effective way of learning to observe speed limits. And it cost me a ruined car to learn the lesson that you should take a break if you’re overtired, rather than falling asleep at the wheel!

Today, many years later, I’m still learning things that make me a better driver. I grasped the basics a long time ago, and thankfully I’ve never needed to repeat the ordeal of passing my driving test – but I think I’m always going to be a learner.

And that’s pretty much how we can view being a disciple. There are basic skills and knowledge that we need to grasp early on in our Christian walk. At first they might seem hard to put into practice, but in time they become almost second nature to us. But we never reach a point where we can take down the L-plates and say, “That’s it! I’ve now made it as a Christian!” We will be learning all through our lives – Living Life as a Learner!

The point of this course is, first of all, to help you become a better disciple, a more fulfilled and a more effective follower of Jesus. But it also aims to equip you so that you can help others to become disciples too.

### The Presence of Jesus

And then the final part of Christ's words at the end of Matthew's Gospel can become a reality for us:

*And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age. (Matthew 28:20)*

The presence of Jesus with us, every moment of every day, is something that all of us should pursue. I don't always know what life is going to throw at me – but I know I can face whatever comes my way if Jesus is with me.

The amazing truth we see in Matthew 28 is that this abiding presence of Jesus, with us no matter what may come our way, is not just something that automatically happens to everyone who describes themselves as 'Christians.' After all, Jesus Himself said that there would be those who would claim to act in His name, yet would lack any real relationship with Him:

*Not everyone who says to Me, "Lord, Lord," will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of My Father who is in heaven. Many will say to Me on that day, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name and in Your name drive out demons and in Your name perform many miracles?" Then I will tell them plainly, "I never knew you. Away from Me, you evildoers!" (Matthew 7:21-23)*

No, the promise of Christ's abiding presence with us is specifically addressed to those who are His disciples, and who are actively engaged in helping others to become His disciples too. This is when we find ourselves in the centre of His will, and in His presence which, as it turns out, is the best place we could possibly be.

There's a tremendous story in the Old Testament, in the Book of Daniel. The Jews had been carried away into exile and captivity in Babylon. The pagan king of that land built a huge gold statue and decreed that everyone must bow down and worship it. But three young Jewish men refused to comply with this command. They knew that it was wrong and sinful to worship anything other than God. As a result, after being subjected to bullying and intimidation, they were hurled into a fiery furnace as a form of execution.

*Then King Nebuchadnezzar leaped to his feet in amazement and asked his advisors, 'Weren't there three men that we tied up and threw into the fire?' They replied, 'Certainly, Your Majesty.'*

*He said, 'Look! I see four men walking around in the fire, unbound and unharmed, and the fourth looks like a son of the gods.'* (Daniel 3:24-25)

Not only did these three brave young men emerge from the furnace unharmed, but when they were in the flames they were accompanied by another – the Son of God Himself! The king, and everybody else, assumed that the furnace was a dangerous place, a place of death. But it turned out to be the safest place in the entire kingdom of Babylon. Why? Because the Son of God was in there!



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That's why I want to be a disciple of Jesus Christ – and why I want to help others to become His disciples too. Yes, I want to be obedient to that final command that Jesus gave at the end of Matthew's Gospel. But I also want to be where Jesus is. I want to be in the place where He is with me always, even to the end of the age. And that place turns out to be the place of discipleship and disciple-making. It's the place of Living Life as a Learner.

### STUDY QUESTIONS

1. The last few verses of Matthew Chapter 28 are known as ‘The Great Commission.’ God’s Mission for His people would seem to concentrate on making disciples rather than on political or military power. What does this tell us about the priority that discipleship should be given in our individual lives and in the life of the Church?

2. In the New Testament, the followers of Jesus were known as ‘disciples’ long before they were known as ‘Christians.’ Yet today we have people who call themselves ‘Christians’ based on being born in a Christian country, raised in a Christian home, or even holding membership in a Christian Church. What would you say to someone who insisted on being called a ‘Christian,’ yet appeared to have no interest in following Jesus as a disciple?

3. The word ‘disciple’ literally means ‘one who learns by grasping hold of something.’ As followers of Jesus, are there some truths, habits and life-skills that we seem to find harder to grasp than others?

4. Being a disciple of Jesus means having a determination to never stop learning. What do you think could be the dangers for a follower of Jesus who felt they had nothing more to learn?

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5. Jesus promised His presence would abide with those who are both disciples themselves, and who seek to help others become disciples. What kind of situations do we face where we particularly need the presence of Christ?

6. Have you got particular goals that you would like to achieve as a disciple of Jesus? I would suggest that you write them down somewhere, and at the end of this course you can evaluate how much progress you have made towards reaching them.

# 2

## STREET LEGAL AND BELTED IN

There are a few things a new driver needs to get straight before they even turn the ignition key to start up the engine.

### Our Legal Basis

In Ireland, before you even think about taking a vehicle out on the road, you need to make sure that you are street legal. This includes obtaining your Provisional Driving Licence, making sure you are insured, and having a car that is properly registered and mechanically sound. You are also legally required to remind yourself, and everybody else, that you are a learner by placing an L-plate in your front and rear windscreens. Then, once all that is in place, you have the legal right to start learning to drive.

Strange as it might seem, we also need to make sure that we have the legal right to start being a disciple of Jesus. Understanding this properly will involve us taking the time to stress why we needed a Saviour, and how we received that Saviour. You might be tempted to skip over this bit because you know it already – but that would be a mistake. I know it can seem like a pain to be messing about with paperwork when all you really want to do is get behind the wheel of the car! But

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I once found myself in a situation where I was involved in a road traffic accident and, because I hadn't taken the time to read my documents properly, I was unknowingly driving without insurance cover. Trust me! It's a lot less painful to get the basics right at the beginning, rather than trying to fix them further down the line.

### Original Sin and Separation

All human beings are born separated from God and with a sinful human nature. This is what we call 'original sin.' This doesn't mean that we deserve punishment as soon as we are born, (we are responsible before God for what we do, not for what our parents or our ancestors did), but it does mean that we have an inbuilt attraction towards sin and away from God.

Perhaps the best way to describe this is to imagine a car with the steering out of alignment. If you've ever driven a car where the steering pulls to one side or the other, then you'll know exactly what I'm talking about. You have to constantly hold the steering wheel tightly to compensate for this pull and, after driving for a while, your arms and shoulders begin to ache. As soon as you relax your hold on the steering wheel, then the car will pull to the side and you wind up driving into oncoming traffic, or else you drive into a ditch!

And that's how original sin works. It doesn't mean that we are wicked monsters that commit evil every moment of the day. In fact people, even those who don't know Jesus, can often live lives that are, for the most part, fairly upright and moral. But sooner or later every one of us relaxes that grip on the steering wheel of our lives – and then our inward pull towards sin

reasserts itself, and we end up in the ditch wondering how we could do something that let ourselves down and hurt other people!

That's why, according to the Bible, everyone ends up giving in to original sin at one point or another:

*For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. (Romans 3:23)*

*All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags. (Isaiah 64:6)*

Our English Bible translations are designed to be read in public in Church, so sometimes they are more polite than the original Hebrew or Greek. That phrase translated as 'filthy rags' literally refers to a used sanitary towel! I'm sorry if I've just offended anyone – but that's actually the point of what the Bible is saying – sin is extremely offensive to God! And every one of us has offended God with our sin.

This offence against God has caused a separation between Him and ourselves. So the first and necessary step to being a disciple is to bridge that separation.

*Surely the arm of the Lord is not too short to save, nor His ear too dull to hear. But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden His face from you, so that He will not hear. For your hands are stained with blood, your fingers with guilt. Your lips have spoken falsely, and your tongue mutters wicked things. (Isaiah 59:1-3)*

So how can we deal with this problem where we have become sinners and are separated from God?

### The Legal Stuff – Justification

I'm not a fan of using technical language and jargon. Sometimes it seems as if experts in a particular field deliberately confuse the rest of us by using a lot of complicated words when a few simple words would do the job better. You can find this with politicians, doctors, economists and lawyers – and I'm afraid that pastors and theologians can be just as bad at times! However, the Bible does use a few words that carry such an important idea that it's best for us to learn what they mean. Four such words are justification, reconciliation, regeneration and assurance.

'Justification' is a legal term that describes your standing before God. It's not about how you feel, or how you behave – it's purely about your status. Without justification, your status before God is that of a sinner. But after justification your status before God is that of a believer – even though you haven't had time to even begin to change your behaviour. 'Justification' means 'Just as if I'd never sinned.'

*Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. (Romans 5:1-2)*

Justification is an instant act – not a gradual process. You're either justified, or you're not. You can't be half-way justified, or

in the process of being justified. Your status before God is either that of a sinner (unjustified) or of a believer (justified).

Think of this as being like getting your Provisional Driving Licence. You either have it or you don't. If the traffic police stop you and demand to see your Licence, you won't last long on the road if you try telling them that you're in the process of getting it!

The thing that determines whether we are justified or not in the sight of God is faith. Faith is more than just believing that God exists. It is more than just believing the facts about the life and death of Jesus Christ. Faith means that we have put our trust in Jesus as our Lord and Saviour, and we know that because of His death and resurrection we now belong to God and are to live for Him.

*If you declare with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved. (Romans 10:9-10)*

### **The Relationship Stuff – Reconciliation**

If 'justification' is a legal term, then 'reconciliation' is a relationship term. It refers to putting that which was separated back together again. We might speak about a married couple overcoming their separation by being reconciled. Or a trade dispute between an employer and a trade union might be settled through reconciliation talks.



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Our sin separated us from God. It was offensive to Him, and that affected our status with Him. But now our status has been changed. We have been justified by faith, and so our status is no longer that of sinners. This means that the barrier which separated us from God has now been removed. So reconciliation is a result of our justification.

*All this is from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to Himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And He has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making His appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: be reconciled to God. (2 Corinthians 5:18-20)*

Do you see how important reconciliation is here? It is mentioned five times in just three verses. We are now privileged to have a relationship with God.

Once again, reconciliation is the work of a moment, not a process. You can't be half-reconciled to God. You're either unjustified, and therefore separated from Him by sin, or you're justified, and in a relationship with Him. Of course that relationship will deepen and grow – but it's important to remember that even when the relationship seems like hard going at times, you still know that you are no longer separated from Him.

### The Inside Stuff – Regeneration

Justification and reconciliation are basically things that happen outside of yourself. Justification is a legal status in the sight of God, and it holds true whether you feel different or not. Reconciliation is a matter of your relationship to God, and it is based on what Jesus has done for you – not on anything you might do for yourself. But ‘regeneration’ is different. It is a change that happens deep down inside.

While we were talking about justification and reconciliation, I’m sure some of you thought something along these lines: “Yes, that’s great that God no longer sees me as a sinner. And it’s great that my sin no longer separates me from Him. But surely this whole problem is going to blow up again further down the line? After all, that original sin is still in me – still pulling me into the ditch. Aren’t I going to end up right back where I started? Am I going to need to be justified and reconciled all over again?”

That’s where regeneration comes into the mix. ‘Regeneration’ literally means ‘to be born again.’ Sometimes we hear people talk about ‘born again Christians’ to refer to a particular movement or denomination. But every true follower of Christ is born-again. There actually isn’t any other kind of Christian!

*But when the kindness and love of God our Saviour appeared, He saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of His mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Saviour, so*

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*that, having been justified by His grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life. (Titus 3:4-7)*

In these verses Paul reminds Titus that we are justified, and he stresses that it was by grace, not by anything we ourselves had done. Even the faith we exercised to put our trust in Christ was a gift from God, it cannot be counted as a work or something we can boast about. He also tells us that we have been washed and cleansed through a new birth.

The idea of washing and cleansing makes it clear that this refers to so much more than a legal status, or even a restored relationship. A very real change has taken place inside us – a change that helps us to live differently.

Most of us probably remember times as children when we got hold of a pencil and a piece of paper and tried to draw something. We had an idea what kind of picture we wanted to put down on the paper. But, if you were anything like me, your drawing skills didn't match your vision. What appeared on the paper didn't look anything like as good as the picture that you had seen in your imagination! So, with a little bit of crossing out and redrawing, you tried to fix your picture. The problem, of course, was the more you tried to fix it, the worse it looked. In the end, it seemed easier to crumple up the picture, grab a new blank sheet of paper, and start all over again.

Maybe that never happened to you. Maybe you were better at drawing than me. But I guarantee that pretty much all of us have had times in our lives where we messed up so badly that we wanted to go back to the beginning and start over again. Wouldn't it be great if, in our 'picture of life,' we could wipe out all our mistakes and make a brand new start?

The great news about regeneration is that we can do just that. Our old life is considered as gone, and we start out on a new life:

*Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: the old has gone, the new is here! (2 Corinthians 5:17)*

This doesn't mean that we become perfect overnight – nor does it mean that we never sin again. We still face a struggle with that inclination towards sin, and sometimes we will still mess up. But the amazing thing about the new birth is that it is based on the compassion and faithfulness of God – and they are renewed each day!

*Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for His compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness. (Lamentations 3:22-23)*

Again, our new birth is something that happens in an instant. You can't be half-born again! But learning to live out that new birth is a process - something that takes a lifetime. And God, in His infinite grace and mercy, gives us a fresh start each day so we can Live Life as a Learner. We can never claim that we've reached the point of perfect sinlessness, but there is an ocean of forgiveness waiting for us to cleanse us if we sin.

*If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:8-9)*

### Safely Buckled In – Assurance

It's wonderful that God forgives us when we sin. Of course this does not give us the excuse to just sin as much as we like. The justified reconciled believer does not say, "Since I'm born again I can keep living in sin, and it's God's job to forgive me." Our new nature causes us to sorrow over our sin, and to seek God's power to improve. We'll deal with that more later in this course.

But sometimes we can be so sorrowful and ashamed of our sin that the promise of forgiveness doesn't seem enough. In those times we start asking ourselves, "Am I really justified? Am I really reconciled? Am I really born again? Maybe I'm just kidding myself?"

That's when the principle of assurance becomes all-important. Just as the driver of a car puts their seatbelt on before starting the engine, we need to be absolutely sure that we are safe and secure in our standing in Christ.

William Booth, who founded the Salvation Army, once said, "There are 'think-so' Christians, 'hope-so' Christians, and there are 'know-so' Christians; thank God ... we know we are saved." I think all of us would want to be among the 'know-so' kind of followers of Jesus. But how do we do this?

This is where we need to understand the difference between two kinds of truth: Subjective Truth and Objective Truth:

Subjective Truth means something might be true, but it depends on how you look at it. For example, if two men were arguing about whose wife is the most beautiful – they might both be convinced that they are right. But how can you prove

which is right and which is wrong? There's no standardised way of measuring beauty. After all, the old saying tells us that 'Beauty is in the eye of the beholder.' So we might have an opinion about whose wife is more beautiful – and we might even strongly believe that our opinion is the truth – but opinions are subjective and change from person to person.

Objective Truth means something is true, no matter which way you look at it. For example, if two men were arguing about whose wife is the heaviest – then we have a standardised way of measuring who is right. You put the two women on the scales and find out their respective weights. (Please note that this is an illustration. If you really try this at home, and start weighing someone's wife to see who is the heaviest, then I am not responsible for any consequences that might occur!) It doesn't matter if someone keeps insisting that their wife is heavier – the scales give us an objective answer that is true, no matter whether you agree with it or not.

So, when William Booth talked about 'know so' Christians, he was saying that this was a matter of Objective Truth. Your status as a justified, reconciled, born-again follower of Jesus is not a matter of opinion – it is a fact. Look at what Jesus said:

*Very truly I tell you, whoever hears My word and believes Him who sent Me has eternal life and will not be judged but has crossed over from death to life. (John 5:24)*

Those words are very clear. Jesus did not say that you can hope that you might pass from death to life at some stage in the future if you're good enough and do all the right things. He

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said we have already passed from death to life. It's a done deal! And the reason it is a done deal is because we have placed our faith in Jesus Christ and received the truth of the Gospel. Jesus was saying that your status as a justified, reconciled, born-again believer is already an objective fact!

And that means that we are safely, tightly and legally buckled into the driver's seat and ready to start learning how to Live Life as a Learner. It doesn't matter what happens to us. It doesn't matter who criticises us. It doesn't matter if other people question our right to be a disciple.

*What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave Him up for us all – how will He not also, along with Him, graciously give us all things? Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who then is the one who condemns? No one. Christ Jesus who died – more than that, who was raised to life – is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written:*

*'For Your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.'*

*No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:31-39)*

You are fully legal and secure – ready to start Living Life as a Learner.

## STUDY QUESTIONS

1. It is important to get the basics right before we rush on into something. Have you ever had an experience where taking the time to get things in order would have saved you a lot of trouble? (For example, you may have tried to assemble something from a pack without reading the instructions first.)

2. Original sin is described in this study as that inward pull towards sin that, in the end, causes all of us to become sinners. Some people object strongly to the idea that they are a sinner. How will this hinder them from knowing God? How can you help them overcome this?

3. To be justified refers to our legal standing before God. Why do you think this is important?

4. This study described reconciliation as an act, rather than a process. But, once we are back in this relationship with God, we need to grow to know Him more. How do you think we might do that?

5. Occasionally we hear 'born again' used as a term of mockery or abuse. If someone used it against you in that way – how could you turn that around to share something meaningful with them?



6. Assurance of salvation means recognising that our new standing and status with God is an established fact. Do you see how that might seem arrogant to some people? How can you share this truth without seeming to be arrogant?

# 3

## MIRRORS AND HANDBRAKES

One of the most basic things a new driver needs to learn is to look in their mirrors before moving off. If you're going to avoid accidents on the road ahead, then you need to know what is behind you.

### Repentance

The Bible speaks quite a lot about repentance. In fact it mentions it over one thousand times! Yet today you can listen to much modern preaching of the Gospel without ever hearing about repentance. Why is this? Why do we find such an important biblical theme to be so unpopular? Why do preachers shy away from talking about repentance?

One reason might be because the very word brings unpleasant images to mind. We think of people making themselves miserable, continually weeping before God, maybe even whipping themselves or harming themselves in some other way, because they feel overwhelmed at what miserable sinners they are. Such negative and gloomy associations seem hard to square with any joyous presentation of the 'Gospel' (which literally means 'Good News').

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Yet Jesus, and His first disciples, clearly saw repentance as being a vital and integral part of the message of Good News:

*Jesus answered them, 'It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but those who are ill. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.'*  
(Luke 5:31-32)

*Calling the Twelve to Him, He began to send them out two by two and gave them authority over impure spirits. These were His instructions: 'Take nothing for the journey except a staff – no bread, no bag, no money in your belts. Wear sandals but not an extra shirt. Whenever you enter a house, stay there until you leave that town. And if any place will not welcome you or listen to you, leave that place and shake the dust off your feet as a testimony against them.'* They went out and preached that people should repent. They drove out many demons and anointed with oil many people who were ill and healed them. (Mark 6:7-12)

We find this same message on the Day of Pentecost when eleven of those same disciples preached the message of Good News:

*When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, 'Brothers, what shall we do?'* Peter replied, 'Repent and be baptised, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.'  
(Acts 2:37-38)

What we need to understand is that repentance refers first and foremost, not to weeping or wailing, but to a change of mind. The word in the original Greek manuscripts of the New

Testament is *metanoia*. In Greek *meta* means ‘beyond’ or ‘after’ and *noeo* means ‘understanding’ or ‘mind.’ Put those two ideas together and you get *metanoia* – a change, after which your mind and understanding are different.

Now, there is an element of sorrow involved, because before you decide to change your thinking about something you have to become convinced that your old way of thinking was wrong. And when we realise that we were wrong, that often makes us sorry.

The Bible refers to this as ‘godly sorrow.’ It is not the kind of sorrow that causes us to get overwhelmed and to wallow in depression and defeatism. The world already has enough of that kind of sorrow. Christians don’t need to be creating any more worldly sorrow. But learning the truth about Jesus Christ exposes our wrong patterns of thinking and behaviour, and the resulting sorrow we feel provokes us to change our ‘stinking thinking.’ That’s why, in the passage about the Day of Pentecost in Acts that we’ve already quoted, it says that the people were ‘cut to the heart.’ Their sorrow prepared them to hear Peter’s message that they needed to repent – to change their way of thinking. And 3000 of them did indeed change their thinking that day and placed their faith in Jesus Christ.

Just as dieticians tell us there are ‘good’ bacteria and ‘bad’ bacteria – there are also good and bad types of sorrow! The apostle Paul describes how the same kind of ‘good sorrow’ led the disciples in Corinth to change their ways of thinking. And once their thinking changed – so did their behaviour:

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*Even if I caused you sorrow by my letter, I do not regret it. Though I did regret it – I see that my letter hurt you, but only for a little while – yet now I am happy, not because you were made sorry, but because your sorrow led you to repentance. For you became sorrowful as God intended and so were not harmed in any way by us. Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death. See what this godly sorrow has produced in you: what earnestness, what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what alarm, what longing, what concern, what readiness to see justice done. At every point you have proved yourselves to be innocent in this matter. (2 Corinthians 7:8-11)*

Just think about this for a moment. If we try to preach the Good News without repentance, then the ‘Gospel’ we preach is not the same Gospel that was preached by Jesus, Peter and Paul. Because the Gospel is more than just making converts – more than just telling people how to get to heaven when they die. The Gospel is about making disciples – where people change their entire way of thinking. If we produce converts who are still following their old patterns of thinking, then we should hardly be surprised if they continually fall into the old sinful patterns of behaviour.

### **Repentance: Before Salvation or After Salvation?**

Some Christians would argue that we should have covered repentance in our last lesson when we were dealing with our initial salvation experience. And it is certainly true that some measure of repentance, or change of thinking, is necessary if we are ever to put our faith in Jesus Christ.

But, in reality, most of our repentance takes place after we have received Jesus Christ as our Lord and Saviour. When we first trusted in Jesus we really had very little idea what we were doing. God didn't expect us to fully understand theology in order to get saved. Neither did He demand that we would change all of our thinking and give up all our sinful practices in order to be good enough to get saved. God saved us just the way we were – but He loves us too much to leave us just the way we were!

So, now we have trusted Jesus and have started on this walk of Living Life as a Learner, we need to be constantly changing our ways of thinking to get them more in line with the truth of God. That is why the Scripture constantly encourages believers to think differently:

*Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God – this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed **by the renewing of your mind**. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is – His good, pleasing and perfect will. (Romans 12:1-2)*

*We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ. (2 Corinthians 10:5)*

So repentance involves each one of us, as disciples of Jesus, in changing our ways of thinking. We need to recognise old patterns of thinking and behaviour that are ungodly or

destructive, and we need to make sure they are firmly behind us. We keep them in our rear view mirror – not on the road ahead of us! This is a process, and it will continue for as long as we continue to Live Life as a Learner. Even the most saintly followers of Jesus, as they get to know God even better, become aware of things still in their lives that need to change.

*Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into His image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit. (2 Corinthians 3:17-18)*

### Renunciation

Another idea related to that of repentance is renunciation. In fact, many Christians often confuse these two ideas and use them interchangeably as if they meant the exact same thing. But to ‘renounce’ something carries an extra meaning above and beyond that of repentance.

The word ‘renounce’ literally means ‘to announce against something’ – or, in other words, ‘to protest.’ It is one thing to disagree with something – but it takes a much stronger depth of feeling to actually go out and protest against it. In the same way, with repentance we change our thinking – but with renunciation we make a formal and public statement that our thinking has changed! Renunciation is announcing your repentance for everyone to hear.

As a young man I was an atheist. I was firmly convinced that God did not exist, that the Bible was full of fairy stories, and that anyone who claimed to follow Jesus was deluded.

Obviously, in order to receive Jesus, that thinking had to change. So, when I received the Gospel, I changed my thinking and repented of my atheism. But I still had to take a further step. I had to announce to the people that knew me that I had decided to follow Jesus and had renounced my atheism.

There is a phrase we use in the English language that speaks of ‘crossing the Rubicon.’ This goes back to the history of Ancient Rome. The Rubicon was a stream that marked the boundary between Italy and Gaul. Rome was a Republic, and they understood that the Republic would be endangered if a proconsul, or any other political leader, brought an army close to Rome to force the citizens to vote in an Emperor or a King. Therefore it was illegal, under penalty of death, to bring an army over the Rubicon towards Rome. In January of 49 BC Julius Caesar marched on Rome to seize greater power. The moment he crossed the Rubicon, he had passed a point of no return. If he failed to win power then he faced execution. And, to this day, when someone takes a step from which there is no turning back, we speak of them as ‘crossing the Rubicon.’

Renunciation is the disciple’s crossing of the Rubicon. It is one thing to change our thinking on things – after all, we can always change our mind again the following day. But when we publicly renounce our old ways of thinking and behaviour, then that is a different matter entirely. Now everyone is watching us, and they will always remember what we’ve done.

The New Testament describes some practices that are incompatible with living life as a follower of Jesus Christ. These are things that need to be avoided and, if we have been guilty of these practices ourselves, they need to be renounced:



*Or do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the Kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor men who have sex with men nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the Kingdom of God. And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God. (1 Corinthians 6:9-11)*

Theses are certainly not unforgiveable sins. Paul specifically tells us that some of the Corinthian believers had, in their old lives, committed all of these sins. But such practices are incompatible with Living Life as a Learner. Therefore we need not only to repent of them, but we also need to renounce them. We need to cross our Rubicon and never go back to these practices.

Such a renunciation can take different forms. We might put it in writing and keep it in a safe place. Or we might announce our renunciation to those with whom we previously had committed these sins. We might feel able to share our decision with trusted leaders or other people within the Church. But, one way or another, it is important to put these things behind us for ever. They belong in our rear view mirror, not on the road ahead of us.

### **Releasing the Handbrake**

Sometimes we find that a particular sin, even though it wasn't listed by Paul in 1 Corinthians 6, keeps tripping us up. This can vary from person to person – but all of us are different

and so have our individual temptations and points of weakness. It may be an addiction, or a pattern of behaviour that results from a situation in the past where we were greatly hurt. Or it may be something as simple as a bad temper that we've always blamed on our red hair! The New Testament speaks directly to this situation:

*Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy that was set before Him He endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider Him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. (Hebrews 12:1-3)*

If you try to Live Life as a Learner, while continually getting entangled in a particular sin, then it is like trying to drive a car with the handbrake still on. Your progress will be slow and frustrating, your engine will keep stalling, and ultimately you will grow weary and lose heart.

Therefore we need to release the handbrake. We need to renounce that particular besetting sin that so easily entangles us, and we need to leave it behind for ever.

### **The Importance of Baptism**

Once we understand the importance of renunciation – putting certain things in the past forever – then we can

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appreciate the importance of water baptism. Baptism is a public declaration by which we declare that we have crossed our Rubicon – we are determined to Live Life as a Learner and we are never going back to our old ways of thinking and living.

The New Testament uses a powerful illustration to help us understand this. It refers to our new status as justified, reconciled, born-again believers as being like dying with Christ. We are leaving our old lives behind, and we are embarking on a new life where Jesus is Lord. But it's not enough to simply die with Christ – we have to be buried with Him too!

As a Pastor I have spent a lot of time ministering to grieving bereaved families. That awful time between the death and the burial is where time seems to stand still. Everyone is paralysed by grief, and normal life grounds to a halt. Family, friends and neighbours visit and speak in hushed whispers. In Ireland the tradition is to hold the funeral quickly, often just a day or two after the death. But in other cultures it can be weeks or even months until the funeral occurs. I've noticed how, in that in-between period, bereaved family members often say, "I can't believe that she's dead. I keep expecting her to just come walking through the door as if nothing had happened and this was all just a dream."

But, after the funeral, you rarely hear people talk like that. There is a finality about that last goodbye, done in such a public fashion. Life goes on. People start talking in normal voices again instead of whispering. Of course there is still grief, but everyone recognises that things have changed and there's no going back to how things were before the death occurred.

And that is why baptism is described as being 'buried with Christ':

*Or don't you know that all of us who were baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into His death? We were therefore buried with Him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. (Romans 6:3-4)*

Through baptism we make a public identification with Jesus Christ whereby we renounce our past ways of thinking and behaving, we declare that our besetting sins are behind us and will no longer keep entangling us, and we fix our eyes on the road ahead.

### **When Should a New Disciple Get Baptised?**

Different churches have different traditions and different ways of doing things – and when it comes to baptism we can see this clearly. Some churches won't baptise you until you are a certain age (often sixteen or eighteen). Others insist you must complete some kind of training course first. I even heard of one church in China that won't baptise anyone until they have personally led ten other people to faith in Christ! I appreciate that congregation's zeal for evangelism – but I think all these traditions are flawed. Our first guide in this matter should be the Bible. And the Bible indicates that people should be baptised once they have received Christ – and the sooner that happens, the better!

When Peter preached on the Day of Pentecost we read:

*Those who accepted his message were baptised, and about three thousand were added to their number that day. (Acts 2:41)*

Later on, Philip hitched a ride in a chariot and shared the Gospel with a man from Ethiopia:

*Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus. As they travelled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, 'Look, here is water. What can stand in the way of my being baptised?' And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptised him. (Acts 8:35-38)*

It would get repetitive to keep quoting one passage of Scripture after another. But we see the same practice happening to Paul (Acts 9:1-18), to the first Gentiles (non-Jews) ever to receive Jesus (Acts 10:23-48), to the first believers in Europe (Acts 16:11-15), and to the prison jailer under whom Paul and Silas were incarcerated in Philippi (Acts 16:31-34). The apostolic practice is clear – they baptised new believers as quickly as possible!

And why not? If renouncing our sins is so important, then obviously it should be done as soon as possible after we start following Jesus and decide to change our ways of thinking and behaving. We need to put the past in the past – in our rear view mirrors and not on the road ahead. We need to take off that handbrake. And we need to start really Living Life as a Learner!

### **Baptism: Doing It Right!**

It may be necessary to include a short explanation here about baptism. We said that many churches have developed

different traditions to do with baptism. Unfortunately some of these traditions have turned out to be very different from anything we see in the Bible.

One unbiblical tradition involves the baptising of babies. Throughout the New Testament we see a very clear order – you believe first, then you get baptised. Nowhere in the Bible do we read about an infant, who lacks the faculties to put their faith in Christ, getting baptised. Therefore our commitment to the Bible as God’s revelation to man leaves us no choice but to declare that such a ‘baptism’ is something very different from the biblical practice whereby a believer publicly renounced their sins.

The second major unbiblical tradition involves the practice where baptism is administered by dripping a few drops of water on someone’s head. The New Testament indicates that baptism was done by immersion – fully underwater!

*After this, Jesus and His disciples went out into the Judean countryside, where He spent some time with them, and baptised. Now John also was baptising at Aenon near Salim, **because there was plenty of water,** and people were coming and being baptised. (John 3:22-23)*

Think about that for a moment. Why would it be important that there was plenty of water in order to conduct baptisms? If John the Baptist and Jesus were simply sprinkling a few drops of water then they wouldn’t need ‘plenty of water.’ A bucket would be enough for hundreds of baptisms! No, it is obvious that New Testament baptism was by immersion, so plenty of water was required.

This helps us realise that baptism is a life-changing act. We don't want to simply renounce a sprinkling of our sins – we want to leave the lot of them behind. And that means being immersed in, and surrounded by, the grace of Jesus Christ.

In fact the Greek word *baptizo* literally meant 'to soak under water.' It was a term used by shoemakers and other leather workers. When they had a small piece of leather that was too stiff to bend to the required shape, they would soak it overnight in water. Then, having 'baptised' the leather, they could easily bend it and stitch it into place.

When the Bible was being translated into English, the translators faced a problem. They knew what *baptizo* meant – but if they correctly translated it as 'immerse' then they would get in trouble with the church authorities, because then everyone would see that the church's tradition of sprinkling wasn't biblical. So they took a crafty way out. They simply left the Greek word as it was. And so a new English word – 'baptise' – was created.

### STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Has this study helped you look at repentance differently? Previously, how would you have looked at someone if they kept telling you to repent?
2. What might be the consequences in people's lives if they have heard a 'Gospel' where repentance is not mentioned? If the word itself causes problems – then what other ways can we use to describe this biblical idea of *metanoia*?
3. Worldly sorrow leads to death – but godly sorrow leads to repentance. How would you help someone with worldly sorrow to change it to godly sorrow?
4. We are to change our ways of thinking. How do you think we might do that?
5. Depending on our past experiences and our individual weaknesses, all of us had things in our lives that needed to be renounced. Have you renounced some stuff? Do you still have stuff that needs to be renounced?
6. If you have not already been baptised – then you need to ask yourself the same question that the African man in the chariot asked Philip – “What can stand in the way of my being baptised?”





# 4

## GOD'S ULTIMATE GPS

I am old enough to remember the days when a roadmap was an essential accessory for every driver. After all, nobody likes getting lost! One problem, however, was that my map-reading skills were less than perfect. I lost count of how many times I found myself stuck by the side of a road trying to work out where I was and how I had got there.

It used to be a popular saying among Christians that the Bible was our roadmap for life. I always found that slightly worrying. Did this mean that I was going to get lost as much when following the Bible as I did when trying to read a roadmap? If so, I reasoned, then I was definitely in trouble!

Even worse, I soon discovered that the idea of using the Bible as a roadmap wasn't as easy and straightforward as it seemed. It wasn't just a case of reading something in the Bible and then doing it. After all, some people in the Bible did some pretty terrible things. Also, a lot of the Bible seemed to be written for people who lived in very different circumstances than mine. In fact, a lot of the Bible was originally written to Jewish people who lived before Jesus was born. If I tried to use some parts of the Old Testament as a roadmap for how I should behave then I was probably going to get arrested. For

example, it would not be a good idea to copy King David's example and marry several wives!

### Much More Than a Roadmap

So, I came to realise that the Bible was so much more than a roadmap. The Bible is a collection of history, songs, poetry, letters and prophecies that all speak about God's relationship with us and His love for us. Taken together, the sixty six books of the Bible give us a revelation of who God is, how much He loves us, how He sent Jesus to save us, and how He can help us to live our lives as learners.

More than that, the Bible is not a book of dead letters. It is God's Living Word:

*For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. (Hebrews 4:12)*

Of course today many people have got a GPS, or a 'SatNav' as it is popularly known in Ireland, in their car and wouldn't dream of trying to read a roadmap. When you stop to think about it, that little gadget stuck to the windscreen of your car is a marvel of space-age technology. It is in simultaneous communication with at least four satellites in space and, by constantly calculating their signals against the speed of light, the GPS can track where you are, what direction you are facing, what speed you are travelling and a host of other information.

It seems that each new model of GPS can do more than its predecessors. They can respond to verbal commands, tell you

the nearest Starbucks to your planned route, estimate your planned arrival time (which is *not* supposed to be a target to race against), warn you of traffic cameras and radar speed traps, and even change your route mid-journey to avoid a traffic jam or an accident.

By becoming more interactive, GPS units do what no roadmap could ever do. They are tailored to your specific needs and circumstances. They show you where you went wrong, help you get back on track, help you to avoid major problems, and get you to where you need to be.

And that's why it can be helpful for us to think of the Bible as God's ultimate GPS. It is not just a dead and dry source of information about God. It is truly living and active. It tells us how we got to where we are today – and where we should go from here. It uses the mistakes of others to help us from getting into trouble. And, most crucially, the author of the Bible has promised that He Himself is with us and will help us in our understanding.

### **The Verbal Inspiration of Scripture**

The New Testament contains a wonderful description of what God's Word, the Bible, is, and what it does:

*All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. (2 Timothy 3:16-17)*

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I love that expression ‘God-breathed.’ Some Bible translations use the word ‘inspired,’ but ‘God-breathed’ is a literal translation from the original Greek. The word ‘inspired’ can mean all kinds of things – for example, a song-writer might say that their song was ‘inspired’ by the Olympics. But ‘God-breathed’ means that the Bible has come direct to us from the mouth of God. If God is absolutely perfect, as He is, then that means that the words that come straight from His mouth must also be perfect.

We are measured by our words. You cannot claim to be a truthful person, but then speak words that are untruthful. Similarly, if God is absolute Truth then the words that come from His mouth must be absolutely truthful.

Now, let’s make one thing clear. The men who wrote the different books of the Bible were not just robots or writing machines. Some people have looked at it that way. They have thought that God dictated the exact words to them, without anything of their own personalities coming through. But we can see that Moses, David, Isaiah, Matthew, Paul – all these were real people and you can see their personalities and style in their various books.

Remember, God is the absolute Ruler and Creator of the universe. When He wanted to give us the Book of Romans, He didn’t have to go searching around for the right person to write it. He didn’t have to look for a Paul. Instead God created, shaped and influenced a Paul! He arranged all the circumstances perfectly, with a complexity that our feeble minds can’t even begin to imagine, and those circumstances produced a man called Paul who was perfectly equipped to write Romans for us.

So, while we don't believe in some kind of mechanical dictation, we do believe that God guided the writers of the different books that make up the Bible. He superintended them and made sure that everything they wrote down was true and without error. One of those writers, the apostle Peter, put it this way:

*Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit. (2 Peter 1:20-21)*

So God guided the writers to produce a Bible that is the very words of God, and therefore perfect and without error. This is why theologians use two very important terms when they speak of the Bible. The first is 'verbal inspiration.' That means that every word of the Bible is from God. The second important term is 'inerrancy,' without error. If every word really comes from God, then it is impossible for God to make mistakes, therefore we can speak of the Bible as 'inerrant' – without error.

### **Inerrancy and Taking the Bible Literally**

When we say that the Bible is without error we mean that everything it teaches is truth, and that it does so without containing any mistakes. But the Bible, like any form of communication, still uses poetry, parables and figures of speech.

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Sometimes you might hear someone say that they take everything in the Bible literally. In fact no-one in the world takes everything in the Bible literally. So, for example, when Jesus says that He is the Vine and we are the branches (John 15:5), this does not mean that we have leaves growing out of the ends of our fingers! We understand that Jesus is not a literal grapevine and we are not literal branches.

Similarly, the Bible uses poetic expressions such as the trees of the fields clapping their hands (Isaiah 55:12). Belief in biblical inerrancy does not mean that we think trees will grow literal arms and start clapping their hands. It is an obvious poetic expression designed to tell us that there will be great rejoicing in the earth.

We all use language in the same way. We speak of the sun 'rising' in the morning - even though the sun stayed where it was and the earth's rotation made the sun look as though it was rising. We speak of a kettle 'boiling' - even though it was the water inside that boiled, not the kettle itself. We speak of a city as being 'eighty miles away' - when the precise distance might actually be just over seventy nine miles. And when we're angry we might say that something 'made my blood boil' - when the scientific fact is that if our blood actually boiled then we would certainly be dead.

So the Bible uses language in a similar way. It was not written as a scientific text book, as a railway timetable or as an archaeological blueprint - and if we try to understand it as such then we are likely to misunderstand it. The Bible was written to tell us about God, about ourselves, and about how we can be saved and have a relationship with God.

So, as we read God's inerrant Word, we should take literally that which is meant to be taken literally. We should read what is obviously poetry as being poetical, and we should understand parables as what they were meant to be – earthly stories with a heavenly meaning.

One thing we should avoid is any interpretation of the Bible that depends on some secret or hidden meaning or code. God has made the Bible clear and straightforward enough for anyone who is prepared to study it to hear what the Lord is saying. It is not a code book, or some mysterious book of magic spells. So steer clear of anyone who tries to pretend that there is some secret hidden code in the Bible that can be discovered by mathematical calculations.

### **The Bible is Complete**

Another way in which the Bible is perfect is that it cannot be added to. The final book of the New Testament to be written was the book of Revelation, and right at the end of the last chapter we find these words:

*I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds anything to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book. And if anyone takes words away from this book of prophecy, God will take away from him his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book. (Revelation 22:18-19)*

This means that the list of books that make up the Bible, what we call the canon of Scripture, has been completed. The



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sixty six books contained in our Bibles will never be added to. In other words, God is not going to inspire Joe Bloggs to write another Gospel tomorrow and then add it to the New Testament as a fifth Gospel alongside Matthew, Mark, Luke and John! Now, God still speaks to people today, He can give them a vision or a dream or a word of prophecy, but those ‘words from God’ don’t carry the same authority and infallibility as the Scriptures. In fact, we are to test any word that people say is from God. We are to see if it measures up to the Bible as God’s plumb line.

Sometimes people appear as witnesses in a court of law. They have to swear an oath to tell the truth. They say, “I promise to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.” That actually describes the Bible pretty well. It is the truth (the Word of God straight from His mouth), the whole truth (nothing else to be added to it), and nothing but the truth (no mistakes in it).

### A Powerful Weapon

The Bible, as God’s Word, is also a powerful weapon to help you in your Christian walk. In fact the apostle Paul described the Bible as a sword, forming an essential part of our armour:

*Finally, be strong in the Lord and in His mighty power. Put on the full armour of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore put on the full*

*armour of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled round your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God. (Ephesians 6:10-17)*

Every other aspect of the armour is defensive, but the sword is your one reliable way to attack and move forward. That's why I've taken so long stressing the inspiration and the authority of Scripture, because a soldier has to have confidence in his weapons. Sometimes we face opposition, and sometimes it can be a battle to press forward to get to what God has in store for us, so we need absolute confidence in the Bible as the sword of the Spirit.

Now, let's look again at 2 Timothy 3:16

*All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.*

Can you see there that there are four main things that God does for us through the Bible? He teaches us. The Bible is full of teaching. It is the number one way to find out who God is and how He works in our lives. The next two things God does are to rebuke and correct us. There are times when we read something in the Bible and we realise that our lives need to

change. Let me stress that this is not because God wants to spoil our fun, but because He wants us to get rid of everything that will hold us back and make us miserable or defeated. The fourth thing that God does for us through the Bible is to equip us thoroughly for every good work. If you were going to climb a mountain then you would want to make sure that you had the right equipment. You would need to ensure that you were ready for any eventuality. In the same way the Bible equips us for whatever we might face in life.

### Which Translation?

Read the Bible in a translation that's easy to understand. The books of the Bible were originally written in Hebrew and Greek, and so what we use are English translations. No one translation is any holier than any other, so use one that you can understand easily, without lots of old language.

There are three main kinds of translations: word-for word; paraphrases; and dynamic equivalents.

A word-for-word translation tries to translate each Hebrew or Greek word into its closest English equivalent. You might think that this would be the most accurate way to translate the Bible – but not necessarily. Every language contains *idioms*. An idiom is a figure of speech that we all understand to mean something else. For example, in English we might speak of a doctor as 'being in hot water' because he prescribed some tablets and his patient 'kicked the bucket.' This is no problem if we all speak English. We understand that to 'be in hot water' means to be in big trouble, and that 'kicking the bucket' refers to someone dying.

But what if you were trying to translate the sentence about the doctor into French? You could look up the French words for hot water (*eau chaude*) and for kicking a bucket (*lancer le seau*) – but those phrases will mean something totally different in French. If you really want a French person to understand what you are saying, then you would need to say that the doctor was *dans le pétrin* (literally ‘in the kneading trough’) because his patient *passa l’arme à gauche* (‘passed his weapon to the left’)!

The same thing happens when we are translating Hebrew into English. The first few times I read through the Old Testament I wondered why people were ‘covering their feet’ (1 Samuel 24:3). It wasn’t until I used a different translation that I realised this was a Hebrew expression meaning ‘to go to the toilet’

So, a word-for-word translation is helpful if you are carefully studying the Bible verse by verse, and taking time to look up Bible dictionaries and other reference books. The NASB (New American Standard Bible) is a very good word-for-word translation. The King James Version (KJV) also tries to translate most things word for word.

A paraphrase translates the Scripture much more freely. Popular paraphrases include The Living Bible and The Message. These are good to catch the overall flow of a passage, but not so great if you want to examine the significance of one word in a verse. Also, some paraphrases try to sound up to date by using lots of English slang, which can sound artificial and be quite off-putting. It can be a bit like your grandfather putting a baseball cap on back to front and calling everyone ‘Dude!’

Most preachers, for the purpose of reading the Bible in public settings such as a church worship service, tend to use a

dynamic-equivalence Bible. This is a bit of a compromise between the word-for-word translation and the paraphrase. It avoids unfamiliar Hebrew and Greek idioms, and flows nicely when you read it, but is close enough to the actual wording to allow for serious study. I personally prefer to use the New International Version (NIV) as a dynamic-equivalence Bible when I am preaching.

Obviously the ideal would be if we were all perfectly fluent in Hebrew and Greek, but that isn't realistic for every new Christian. The important thing to remember is that, while there are lots of good translations out there, none of them are perfect. So it makes sense to study the Bible carefully, comparing one translation with another, and asking questions of others when we are in doubt.

### How to Read the Bible

There are several ways in which we use God's Word:

1. Read it (or listen to it) every day.
2. Meditate on it.

*Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers. But his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on His law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers. (Psalm 1:1-3)*

3. Memorise it.

*I have bidden Your word in my heart that I might not sin against You.  
(Psalm 119:11)*

Once you start memorising bits of the Bible then you will find that you are quoting it when you are praying, or you start speaking it out when you need to encourage yourself, or even to encourage someone else.

#### 4. Be a Doer of the Word.

*Do not merely listen to the Word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the Word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it - he will be blessed in what he does. (James 1:22-25)*

To help you be a doer of God's Word remember the word SPACE. S-P-A-C-E

When you read any passage from the Bible, look for the following:

S – Are there any **S**ins to confess?

P – Are there any **P**romises to claim?

A – Are there any **A**ttitudes or **A**ctions to adopt or avoid?

C – Are there any **C**ommands to obey?

E – Are there any **E**xamples to follow?

By daily approaching the Word of God in this way you can keep yourself on the right track with God's ultimate GPS.

## **STUDY QUESTIONS**

1. Some Christians read the Bible very little. Why do you think this might be? What could the Church do to encourage them to read the Bible more?
2. In this lesson we saw that the illustration of the Bible being a roadmap is not always helpful. Can you think of examples of things in the Bible that would cause great trouble if we followed their example?
3. ‘Inspiration’ means God-breathed. How would we react if someone claimed to be honest and truthful, but their words often turned out to be untrue?
4. The Bible is complete, in that no other books will be added to it. But many other books are still helpful. What other books, apart from the Bible, have helped you learn about God? How are these books different from the sixty six books of the Bible?
5. The Bible is described as a sword in the New Testament. How would you learn to handle a sword well? Can this help us understand how we can handle the Bible well?
6. What have you found to be helpful, or unhelpful, in different translations of the Bible?

7. One of the ways we should read the Bible is to look for promises that we can claim (the **P** in S-P-A-C-E). Have you found promises in the Bible that have particularly helped you?





# 5

## THE DIVINE INSTRUCTOR

In Ireland it is a legal requirement that learner drivers have a qualified driver sitting in the vehicle beside them at all times. The point of this is that the learner should have constant access to help, support and advice. After they have passed their driving test, then they may drive on their own.

Don't forget that, as disciples of Jesus, we never stop being learners. We will always need constant access to help, support and advice. Isn't it great, then, that Jesus has promised to be with His disciples to the end of the ages?

### **Teachability and Confidence**

There would be no point in a learner being accompanied by a qualified driver if they chose to reject any advice coming from the voice of experience. Such an arrangement might conform to the letter of the law, but very little true learning would result. Living Life as a Learner involves being teachable.

Equally, a hesitant learner who lacks any confidence at all can be dangerous on the road.

Your attitude is essential to successfully living the Christian life. God doesn't want you to see yourself as a nobody, beating

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yourself up, running yourself down, and always feeling that you're never good enough. But neither does God want Christians to be big-headed, proud, or arrogant. So how do we maintain the right attitude?

An old saying tells us that your “attitude determines your altitude more than your aptitude.” In other words, the people who reach the heights of success are not necessarily the cleverest or the most talented. Sometimes they are just the people who have the best attitude.

We need to know that we are a ‘somebody’ in Christ. When we start out on the Christian walk it's easy to be overwhelmed by everything that faces you. Your friends know that you have become a Christian, so they're watching you. You feel that responsibility and you don't want to mess up and have that reflect badly on the Church or on Jesus Christ. People ask you questions and you don't know the answers. Insecurities and fears and temptations still follow you from your past. It would be easy to think, “I'm no good at this. I might as well give up.” But what does the Bible say?

The Word of God tells us that we can do everything we need to. It says:

*I can do everything through Him who gives me strength. (Philippians 4:13)*

I like to think of that as a ten finger prayer (counting each word by extending a finger). When I'm feeling weak or inadequate I can remind myself, “I can do everything through Him who gives me strength.” Sometimes you just have to repeat that to yourself over and over again. I would encourage

you to memorise this verse, and to pray it over and over again when you feel intimidated and need confidence or courage.

Another Scripture that is useful when you feel insignificant and unimportant is Romans 8:31:

*If God be for us, then who can be against us? (Romans 8:31)*

God is on our side! That means that no situation we face will be too much for us to handle. But, remember what I said earlier, God does not want us to proud or arrogant.

*All of you, clothe yourselves with humility towards one another, because God opposes the proud but shows favour to the humble. (1 Peter 5:5)*

### **The Imitation of Christ**

So how do we strike this balance? How can we be confident and ready for anything, yet avoid being proud? The answer is found in one of the key passages in the New Testament:

*In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to His own advantage; rather, He made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to death - even death on a cross!*

*Therefore God exalted Him to the highest place and gave Him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,*

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*in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2:5-11)*

What a wonderful piece of advice! We have to model ourselves on Jesus. You might have seen those wristbands that say WWJD (What Would Jesus Do?) But maybe they should say WWJT (What Would Jesus Think?) Jesus did what He did because of His attitude. He was God, and yet He took a place of humble service in order to fulfil the greatest act in history – the salvation of the world.

### **The God Who Lives in You**

So how did Jesus manage to keep that right attitude? Even though He knew He was the Son of God, how did He stay humble? Philippians tells us that as well. Let's continue reading from Chapter 2, but now we'll read the next two verses:

*Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed - not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence - continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to His good purpose. (Philippians 2:12-13)*

Do you get it? God Himself is dwelling in you. This is part of what happened when you first believed on Christ as your Saviour. The Holy Spirit came into your heart and now He dwells there. You don't have to ask God to come down from heaven to help you. He's already inside you!

This realisation is essential to a healthy prayer life. If we have a mistaken idea that God is somewhere far off, then we will always struggle to ‘break through’ in prayer – somehow feeling that He cannot hear us. But once we understand that He is with us all the time – then prayer becomes as natural as when a learner driver asks advice from the person sitting right beside them.

### Spontaneous Prayer and Scheduled Prayer

Many Christians struggle in this very area. They say, “I know God is inside me, but I just can’t feel that presence most of the time.” The answer is prayer. Jesus is the Son of God, but even He had to pray when He was on earth. Sometimes He would go away by Himself and pray for an entire night. If Jesus needed to pray, then how much more do the rest of us need to pray?

Prayer is communicating with God. In one sense you can do this all the time. In 1 Thessalonians we find this exhortation:

*Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus. (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18)*

What do you think it means to ‘pray continually?’ That your lips must be moving every second of the day? That you should continually have your head bowed and your eyes closed? No, I think to pray continually is to learn to walk in God’s presence all the time. To be whispering a prayer to Him while you’re

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driving, as you're cooking the dinner, as you're entering the room for an important interview.

But prayer also means setting aside time to spend with God in prayer. Jesus said:

*And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. (Matthew 6:5-6)*

We need to set aside time when we shut the door, turn the mobile phone off, and spend time set apart to communicate with God. It's like my relationship with my wife. We find ourselves communicating at many different times during the day. Even if one of us is busy doing something else, we still find time for a quick word, a hurried phone call, or even an SMS text message. But we also need those times when we plan to spend time together. Then we put our phones on silent, schedule time for just the two of us, and spend time chatting and communicating in a setting where we have each other's undivided attention.

### **The Lord's Pattern for Prayer**

Jesus gave us a pattern that we could follow in our praying. We often hear this pattern referred to as 'The Lord's Prayer,' and people repeat it word-for-word, sometimes over and over

again. This was not what Jesus was telling us to do. He was giving us this as a pattern, not as a script.

*Our Father in heaven, hallowed be Your name,  
Your kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us today our daily bread.  
And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.  
And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.  
(Matthew 6:9-13)*

A similar pattern can be expressed in the acronym A-C-T-S.

**A - Adoration.** Worship God for who He is and what He has done. Worship is good at any time, but it also reminds us of God's power, which helps us have more faith when we bring our requests to Him.

**C – Confession.** Unconfessed sin in our lives leads to condemnation, and this will also hinder our faith to believe for answered prayer.

**T - Thanksgiving.** Acknowledging how God has provided for you and answered your prayers previously will increase your expectancy for Him to do it again.

**S - Supplication.** God delights in hearing us bring our needs to Him. He wants us to pray in faith.

*“Have faith in God,” Jesus answered. “I tell you the truth, if anyone says to this mountain, ‘Go, throw yourself into the sea,’ and does not doubt in their heart but believes that what they say will happen, it will be done for*



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*them. Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.” (Mark 11:22-24)*

### Forgiveness

Jesus was very clear that unforgiveness towards anyone else will be a major barrier to answered prayer. Immediately after giving us His pattern for prayer, He gave this warning:

*For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins. (Matthew 6:14-15)*

### Moving Up a Gear

Sometimes we don't even know what to pray for. We might know something about a situation, but it is so complex that we're not even sure what needs to happen to resolve things. At other times we feel an overwhelming sense that we need to pray for a particular person, but we might have no idea why. In those times the Holy Spirit within us can help us to pray:

*In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. (Romans 8:26)*

There are two ways the Holy Spirit can move your prayer up a gear and help you pray effectively even when you don't know what to pray for. One is to pray supernaturally in another language – something we will look at in our next lesson. The

other is what is referred to in Romans Chapter 8 – when your longing for God to do something is so great that you can't even verbalise it. Instead you groan before God with an intensity that goes far beyond words. At that time, don't worry that you can't find the right words. The Holy Spirit Himself is praying through you with that intense desire – and God hears that desire more readily than any words you could possibly utter.

### Many Different Ways to Pray

Occasionally you might come across a Christian who insists that their way of praying is the only correct one, and that any other method is wrong. Such people become very judgmental in condemning the prayers of others.

The wonderful truth is that there are many different ways of praying – and you can find the ones that work best for you.

*And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord's people. (Ephesians 6:18)*

You can pray when walking around, standing up, sitting down, kneeling, or lying flat on your face. You can pray loudly or quietly. You can pray on your own or as part of a group. The most important thing about prayer – to borrow the slogan of a famous sportswear manufacturer – is that you just do it!

## **STUDY QUESTIONS**

1. What problems might occur if a disciple was unteachable? What if they were totally lacking in confidence?
2. One of the keys to effective prayer is remembering that God is close to you – in fact He’s living inside of you. Have you ever felt that God was far away? How might you overcome such a feeling?
3. Are there particular times of the day or night that suit you best for scheduled times of prayer? For example, times when you know you are less likely to be interrupted?
4. When you look at the pattern for prayer that Jesus gave us (often referred to as ‘The Lord’s Prayer’), is there any part of it that you find particularly helpful?
5. Forgiveness is key to answered prayer. So why do we still sometimes find it hard to forgive? How can we overcome this?
6. The Holy Spirit can move you up a gear in prayer when you don’t know what to pray for. Can you think of times when you need this kind of help?

7. There are many different ways to pray. Have you found ways that work particularly well for you?



# 6

## EMPOWERED BY THE SPIRIT

Does this scenario sound familiar? You get behind the steering wheel of your car. You fasten your seatbelt. You're ready to go and set for your journey. Then you turn the ignition key and .... nothing! For whatever reason, the car won't start. All your expertise as a driver means nothing if you lack the power that comes from the engine.

So far, we have been learning lots of information about what it means to Live life as a Learner. But information by itself is not enough. We also need power in the Christian life. It's not enough to know what to do – we've also got to have the power to do it. After all, there have been many great moral teachers who have taught similar stuff to what Jesus taught. The difference, of course, is that while those moral teachers could offer great advice, they couldn't give their followers the power to live by that advice.

### **More than Just Words**

This is where so much modern religion and Christianity misses the mark altogether. A lot of it is all nice sounding words. God is this. Jesus did that. Believe this. Go through

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that ceremony or ritual. But that is all words. Listen to what the apostle Paul said:

*For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile. For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed – a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: ‘The righteous will live by faith.’ (Romans 1:16-17)*

*For Christ did not send me to baptise, but to preach the gospel – not with wisdom and eloquence, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power. For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. (1 Corinthians 1:17-18)*

The message of the Cross is foolishness to those who are perishing. In fact, every time an unbeliever says that the Gospel is stupid, then they are unwittingly proving the Bible to be true! The fact that they see the message of the cross as foolishness merely demonstrates that they are perishing.

But the Scripture goes on to say that for those of us that are saved, those that are not perishing, the Gospel is the very power of God. We are to walk the walk, not just talk the talk!

So, how do we get this power? Jesus made it quite clear when He was talking to His disciples in Acts Chapter 1. This was after His resurrection, but before He ascended into heaven. This was the point where He gave them all the instructions, the equipment – basically everything they would need to be His representatives on earth.

*But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. (Acts 1:8)*

### Indwelt and Filled

So, the Holy Spirit is our source of power. Do you want the good news or the even better news?

The good news is that you already have the Holy Spirit in your life. If you have prayed a prayer of faith and believed on Christ as your Saviour then you already have the Holy Spirit living in you. In Romans Chapter 8 we find these words:

*If anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ. (Romans 8:9)*

And then verse 11 goes on to say:

*And if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, He who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies because of His Spirit who lives in you. (Romans 8:11)*

This connection between the power of God as demonstrated in the Resurrection, and the Holy Spirit in us, is made even more explicit when Paul writes to the Church in Ephesus:

*That you may know the hope to which He has called you, the riches of His glorious inheritance in His holy people, and His incomparably great power*



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*for us who believe. That power is the same as the mighty strength He exerted when He raised Christ from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly realms. (Ephesians 1:18-20)*

This must rank as one of the most amazing statements anywhere in the Bible. The same power that raised Jesus from the grave, shattering the stranglehold of death, is at work within us!

I said there was good news and even better news. The good news is that the Holy Spirit is already in you. You have already received Him. The even better news is that we can have a further experience of the Holy Spirit that will give us the power to be witnesses of Jesus and to take His message to the whole world. Some people call this further experience being baptised with the Spirit, others talk about being filled with the Spirit. Whatever you want to call this experience, Jesus has promised it to every Christian. Once again:

*But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. (Acts 1:8)*

### **Some Basic Truths About the Spirit**

So, three things we need to get right in our minds. First, the Holy Spirit is a Person. He's a 'He' not an 'it.' The Holy Spirit is the Third Person of the Trinity – God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit.

You occasionally hear people speaking as if the Holy Spirit were just some kind of influence or force, but the Bible clearly

describes Him as having qualities that denote personality. He speaks (Acts 8:29), teaches (Luke 12:12), prays (Romans 8:26), has a mind (Romans 8:27), can be lied to (Acts 5:3) and can be grieved (Ephesians 4:30).

Secondly, if you are saved then you already have the Holy Spirit. Even before the promise of receiving power in Acts 1:8 – the disciples had received the Holy Spirit. In John's Gospel, just after the Resurrection of Christ, we find this event recorded:

*Again Jesus said, 'Peace be with you! As the Father has sent Me, I am sending you.' And with that He breathed on them and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.' (John 20:21-22)*

So that's where we are. We receive the Holy Spirit when we believe on the risen Lord Jesus as our Saviour. In fact, His indwelling within us is so real and so permanent that our bodies are called temples of the Holy Spirit.

*Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? (1 Corinthians 6:19)*

The third thing we need to get straight is that we need this further experience of the Holy Spirit that Jesus promised – this baptism or filling – in order to live the Christian life with power. Without this experience we will be like an electrical appliance that has no batteries and is not plugged into the mains – powerless!

### What Kind of Power?

So, what kind of power are we talking about? How does the Holy Spirit affect our lives today?

Well, you are already enjoying the benefits of the Holy Spirit's power in several ways. The Holy Spirit was active in the Creation of the world. The first two verses of the entire Bible, in Genesis Chapter 1 tell us:

*In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth .... and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. (Genesis 1:1-2)*

So, everything you see around you, such as the beauty of the earth and the stars in the sky, is a result of the Holy Spirit's power. It was the Holy Spirit who guided the writers of Scripture. So every time you hold a Bible in your hands, you are holding a product of the Holy Spirit's power. It was the Holy Spirit who convicted you of sin and helped you to realise your need of a Saviour – so if you are a believer in Christ then that is as a direct result of the work of the Holy Spirit.

So in what other ways can you experience the power of the Holy Spirit? We are going to look at several of them, but let's always remember this – Jesus said the reason He will give us the power of the Spirit is to be witnesses for Him. Sharing our faith with others is one of the most important things we can do. The power of the Holy Spirit is not given primarily for our own needs. This is not all about making you richer, healthier and happier. That is important, and God does want to bless you,

but the number one reason for receiving this power is to be good witnesses for Jesus. Let's not lose sight of that.

### Spiritual Gifts

The first, and most obvious, result of being filled with the Holy Spirit is that God gives us the gifts of the Spirit. These are not just natural talents. Maybe you have a talent for playing the piano. You had it before you believed in Christ and you still have it afterwards. That talent has been given to you by God, but that is not what we mean by the gifts of the Spirit.

Spiritual gifts are abilities that you didn't have before, but God gives them to you when you are filled with the Holy Spirit. They can include the ability to pray for sick people so they get healed, the ability to preach, hearing messages from God in visions and dreams, and the discernment of spirits – when you can tell just by listening to someone's voice whether they are sincere or not, or whether they are lying or telling the truth. We can't cover all of the spiritual gifts in depth in this one lesson, but they are all demonstrations of supernatural power that comes from God.

One of these spiritual gifts that the Bible talks about is called "Speaking in tongues." This is where someone begins to speak or pray in a language that they have never learned or spoken before. Some people get freaked out by this, because it seems strange and not what they are used to in church, but it is important that we are led by the Bible, not by traditions of men.

When the first disciples were filled with the power of the Holy Spirit, this was the first proof, the initial evidence, that the

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promised power had arrived. The book of Acts describes it well:

*When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them. (Acts 2:1-4)*

This was no quiet affair. They knew they had been filled with the power of the Spirit because something powerful happened! A similar event later happened with a group of non-Jews, or Gentiles, in Acts 10:44-46.

*The Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God. (Acts 10:44-46)*

So, in both cases the initial evidence that they had been filled with the Holy Spirit - that the power had been turned on - was that they spoke in tongues. Even today the normal way that we know that someone has been filled with the power of the Holy Spirit is by the fact that they start praying in an unknown language they've never spoken before.

### Power to Witness

The initial evidence is simply the indication that the power has been turned on. For example, when you turn a computer on, you may see a little green light to let you know the computer is now switched on. That is a useful indication, but it is not the reason why you bought the computer! If that was all your computer did then you would return it to the store and ask for your money back.

In the same way, we shouldn't get too hung up over speaking in tongues. It is a useful sign that the power of God has been poured out on us – but the whole point of receiving the power is that we go on to be effective witnesses for Jesus Christ – sharing the Gospel with others and helping them to become His disciples too.

Being a witness is not just about making a lot of noise and doing miraculous stuff. We are also to be witnesses by living lives that are good and so give glory to God. Most people, deep down, secretly long to be a better person. The Holy Spirit gives us power to live lives that are a testimony to God's ability to change us for the better. Jesus described it this way:

*You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven. (Matthew 5:14-16)*

### The Spirit of Holiness

The Spirit of God is the *Holy* Spirit. When He touches our lives He gives us victory over sin and temptation and helps us live lives that are also holy.

This whole aspect of holiness – living a life that gives glory to God and attracts others to Jesus – is an important part of the Christian life. It is also a result of the power of the Holy Spirit.

The Bible doesn't only talk about the gifts of the Spirit, but also about the fruit of the Spirit. The power of the Holy Spirit in your life will produce qualities that all of us need to cultivate.

*But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. (Galatians 5:22-23)*

When you are filled with the Holy Spirit you should expect to see both the Gifts of the Spirit and the Fruit of the Spirit in your life. Power without holiness would be a dangerous thing indeed.

So, how do you claim the promise? How do you receive this power of the Holy Spirit that Jesus has promised? How do you become an effective witness? The answer is amazingly simple. Listen to the words of Jesus:

*So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened. Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake*

*instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him? (Luke 11:9-13)*

If you have not already done so, I strongly encourage you to come before God in prayer, and ask Him to fill you with His Holy Spirit.

Pray in faith. Expect God to do what He has promised and to fill you with the Holy Spirit. Don't get too fixated on speaking in tongues – because your attention should be fixed on the Giver (God Himself) rather than on the gift! Many followers of Christ find that as the Holy Spirit fills them they feel an increased love and appreciation for Jesus Christ – as they worship Jesus they find themselves praying in tongues without even thinking about it!

Finally, being filled with the Spirit starts with an experience, but it continues as a process.

*Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. (Ephesians 5:18-20)*

A literal translation from the Greek would more properly say, “Go on being filled with the Spirit.” It is something called the present continuous tense – it means that we continue to be



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filled with the Spirit on an ongoing basis as we continue to live a life of worship and faith.

### STUDY QUESTIONS

1. The apostle Paul described the Gospel as being something of power, not just of words. What kind of power do you think we should expect to see accompanying the sharing of the Gospel?
2. The New Testament says that the same power that raised Jesus from the dead is at work in us. Are there areas in your life that need this power? If so, you can pray for that right now.
3. The Holy Spirit is a Person – not just a force or an influence. As such He can be grieved or offended. If the Holy Spirit is truly dwelling in us as the Bible says, then how should this truth affect our behaviour?
4. If speaking in tongues was the initial evidence of being filled with the Spirit in the book of Acts, why do you think some Christians avoid the practice today?

5. The reason we receive the power of the Holy Spirit is to enable us to witness to others about Jesus. 2000 years ago this power was very necessary as disciples risked being arrested or killed for sharing their faith. What obstacles do we face today when we witness?
  
6. The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness and self-control. How might these qualities help you to be a better witness for Jesus Christ?

# 7

## KEEPING ON THE ROAD

Most of us, when we're first learning to drive, are nervous. Then, as we continue to practise, we gain confidence. Things that seemed so daunting at first, even things as simple as changing gears, become so familiar that we feel we could do them in our sleep.

Then, sooner or later, our confidence lets us down and we can become lazy or careless. Maybe we let our attention wander while we're driving. Or we're in a hurry so we start breaking the speed limit. Bad habits can start creeping into our driving.

If we're not careful, then we can find ourselves in a situation where we're skidding out of control – or maybe pulled over by the flashing blue light of a police patrol car.

### **Temptation Happens**

Sometimes being a Christian feels a bit like that. You start off on this new life that you're living with Jesus and everything seems new and exciting. Your sins are forgiven, your past is behind you, and you know you're on your way to heaven. Then suddenly a temptation comes up. You do something wrong, say something hurtful, lose your temper – and now you're feeling like you've just messed up totally.

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Overcoming temptation is something that every Christian needs to learn. First of all, we need to accept that temptation is part of every Christian's life – and it always will be. Some of us feel guilty because we are being tempted. We think, “If only I was a better Christian, if only I had more faith, if only I had gone to church more, then I wouldn't have these horrible thoughts and temptations.” But even the greatest of Christians have to struggle with temptation. In fact, even Jesus was tempted!

*Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, left the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, where for forty days He was tempted by the devil. (Luke 4:1-2)*

Now, maybe you're thinking, “Yes, but Jesus only got tempted over one or two things, and they don't seem particularly evil. If you only knew the temptations that I'm facing, you would realise that my temptations are much more horrible than everyone else's.” Really? Let's read what the Bible has to say about that:

*Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to feel sympathy for our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet He did not sin. Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need. (Hebrews 4:14-16)*

Jesus has been tempted in every way – just like us. Sometimes we talk as if the Temptation with the Devil in the wilderness was the only temptation Jesus faced – but that is not true at all. He was tempted all through His life. He was tempted with all the same kinds of stuff that the rest of us get tempted with. And even right at the end, just before His crucifixion, He still faced a terrible and powerful temptation to avoid the Cross and to abandon us to sin and hell forever. He had to kneel in the Garden of Gethsemane and wrestle in prayer until his sweat became like drops of blood as He said to God the Father, “Not My will, but Your will be done!” (Luke 22:42)

So, if Jesus was tempted so severely, then we need to accept that temptation is not something we will grow out of as Christians. Temptation is going to be there until our dying day! So it is vitally important that we learn how to cope with it.

### Coping with Temptation

When we get to heaven there will be no more death, no more sickness, no more pain, no more tears – and no more temptation. But until then we will continue to be tempted, because we are human beings.

So are we condemned to keep on sinning forever? Is our Christian life going to be a continual cycle of getting tempted and sinning? No! No! No! Listen to this wonderful Scripture:

*No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; He will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But*

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*when you are tempted, He will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it. (1 Corinthians 10:13)*

How often have you heard someone say, “I was tempted more than I could bear?” A disciple of Jesus can never honestly say that! God has promised that will never happen. He will always provide us with a way of escape.

So, it’s great to know that God will give us the power to overcome temptation – but how? How can we actually get the victory over temptation?

Firstly, we stay away from situations where we are likely to be tempted. If you know you get tempted by hanging out with certain people, then find new people to hang out with! If you know you get tempted by watching certain TV programmes, then don’t watch them anymore! Right at the beginning of the Book of Psalms, we find these wise words:

*Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers. But his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on His law he meditates day and night. (Psalm 1:1-2)*

So choose your friends carefully. Choose what you watch carefully. Choose what you listen to carefully. Don’t go putting yourself in the way of unnecessary temptation.

Secondly, we overcome temptation by the Word of God – the Bible:

*How can a young man keep his way pure? By living according to Your Word. I seek You with all my heart; do not let me stray from Your*

*commands. I have hidden Your Word in my heart that I might not sin against You. (Psalm 119:9-11)*

So the Bible, as God's Word, strengthens us and enables us to resist temptation. I like to think of it as similar to the anti-malaria medication I take every time I travel to a tropical destination. If I forget to take it each day, then I run the risk of coming down with something really nasty.

Thirdly, we need to pray to overcome temptation. After all, this is what Jesus did. He prayed in the desert when the Devil tempted Him. He prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane when He was being tempted to avoid the suffering of the Cross.

The fourth way we overcome temptation is by the power of the Holy Spirit. In our last lesson we talked about how the Holy Spirit gives us power to witness, but He also gives us the power to overcome temptation. The Bible gives us an amazing promise for anyone who is struggling in what seems to be a never-ending cycle of temptation, sin and condemnation:

*Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death. For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. And so He condemned sin in sinful man in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit. (Romans 8:1-4)*



That is a powerful truth. Our sinful nature was incapable of resisting temptation – but now we have God’s Spirit living inside us, so we can live a life of victory over temptation!

So, we overcome temptation by:

1. Steering clear of temptation as much as possible .
2. The Word of God.
3. Prayer.
4. The Holy Spirit.

### Walking in Holiness

As we continue to walk in fellowship with the Holy Spirit our lifestyle begins to change – and so we begin to progress in what the Bible calls ‘holiness.’

Holiness is basically about living life God’s way. In the original Hebrew language of the Old Testament the word ‘holiness’ means ‘to be set apart.’ It means that you are cutting yourself off, or setting yourself apart, from those things that controlled and dominated your old life and instead being separated to God so you can serve Him and live by His standards.

Let’s have a quick look at this idea of holiness in the Bible. Moses was instructed by God how to make holy anointing oil for the House of God, and how it was to be used:

*Make these into a sacred anointing oil, a fragrant blend, the work of a perfumer. It will be the sacred anointing oil. Then use it to anoint the Tent of Meeting, the ark of the Testimony, the table and all its articles, the lampstand and its accessories, the altar of incense, the altar of burnt offering and all its utensils, and the basin with its stand. You shall consecrate them*

*so they will be most holy, and whatever touches them will be holy. (Exodus 30:25-29)*

A table or a lampstand are not able to distinguish between right or wrong. They're inanimate objects! They can't do good works or commit sin – yet they can be holy. This illustrates this idea of holiness as being set apart for God's purposes.

However, when it comes to people, rather than tables and lampstands, holiness also refers to whether our words, thoughts and actions are righteous or sinful. Yes, holiness means to be set apart for God, but it also means to be more like God. This leads us to another word we use – 'godliness.' This literally means 'Godlikeness' – or to be like God. This was always God's intention for the human race:

*Then God said, "Let Us make man in Our image, in Our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground." So God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. (Genesis 1:26-27)*

If the Bible says something even once then it must be important. But in the space of just two verses there it told us three times that God has created us in His own image. Now, what does that mean? It can't be talking about our physical appearance, because God is a Spirit. We all look so different from each other – male and female, black and white, short and tall, fat and skinny. So there's no way that this can be referring to our actual physical appearance.

Also, there are so many ways in which we can't be like God. We can't be all powerful (omnipotent), we can't know everything (omniscient), we can't be in more than one place at one time (omnipresent). But there is one way we can be like God, the same way that we can be His image – and that is in a moral sense. We are to be like God by being holy.

### **Holy as He is Holy**

But God is God. He is absolute perfection. We are just ordinary sinful human beings. How can we be holy in any way that comes even near to God's holiness?

You can't be holy to the same extent and magnitude that God is – but you can have the same kind of holiness that God has. How many fathers would ask their children to do something that was absolutely impossible?

*Therefore, with minds that are alert and fully sober, set your hope on the grace to be brought to you when Jesus Christ is revealed at His coming. As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. But just as He who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: "Be holy, because I am holy." (1 Peter 1:13-16)*

That last phrase, "Be holy, because I am holy," is a direct quote from the Book of Leviticus. So God, in both the Old Testament and the New Testament, commands us to live with the same kind of holiness in our lives that He Himself possesses. And I find it so comforting that those words we just read came from the pen of the apostle Peter – a man who knew

what it was to slip up and fail his Lord in a time of pressure. Elsewhere he wrote:

*His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and goodness. Through these He has given us His very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires. (2 Peter 1:3-4)*

Praise God! He doesn't ask you to do the impossible. He doesn't ask you to do something and then leave you poorly equipped for the job. When God says, "Be holy because I am holy," He gives you everything you need for life and godliness. Through the death of Jesus on the Cross, through the Word of God, through prayer, through the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives – God equips us to be holy with the same kind of holiness as He Himself possesses!

So how does this work in practice? What does it really mean to be godly? What should a life of Christian holiness look like? One of our problems is that Christians, historically, have defined holiness in mostly negative terms. They see it as not doing this, not doing that etc. This sometimes produced attempts at holiness that were nothing like the holiness of God. For example, monks would lock themselves away from everybody else in solitude.

### Positive Holiness

But true holiness is not just avoiding committing sin. It is also about making a positive impact on the world through the relationships we build with other people. The Scribes and Pharisees, who were the religious establishment of the day, asked Jesus a question about holiness and obeying God:

*One of them, an expert in the Law, tested Him with this question: “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?” Jesus replied: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbour as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.” (Matthew 22:35-40)*

So, the positive part of holiness is about loving God and loving your fellow man. This can be demonstrated by spending time with God in prayer and in His Word (the Bible) – also in telling other people about Jesus Christ. Other ways that you show your love for your fellow man are by helping the poor, by comforting the lonely and hurting, by helping those who are suffering injustice, or by giving to charitable causes. It may mean getting involved in causes that don’t even seem religious or spiritual. For example, climate change causes drought, affecting the poorest in our world the most. Therefore loving our neighbour can include acting responsibly in preserving the environment and changing our habits so as to conserve energy and reduce carbon emissions.

But the other side of holiness is about the things you don't do. Let's put it quite simply. Being a Christian means that you need to look at your life and cut out the stuff that stops you loving God and stops you loving your fellow man. So what kind of behaviour do we need to cut out?

### **Cut it Out!**

First of all, anything that hurts other people or treats them with a lack of respect is unacceptable for Christians. We need to live by the Golden Rule as taught by Jesus:

*So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets. (Matthew 7:12)*

That's straight forward enough. You wouldn't want other people to lie to you – so don't lie to them. You wouldn't want others to rip you off – so don't rip them off. You wouldn't want others to look down their noses at you – so don't you go looking down your nose at them. The world actually tends to live by a different principle: namely, do unto others as you think they might do to you! Others might want to walk all over you, so that makes it OK for you to walk all over them. That may be the way the world operates, but we as Christians need to be different. Do unto others what you would want them to do to you.

That means we must never cheat, steal or defraud anyone. This includes any kind of criminal or dishonest behaviour. It also means we are to avoid anything that hurts others such as

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violence, oppression, slander or gossip. It also includes any kind of sexual immorality.

Some people have accused Christians of being obsessed with sex. Why are sexual sins often treated as if they are worse than others? Quite simply, sexual sins often cause the biggest harm. Families are torn apart by the unfaithfulness of a husband or wife. Most murders are committed for either money or sexual motives. This is a whole subject in itself, and we can't go into it in depth in this teaching, but basically God gave sex as a wonderful gift and as a way that two people who are committed to each other for life can seek to bless and please one another. But immoral behaviour perverts sex into something greedy and selfish, where people are more interested in getting their own desires met rather than blessing anyone else. Also, many forms of immorality, such as pornography and prostitution, turn people into objects that are just there to be used. That breaks the Golden Rule, because it fails to treat others with the respect that you would like to receive yourself.

Another aspect of living in holiness is to avoid anything that controls your life. Part of the fruit of the Spirit is self-control, so that means you avoid anything ungodly that would control you. This is why Christians should steer clear of drunkenness or mind-altering drugs, or addictive habits such as smoking. Indeed we need to be careful of anything that becomes a controlling or dominant factor in our lives. Some people are even addicted to watching soap operas or playing computer games. Others become obsessive about dieting, or exercise. Not that there's anything wrong with dieting or exercise – but the key principle is that your spirit should be in control instead of allowing something else to control you.

Another part of holiness is avoiding any kind of false religious practices. In the same chapter where we were given the fruit of the Spirit, Galatians Chapter 5, we are warned about the works of the flesh:

*The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy, drunkenness, orgies and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the Kingdom of God. (Galatians 5:19-21)*

A lot of that stuff we've already mentioned. But it also talks about idolatry or witchcraft. Any kind of religious practices that are not of God must be avoided. These include occult practices, fortune-telling, ouija boards, tarot cards, and practices such as transcendental meditation or yoga that are based on Eastern religions. Christians should avoid every kind of false religious practice or beliefs.

So, as we have seen, holiness has a positive and a negative side. We need to love God and our fellow men with all of our hearts. We also need to cut out anything that would stop us treating others as we would wish to be treated ourselves. This is not always easy. We are trying to stick on the path God has given us to follow, not turning away to the left or to the right. But God has promised that He will equip us to obey Him and that we can do it.



## STUDY QUESTIONS

1. We have seen that Jesus was tempted just as we are tempted – but without committing sin. How can this realisation strengthen us to resist temptation?
2. One of the ways of escape from temptation that God provides is through the Word of God. Are there particular passages of Scripture that you have already found helpful in this way?
3. Holiness means separation to God – but Jesus has told us to live in the world, and to be a witness to that world. Where do we draw the line between ‘being in the world’ and ‘becoming like the world?’
4. The Golden Rule tells us to treat others as we ourselves would wish to be treated. Why do we sometimes find it so hard to live by that rule?
5. Every society and culture has its own difficulties and pressures for the Christian disciple. What are some of the ways in which the society where you live pressurises Christians to drop their standards?

6. As Christians we are to avoid false religious practices – but we still want to show love to people with different religious beliefs. This may involve conflicts of conscience. For example, if a friend of another religion invites you to attend a wedding in their place of worship. How can you show love and respect but still walk in holiness?



# 8

## THE ESSENTIALS

Every driver has a different style and a different level of expertise. Nevertheless, there are certain essential skills and competencies that cannot be neglected. Quite simply, if you can't get these basics right then you will never pass your driving test.

In the same way, you will find a wide variety of different kinds of Christians. There are many different churches and denominations out there, and each of them tends to place a stronger emphasis on one part of the faith than another. Sometimes we see things differently from each other. A wise man once said, "In essentials, unity; in doubtful matters, liberty; in all things, charity."

In other words, we need to avoid being so dogmatic that we fall out with anyone who disagrees with us on the tiniest detail. But we also need to avoid being so open-minded that our brains fall out! So what are the essentials? What are the basic beliefs which are absolutely essential if we are to be Christians at all? Where do we draw the line between legitimate disagreement, and someone departing from Christianity altogether into the world of heresies and cults?

### The Bible and Creeds

Some Christians seem to start off well living the life of a believer. They've genuinely believed in Christ. They read the Bible. Their attitude is good. They pray regularly. And then they open their mouths and you realise they've picked up some crazy false teaching, or they've missed out on learning one of the basic Christian beliefs that we all need.

So how can we make sure we have the essential Christian beliefs – the bare minimum required to be an effective Christian? Well, it starts with the Bible. Remember, this is the Word of God, so if God wants us to have a grasp of the basic things we need to know, then this should be the place to start.

In fact, the Bible itself makes it clear that it is the source for our basic beliefs:

*All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. (2 Timothy 3:16-17)*

Thoroughly equipped. Your basic set of Christian beliefs needs to be based on the Bible.

From the earliest days, Christians have written down Creeds, or Statements of Faith, that try to sum up the basic essentials that we need to function as a follower of Christ. These vary slightly from church to church. Churches are made of human beings, after all, and each one tends to try to stress what is particularly important to them. But when you look at the various Creeds and Statements of Faith you see that the

same biblical essentials are emphasised in every one of them. This is because all the different churches, even though they are made up of human beings, are in touch with God Himself. The apostle Peter, tells us:

*His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and goodness. (2 Peter 1:3)*

First of all, you need be sure about the Bible. We already talked about this in a previous lesson. Every Christian needs to know that the Word of God is their final authority, more so than church traditions or human reasoning.

### Who God Is – One God

Next you need to be sure about who God is. How can you share the love of God with others if you don't know who God is? The Bible tells us that God is the Creator of the world. That He is Love. That He is holy. That He is all-powerful, all knowing. It also tells us that God is a Trinity.

The Trinity is a difficult concept to get our heads around. It means that there is only one God, but that there are Three Persons within God – that is, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. When St. Patrick brought Christianity to Ireland he used the shamrock as a tool to explain the Trinity. There are three leaves on the shamrock – but only one shamrock.

The word 'Trinity' itself doesn't appear in the Bible, but it's a convenient word (combining tri & unity) that sums up the

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biblical teaching. It's not actually necessary that we totally understand how the Trinity works, but it is important that we understand that it is taught in Scripture and so we believe it.

First of all, the Bible tells us that there is only one God. This is one of the central truths that God gave the Jewish people when He chose them to be different from all the heathen nations around them who worshipped many false idols. Right at the beginning of the Jewish nation, when God gave Israel His law, He started with this:

*Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. (Deuteronomy 6:4-6)*

This was called the *Shema*, because in Hebrew it begins *Shema Y'israel*. It is considered the most basic and essential piece of knowledge that any Jew can have about God. And so any understanding of God must have this as its basis. The Trinity does not mean that we worship three gods. There can only be One God.

The Bible speaks about God the Father. There are hundreds of Scriptures that call God the Father, for example:

*One Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. (Ephesians 4:5-6)*

So, the Father is God.

But the Bible also tells us that the Son is God. Jesus Christ claimed qualities and characteristics that belong only to God.

He claimed to have existed from all Eternity, to have all knowledge, power and authority. He had the authority to forgive sin. He was the Creator. John's Gospel declares of Christ:

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through Him all things were made; without Him nothing was made that has been made. (John 1:1-3)*

There are also Scriptures that expressly refer to Jesus Christ as God. For example, Titus 2:13 speaks of Christ's Second Coming as "the glorious appearing of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ."

So far we've seen that both God the Father and Jesus Christ, God the Son, are God. But the Bible also teaches that the Holy Spirit is God. In Acts Chapter 5 there is an account of a married couple, Ananias and Sapphira, who tried to be hypocrites and lied to God. Peter rebuked them:

*Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land? Didn't it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn't the money at your disposal? What made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied to men but to God. (Acts 5:3-4)*

Peter said "You have lied to the Holy Spirit," and then added, "You have not lied to men but to God." So now we have these biblical truths that we have to fit together. There is



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only one God. But the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Spirit is God.

I know what some of you are thinking. This doesn't necessarily mean we have to believe the Trinity? Maybe the Father, the Son and the Spirit are all the same Person? Right? No – wrong!

### Who God Is – Three Persons

The Bible is also clear that Jesus is distinct from the Father. In John Chapter 8 Jesus was accused by the Pharisees of being just a boastful windbag who made fancy claims for Himself. Jewish law said that you had to have a witness to back up any claim you might make. So who, the Pharisees asked, was Jesus' witness? Listen to how He answered them:

*When Jesus spoke again to the people, He said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows Me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." The Pharisees challenged Him, "Here You are, appearing as Your own witness; Your testimony is not valid." Jesus answered, "Even if I testify on My own behalf, My testimony is valid, for I know where I came from and where I am going. But you have no idea where I come from or where I am going. You judge by human standards; I pass judgment on no one. But if I do judge, My decisions are right, because I am not alone. I stand with the Father, who sent Me. In your own Law it is written that the testimony of two men is valid. I am one who testifies for Myself; My other witness is the Father, who sent Me." (John 8:12-18)*

Did you get that? Jesus in effect said, "My Father is a second witness along with Me – so We count as two witnesses."

And the same is true of the Holy Spirit. Jesus told the disciples that after His death and resurrection He would have to go away so that the Father could send them another Counsellor, or Advocate. Listen to how Jesus puts it:

*Jesus replied, "If anyone loves Me, he will obey My teaching. My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our home with him. He who does not love Me will not obey My teaching. These words you hear are not My own; they belong to the Father who sent Me. All this I have spoken while still with you. But the Counsellor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; My peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid." (John 14:23-27)*

That is very clear to me. The Father, the Son and the Spirit are all distinct from each other. It wasn't the Spirit who died on the Cross – it was Jesus, God the Son. It wasn't the Father who was poured out on the Day of Pentecost – it was God the Holy Spirit.

So now we have three biblical truths that we have to put together.

1. There is only one God.
2. The Father, Son and Spirit are all God.
3. The Father, Son and Spirit are not the same, but are distinct.

The only sensible explanation that has ever been proposed for this is the concept of the Trinity. Three persons, (Father, Son & Spirit) all joined in perfect unity as One undivided God.

It's hard to understand I know, but any other belief fails to embody these biblical truths.

### Who Jesus Is – the Son of God

Another essential part of Christian belief concerns who Jesus is, and how His death on the Cross affects each one of us. Even today, most people in Ireland believe that Jesus died on the Cross – but most people would be hard pressed to explain how a man being executed two thousand years ago can still affect us today. The Romans executed lots of people. So what makes this one different?

First of all, we have to understand that Jesus Christ was not just an ordinary man. He is God the Son. In John Chapter 8, Jesus was in a discussion with some of the Pharisees and other religious leaders. They asked Him, “Who do you think you are?” Let’s look at Jesus’ reply:

*“If I glorify Myself, My glory means nothing. My Father, whom you claim as your God, is the one who glorifies Me. Though you do not know Him, I know Him. If I said I did not, I would be a liar like you, but I do know Him, and keep His word. Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing My day; he saw it and was glad.” “You are not fifty years old,” the Jews said to Him, “and yet You have seen Abraham!” “I tell you the truth,” Jesus answered, “before Abraham was born, I am!” At this, they picked up stones to stone Him, but Jesus hid Himself, slipping away from the temple grounds. (John 8:54-59).*

So why did the Jews want to stone Jesus to death? The answer is straightforward enough. They clearly understood that

He was claiming to be more than a mere man. He existed before Abraham, and He claimed a divine title of ‘I am’ – literally *Yahweh*, or *Jehovah*.

The teaching of the New Testament, from start to finish, backs up this claim of Jesus to be God. The announcement of His birth said that He would be Emmanuel – God with us. He accepted worship, He claimed the power to forgive sins, He declared that He and the Father were One. Jesus clearly claimed that He was God. Now, what are we to make of this claim? Was Jesus right? Was he really God? Or was He, as many people have thought, simply a good man – a great moral teacher?

C.S. Lewis famously expressed this as a trilemma – a stark choice between three options:

*I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: “I’m ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don’t accept His claim to be God.” That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic — on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg — or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God; or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronising nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to. (Mere Christianity)*

### Who Jesus Is – the Son of Man

So Jesus was, and still is, God. But, even after we get that clear in our heads, some people still manage to get themselves confused. They begin to wonder if He was really a proper man. Maybe, they say, He was just God pretending to be a man – just sort of dressed up in human appearance? However, once again, the Bible is very clear about this:

*There is one God and one mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus. (1 Timothy 2:5)*

He is ‘the Man Christ Jesus.’ Jesus was not just pretending to be a man – He was a real man. He was born as a baby, He got hungry, He got tired – all the stuff that makes us human. In fact, even though Jesus, as God the Son, was all-knowing, He voluntarily laid that aside when He took on human nature in Mary’s womb. Look at what Luke’s Gospel says about the childhood of Jesus:

*And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and man. (Luke 2:52)*

Did you get that? God the Son grew in wisdom! How can that be? As God, isn’t He supposed to know everything already?

The answer is that God the Son, in order to fulfil His role of saving the world, voluntarily and temporarily laid aside some of His divine attributes. He chose to be in one place at one time,

instead of being everywhere. He chose to become a weak and helpless baby. And He chose to limit His knowledge.

The theological term for this is *kenosis* – a Greek word that literally means ‘emptying.’ Charles Wesley famously expressed it in a hymn by saying that Jesus ‘Emptied Himself of all but love, and bled for Adam’s sinful race.’

The Bible expresses it this way:

*Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to His own advantage; rather, He made Himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to death – even death on a cross! (Philippians 2:6-8)*

### How We are Saved

Another Christian essential, and one that is a direct result of understanding who Jesus is, is understanding how we are saved.

The problem of human sin put a gap between man and God, and so in order to bring reconciliation it needed a Saviour who would be both man and God. Jesus was able to bridge the gap between man and God because He was both man and God!

So how exactly did Jesus do this? Christian thinkers have, over the years, used several different pictures to explain what happened on the Cross. Each one of these pictures, or theories, gives us part of the whole picture – and so taken together they give us a pretty good understanding of the Cross.

### The Battle

First of all there is the *Christus Victor* theory. This basically describes the events of the Cross and resurrection as a gigantic battle between Jesus and Satan. The whole Bible can be read as a battle between good and evil, with Jesus winning the climactic battle on the Cross.

There's a lot of truth in this. Way back in the Garden of Eden, when sin first became a problem, God spoke to the serpent and said:

*I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; He will crush your head, and you will strike His heel. (Genesis 3:15)*

That was a clear prophecy of a future confrontation between the seed of the woman and the Devil. (Only Jesus could ever be called 'the seed of the woman,' because He was born of a virgin. Every other single human being was the seed of man.) In this battle, according to that prophecy, Jesus would be seriously damaged (strike His heel) but Satan would be destroyed (crush his head). That is what happened on the Cross. Jesus was hurt – in fact He died. But, as we know, that death was not permanent because the resurrection was coming. But the Devil's power over mankind was broken and destroyed forever when Jesus, as both man and God, rose from the dead in power.

1 Corinthians Chapter 15 is all about the resurrection of Christ:

*Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Corinthians 15:55-57)*

The resurrection was the knock-out punch that gave Jesus victory over Satan.

### **The Ransom**

The next theory we need to consider is the Ransom Theory. Again this goes back to the origin of the sin problem in the Book of Genesis. When God created the first humans He gave them authority over everything He had created. But once they messed up by disobeying God, they tried to evade and deny their responsibility. Adam blamed his wife, and his wife blamed the serpent. So, because no-one else seemed to want the authority, the devil ended up controlling the earth. Just look at the history of the human race. It is one long litany of cruelty and oppression.

We are all familiar with the concept of a ransom. Someone is kidnapped and the kidnappers won't release them until the ransom is paid.

*You are not your own, you were bought at a price. (1 Corinthians 6:19-20)*

And what was that price? Peter tells us the answer:



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*For you know that it was not with perishable things like silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect. He was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake. Through Him you believe in God, who raised Him from the dead and glorified Him, and so your faith and hope are in God. (1Peter 1:18-21)*

So what happened on the cross was the payment of the ransom demand. The resurrection, again, was the sting in the tail. It was like where the kidnappers pick up the ransom money but then get arrested anyway.

### The Substitute

The other great explanation of what happened on the Cross is the Penal Substitution Theory. Don't be scared off by the theological words! Penal just means 'punishment' and substitution, well, it's just like a substitute coming on to replace somebody else in a football game.

The idea is that our sin meant that a punishment had to be paid, and that punishment was death. But Jesus stepped in as our substitute and took our punishment on His own shoulders:

*He Himself bore our sins in His body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by His wounds you have been healed. (1 Peter 2:24)*

The punishment for sin was paid once and for all on the Cross. That is why Jesus cried out, "It is finished" just before

He died. So how does the Resurrection fit in to this? Quite simply, the Resurrection was the proof that God accepted the way in which Christ had carried the punishment for our sins. God was saying, “Yes. I accept the sacrifice of My Son. You are forgiven. I’ve proved this by raising My Son back from the dead!”

### A Great Salvation

So, let’s put these three ideas together to give us the big picture of what happened on the Cross.

1. Jesus fought the mother of all battles against Satan, and delivered the knock out blow when He was raised from the dead. This leaves Satan as a defeated enemy.

2. Jesus paid the ransom of His own life and blood to set us free from our captivity. Then, by being raised from the dead, He broke free from the power of death, bringing Satan, the kidnapper, to justice.

3. Jesus took our punishment on His shoulders and suffered in our place. The fact that He rose from the dead is proof that God accepts Christ’s sacrifice on our behalf and makes it possible for us to be forgiven, saved, and to go to heaven.

As you can see, the Resurrection is vitally important to every understanding of the Cross. I don’t believe any one Theory, or explanation, gives a full picture of the Atonement – of what Christ did for us on the Cross. This is like a war that is fought on the ground, in the air, and at sea. To fully appreciate the victory that has been won, you need to look at the big picture.

*If you confess with your mouth “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved. (Romans 10:9-10)*

Let’s make sure that we get these essentials right. We need to hold the truth that God is a Trinity. We need to remember that Jesus is both truly and properly God, and yet truly and properly man. And we need to make sure that we are unshakable in our belief that we are saved through the atoning death of Christ.

To help us, here are two attempts by Christians to sum up the most important basic beliefs in a written form. The first is the Apostles’ Creed. This was a document drawn up by the early Church to express what they felt were the essentials that needed to be shared by every true Christian.

The second is the Church of God Declaration of Faith. This is adopted by many churches (including the Solid Rock Church) as a standard to be adhered to by members and to set a standard that preaching and ministry in the Church should conform to. We are not saying that it is essential to agree with every part of this in order to be a Christian – but that it represents an agreed core around which we organise our local congregation.

## THE APOSTLES' CREED

I believe in God, the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord,  
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,  
born of the Virgin Mary,  
suffered under Pontius Pilate,  
was crucified, died, and was buried;  
He descended into Hades.

On the third day He rose again;  
He ascended into heaven,  
He is seated at the right hand of the Father,  
and He will come to judge the living and the dead.

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

**THE CHURCH OF GOD DECLARATION OF  
FAITH**

We Believe:

In the verbal inspiration of the Bible.

In one God eternally existing in three persons: namely, the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

That Jesus Christ is the only begotten Son of the Father, conceived of the Holy Ghost, and born of the Virgin Mary.

That Jesus was crucified, buried, and raised from the dead.

That He ascended to heaven and is today at the right hand of the Father as the Intercessor.

That all have sinned and come short of the glory of God and that repentance is commanded of God for all and necessary for forgiveness of sins.

That justification, regeneration and the new birth are wrought by faith in the blood of Jesus Christ.

In sanctification subsequent to the new birth, through faith in the blood of Christ; through the Word, and by the Holy Ghost.

Holiness to be God's standard of living for His people.

In the baptism with the Holy Ghost subsequent to a clean heart.

In speaking with other tongues as the Spirit gives utterance and that it is the initial evidence of the baptism in the Holy Ghost.

In water baptism by immersion, and all who repent should be baptised in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.

Divine healing is provided for all in the Atonement.

In the Lord's Supper and washing of the saints' feet.

In the premillennial second coming of Jesus. First, to resurrect the righteous dead and to catch away the living saints to Him in the air. Second, to reign on the earth a thousand years.

In the bodily resurrection. Eternal life for the righteous, and eternal punishment for the wicked.

## **STUDY QUESTIONS**

1. What problems might occur in a Church that had no agreed Statement of Faith or common beliefs? How might this create confusion?
2. What problems might occur in a Church that insisted on every member agreeing on every single detail of belief? Is there a benefit in allowing people to question things and disagree?
3. The Trinity is one of the basic beliefs of historic Christianity – yet most of us struggle to fully understand it or explain it. Are there other things in life that you believe to be true, but are unable to fully understand or explain? Do you see why truth about an infinite God might be greater than the limitations of our finite understanding?
4. Jesus is both fully God and fully man. Can you think of reasons why this is important in one who was to become the Saviour of the world?
5. We looked at three explanations for how Christ's death saves us – the Battle, the Ransom and Penal Substitution. Which of these explanations do you find most helpful? Why? Are there any other explanations that make sense to you?

# 9

## YOU'RE NOT ON YOUR OWN

When you drive a car it's easy to imagine that you're on your own. Drivers are so sealed in that box of plastic, glass and metal, and feel so insulated, that they sometimes act in ways that they would never act in normal society. I have seen people who are ordinarily polite and mild-mannered suddenly become screaming maniacs because another driver was driving too slowly, or took their parking place. We even have a specific term – 'road rage' – for those people who take this personality change to its most violent extremes.

But, in reality, driving a car means you are part of a community of drivers. There are rules and laws that you all have to abide by. Often we moan about these laws. For example, most drivers complain about getting stopped by a red light at traffic signals. But have you ever tried driving in a city without traffic lights? I have – in a number of cities overseas – and it is a frightening experience. I also remember driving in a major US city after it had been hit by a powerful hurricane. All the power was knocked out, and without working traffic lights it seemed as if every road junction was a scene of confusion. I have also travelled by car in a few places in the world where people routinely ignored traffic laws, driving on whatever side of the road they felt like and turning abruptly without signalling.



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I quickly realised that traffic laws and traffic lights are a good thing! Without them, the roads rapidly descend into chaos and gridlock.

I have learned over the years that driving is more effective, and less stressful, when you obey the rules, follow the signals, and show courtesy to other drivers.

Funnily enough, living as a follower of Jesus tends to work the same way.

### No Lone Rangers

When I was a young boy, one of my favourite TV cowboy shows was ‘The Lone Ranger.’ This ex-Texas Ranger fought against crime and injustice accompanied only by his horse, Silver, and Tonto – his native American sidekick. He didn’t need anyone else. He was fiercely independent.

It can often be tempting to become a Christian version of the Lone Ranger. We become irritated and frustrated by the actions and attitudes of other Christians. Of course this is particularly prone to happen when we ourselves are immature in our faith – for then we find it easy to focus on the faults of others while ignoring our own faults.

So why can’t we just become Christian Lone Rangers? Why can’t we spend our Sundays alone basking in God’s presence rather than going to a Church and meeting other believers? Why can’t we gather our teaching from books, DVDs and Christian television without having to put up with the hypocrisy and religiosity that we often encounter in Church?

The main reason why we can’t do this is that the Bible has an awful lot to say about what it means to be part of the

Church. The New Testament actually speaks much more about how we behave towards other Christians than it does about our own personal relationship with God!

### Loving God and Loving People

In Chapter Four we talked about how we should search for, and claim, promises in the Bible. If you have been doing that then you've probably noticed that most of the promises, in both the Old Testament and the New Testament, are in the plural rather than the singular. God seems to offer most of his best promises and blessings to His people as a group, rather than to isolated individuals.

In fact the apostle John makes it clear that walking with God involves sharing fellowship with God – and that is impossible unless we also share fellowship with one another:

*If we claim to have fellowship with Him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live out the truth. But if we walk in the light, as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, His Son, purifies us from all sin. (1 John 1:6-7)*

That is clear and unmistakable teaching! John is telling us that there are two choices – you either walk in the light or you walk in darkness. If you walk in the light then you share 'fellowship' (the Greek word is *koinonia*). And if you share this fellowship with God then you inevitably have fellowship (the same word – *koinonia*) with other followers of Jesus. So, unless

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we are sharing this fellowship with other believers, then we are in darkness!

Just in case we didn't get that blunt truth, John goes on to state it over and over again:

*Anyone who claims to be in the light but hates a brother or sister is still in the darkness. Anyone who loves their brother and sister lives in the light, and there is nothing in them to make them stumble. But anyone who hates a brother or sister is in the darkness and walks around in the darkness. They do not know where they are going, because the darkness has blinded them. (1 John 2:9-11)*

*This is how we know who the children of God are and who the children of the devil are: anyone who does not do what is right is not God's child, nor is anyone who does not love their brother and sister. (1 John 3:10)*

*We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love each other. Anyone who does not love remains in death. (1 John 3:14)*

*We love because He first loved us. Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. And He has given us this command: anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister. (1 John 4:19-21)*

No room there for Lone Rangers! Loving God, and Living Life as a Learner, is closely bound up with loving people – and you don't love people by cutting yourself off from them.

I once heard someone say, "Church would be wonderful if it wasn't for the people." The problem with that, of course, is

that the Church *is* people! We have to love those people. Loving them might be easier for us if we actually understand what the Bible has to say about the Church.

### God's Purpose for the Church

There is an entire branch of theology called Ecclesiology – the study of the Church. The Greek word for ‘church’ (*ekklesia*) literally means ‘the called out ones’ (this is where our English word ‘ecclesiastical’ comes from).

The word *ekklesia* is even used in the Bible to describe the assembly of the Israelites who were led by Moses out of Egypt (Acts 7:38). The descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were bound together as a community when they received the Law of Moses.

In the same way the Church is a community of people who have been called out from a wide variety of different backgrounds, nationalities and races. We become brothers and sisters in Christ who have a shared salvation and a shared future in Christ. Together we are even called ‘the Body of Christ:’

*Now you are the Body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it. (1 Corinthians 12:27)*

God's plan is that the Church would become the ultimate example of His power, grace and mercy for all the universe to see:

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*For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do. (Ephesians 2:10)*

The idea here is that of a master craftsman who would create an object so marvellous and intricate that it showed everyone the extent of their skill. The craftsman then placed that beautiful piece of handiwork in their shop window – thus assuring any potential customers that the craftsman was easily able to meet their needs and requirements.

By calling us ‘God’s handiwork,’ the New Testament is asserting that the Church is the ultimate expression and demonstration of God’s creative power. When God wants the universe to see His glory and beauty at work, He doesn’t point to the Grand Canyon. He doesn’t point to Mount Everest or the stars of the Milky Way. God points to the Church and says, “Look at the way I’ve called these sinful human beings out of darkness and have joined them together to worship Me and to love one another!”

When we begin to understand this incredible plan and purpose, then any idea of Lone Ranger Christianity starts to look rather selfish and shabby. The very fact that other Christians sometimes annoy and frustrate us is not an excuse to walk away. Rather it is the means by which God changes us and shapes us into something glorious. As we learn to love and forgive one another, even with all our annoying quirks and habits, then we become more like Jesus.

Being part of the Church means surrendering our petty and selfish ambitions. Instead we grasp the wonderful truth that we are part of something that is much bigger than us. We are part

of the very purpose of God – and that only happens when we are part of the Church.

This is one reason why the Cross is such a wonderful symbol for Christians. It not only reminds us of *how* Jesus died, but it also reminds us of *why* He died. The vertical beam speaks of a restored relationship between ourselves and God. The horizontal beam speaks of an ongoing relationship with each other.

### Koinonia

Let's look a bit closer at that word for fellowship – *koinonia*. In Greek it originally referred to any form of sharing among people. It was used about partners in a business venture. In fact, it is used in that way in the New Testament to describe the fishing business that was owned by a shared partnership:

*When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus' knees and said, 'Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!' For he and all his companions were astonished at the catch of fish they had taken, and so were James and John, the sons of Zebedee, Simon's partners (**koinonia**). Then Jesus said to Simon, 'Don't be afraid; from now on you will fish for people.' (Luke 5:8-10)*

The same word crops up in the Book of Acts to describe how people shared the love of Jesus in the Early Church following the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost:

*Those who accepted his message were baptised, and about three thousand were added to their number that day. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. (Acts 2:41-47)*

This passage demonstrates some of the key things that result from *koinonia* – teaching, meeting together, praying, breaking bread and giving.

### Teaching

We've already talked about the importance of studying and understanding the Bible correctly. The best way that this occurs is together with other believers. As we discuss with each other what the Lord has shown us, we find that God has given more wisdom and grace to the Body as a whole than He ever does for one individual. The Creeds and Statements of Faith that we discussed in our last lesson didn't come about from one person coming up with some ideas and then forcing them on everyone else. They developed when many different believers shared their wisdom and insights together under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

There will always be a place for the gifted teacher or prophet who hears a truth from God and shares it with others who haven't grasped that truth yet. But the ultimate test is when their fellow disciples weigh up that revelation and measure it by Scripture. If it is really of God, then that will become evident as the Church meets together. Be careful if you think you've discovered some truth about God that no-one else has ever thought of and which no-one else can see. That is usually the hallmark of a false teacher or a cult leader rather than of someone who is genuinely hearing from God.

### Meeting Together

Another characteristic of the Early Church's *koinonia* was that they met together frequently. In fact, they met together every day. That may not always be possible in the busy schedules of life in the Twenty First Century – but those who are determined to discover God's purpose for the Church still place a high priority on meeting with other believers.

We should not fall into the trap of measuring someone's spirituality by how often they attend Church, and Jesus came that we might have life more abundant (not meetings more abundant), but the truth remains that we express our love for other Christians by gathering with them – either in formal Church settings or informally in our homes:

*And let us consider how we may spur one another on towards love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but*



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*encouraging one another – and all the more as you see the Day approaching. (Hebrews 10:24-25)*

One cold winter's day a pastor visited a Church member who was very infrequent in his attendance at Church services. They sat together in front of a blazing coal fire as the pastor shared his concern for the man's spiritual well-being. The member replied, "I can meet with God here at home. I don't have to go to church and mingle with a bunch of hypocrites in order to meet with God." The pastor didn't speak a word. He simply took the tongs from beside the fireplace, plucked a burning coal out of the flames, and set it on the stone hearth. They both watched in silence as the coal, separated from the other coals in the flames, gradually became cold and dark. As the pastor got up to leave, the member turned to him with tears in his eyes and said, "I'll be in Church on Sunday."

### Praying

Part of *koinonia* is praying together. The New Testament is clear that our prayers are more effective when we join with others in agreement. Yes, we are encouraged to pray on our own – but Jesus also taught about the power of praying with others:

*Again, truly I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything they ask for, it will be done for them by My Father in heaven. For where two or three gather in My name, there am I with them. (Matthew 18:19-20)*

This passage occurs directly after Jesus had given His followers instructions on how to resolve disagreements and conflicts in the Church. Then, in the next few verses, Jesus went on to teach about the absolute necessity of believers loving and forgiving each other. The connection is clear. When we learn to love and live as the Church, then our prayer has added power.

### Breaking Bread

The Early Church also showed *koinonia* by breaking bread together – or sharing communion. Jesus had instructed them to do this in order to remember His death on their behalf:

*And He took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, 'This is My body given for you; do this in remembrance of Me.' In the same way, after the supper He took the cup, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in My blood, which is poured out for you.'* (Luke 22:19-20)

Obviously Jesus was not saying that the bread literally turned into His body. After all, He was clearly sitting before them in His body as He spoke these words. If the bread turned into His body then that would have meant that He had two bodies in the room at the same time – one sitting in His seat and speaking to them, and the other in a lump of bread! That would be foolishness indeed. Jesus was clearly saying that the bread and the wine were symbols, helping us always to remember the body and the blood of Christ.

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Different churches celebrate communion in slightly different ways. Some use a single loaf of bread and one large cup. Others use lots of little pieces of bread and little individual cups. Some have servers who take the bread and wine to the rest of the congregation. Others encourage the congregation to come forward and gather round a table. It goes beyond the purpose of this study to argue over details like that. But what is important to this Lesson is that celebrating communion (or the Lord's Supper, as it is sometimes called) is an opportunity for the Church to grow closer together in their shared love and commitment to Jesus.

In fact the apostle Paul stressed this important aspect of the communion meal:

*So then, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. Everyone ought to examine themselves before they eat of the bread and drink from the cup. For those who eat and drink without discerning the body of Christ eat and drink judgment on themselves. (1 Corinthians 11:27-29)*

Theologians have argued over what is meant by 'without discerning the body of Christ.' But, when read in context and viewed in the light of the Scriptures we have already examined in this Chapter, I think the meaning is clear. Paul was rebuking the Corinthian disciples for acting selfishly during their communion services. He was letting them know that it was absolutely essential for the Church to grow closer to one another in love and consideration. If they failed to do that,

then their ceremony with bread and wine was nothing but a religious sham.

### Giving

The other main result of the Early Church's *koinonia* was in their giving – as they shared their material resources with each other for the good of the entire community.

In fact, the same word *koinonia* is used in the New Testament to refer to a financial offering taken up in the Church:

*Now, however, I am on my way to Jerusalem in the service of the Lord's people there. For Macedonia and Achaia were pleased to make a contribution (**koinonia**) for the poor among the Lord's people in Jerusalem. They were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles have shared in the Jews' spiritual blessings, they owe it to the Jews to share with them their material blessings. (Romans 15:25-27)*

This is the biblical basis for financial giving in the Church. It is not a financial get-rich-quick scheme for individuals. It is not a painful duty like paying income tax. It is an opportunity to share – where all contribute joyfully to the overall mission and purpose of the Church to which we belong.

People get touchy when preachers and churches talk about money. Yes, we want them to talk about heaven and hell, about loving one another, about prayer and the Bible – but we get easily offended when they talk about money. This is because money is tremendously important to us. Everybody needs

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money in order to survive. And money is a powerful motivating factor. People spend hours each week working, often doing stuff they don't even enjoy – and why? To get money. The two most common motivations for murder, for violent crime – indeed for any crime at all – are sex and money. So, if something is so important to us, then that is all the more reason why we need to understand what the Bible has to say about money. This is particularly true when we consider that, in the Four Gospels, Jesus actually spoke more about how we deal with our material possessions than He spoke about heaven, about hell, about prayer, or about the Scriptures.

### Jesus on Money

Listen to what Jesus said:

*Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. (Matthew 6:19-21)*

*No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money. (Matthew 6:24)*

There are three great principles there for us. First, we need to make our money count for eternity. As Christians we believe that everything we have comes from God, in fact everything on the earth really belongs to Him. So we are stewards, or

managers, who look after God's funds and use them as He directs us. This means we follow His commands and, instead of storing up money for ourselves here on earth, we use money in a way that will do lasting good and impact other people's lives for all eternity.

Secondly, what we do with our money shows where our heart is. Our financial affairs are a bit like a spiritual lie detector that measures whether our words are sincere or not. If you say you care about other people, but you really spend all your money on selfish things that just make you feel good, then the lie detector goes BEEP! If you say you want the Gospel to be preached in all the world, but you never give anything to missions projects then BEEP! The way you use your money has exposed a lie.

The third principle that Jesus was sharing is that money makes a good servant, but a bad master. There is nothing wrong with money itself. Some people say that money is the root of all evil, but what the Bible actually says is that “the *love of money* is the root of all kinds of evil” (1 Timothy 6:10). God delights in the prosperity of His people, and He gives us material blessings so that we can bless others.

### **The Promise of the Tithe**

The Jews are a great example of how God blesses His people materially. When they honoured God and obeyed His laws they were successful in every area. They were able to win battles against armies much bigger than theirs, and they were blessed materially and financially. God had established a system

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known as the tithe, where every Jew brought a tenth of their income into the Temple and gave it to God. This financed the running of the House of God, looked after all the priests and Levites and temple servants – and God continued to bless the people. But when the Jews began disobeying God, worshipping false idols, then they also stopped paying their tithes, and God was not impressed with that:

*I the Lord do not change. So you, the descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed. Ever since the time of your ancestors you have turned away from My decrees and have not kept them. 'Return to Me, and I will return to you,' says the Lord Almighty.*

*But you ask, 'How are we to return?'*

*Will a mere mortal rob God? Yet you rob Me.*

*But you ask, 'How are we robbing You?'*

*In tithes and offerings. You are under a curse – your whole nation – because you are robbing Me. Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in My house. 'Test Me in this,' says the Lord Almighty, 'and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that there will not be room enough to store it. I will prevent pests from devouring your crops, and the vines in your fields will not drop their fruit before it is ripe,' says the Lord Almighty. 'Then all the nations will call you blessed, for yours will be a delightful land,' says the Lord Almighty. (Malachi 3:6-12)*

Some people say, “Ah, but that's the Old Testament.” That's true – and we believe that the Old Testament is every bit as much the Word of God as the New Testament. Of course the curse no longer applies, because Jesus Christ has set us free from the law of sin and death. But the promises do still apply –

and we can claim this promise of an open heaven over the Church when we give God a tenth of all we earn.

One problem was that some Jews, such as the Pharisees, thought that if they paid their tithes then God would automatically bless them, even if they were doing everything else contrary to the will of God. Therefore Jesus rebuked them:

*Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices – mint, dill, and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law – justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter without neglecting the former. (Matthew 23:23)*

Do you see what He is saying here? There are things much more important than money – so don't think that if you're paying your tenth (your tithes) to God then that is all that matters. But He also said they should not neglect the tithing thing. Jesus was saying that we should pay our tithes to God, but we also need to care for the poor and show justice and mercy.

### The Offering

Jesus also emphasised that our giving to God will actually help determine how we ourselves receive from God:

*Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. (Luke 6:38)*



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Pressed down, shaken together and running over. That is an overall picture of abundance. This means that if we give by the teaspoon then God will bless us by the spoonful. The spoonful will be pressed down, shaken together and running over – but it’s still just a spoonful. But if you give by the bucketful then that is better!

The apostle Paul shared the same principle:

*Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. Each person should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. (2 Corinthians 9:6-7)*

Now obviously the measure with which we give is not referring to the tithe, because that measure is the same for all of us – it’s 10%. No, the measure is referring to offerings that we give. These may be gifts to an individual you know who is in need, or support for a missionary organisation, or maybe something you give in a special offering for some project or outreach at church. Basically it works like this. The tithe was brought into the storehouse – the temple where the people received their spiritual food. So each of us should pay our tithes to the local church where we are fed with the Word of God. Then we give offerings to other things as the Holy Spirit guides us.

But let’s not miss something important that Paul said in that last passage of Scripture. He said, “Each person should give what he has decided in his heart to give.” I believe that is

saying that our giving of tithes and offerings should be planned, not on impulse. Our giving should be purposeful.

This system of tithes and offerings that God has established is fairer than anything that men could devise. The standard for giving is the same for rich and poor alike – 10%. Yet, it still leaves us the opportunity to demonstrate our extra gratitude to God by giving additional offerings as and when He leads us.

When people come together to worship in the Church, there are lots of things that we expect to be there. Among other things we expect a building in which to worship, heat and light, musical instruments, children's facilities, toilets, a car park, and a preacher who has studied the Word.

All these things need to be paid for. It would not be fair if the poor person and the rich person paid exactly the same amount in euro and cent. The rich person would barely notice it while the poor person would be breaking their back financially just to fulfil their sharing in the Church. Therefore a percentage is a much fairer way of doing things. God's system of tithes and offerings is so much fairer.

So we each pay our tithe to God, and God promises that He will open the windows of heaven and pour out blessings so great that we can't contain them. Then we give our offerings freely and willingly, and God promises that He will give back to us with the same measure – but this time pressed down, shaken together and running over.

Once we really start to get into this whole business of giving and receiving it gets really exciting. But one thing we always find is that you can never out-give God! This holds true both as individuals and as a Church community.

## **STUDY QUESTIONS**

1. We saw that discipleship is not for Lone Rangers. What do you think would be the biggest dangers facing a believer who is not in fellowship with others?
2. This Chapter described God's purpose for the Church as a great cosmic event to show forth God's glory. Yet, if we're honest, the Church doesn't always look that way. Why not? In what ways are we missing God's purpose for us?
3. Meeting together is absolutely essential if we are to Live Life as Learners. What would you see as the biggest benefits from meeting regularly with others?
4. In some churches Communion, or the Lord's Supper, can sometimes turn into a stale formal ceremony. What can you do to remind yourself of its importance?
5. Money is a touchy subject for many Christians. How can churches overcome this resistance and present biblical principles on finance in a way that people can receive?

# 10

## THE DAY YOU STOP LEARNING

Let's come back to our driving illustration again. Most people would think that you stop being a learner the day you pass your driving test and qualify for a full driver's licence. But, as we made clear right at the beginning of this course, that isn't actually the case. You might get to take down the L-plates at that time, but you'd better be prepared to keep on learning. In fact you could say that you don't stop learning until you stop driving!

It's exactly the same when it comes to Living Life as a Learner. In this life we will never reach the point where we have 'arrived' as a perfect Christian. We will still be learning more about God's love and power shown to us in Jesus right up to the last day of our lives.

So, in this Chapter we're going to think about what that last day will bring. What happens when we draw our final breath? What new things are awaiting us?

### **Death is Just the Beginning**

As a Pastor, I have had to occasionally conduct funeral services for people who did not have any kind of personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Such services tend to be

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miserable joyless affairs. The grief at losing a loved one is complete, with no certainty of any eternal life to follow. In such cases there is no silver lining to the cloud.

The funeral of a follower of Jesus Christ has a completely different atmosphere. Yes, there is grief and loss because we know that we will not see our loved one again in this life – and that grief is very real and painful, especially where we have been bereaved of a spouse, or of a parent, or even of a child. But mingled in with that grief is a note of celebration – because we know that the follower of Jesus Christ who dies has now entered something even better than the life we now live. The apostle Paul put it this way:

*Death has been swallowed up in victory. Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Corinthians 15:54-57)*

So, as followers of Jesus Christ, death is not something to be dreaded. Once our lives here on earth are done, then we move on to the next stage of our fellowship with God. A funeral is not a ceremony to mark our defeat by death – it is an opportunity to rejoice that we have remained faithful to Christ and therefore have the victory over death.

The first Christian Church I belonged to was the Salvation Army. They had a unique and wonderful way of marking this victory over death. At funerals the predominant colour on display was not black – but rather white! Often these times of loss and sadness were transformed into joyous celebrations. Even the term they used for death – ‘Promotion to Glory’ –

was a faith declaration that death is, for the Christian, just the beginning.

### **The Great Hope for the Believer**

Thank God that most true Christians do indeed know that death is merely the gateway into something much better that God has in store for us. Yet I have been surprised by how popular Christian imagination of what this involves so often fails to measure up to what the Bible teaches.

A popular view is that at death our body dies, and that the only part of us that really matters (the soul, or the spirit) then goes to heaven or to hell – where it remains for all eternity. Then we float around as disembodied spirits for ever like Casper the Friendly Ghost.

This popular view has been perpetuated by preachers who say things like, “You are a spirit, you have a soul, and you live in a body.” It might surprise some of us to realise that this viewpoint owes much more to pagan Greek philosophy than it does to the Bible. Many of the Greeks believed that the body was essentially evil, and that our goal should be to leave the body behind and exist as a pure spirit. But the Bible’s view is very different:

*May God Himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Thessalonians 5:23)*

No, the Bible does not endorse the Greek ideal of floating around in heaven as a disembodied spirit for ever. The great hope for the Christian believer is something much earthier - that of resurrection from the dead.

Remember those verses we quoted earlier from 1 Corinthians Chapter 15? The ones about death losing its sting and its victory? Let's look at the context in which they occur:

*But someone will ask, 'How are the dead raised? With what kind of body will they come?' How foolish! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. When you sow, you do not plant the body that will be, but just a seed, perhaps of wheat or of something else. But God gives it a body as He has determined, and to each kind of seed He gives its own body. Not all flesh is the same: people have one kind of flesh, animals have another, birds another and fish another. There are also heavenly bodies and there are earthly bodies; but the splendour of the heavenly bodies is one kind, and the splendour of the earthly bodies is another. The sun has one kind of splendour, the moon another and the stars another; and star differs from star in splendour. So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonour, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. (1 Corinthians 15:35-44)*

So our victory over death does not consist in floating around as a spirit. Our victory over death lies in our future resurrection in new glorious bodies. And because Jesus Himself was raised from the dead, we know that we will follow in His footsteps:

*But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. But each in turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when He comes, those who belong to Him. (1 Corinthians 15:20-23)*

Heaven, then, is not so much a permanent place as a temporary state of being. Upon death, if we have truly been saved by faith in Christ, our souls and spirits will rest in God's presence until the Return of Jesus Christ to the earth. Then our transformed and glorious bodies will be raised from the dead. Think of Jesus when He was raised. He no longer looked like the battered and bruised corpse that had been taken down from the Cross and laid in the tomb. Now He was raised as the Lord of Life, so that even some of his closest followers failed to recognise Him!

So our souls and spirits will be reunited with our new resurrection bodies, and at that point something wonderful will happen. Heaven will descend to earth and the two will become one:

*Then I saw 'a new heaven and a new earth,' for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Look! God's dwelling-place is now among the people, and He will dwell with them. They will be His people, and God Himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every*



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*tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.’ (Revelation 21:1-4)*

Let me also point out that there is no Scriptural basis whatsoever for the idea that people become angels when they die. Angelic beings, according to Scripture, are a different category of beings altogether from humans. When a child dies we sometimes hear people say things such as, “God needed another angel in heaven so he took this little one.” That is pagan nonsense of the silliest kind! We do indeed believe that the child is now with God, but angels are a different issue entirely.

### **The Return of Christ**

The key event that we wait for with respect to our resurrection is the Return of Jesus Christ. You are probably aware that there are many different theories and opinions about the details of the Second Coming. It goes beyond the scope of this study to argue over details of the identity of the Antichrist, or the exact timing of the Rapture or the Tribulation. So let’s concentrate on some certainties concerning the Return of Christ.

### **A Personal and Literal Return**

For the Early Church in the First Century, the Return of Christ was considered to be one of the most important truths of all. Someone has calculated that the Bible refers to this event

1,845 times (1527 times in the Old Testament and 318 times in the New Testament).

Today you sometimes hear people speaking of Christ's Return as something symbolic, or something invisible that will happen in secret but Scripture is very clear that it will be personal, literal and public.

*After He said this, He was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid Him from their sight. They were looking intently up into the sky as He was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. 'Men of Galilee,' they said, 'why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen Him go into heaven.'* (Acts 1:9-11)

They saw Jesus bodily ascend into heaven with their physical eyes. Then they were told that He would come back in the same way as they saw Him go. In other words, He will return bodily and before people's eyes.

*Look, He is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see Him, even those who pierced Him; and all peoples on earth will mourn because of Him. So shall it be! Amen.* (Revelation 1:7)

*Then will appear the sign of the Son of Man in heaven. And then all the peoples of the earth will mourn when they see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven, with power and great glory.* (Matthew 24:30)

### A Sudden and Unexpected Return

People have wasted years of their lives trying to calculate the date of Christ's Return. This is a pointless exercise as Scripture is very clear that no-one knows the date or the time:

*But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark; and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away. That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. (Matthew 24:36-39)*

Indeed, we might say that the most likely date and time for Christ's Return will be the day and time that you least expect it!

In the earliest days of the Church, people were expecting the Return of Christ to happen very quickly, probably in their own lifetimes. The early Christians used to greet each other by saying 'Maranatha' – which, in the Aramaic language as spoken by Jesus and His first disciples, means 'even so, come, Lord.' Of course nearly two thousand years have passed since then, which has greatly dimmed such expectancy for many believers. But we should be careful not to assume that such a delay means that the event will not occur as promised:

*Above all, you must understand that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and following their own evil desires. They will say, 'Where is this "coming" He promised? Ever since our ancestors died, everything goes on*

*as it has since the beginning of creation.’ But they deliberately forget that long ago by God’s word the heavens came into being and the earth was formed out of water and by water. By these waters also the world of that time was deluged and destroyed. By the same word the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly. But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: with the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping His promise, as some understand slowness. Instead He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything done in it will be laid bare. (2 Peter 3:3-10)*

### **The Tribulation and the Rapture**

We know that among the events associated with the Return of Christ will be a time of great turmoil and suffering. This is known as ‘The Great Tribulation’ – or sometimes just as ‘The Tribulation.’

*For then there will be great distress, unequalled from the beginning of the world until now – and never to be equalled again. (Matthew 24:21)*

This is hard for us to imagine. There have been many times of great distress in human history. The collapse of the Roman Empire, the invasion of the Mongol hordes under Genghis Khan, the Black Death of bubonic plague, the Holocaust perpetrated by Hitler and his Nazis – all of these were times of

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great tribulation. Yet there is still a time of trouble to come that will exceed any of these.

Another key event connected with Christ's Second Coming is the Rapture. We already referred to what happens when we die, but what about those people who are still alive at the time of Christ's Return? The Scriptures tell us that they will be caught up to be with the Lord (the word 'Rapture' does not appear in the New Testament, but it is taken from the Latin word *rapio* which means 'to be caught up').

*Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope. For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in Him. According to the Lord's word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord Himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord for ever. Therefore encourage one another with these words. (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18)*

Christians disagree as to whether the Rapture will occur before the Great Tribulation or after it. In other words, will Christians be on earth during the Great Tribulation or not? Some say yes, but others say no. And others even believe that the Church will go through the first half of the Tribulation and then be raptured away. We are not going to get involved in that

debate, since there are good Christians on either side of the argument, and there is room in the Church for both groups. It might make for an interesting discussion among believers, but it is not essential one way or the other in order to be an effective disciple.

### Judgment

Up to this point we have been talking about what happens to disciples, or followers of Christ, after this life is over. But we also need to consider what happens to those who reject the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Historically Christians have believed that the unsaved will be punished eternally in hell. In modern society many people find it hard to accept such a teaching. Therefore they suggest different theories – that the wicked will simply be annihilated, or that after a period of punishment they will be given a second opportunity to repent and be saved. The problem with this is that our beliefs must be based on the Bible, not on modern ideas of how we think things should be.

*Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life. (Matthew 25:46)*

The same word for ‘eternal’ (Greek - *aionios*) is used for both the eternal life of the saved and the eternal punishment of the unsaved. We do not for a moment believe that eternal life is temporary or non-existent, therefore it would be dishonest of

us to argue that eternal punishment is anything other than what it says.

Perhaps the reason why modern man struggles so much with this idea is because we completely fail to appreciate the serious nature of sin. We have become so accustomed to sin that we fail to see what an offence and affront it is to God. If we truly understood the awfulness of sin, then we might more readily appreciate the justice of divine punishment.

However, for those of us who are Living Life as Learners, hell should never be a cause of gloating or complacency. Understanding the dire consequences of rejecting Christ should make us all the more willing to go the extra mile in sharing the Gospel with as many people as possible.

**STUDY QUESTIONS**

1. What differences do the promises of Eternal Life and Resurrection make to how each of us views the prospects of our own death at some point in the future?
2. When we lose a loved one to death, what are the reasons for us to grieve? What are the reasons for us to celebrate?
3. Jesus spoke about hell more to His disciples than He did to unbelievers. What can this tell us about why the doctrine of hell is important? Is it supposed to be a motivation for believers to witness, or a stick to threaten the lost?
4. The early Church looked forward eagerly to the Return of Christ, yet some Christians today get afraid when they think of the Second Coming. Why do you think this might be?





# 11

## PASS IT ON

Illustrations and stories are good things. They help us understand truth in a way that is both easy to grasp and interesting. Most of us remember a preacher's stories – even if we can't remember what the sermon was about! We've already mentioned how St. Patrick used the shamrock to teach the first Irish converts about the Trinity – and centuries later the whole world associates the shamrock with Ireland.

Jesus used illustrations and stories all the time. He spoke about farmers sowing seed in fields, about fishermen casting nets to catch fish, about a man getting mugged on a journey to another town. Jesus spoke about the stuff people were interested in – and then used that interest to teach spiritual truth.

But even the best illustrations eventually run out of steam. If we press a parable too far, endlessly analysing every detail, then we will probably end up missing the main point. Our illustration of discipleship as being like learning to drive is a useful way to think of Living Life as Learner – but ultimately we reach a point where the illustration becomes inaccurate. And that's where we are in this final Chapter.

If you ever want to become a driving instructor, then it is absolutely essential that you pass your driving test first!

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Allowing an unqualified driver to teach other learners would be a recipe for chaos and disaster on the roads.

But discipleship is different. As we saw in our previous Chapter, we never stop being a learner until we finish this life and pass into eternity with Christ. Yet, even while we are still learning, Jesus calls us to share the Gospel with others and to help them to become His disciples too.

### Why We Are Here

So what is the point of it all for us as Christians? All this stuff we're learning – all this life change – where is it taking us? Some might say heaven, and that certainly is something to look forward to, but that's not the whole point of the Christian life. After all, if heaven was all this was about, then God might as well kill us in our sleep and take us to heaven right now! No, there's got to be another purpose to all this.

Some people think that being happy and enjoying life is the be-all and end-all. Now, don't get me wrong, Jesus did come that we might live life in all its fullness, but don't you think it would be a bit selfish if that was our only motive? I'm all for having a good time – but life has got to have more meaning to it than that.

Actually the Bible tells us why God has us here on the earth and what we're supposed to be doing. Let's look at the verses we started with in the first Chapter of this course. After the Resurrection we find these words from Jesus to His followers:

*All authority in heaven and earth has been given to Me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and*

*of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age. (Matthew 28:18-20)*

That is why we are here. We are to become disciples, or followers of Jesus, and we are to share the Good News of Jesus with others so that they can believe on Him and be forgiven, and then we teach them to become His disciples as well.

### **Ambassadors**

The apostle Paul actually described each Christian as having been appointed as an ambassador of God:

*God was reconciling the world to Himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And He has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making His appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. (2 Corinthians 5:19-20)*

In an earlier Chapter we talked about the gap of sin that existed between God and man. We said that Jesus, as both God and man, bridged this gap. But for most people in the world there is still a gap separating them from God. That is the gap of unbelief. So our task as Christ's ambassadors is to bring reconciliation – to bridge that gap between God and man by helping people come to faith in Jesus Christ.

There are several things that we need to consider when it comes to being an ambassador for God. First of all, we need to

be secure in who we are in Jesus Christ. An ambassador needs to know who they belong to. They need to be sure of their status. Think of a political ambassador who represents their nation. What if they were unsure how much authority they had? What if they were afraid whether their government at home would back them up or not? They would be insecure, unsure of themselves, hesitant. And that is how many Christians are. They lack a real sense of their standing and authority in Jesus Christ, so therefore they never really come across confidently as His ambassadors.

If you are born again through faith in Christ then you are a child of God. God loves you. God is committed to you. He has appointed you as His ambassador, and the Word of God declares that you can do all things through Christ who strengthens you. So be confident and secure! You have the authority to speak to others as a representative of Jesus Christ.

### **The Power of Personal Testimony**

The next thing we need to consider is the value of our personal experience. Some Christians make the mistake of thinking that we can persuade other people to become Christians through powerful or intellectual arguments. However, there is a problem with that – you will always meet someone who knows more about what you are talking about than you do.

I remember when I was in Bible College. All the students were taken to Soho, in London's West End. We sang some songs of testimony in Leicester Square, and then we were ordered to disperse into the crowds of pleasure-seekers and

theatre-goers to witness to unbelievers on a one-to-one basis. I had been looking forward to this. For two months I had been studying theological and philosophical arguments to prove the existence of God. In my arrogance, I believed that I was fully equipped to argue anyone I might meet into an acceptance of the Gospel.

The first person I tried to speak to soon punctured my pomposity. He was a Professor in Theology from a very prestigious German university. He was not born again, in fact his views on the Bible were extremely liberal, but his knowledge of Theology and Philosophy was such that my well-constructed arguments soon dissolved. I soon had to retreat back to the rest of the students with my tail between my legs!

A few minutes later another student returned to the group. He was my best friend in College, a Scottish guy called Bobby Deans. Bobby had a similar testimony to myself in that he was a converted alcoholic. He knew that God was calling him to witness to others in that lifestyle, and was studying to be ordained as a Salvation Army Officer so he could work as a Captain in hostels for the homeless. Bobby had an extremely strong Glasgow accent, so strong that sometimes you felt you needed subtitles to understand what he was saying. I looked at Bobby. If I had struggled so much with all my well-constructed arguments, then what about Bobby who hadn't appeared to have prepared for this night at all?

“How did you get on, Bobby?” I asked him.

“Great!” he replied, “I led two people to the Lord.”

I stared at Bobby. How on earth? What evangelistic technique had Bobby studied that I had missed? Had he some

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wonderful gift in apologetics that I hadn't noticed? "So, Bobby," I asked, "How did you do that?"

"I just told them what Jesus has done for me."

That day Bobby taught me one of the most important truths I would ever learn as a Christian. It is better to be real than it is to try to be smart. Whatever subject you talk about, you always run the risk of being shown up by someone who knows more than you do – but when it comes to your personal experience of Jesus Christ then you are the world's greatest expert on the subject. There is nobody, and I mean nobody, who knows more about your personal experience than you yourself. That means, when you share your personal testimony of what Jesus has done for you, that you can speak with confidence and assurance.

There was a man in the Bible who had a wonderful experience of Jesus Christ. Jesus healed him of blindness. Then the enemies of Jesus tried to interrogate him and get him involved in a theological dispute. The issue they were discussing was whether Jesus claimed to be God or not. If they could get this man to say that Jesus was sinless then they could use that to accuse Jesus of blasphemy, because only God is sinless and so that would mean Jesus was claiming to be God. But if the man said Jesus was a sinner, then His enemies could use that against Him. They would say, "Look, even his own followers admit He is a sinner." So what did the guy who was healed of blindness say?

*A second time they summoned the man who had been blind. "Give glory to God," they said "We know this man is a sinner." He replied, "Whether*

*He is a sinner or not, I don't know. One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!" (John 9:24-25)*

That answer drove them crazy. If he had argued about who Jesus was, or whether He was a sinner or not, then those theological experts could have tied him in knots. But he stuck to what he was sure of – that Jesus had healed his blindness. That is one of the most effective ways to be an ambassador of Christ. Simply tell others what God has done for you. Tell them how Jesus has changed your life for the better. There is a power in personal testimony!

### **The Power of Personal Relationships**

Another thing we need to consider is who we are to be ambassadors to. Jesus gave us a command to preach the Gospel to every person from every nation. But let's be realistic, there are over seven billion people on the earth, and you or I are not going to get to speak to every single one of them. It would be great if we could be like Billy Graham and rent a football stadium that holds 100,000 people and then tell them all about Jesus. But again, let's be realistic, if you or I rented a football stadium, how many people are going to turn up to listen to what we have to say? And why should they?

In fact that is a very good question. Why should anyone listen to what you have to say? There are millions of other people out there who have something to say or who have an opinion. Why should someone listen to you and hear what you have to say?



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This is where we have to take relationships into the picture. People are more likely to listen to what you have to say if you already have a relationship with them. Think about it for a moment. If a total stranger approaches you in the street and tries to persuade you to buy a particular brand of shampoo, then you would probably brush them off and ignore them. But what if the same recommendation is made to you by a close friend or relative whom you trust? You would be much more likely to listen to what they have to say.

The stronger the relationship you have with someone, then, providing that relationship is a positive one, the more weight your words will carry when you speak about what Jesus Christ has done in your life. This is why most people are won for Christ through the witness of a close friend or family member rather than through a stranger speaking to them.

Think of how many methods of witnessing or evangelism actually involve trying to get people to listen to a stranger:

Television: People look at a moving picture of a preacher that they've never met, telling them about God.

Radio: People listen to the voice of someone they've never met, telling them about God.

Street Preaching: A stranger stands on the street and tells people about God.

Door-to-door Ministry: A stranger knocks at your door and wants to talk to you about God.

Leafleting: Someone you've never met before hands you a leaflet written by someone else you've never met, telling you about God.

Crusades or Campaigns: You go to a stadium or a meeting hall to listen to someone that you've never met, talking about God.

Are you starting to see a pattern here?

The fact is that people are much more likely to listen to someone who they feel they already know. This is why advertisers use celebrities to endorse their products. Why does George Clooney appear in television commercials for espresso coffee? He might be a talented actor, and he might be handsome – but surely none of us think that he really knows more about what constitutes a good coffee than any of the rest of us? No, the reason why he is paid huge fees to appear in coffee commercials is because people who have watched him in films feel that they now know him and trust him.

Now, don't get me wrong. I think anything that leads people to faith in Christ is great! If people come to Christ through any of the methods that I described earlier then I for one am overjoyed at that. But, if we're really honest, we'll realise that most people don't come to Christ that way. Most people are reached through the witness and testimony of someone that they have already met - someone with whom they already have a relationship of some sort. Usually that will be a friend or a family member.

So start with those closest to you.

### **Start Now**

Here's a question to consider. When is a Christian most effective at reaching other people with the Good News about

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Jesus Christ? Many of us would think that it is when we have matured, learned how to witness or evangelise, or maybe even studied at Bible College.

Statistics, however, tell us a very different story. People are most effective at reaching others with the Gospel in the first six months after they themselves come to Christ. This is because a new Christian still has lots of friends and contacts who don't know Christ. But after they have been Christians for a while they tend to make new friends at Church, so have less relationships with unbelievers.

This is a powerful reason why we should witness to others now, rather than waiting until we feel more qualified.

### **The Ends of the Earth**

Sharing our faith with others might start with those closest to us, but it doesn't stop there. Jesus told us that He has given us the Holy Spirit so we can witness on several different levels:

*But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. (Acts 1:8)*

So we start witnessing in our Jerusalem (the place closest to us) but we are also to reach further afield. Next comes Judea (our region or nation), then Samaria (the people we might have issues with) and even the ends of the earth (other nations).

I firmly believe that this mandate from Jesus means that, for every single believer, we are commanded to get involved in the task of World Missions in some way. We can inform ourselves

of what God is doing in other countries and pray for them. We can financially support missionaries and missions projects in other countries. We can go on short-term missions trips to other lands. But we must do something! Doing nothing would be an admission that we have not really received the Holy Spirit.

### Witnessing By Doing

Witnessing is not just about talking the talk. Sometimes we can share the Gospel with others by walking the walk. Francis of Assisi is supposed to have said, “Preach the gospel, and if necessary, use words.”

This is not an excuse to remain silent – but it is a reminder that there are many ways to share the Gospel. So our words need to be backed up by actions that demonstrate the love of Christ to others. This is why, for example, missionaries have achieved so much in other nations by establishing schools and hospitals.

There are two extremes that Christians should avoid. One is the purely ‘Social Gospel.’ This is where Christians think that doing good works is a substitute for preaching – so they keep silent. Such an approach leads to a vague and wishy-washy Christianity that lacks any spiritual power. But too many Christians swing to the opposite extreme, where they talk a lot but do nothing. Our task, as we Live Life as Learners, is to be constantly seeking ways to share Jesus with others – both by word and by deed.

### The Privilege of Making Disciples

Being called to share Jesus with others, and to make disciples of them as we walk as disciples ourselves, is an immense privilege. God could do it without our help if He wished. There is an old saying attributed to a 14<sup>th</sup> Century saint that says:

“Christ has no body now on earth but yours, No hands but yours, No feet but yours, Yours are the eyes through which is to look out Christ’s compassion to the world; Yours are the feet with which He is to go about doing good; Yours are the hands with which He is to bless men now.”

That sounds spiritual, and I’ve seen it framed and hanging on the walls of Christian homes – but in fact it is dangerous nonsense. God is all-powerful, and He is well able to save the world without your help or mine!

Nevertheless, God has, in His infinite love and grace, allowed us to have an opportunity to work with Him in the task of reaching the world. This is because He loves us, and He wants us to know the incredible joy that comes from helping someone else discover eternal life.

When my daughter was very young she was watching me working on our car in the driveway of our home. I was replacing a cylinder head gasket. Eventually she asked me if she could help me. I didn’t see what help a five-year-old child could be – but she was so excited that I hadn’t the heart to refuse her request. So, for the next few hours she sat beside me and handed me tools as I needed them.

Of course, being only five-years-old, she had no idea which tool was which. She would hand me a screwdriver when I needed a torque wrench, and I lost count of how many bolts she dropped that rolled underneath the car. With her ‘help’ the job probably took much longer than if I’d done it on my own. But that wasn’t really the point.

The best bit of the day was when we walked back into the house and she proudly announced that she had helped her dad fix the car. My little girl was walking as if she was ten feet tall! I don’t know who benefited most that day. She was elated by her achievement, and I was thrilled to see my little girl so happy.

And that is a faint picture of what happens when we partner with God in helping others come to know Jesus and to become His disciples. We get to participate in the most important activity in the universe, and God gets to see us experiencing the joy of being effective witnesses.

So, keep Living Life as a Learner. And expect God to use you so others can Live Life as Learners. As for me, I’m going to keep on Living Life as a Learner too. We’re in this together.

## **STUDY QUESTIONS**

1. Ambassadors are people with special privileges and powers that represent their nations. How can seeing yourself as an Ambassador for Christ help you in sharing Christ with others?
2. This Lesson has emphasised the power of personal testimony. Have you shared your personal experience with others? Was this one-to-one or in a more public setting? How do you think you could learn to do this better?
3. We need to start witnessing now. What kind of reasons (or excuses) tend to stop us?
4. This Lesson discussed various ways of sharing the Gospel. Which of these do you feel called to do? Do some methods seem particularly difficult for you?
5. Our experience of the Holy Spirit equips us to be witnesses to the ends of the earth. In what ways could you get involved in the task of World Missions?
6. Can you think of ways that we can walk the walk? What practical ways are there by which we could share Jesus with the community around us?

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