

The Bag Lady and the Basics



The Bag Lady and the Basics

1) The Bag Lady and the Basics.

What do we need? Have we got it all? How can we find it? How much does it cost?

2) Clearing the Debts.

What do I owe? What am I owed? Settling the scores? Can God forget? Afraid of being found out? Can I really forgive them? Grudges? One-sided forgiveness?

3) A Fresh Finish.

Goodbye to the old? Can I really draw a line under my life so far? How I can be free from the past? What about family failings?

4) A Really New Life.

Starting from scratch? Is this still me? Changing from the inside? How can I do it? Can I know God without pretending?

5) Part of Something Bigger.

More people like me? Just the sum of the parts? More than a holy huddle?

This is a series of studies which we did with a group who had just completed an 'Alpha' Course.

Further copies can be downloaded from

www.justonecandle.uk

The Bag Lady and the Basics

Do you remember the story of the little old lady who was well known to everyone as she pushed her shopping trolley of personal rubbish around the streets and demanded money from passers-by? She really looked the picture of poverty and would even become abusive if you refused to give her anything.

But really she was richer than almost anyone she met. She had a luxury flat and more money in the bank than most of us dream of. Well, in theory she did, anyway. Yes, she had been given all these things but she never enjoyed the benefit of them. In practice her life was filled with need, although all she needed was already at her disposal. As we look at some of the needs of our lives and how they can be met through the Lord Jesus Christ, let's decide not to be bag ladies but to take hold of, make use of and **enjoy** what we have been given!

So, what do we need in life? In this part of the world we are mostly fortunate enough not to need to worry about food, drink, clothing and shelter, so what about our other needs? Try making a private list of the things that strike you personally, either for people you know or for yourself. Look at emotional needs (things we need to be able to feel), mental needs (things we need to know) and needs of our will (things we need to be free to choose or decide). Don't worry if the lists overlap – put things down wherever they fit!

Emotional Needs

We need to be able to feel:–

Happy, sad, loved, secure, free, unafraid, . . .

Mental needs

We need to know that:–

We are appreciated, we fit in, our life has a purpose, . . .

Needs of our will

We need to be free to choose:–

What to do, where to go, what to watch, read or listen to, who to spend time with, whether or whom to marry, . . .



These are just a few of the needs we have. If you started your list before you read on into mine, I expect you came up with some of the same ones and some different ones as well. Probably many of them **did** overlap, didn't they?

How Does Jesus Fit In?

"I thought this was going to be a Bible Study; what has all this to do with God and Jesus?"

Have another look at your lists, or at mine if you like. We have all expressed a number of things we need which say, "I need to be loved and appreciated and feel that I belong." There are things that stand in the way and stop us from feeling as we would like to all the time. Often it has to do with relationships. If things are wrong between us and other people, it can make a real mess of how we feel and think and sometimes stop us from being able to make decisions. We feel guilty because things are not right.

Sometimes we feel bad even when things are OK with others. Maybe we have done something which we are not happy with. Our consciences get to work. This is something that every person in the world knows about – that 'inner voice' that either accuses or excuses us. See **Romans 2:15** (or you could read the whole chapter!) Do we know how to put this sort of thing right? Have we found a real practical solution to this? How do we deal with guilt, with the sense of **owing** something to other people, to God or to ourselves?

What about fear? Along with guilt goes the fear of being found out, of being shown up as worse than we would like to be. If we are afraid of certain facts becoming generally known, is it because we know we are guilty? Are there other reasons? Someone once said that all fear is really the fear of death. Do you think that is true? Have you found any answers which keep the fear at bay? Have you had to test those answers in times when fear threatens to grip you? Jesus has dealt with the root cause of fear – see **Hebrews 2:14-15**.

Do we feel trapped? Probably most of us have felt at some time that we would just love to start again, to wipe the slate clean, pretend that some parts of our lives did not happen and just 're-invent' ourselves. Perhaps

we feel dissatisfied with the sort of person we are and would like to change our personality – perhaps we **have** tried to change ourselves, maybe when we changed jobs or moved to a new area . . . How successful were we? It is difficult to really let go of the past, isn't it?

The positive side of change is just as difficult; even harder to actually **become** positively better than to stop being the person we don't want to be. 'Difficult' is the wrong word, isn't it? 'Impossible' would be more accurate! Through Jesus we can find that both negative and positive change are possible; change that not only lasts but goes on developing – see **2 Corinthians 5:17** and **3:18**

Everything may be all right as far as we can work out, but still we may feel dissatisfied, feeling like a 'spare part', wondering how we fit in, perhaps feeling very lonely in our quieter moments. This happens to people of all ages, even to those who seem to be right in the midst of a happy and busy life. Sometimes that 'busy-ness' may be acting as a cushion to help us pretend that everything really is OK. Even in the midst of close friends or family, we can find ourselves alone. Maybe this is like a great hole in our lives, so threatening that we dare not look at it, or else we try to fill it with all sorts of 'worthwhile' pursuits – all to try to give us some purpose in life. This is a 'hole' which is designed to be filled with a secure knowledge of our Creator God, his love for us individually, and our significance to him. People sometimes talk of 'cosmic loneliness', feeling that they are all alone in the universe. If you have felt that and then been made aware of the personal love of God in Jesus, you will know the difference – not smugness, but a real sense of security! Try reading the whole of **Ephesians chapter 1**.



So, perhaps these are some of our needs. We have looked at examples of different types of need. Maybe there are others. Over the next few sessions, I hope that we shall be able to explore together how our needs can really be met in the Lord Jesus Christ. This is not just religious talk or interesting theory; it is real! If it were not real, this would just be an enormous waste of time, and I certainly would not be interested – would you?

How much will it cost?

In one way, it would have cost the bag lady nothing to experience the great riches which were already available to her. However, in practice she did not actually possess them, so something got in the way. Was there a price that she was not prepared to pay?

In order to experience the riches which were hers for the taking, the little old lady only had to give up her miserable existence, throw away the rusty old shopping trolley with all the plastic bags and rubbish and move into the luxury flat and use the bank account. There was more than enough for all her needs.

The Bible tells us that God's power has given us everything we need for life and godliness, through knowing Jesus (**2 Peter 1:3**) but Jesus himself also made it clear that it costs everything to be one of his disciples. See **Luke 9:23-25** and **14:33** (or read the whole passage, **Luke 14:25-35**). Jesus himself has paid in full for all the answers to our needs, but, like the bag lady, we need to give up all our collection of 'treasures' and begin to put our trust in what we have been given.

"I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and his incomparably great power for us who believe." (Ephesians 1:17-19)

Clearing the Debts

We have looked at our needs. They fall into several categories:- 1) Our Physical Needs such as food, water and shelter. We spent a little time on these and moved on. 2) Our 'Personality' Needs, the needs of our minds, wills and emotions. We concentrated on these. 3) Our Spiritual Needs. We mentioned these briefly and will come back to them.

Bad Debts

Our relationships are a key part of our needs. The need for love, security, purpose and freedom depend heavily on right relationships, including the need for a right 'relationship' with ourselves. Perhaps we have found that our lives are less than they should be because we have a poor appreciation of ourselves. Often this can be because we have failed our own expectations, the standards which we have set for ourselves.

Relationships with other people suffer from the same problem. People say and do things which do not match up to the accepted standard of behaviour and we then find it very hard to keep a good relationship with them. Try making some lists. The first is a list of the things you owe yourself, the second a list of things you owe to others and they owe to you. We often feel that they 'owe' us, that they ought to put it right, or at least give us an apology! If this does not happen, the 'debt' might become a 'bad debt' and the relationship is then definitely at risk!

The third is a list of things you owe God. Things are very similar with him. He has standards which are very high, perfect in fact. The Bible puts it simply in **Romans 3:23**. The words "fall short" mean "lag behind", "not keep up with" and express our experience very clearly - we just can't keep up with what we would like to be! We fail our own standards, society's standards and God's standards and we know we are responsible for our own actions - what can we do about it?

The New Testament word most often translated "sin" is a word with a very similar meaning. It could be used to describe an archer or marksman missing the bullseye of a target. The saying is that 'a miss is as good as a mile' and we are more than a little off target. **Romans 6:23** puts it bluntly. **Hebrews 9:13-14** refers to the Old Testament priest bringing blood to the holy place in the temple as a symbol of the need for the debt to

be paid and then goes on to show how the blood of Jesus has a real effect on our lives, cleaning up the accusations of our consciences.

How to Get In

Romans 5:8-11 shows how great God's love for us is. His standards are perfection and he cannot stand sin. However, he loves us with such a tremendous love that he is prepared to go to extremes to get us back 'on target'. We can see this again in **John 3:16**, a very well-known verse which also shows us how we can begin to experience God's love. The key is believing, but the word really means 'trusting' rather than just agreeing in our minds. When we see what he has done for us, we need to take hold of it, just like the little old 'bag lady' needed to take hold of the fortune that had been given to her. We could compare putting our trust in Jesus with the bag lady going to pick up the key to her luxury flat, or calling in to the bank to arrange to take money out of her account.

With believing goes a change of heart, a new approach, a change of thinking. The Bible word for this is repentance. The bag lady had to change her approach and her way of thinking in order to benefit from what she had been given. For her the cost of repentance was too high. See **Acts 2:37-40**.

The Bible talks about believers in Jesus as being 'in Christ'. When we start to trust in him and what he has done for us, we move into a new dimension; we have changed sides and started a new life. Look at **2 Corinthians 5:17** again and then **Colossians 1:13-14**. If we start to trust Jesus, this is what we are entering into. Forgiveness through the fact that his blood has been shed for us is a very important part of our inheritance in him, a vital basis of confidence in our relationship with God (see **Hebrews 10:19-22**).

It is not the whole story; there is much more that is ours in Jesus and we will go on and discover how this wonderful inheritance meets our needs - and more! For the time being, let us look at the effects of forgiveness in our lives.

Release

First of all, let us realise what it means to be forgiven. The debts are paid for us, we have been released from the fear of being found out, we can stop hiding. In **1 John 1:5-10**, it talks about "walking in the light".

This is exactly the opposite of what we may have become used to. We can begin to open out to each other, knowing that God knows the worst about us and loves us enough to have dealt with it. Of course it is easier if there are two people who have each experienced God's forgiveness in Jesus - each of them knows the reality of forgiveness and can find it easier to forgive the other. Jesus told a parable about this in **Matthew 18:21-35**. One man owed his colleague about 3 months' wages. The second man owed their boss 55 million times as much - he could never pay it off. When the boss forgave the second man, he should have been able to forgive his fellow-servant but he didn't. How real was his own experience of forgiveness? Does this help us to understand how to react to those who owe us things? Perhaps we should look again at the lists we made earlier!

Forgive and Forget?

In **Jeremiah 31:31-34**, God is speaking about what he will do in the future (from that time) when he sends Jesus and sets up a new agreement with his people. Amongst all the great promises, he says that he will not remember their sins any more. These promises are repeated in **Hebrews 8:8-13** and clearly refer to Jesus.

The Start of Something Big

We have only just started exploring the inheritance which is 'in Christ' and it obviously claims to sort out some very basic needs. A clear conscience is just the start. We need to find out how to go on taking hold of this forgiveness, however many times we fail, developing and refreshing our 'open' relationship with God and each other. He has made amazing provisions which go much deeper in dealing with problems right in the depths of our personalities. Like forgiveness, these are not individual things which we go and ask God for; they are all included in the package of being 'in Christ'. Our Father is not an old-fashioned grocer, just pulling individual items off the shelf when we ask for them. He has given us (so to speak) a vast supermarket of provision, and provided us with an expert guide to show us what is already ours in Jesus! See **John 16:13-15**; the Holy Spirit is our guide to discover more of Jesus.

A Fresh Finish

When we started looking at our needs, we began to see how they could be met through what God has done in the Lord Jesus. We have seen that our basic problem is what we might call ‘human failure’, our inability to match up with the standards that either we set for ourselves or which are set by society. The Bible makes it clear that God has even higher standards and that we fail those too; we ‘miss the mark’ of perfection. Only Jesus ever reached that standard and he is the one who has made it possible for our impossible debt to be cleared in God’s eyes. He gave his perfect life for us, so that we might inherit what we otherwise had no chance of receiving. See *Romans 5:6-11* and *Romans 3:23-24*.

The word ‘redemption’ means ‘a release by payment of a ransom’ and we have seen that Jesus paid what we owe to God, getting rid of the debt of failure and disobedience. But there is much more to it than just settling a debt, however vast that debt might be. If a ransom is paid, it is not just a question of money changing hands – someone is released as a result, bondage is broken and family relationships can be restored. It is the same with what Jesus has done for us and it is not just fancy words – it works!

‘I Can’t Help It!’

Just as we made lists of the things we owed or felt that **we** were owed, perhaps we need to look at the things that we are trapped by, the things about us that we don’t like but that we feel we can do nothing about. Some of these are things that we started to do out of choice but now we can’t stop. Others are parts of our character that we blame on our family, our school, our upbringing, something that happened to us recently or many years ago. We may give excuses (‘reasons’?) why we cannot be held responsible for these habits and repeated failings but we know that we would like to change and feel powerless to do so.

‘Should I Try Harder?’

Most of us have made resolutions to reform our behaviour. Some of them seem to succeed. Probably most of them do not last very long. Our experience reminds us that we can’t always change ourselves to be the people we would like to be – will power often doesn’t work. Paul the apostle

had had the same problem. We can read about it in **Romans 7:15-25**. He tells his experience to back up what he is writing to these young Christian believers. He has explained about forgiveness and said how God's grace increased to cover more and more imperfection. Some might have thought that gave them the perfect excuse to go on wilfully doing wrong – after all, God was going to forgive them, so why not? Paul starts **Romans 6** with his answer to this: *“How shall we who died to sin still live in it?”* He begins to spell out the implications of what it means to be ‘in Christ’ – being so joined to Jesus that we share in his death and life, not just simply receiving gifts from him.

A Different Message?

This may sound like a totally different message from what we thought Christianity was about but it is clearly there in the New Testament, not just in **Romans**. When he knew that his crucifixion was coming soon, Jesus himself told his disciples that they needed to be ‘in’ him in the same way that a branch of a vine is ‘in’ the vine itself. Unless they were, he said, their life would dry up and they would not produce the sort of results which he wanted. ‘Fruit’ is what he called those results. No branch can produce fruit without being joined to the life of the tree itself. See **John 15**. A little later, he talked with his Father about the believers he was going to leave on the earth. He asked that they would be united with himself, his Father and each other. Here is a kind of shared life which really makes impact on those who see it and Jesus asked that this might happen *“so that the world may believe that you (Father) have sent me”*. See **John 17:20-23**. The whole chapter gives us a wonderful picture of how Jesus sees himself, the disciples and their role on the earth.

Positive & Negative

There are two sides to a new start. The obvious one is the fresh beginning. The less obvious side is the need to finish with the old way of doing things. Probably most people would agree that the biggest hindrance to making changes in our lives is not a lack of desire to start afresh but the inability to get rid of old habits, accustomed ways of thinking and acting. Many folk have made the same mistake with the Christian life. They think they can just start where they are and try to live a new life following Jesus and trying to obey what the Bible says. True, we can start

where we are, but we are just not able to live this sort of new life. Like Paul, we have to agree that *“I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out.”* (**Romans 7:18**) What gets in the way? Our old lifestyle and general approach to life!

Out With the Old!

We need to somehow get rid of our old way of life in order to make an effective new start. ‘Death and resurrection’ may seem rather dramatic compared with ‘turning over a new leaf’ but that is exactly what Jesus and the early Christian believers spoke about and enacted in the ‘living parables’ of baptism and the bread and wine.

Back to **Romans 6** again! In the opening verses, Paul makes it clear that by going through baptism, the Roman believers had identified themselves with the death of Jesus and that there was **no going back** to the old life. Jesus spoke some very hard words in **John 6:48-59**. They make much more sense to us in the light of Paul’s explanation in **1 Corinthians 10:16** but they will have been very difficult at the time. Eating and drinking the symbols of Jesus’s death are a strong and graphic way of declaring our being part of it, joined to him.

What’s It All For?

As we have said, the ‘fresh finish’ is with a view to making a ‘fresh start’, and we shall look at it from the positive side in more detail in the next topic. In **Romans 7:1-6**, Paul takes the picture of a woman bound by the law to her husband. If the separation of death breaks the marriage, she is free to marry again. We are like that, he says, bound to law, feeling the obligation to try to do right, failing, feeling guilty when we are faced with the reasonable demands of law, and generally trapped.

In this case, though, it is the ‘wife’ (the Christian) who ‘dies’, to be released for a new relationship: *“But now, by dying to what once bound us, we have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code.”* How can we ‘die’ in this way? We can join in with what Jesus has already done in the same way by which we enter into forgiveness through what Jesus did by paying the price for our sins and failures – believing in, ‘trusting into’ him.

Just like the sort of faith which takes us out of the airport departure

lounge, into the aircraft and to sitting in our seat; the sort of belief that becomes trust and so joins our destiny with the plane's.

A Complete Solution

We have touched on two important aspects of what Jesus has done for us:— Firstly, he has dealt with the guilt of wrong actions for which we are responsible, by paying our debt with his blood. Secondly, he has made it possible for us to be set free from the power of failure and fear by letting his body be broken for us. Paul's letters to the young churches in the New Testament are full of these amazing truths. You will find them in **Galatians 2, Ephesians 2, Philippians 3, Colossians 2&3** and plenty more. Even these, though, are not the whole story. God is not just concerned to deal with the negative – he has very positive purposes for each one of us if we will co-operate with him through trust in Jesus. There is much more to discover, even in our brief look at the basics!

*“And when you were dead in your transgressions . . . ,
he made you alive together with him,
having forgiven us all our transgressions,
having cancelled out the certificate of debt
consisting of decrees against us
and which were hostile to us;
and he has taken it out of the way,
having nailed it to the cross.”
(Colossians 2:13-14)*

A Really New Life

Dealing with needs – spoilt relationships with God, other people and ourselves – guilt and moral debts, and how they can be cleared – our slavery to ‘the way I am’ and the situations in which we say “I can’t help it!” – how we can find freedom from these through trust in the Lord Jesus Christ. We have looked at how God has made provision to deal with some of the more ‘negative’ sides of our lives, but (despite how we sometimes feel!) life is not just about problems. We need to find ways to deal with those problems but then we can move on into discovering what our life is really intended to be. Perhaps we have not realised before that **it is possible to have a fulfilled life!**

In the first session together, we looked at **2 Corinthians 5:17** *“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!”* We have seen that when we believe in Jesus, it is more than just agreeing with some ideas in our mind – there is a trust, a commitment which results in our destiny being joined with Jesus’s. When we put our trust in an airliner, wherever that plane goes, we go too. It is much the same in our relationship of trust in Jesus.

As we began to see in **Romans 6**, Paul uses the powerful picture of death and resurrection to show how, for someone who has put their trust into the Lord Jesus, the old way of life is finished and a new life has started, like life out of death. The whole purpose of dealing with the problems is to ‘come out the other side’. See some of the positive statements in **Romans 6**: *“in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life” (v.4)*, *“that we should no longer be slaves to sin . . . freed from sin” (v.6&7)*, *“alive to God in Christ Jesus” (v.11)*, *“brought from death to life” (v.13)*.

Romans 7 contains the passage we can all identify with, where Paul talks about wanting to do good but finding that he just can’t. By the beginning of **chapter 8**, he is not bemoaning failure any more but celebrating the victory of being **in Christ**, and here too he has some great examples of what this new life is all about:– *“no condemnation” (v.1)*, *“set free” (v.2)*, *“life and peace” (v.6)*. He talks about a new sort of life that comes

from **inside**, because *“the Spirit of God lives in you” (v.9)*. In **chapter 7**, he wrote of the frustration of being trapped in a body that will not stop sinning. Now he knows that, with the Spirit of God living within, even that same old body will be given the power to live a life pleasing to God.

In **Romans 8:5-8**, Paul shows just how hopeless it is to try to please God by our own efforts. However hard we may try, it is just impossible as long as we rely on our own ability. But what other resources are available? Now he has the answer!

In **Romans 8:9-17**, he outlines an amazing quality of life. There has been a miraculous change from the gloom and desperation which he knew before! Instead of being just an ordinary person, unsuccessfully trying to follow rules which he knew were right, he now finds that there is a new sort of life inside him, *“because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death” (v.2)*. He is not pretending to be perfect, because he knows there is a process going on. He tells the Roman Christians that they will have to go on ‘putting to death’ their old way of life. They may have tried before but now they can do it *“by the Spirit”* and be successful, because, he reminds them, they are now sons of God.

No more slavery, bound by fear, but the open relationship of a mature son with his father. There is a life inside us that confirms “Yes, you are a child of God”. The rest of the chapter is worth reading. It expands some of the inheritance which is ours as sons. More of that in a minute – let’s go on a useful diversion first!

In **verse 15**, the original Greek uses a word that is translated ‘adoption’ in some versions, ‘sonship’ in others, saying that we have received the Spirit of adoption or sonship, and that it is by the Spirit that we cry out ‘Abba, Father’. This is not adoption as we know it, where a little child who does not belong to a family is adopted and made part of that family by a legal process. Greek families had a system by which, as long as the heir was a child, he was looked after by a trusted family slave. This slave had to make sure that the son learned his school lessons and generally behaved himself.

The time eventually came when the heir had completed his training and was now adult. The father would then have a ceremony by which the

son was recognised, not just as the heir when the father died, but a partner with him in the authority of the family and the business. The slave had no further role to play in bringing up the child, because the child was now an adult and was now in fact the master of the slave who had trained him. The Greek words for ‘child’, ‘training’ and ‘discipline’ all come from the same root.

Why are we looking at this bit of Greek social history? Because the word for this recognition ceremony is the word Paul uses here, ‘adoption’ or ‘sonship’ and he uses it again in ***Galatians 4:1-7***. Read it and see a bit more about the sort of freedom we have in Christ. When the son was under the slave’s care, he was far from free; there were rules to try to keep him in line with the father’s wishes expressed through the slave. Once he was officially an adult, he was free but he was also a partner – it was not very likely that he would run off with the family fortune now – freedom with responsibility!

This, then, is the sort of inheritance we have come into by ‘believing into’ Jesus. God our Father, although he gave us rules and regulations while we were ‘under age’, has given us the Holy Spirit to live in us and make us more like him. This new relationship with God through Jesus is the fulfilment of a prophecy in ***Jeremiah 31:31-34***, where it speaks of a new agreement between God and man, not one of rules and regulations but of real heart-response to him, in which every person **knows** God on a personal level. This prophecy is quoted again in ***Hebrews 10:15-25*** and clearly refers to Jesus.

In one sense, it is all ours **now** but, in another way, the process has only just begun. ***2 Corinthians 3:18*** makes it clear that the change is intended to be ongoing; as we get to know the Lord more, we are being changed to become more like him, step by step. Peter, in his first letter, says much the same. See ***1 Peter 1:3-12***, especially **verses 8 & 9**.

Jesus himself made it clear that one of the roles of the Holy Spirit was to lead us into all truth, and that he (the Holy Spirit) would do that by taking what belongs to Jesus and showing it to us, actually making it possible for us to know it (***John 16:12-15***). He also summed up what it was to have eternal life in terms of ‘knowing God’ (***John 17:3***).

The New Testament is full of references to this new quality of life, this

relationship with God the Father which is made possible through what Jesus has done and made real to us by the work of the Holy Spirit. Once we begin to see this, the Bible can take on a whole fresh meaning!

Paul, writing his 'letters to young churches', never seems to stop. We have seen how he goes into some detail in **Romans** and a little of what he says in **Galatians**. In **Ephesians**, he enlarges on the great inheritance which belongs to those who have been "*adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ*" (1:5). Try reading **Ephesians chapters 1 & 2** – exciting stuff! In **Colossians 2:6-23**, he reminds the young Christians of what God has done for them in Jesus, again using the picture of death and resurrection and also bringing in the parallel of Jewish circumcision. The old written code of regulations, which did nothing but accuse us, he says, has been nailed to the cross with Jesus – we are no longer slaves to it. He goes on into **chapter 3:1-4** to emphasise the fact that their lives are now "*hidden with Christ in God*". The change has really happened and will be completed when Jesus comes back.

Jesus said:

"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 14:25-27)

Part of Something Bigger

We have begun to see something of the inheritance that is ours by being 'in Christ'. We have also seen how God has provided for our needs and his purposes in our lives and how all of this is based on what he has done through the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ:—

1) Through the fact that Jesus shed his blood for us on the cross, we may take hold of the forgiveness that God offers. The 'debt' of guilt which we have before God is paid by the 'price' of the sacrifice of his perfect life. As it says in **1 Peter 3:18**, *“For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God.”*

2) Through the fact of his body being broken for us, we may be released from the slavery of failure and 'I can't help it'. **Romans 6:6** puts it like this:— *“For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be rendered powerless, that we should no longer be slaves to sin”.*

3) Through the historical fact of Jesus's resurrection, we can experience a really new life which enables us to live and positively please God, something we certainly cannot do on our own! *“The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace; the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God. You, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you . . . 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 through his Spirit, who lives in you.”* (**Romans 8:6-9,11**)

So here we are, beginning to see how God has made provision for all we need in Jesus; starting, hopefully, to actually take hold of these amazing promises and see the results in our lives. As we become aware of something we have done wrong, we can reach out immediately and take hold of the forgiveness which is ours through Jesus. When we are faced with a strong pull of temptation, we can reaffirm that we really **are** dead to sin and that therefore we do not need to go down that road again. We become very conscious of the fact that we are weak and helpless and

cannot live a life that pleases God, so we are learning to trust the life of the Spirit of God in us to make our lives more Christ-like. **We have definitely not 'arrived'** but we can go on learning to live in this new way.

There is more! Two more aspects of the work of Jesus which are intimately linked and bring us 'up to date' with him – the pouring out of the Holy Spirit and the life of the Church. The first is very personal. The second springs out of it and is very communal.

In the Old Testament, it was only the spiritual leaders, the prophets, priests and kings, who could even hope for a real personal relationship with the living God, in which he told them what he was planning to do. We think of Moses, Elijah, David and others. The ordinary people had to make do with sets of rules and (occasionally) specific instructions from God through one of his prophets. But the Lord promised something better, a new agreement ('new testament') in which each believer would know him. We have seen these already in ***Jeremiah 31:31-34*** and ***Hebrews 10:15-25***. As a further fulfilment of this, he promised to 'pour out his Spirit' on all people, with the result that ordinary folk would be able to function in a similar way to the prophets, priests and kings. See ***Joel 2:28-32***, a passage which Peter quoted on the day of Pentecost, as recorded in ***Acts 2:17-21***.

Jesus had already made it clear to his disciples that it was to their advantage that he went away because the Holy Spirit would not be given until he was glorified, i.e. seated at the right hand of God the Father. See ***John 7:37-39***, ***John 14:25-26*** and ***John 16:4-15***. In ***Acts 2:33-36***, Peter pulls all the threads together. Joel's prophecy, two of the Psalms of David which speak of the Messiah (Christ, Anointed One) being seated at the right hand of God and the fact that God had evidently 'poured out' the Holy Spirit on the believers there. He uses the evident fact of the outpouring of the Spirit, linked with Joel's and David's prophecies, to demonstrate that Jesus is confirmed by the Father to be the Messiah. The ascension of Jesus to 'the right hand of the Father' is inextricably linked to the outpouring of the Spirit.

What does this mean for us? Amazingly, that the special prophetic relationship which used to be reserved for exceptional men and women of God is available to every believer in Jesus! (In fact, we have something

better – see **Hebrews 11:39-40!**) Just as we can know forgiveness, release and new life through the death and resurrection of Jesus, we can also find access to the heart and mind of God by the Holy Spirit, who is given because Jesus **is** the Anointed One at the Father's right hand!

This is mind-blowing stuff, especially when we remember who God is and the scale on which he operates, underlined by our tiny place in an enormous universe. Is it just imagination? No, says Paul, in **1 Corinthians 2:6-16**. We have been given the Holy Spirit to “*understand what God has freely given us*” and to be taught by the Spirit how to convey that understanding with the appropriate words.

On the day of Pentecost, the believers were given the ability to speak the message of God in other languages, so that all the great variety of foreigners there could hear about Jesus. Most of the disciples were Galileans with a fairly basic education. It was ‘super-natural’, beyond their natural abilities, a miraculous event, but it was not weird or mystical.

Later on in his letter to the believers in Corinth, Paul goes into more detail about the different ways in which they can see this dimension in their **life together as the local Church**. (Please notice this; we will come back to it soon.) In **1 Corinthians 12:1-11**, he talks about their earlier ungodly experiences, contrasts them with these ‘spiritual gifts’ and then lists the different ways in which their church life can be enriched by the exercise of these gifts. Each one is a means of God communicating what he wants to say or do, again in a way beyond natural ability. He makes it clear that these gifts are given at the discretion of God the Holy Spirit and that they are given with the aim of helping every believer, “*for the common good*”.

Much has been said and written about spiritual gifts, especially about the gift of ‘tongues’, but most of the problems would be removed or at least dramatically reduced if Paul's words in **1 Corinthians 12:7** were heeded, together with the well-known following passage in **1 Corinthians 12:12-31**. This is where we come on to God's purpose in the Church. Once again, there is a close link, this time between the gift of the Holy Spirit and the Church

Many people think of ‘church’ as meaning a building, although sometimes we know and say that it really means the people. Does it

matter? In **Ephesians 5:25**, we read that “*Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her*” and it is clear from Jesus’s own prayer in **John 17** that his overwhelming priority as he faced death was the future life of the people whom he had protected and kept safe and the oneness of those who would believe in him through their message. He is not praying for the world, he tells his Father, “*but for those you have given me*”. All of his purpose is bound up in those few men and women who will be his witnesses, and he knows that it is vital that they are “*brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.*”

Back in **1 Corinthians 12:12-13**, Paul links the unity of the Church with the exercise of spiritual gifts and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, using a phrase which both Jesus and John the Baptist had used. He says that all believers have been brought into one body through being dipped (‘baptised’) in, with or by the Holy Spirit. In **Matthew 3:11**, John the Baptist had said that Jesus would baptise in/with/by the Holy Spirit, just as he was baptising people in/with/by water. In **Acts 1:5** (and quoted in **Acts 11:16**), Jesus had told the disciples that they would soon be baptised in/with/by the Holy Spirit – which happened in **Acts 2**, as we have already seen.

There is so much for us to discover about the Church! The New Testament letters are almost all about different aspects of life in this new ‘body’ which we have been joined into. We have seen that all who put their trust into the Lord Jesus are joined to his life; the Church is the ‘body’ which is built up of many parts, all joined to him and so joined to each other. Each one of us knows that we are completely accepted by the Father, simply on the basis of what Jesus has done, and so the relationships which we have with each other need to be based on that same relationship of grace, forgiveness and acceptance. Paul put it very clearly:–

“But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ . . . His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility . . . For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.” (Ephesians 2:13-18)

