

Foundations for Faith

February - March 2003

Lapford Congregational Chapel

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On the next page is a brief outline of the topics which we aimed to cover in the 8-week series on Sunday mornings from 2nd February to 23rd March inclusive. Although these may seem to cover a lot of ground, they do not pretend to be complete, but are intended to cover the most important basics of Christian faith from a Biblical position.

In addition to the actual talks, we used simple dramas to illustrate the truths which we looked at.

Although the content of the talks was my own responsibility, I had discussed them in some detail with the deacons and we expected to be in broad agreement on all major points. If we found that any points needed to be clarified, we agreed to talk honestly with each other rather than complain to other people!

The idea of this series was not just to fill our heads with more information, but for that information to be put to good use as we saw more about practical Christian living. The idea was that we would see things fitting together better as we went on.

I am unashamedly committed to the principle that the Christian life is fundamentally spiritual, but that spiritual truths need to come to life in daily reality. My heart's desire was (and is) that the Holy Spirit would lead us all as we embarked on this voyage of discovery together.

I suggested that people brought their Bibles with them for this series - preferably a modern translation that they could understand easily. The same applies as you use these notes.

David Taylor

April 2003

Sunday 2nd February "Your Life In His Plans"

Did God make the world with a plan from the beginning? Was the world created perfect? Is humanity made in the image of God? Does God have a plan for me?

Sunday 9th February "I've Blown It - Again!"

How can I deal with my own failure? How can I find forgiveness and share it? Is it possible to have a clear conscience?

Sunday 16th February "I've Given Up On Me"

Why do I go on doing things wrong? Is mankind programmed towards evil? Does God have a solution? Can I overcome temptation?

Sunday 23rd February "New Life - New Living"

Can I have a fresh start? What's all this about being 'born again'? Can I live a life that pleases God? Can Jesus live inside me? What is 'the Fruit of the Spirit'?

Sunday 2nd March "Naturally Supernatural?"

Is there a place for the supernatural in Christian life? What are spiritual gifts and are they useful for anything? Can I expect to hear God speaking to me?

Sunday 9th March "Hang on in There!"

Can all this work out in practice? How can I grow in Christ? What does 'abiding in Christ' mean? What's so important about baptism and sharing bread and wine together?

Sunday 16th March "Growing Together"

Is the Church important? Has God got a plan for it? Do I have a contribution to make? What is 'Church life'? Is the Church an end in itself?

Sunday 23rd March "The End Of The Beginning"

Where's it all going? Who is the Bride of Christ? Will Jesus actually return to the earth? If so, how? And what for? What will happen then? Does it concern me?

Why do we need to look at foundations?

Have you ever bought a house? Did you get a survey done? Or, when thinking of buying a second-hand car, felt you needed an engineer's report?

What were you looking for? Maybe you were worried about possible subsidence, so you asked the surveyor to have a special look at one corner? Perhaps the gearbox made some strange noises, so you wanted it checked out? Or maybe you are one of those wise and cautious people who just want to be reassured that everything really is as good as it looks?

When the expert had made his inspection, he gave you his report. Was everything given a clean bill of health? In that case, you were happy and reassured and went ahead with your purchase. Your money was well spent getting it checked. Peace of mind is worth a lot.

But what if the expert's report showed up problems? Maybe you just walked away and looked at a different house or another car, but maybe you really liked it in all sorts of other ways, but needed to know what problems there were so that you could get them put right. Maybe the specialist was able to confirm your suspicions. Either way, your inspection fee had been worth it. It had been worthwhile finding out the true situation.

We do the same with medical check-ups too. Obviously we go to the doctor if we suspect that we are ill. But we may also go for a routine check-up when there is nothing obviously wrong. Why? Because if the doctor finds a problem, he can deal with it and start treatment promptly.

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Sometimes we have obvious spiritual problems. We know there is something wrong, we may even be pretty sure what it is, but we are reluctant to face it and get it dealt with. Very much the same sort of approach as someone who suspects that they are seriously ill, but refuses to go to see the doctor. Foolish, to say the least. Medical history is full of cases of men and women who delayed seeking advice until their condition was either incurable, or at least much more difficult to deal with.

Or perhaps we have no reason to suspect that there is anything wrong? In that case, a fresh look at our spiritual 'foundations' should prove reassuring and even give us fresh encouragement to move

forward. If, on the other hand, an unexpected problem comes to light (perhaps an area where we find that our foundations are a bit shaky), we are given an early warning and can deal with it before it becomes more serious.

As we go through this series, we shall find ourselves questioning and re-examining basic Christian teaching. We may find that we get fresh light on things which have been part of our lives for years. We may also discover 'blind spots', where we have been looking at truth for ages but it has never before become personal and real to us. Other things may be totally new to us! We shall need to learn to listen to the 'diagnosis' of the Holy Spirit as he shows us our true situation. Hopefully, as we talk these things through with the Lord in prayer, and also with our trusted Christian friends, we shall be able to make sure that our foundations really are secure.

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There are other aspects to look at as well as our own individual lives. Often there are things which we do together, traditions which we have inherited, ways of doing things that have become part of our routine. We need to allow the Holy Spirit to show us where there are insecure foundations to parts of our corporate life as well.

The difficult part in each case is being prepared to face the facts and take action as appropriate.

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When a surveyor carries out a structural survey and finds that there is something wrong with the foundations, there are two possible courses of action (or maybe three!):-

1) If the foundation is defective, but the structural damage has not yet become too severe and there is solid rock nearby, it may be possible to 'underpin' that part of the house by removing the faulty foundation and building a fresh one in its place, making sure that the house is then securely based on the sound foundation which is itself built back to the rock. This is a costly operation, but not so expensive as the next one!

2) Sometimes there is no alternative to demolition. In this case, all or part of the house has been built on foundations which are totally insecure, and there is no way that they can be repaired by underpinning. There is no other solution but to remove the whole structure, dig new secure foundations, and build up from scratch. This is very expensive, because much or all of the house has to be built again, together with the cost of site clearance before the real building work can start.

3) The third option is not really a 'course of action' at all. It is to do nothing - a 'course of inaction'. Maybe the cost is too high. Maybe we do not believe the survey report. Maybe we would prefer to pretend that there is nothing wrong, 'burying our heads in the sand'.

We use the expression 'papering over the cracks' to accurately describe this approach. The cracks are there, like it or not. If we refuse to take radical action and just get out the Polyfilla and the wallpaper, we know what the result will be. Sooner or later the fault in the foundations will cause the collapse of the house. Obviously it is much better to face the true situation and do something effective about it, and we need to remember:-

a) The choice between taking effective action or doing nothing rests with us. We cannot dodge it or pass it on to anyone else.

b) The choice we make also depends on what our priorities are. If we value the reality of our walk with God highly then we shall be prepared to face the high personal cost of seeing parts of our life temporarily reduced to nothing so that they can be rebuilt on proper foundations. This is an important but difficult issue, especially for anyone with a good reputation or standing in Christian ministry or witness.

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The 'piecemeal' approach does not work, whether in our own lives or corporately. We do not achieve anything worthwhile by undertaking new projects or initiatives unless they have their origins in real spiritual foundations. It really is worth taking the time to make sure of these before we go rushing ahead like the man who built his house on the sand. (**Matthew 7:24-27**) The apparent success of quick results is tempting but deceptive.

On the other hand, there is no value getting the foundations in place and then not getting on with the building. As we go through this series, we may realise that this is what has happened in certain aspects of our lives over past years. A good opportunity to make sure of those foundations and then see how we can grow!

This series, then, is not intended to be an end in itself, but to be part of the preparation which is needed to see real growth in our individual and corporate lives. It may look as though we are covering almost every aspect of Christian life here. Not at all. We are just getting started!

Many years ago, someone told me that there were two qualifications I needed if I wanted to learn. The first was to be ignorant - that was easy!

The second was more difficult - it was to be prepared to admit it. Each one of us (definitely including me) will need to be ready to admit that we don't know and we want to know.

And then it is not just a question of collecting lots of useful, accurate and Scriptural information, so that we become walking experts on as many aspects of Christianity as possible. That is definitely not the aim. Our heavenly Father has a much better way of doing things.

In **John 16:12-15**, Jesus said that the Holy Spirit would do several things, including:-

1) He will show us things 'of' Jesus. Not just things about him but a real revelation, so that we get a more complete appreciation of him, relevant to us personally.

2) He will bring glory to Jesus. No room for personal boasting or 'spiritual one-up-man-ship'

3) He will lead us into all truth. The word 'truth' actually means 'reality'! He intends to lead us into personal experience of the truth we have been shown. Again, this always seems to mean admitting our ignorance and helplessness and being prepared to start from scratch. Reality with God is worth it.

The apostle Paul said that he who thinks he is wise in this age must become 'foolish' so that he may become wise (**1 Corinthians 3:18**). Are we ready to learn like this? Let's keep our 'L' plates on!

David Taylor

January 2003

1. Your Life in His Plans

Some people believe that God is responsible for every little thing that happens in the world. After all, he created it, he made us the way we are, so it must all be down to him, positive and negative, good and evil - the whole lot is his responsibility, right down to the details!

Obviously not many atheists or agnostics go along with that idea! Instead they say that there is no plan, no direction, no responsibility, because they say there is no Creator. Well, the agnostics might not be that certain - they would probably say that we cannot be sure whether there is a God - but the end result is very similar, no purpose at all.

In practice, of course, many people don't really think about things like that, and so don't follow either of these ideas. Others who do think about it have their own different ideas - the list may be nearly endless!

As we shall see, the Bible does not subscribe to either of these two views, though many people think that it supports the first one.

We shall be looking at the book of Genesis. For the sake of what we are looking at here, I believe it makes no difference whether you consider Genesis to be literally accurate or simply a picture to describe how God conducted the creation process. You can take whichever interpretation you prefer. The overall plan of God in creation shows clearly in either case!

But why do we need to even start looking at creation? We are looking at the foundations of real Christian faith - what does the Bible's account of creation have to do with us? Quite a lot, as we shall see!

A plan from the beginning. In various places in the Bible, we find references to the fact that God has had a plan for people since before they were born, even from before the world was created! For some examples, see *Ephesians 1:4 & 11*, *Matthew 25:34*, *Revelation 17:8*, *Romans 8:28-30*, *Galatians 1:15*, and *Psalms 139:16*.

This is hard to believe, isn't it? Putting it personally, it means that, before he had even made the world, let alone before mankind first rebelled against him or anything else had happened, God had a plan for you and me. He knew what we would be like and was already interested in us. Amazing!

The whole process of creation was (and is) mind-boggling in both its enormous scope and its minute detail, but probably the most amazing thing that God did was to create man. There are two features which distinguish mankind from the rest of creation:- firstly, man is made in the image and likeness of God; secondly, God placed man in a position of authority and control over the whole of creation. See *Genesis 1:26-31*. (Please note that 'man' includes all mankind, male and female) Let's look at these two for a moment . . .

Man in the image of God? Perhaps we think it is rather vain to say that man is God's most amazing feat of creation? Can we really say that man has been created in the image and likeness of God? After all, man is not always so very pleasant, is he? If man is made in God's image, we might find ourselves tempted to agree with the sceptic who declared that 'if there is a God, he is the devil'!

But the Bible says that man has gone wrong, as a result, the whole world has gone wrong too. Man is not as he was originally intended to be. None the less, we can still see some really wonderful human characteristics which reflect the original 'image and likeness of God' :-

Our creativity in all its various aspects, including art, music, drama, dance, prose, the spoken word and poetry, plus the capacity to appreciate their beauty and form. Our intellectual prowess in the sciences, mathematics and logic. Our ability to combine theoretical ideas and creative skill to invent, design and make technical, functional objects and machines. Our seemingly insatiable thirst for more knowledge and understanding. Our capacity for spiritual awareness. Our desire to help others, even at cost to our ourselves. Our wide range of emotional sensation and expression. Our ability to take decisions and accept responsibility. The list goes on . . . Some people celebrate these sorts of features as 'proof' that man is basically good.

Mankind is certainly amazing and, as we realise that these characteristics are all part of the 'image of God' in us, we may begin to see with the psalmist that we are 'fearfully and wonderfully made' (*Psalm 139:14*).

Man over creation? *Genesis 1:28-30* says that God placed mankind in charge over all the rest of creation. Words like 'rule', 'control', 'subdue' and 'have dominion' do not sound very 'politically correct' in these days, but it is clearly stated! Present-day reaction against the idea of man being 'top dog' in the creation is quite understandable. There has been so much abuse of power by man's exploitation and destruction of plant and animal life (not to mention the environment in general) that it is easy to imagine that any rule of man over creation would follow the same pattern.

A perfect world? God's plan was different. The whole environment of Eden in the first two chapters of Genesis shows the created world as it was first designed:- everything made to fulfil its own particular role, no defects, no faults - it was all good in God's eyes. Man was at the pinnacle of creation but working in harmony with it rather than exploiting it. In fact, man's creativity and inventiveness were intended to enhance and develop God's creation. You might say that creation was faultless but still incomplete, in that sense not yet 'perfect'.

Modern environmentalists might insist that this is still possible to achieve. But there is a big problem. Everything seems to have gone wrong, and it seems clear that man is the culprit. Greed, exploitation, selfishness and heartlessness are characteristics of mankind down the ages. They have been the causes of

massive ruin of the earth, and are the main reasons why hopes of environmental reform remain unfulfilled.

The account of Adam and Eve and 'the Fall of Man' as described in **Genesis 3** is well-known to most of us, but why all that fuss over a piece of fruit? The point is that they had decided to follow their own ideas and feelings independently, rather than develop them in partnership with God the Creator. Not, as some would say, that God just wanted them to obey him like robots. On the contrary, he wanted them to develop the creative abilities he had given them - part of the fact that they were made in the image of God! From that passage onwards we can see a very different picture. The ground is cursed, getting food is really hard work, man is now in conflict with nature - why?

The original plan went wrong because of man's disobedience, but the 'order of things' remained unchanged - creation was (and is) still under man's rule. In **Romans 8:20** it says that the creation was 'subjected to futility' by being put under the control of man, who then rebelled against the Creator. The whole creation is waiting for the day when that situation will be reversed - more of that later!

God's plans gone 'pear-shaped'? The present situation, according to the Bible, is that man remains 'in charge' over the creation, but that he has separated himself from God and his plans because of rebellion. As a result, the whole natural system, still under man's rule, is in a far from perfect state. In fact, John writes that "the whole world is under the control of the evil one." (**1 John 5:19**)

Knowing this, it is really amazing that we can still see tremendous beauty in the natural order of creation and in man himself, but it is like a shadow of what it was designed to be. We may be familiar with Christian teaching about sin separating us from God and that we need to receive forgiveness. We may not have realised that the whole earthly creation has missed out on God's plans because of man's rebellion.

What about my own life plans? If this is true on a global scale, what about us personally? What about that long-distance plan that God had for each of us before we were born? In **Ephesians 2:12**, Paul tells the believers that when they were separate from Christ, they had no hope and were without God in the world. These are the same people he is writing to in **Ephesians 1:3-6**, when he talks about being chosen in the Lord Jesus Christ before the foundation of the world! What's the difference? How have they moved from hopelessness and godlessness to being right in the centre of God's plan? From strangers to sons and heirs?

Simply **by receiving the grace of God in the Lord Jesus Christ**. The New Testament is full of it, here in **Ephesians 2** and in many other places. Peter says much the same in a different way in **1 Peter 1:3-5**, where he says that we have an eternal inheritance as a result of being 'born again to a living hope

through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead'. In **Colossians 1:12-14**, it says that believers have been qualified to share in this inheritance by being rescued from 'the domain of darkness' and transferred to 'the kingdom of his (God's) beloved Son', which he also describes as 'the inheritance of the saints in light.' Which are we in, darkness or light?

We need to face the fact that our own life will definitely miss God's plan if we are not in Christ, not part of his kingdom by spiritual rebirth. It is only by personally receiving the grace of God in the Lord Jesus Christ that we can begin to experience this. God's plans for us, though complete and wonderfully worked out, are held in store for us like an unclaimed inheritance - until we come and claim the inheritance and see what a difference it makes! Try reading **Ephesians 2:1-10**, written to people who had started to explore their inheritance in Christ.

In every topic of this series, as we explore some of the basics of Christian faith, we shall see ways in which we can make our own personal response. What is yours today? Are you still trying to work out 'the meaning of life' - and yours in particular? Perhaps you have realised at last why the world is in such a mess - and individual human lives as well? A simple starting response might be to tell the Lord that you want to find out his plans for your life, and fit in with them. This will need a definite decision on your part, at least a willingness to explore, discover and learn more.

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We shall be looking at different aspects of the plan that God has put in place through the Lord Jesus Christ, and seeing how it can take effect in our own lives, equipping us for real practical Christian living. We shall also look beyond the problems, to get at least a glimpse of God's ultimate plan for us and how we can begin to see that working out here and now.

It may look as though the whole thing has gone 'pear-shaped', but each of us can discover God's plan for our lives.

"For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them." (Ephesians 2:10)

David Taylor

February 2003

2. I've Blown it - Again!

Written out of God's plans? We saw a little last time about the predicament that humanity has got into as a result of rebellious independence against God. How God's great plans for mankind as a whole have had to be shelved, along with his life plans for each one of us. How we find ourselves disinherited from the full potential that we were designed to reach, and that we have taken the earthly creation with us. In the words of the apostle John, "the whole world is under the control of the evil one" (**1 John 5:19**).

"So", you may say, "I find myself written out of God's plans for me because of Satan's tricks and my ancestors' rebellion. Why should I have to suffer for what someone else did?"

"It's not my fault!" - ? Are we so very sure that we are not responsible? Whatever arguments (or excuses?) we may put forward, we know that we are responsible for the things we decide to do, good or bad. We are certainly ready to claim the credit for the good bits! In **Romans 3:9-20**, Paul quotes passages from the Psalms and Isaiah which show that everyone, religious or godless, has failed. As he puts it, they (we) are all 'under sin', and all are accountable to God. This theme of personal responsibility runs through the Bible. We can't just blame Adam and Eve - we are responsible to God individually. "There is none who does good, there is not even one".

So the problem is two-sided. Not only has the whole of mankind stepped away from God's plans, but we have each rebelled individually as well. The Bible calls this rebellion 'sin', and the individual acts of disobedience 'sins'. What do these words really mean? Are they just more religious jargon?

Off target! The Greek word translated 'sin' comes from the martial skill of archery. Just as marksmen today spend hours practising on the rifle range, so archers training for battle would try to perfect their skills aiming at a target, trying to get their arrows in the centre every time. If they failed, they had 'missed the mark' or 'sinned', so 'sin' simply means 'missing the mark'.

We tend to feel that there are bigger or smaller grades of sin, but the target practice picture gives us another clear illustration. In the words of the proverb, "a miss is as good as a mile"!

Failure. However hard we try to convince ourselves, we all know that we have failed to live up to expectations. Maybe the expectations are from friends or family or from ourselves. Perhaps we realise that we have also failed to live up to God's standards. In fact, it seems to be a common experience for every single human being; a sense of failure, of guilt, of having a 'debt' which we owe and cannot pay.

Romans 1:18-32 shows the same picture. God has revealed enough of himself in creation for all people to at least respond in worship and, as they have

not done so, they have sunk into an ever-deepening spiral of depravity and enmity against God. We can see all societies, primitive and 'sophisticated', depicted here!

Hopeless? We may feel that all this is too big for us to cope with. If mankind has messed up on such a grand scale, and if I have this unpayable debt, what hope is there? Amazingly, it is our own personal situation which gives the opportunity to see the whole mess begin to turn around, because God has a rescue plan and, although it reaches out to the whole world, it begins on a personal scale.

Rescue Package. Perhaps now we can begin to understand more clearly why Jesus was sent into the world. When Joseph was shown in a dream that Mary was going to have a son, he was told to call him Jesus, because 'he will save his people from their sins'. (**Matthew 1:21**) When Jesus was talking with Nicodemus, he said that God had sent him so that the world might be *saved* through him. (**John 3:17**) These are just two of many places in the Bible where the word 'save' turns up, along with related words like 'saviour' and 'salvation', and (sadly) they are often treated as 'religious jargon' words. 'Save' simply means 'rescue', so we can easily see that a saviour is a rescuer and receiving salvation means being rescued. It makes a whole lot more sense if we have begun to realise that we need rescuing out of Satan's system!

If you are thinking to yourself at this point, "I don't know what all the fuss is about, I'm doing OK, I don't need any rescue package", then it will be very difficult for you to see the point of Jesus ever coming to the earth. However long we may have been 'coming to church' or reading the Bible, we need to face the fact that Jesus said he came "to seek and to save that which was lost" (**Luke 19:10**). If none of that needs to be done, he was wasting his time, and his life, death and resurrection were meaningless.

Breaking the circle. So, if we are going to be included in God's rescue plan, we need to know where we are starting from, to be aware of our own guilt, our own sin, our own 'debt' to God. In fact, even thinking about it like that may make us realise that we are in a totally helpless position - we simply can't help ourselves at all - trying to reach out to God from where we are is impossible! Rather like a homeless person who wants somewhere to live, but can't get a flat because he has no money, and can't get a job to earn money - because he has no fixed address! He needs someone to reach into his situation and give him help. Or a slave in the market in the first century AD - how could he possibly buy himself out of slavery? He needed someone else to pay the price to buy him, and then set him free! This process - redemption - has sadly become another religious jargon word.

The Bible says that Jesus did exactly the same thing: "*While we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly*" (**Romans 5:6**) and "*Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, so that he might bring us to*

God” (**1 Peter 3:18**) and a verse we saw last time, **Colossians 1:14**: “. . . in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.”

Reconciliation needed. We sometimes have an idea that anyone can just approach God whenever they like, but the Bible makes it clear that individual human beings (you and I) have a broken relationship with him because of our own sins, and we need to be reconciled. We know from human experience that reconciliation needs one of the estranged parties to make an approach to the other, and for that approach to be received. If either of these steps is missing, the relationship will remain broken.

Take some time to sit down and read **Romans 5:6-11**. There is a lot here, and we shall return to some of it another time, but here are some ‘headlines’:-

1) We are helpless. 2) In his love, God took the initiative in reconciliation by sending Jesus to die for us, even while we were his enemies. 3) By Jesus’ blood we can be ‘justified’ (made sinless in God’s sight). 4) It is possible to receive the reconciliation now.

What about me? We could spend a long time on explaining and trying to understand this, but the crucial question is, “have I received the reconciliation that God is offering to me?” Receiving is something we do positively, not something that happens to us, so we will know whether we have received God’s reconciliation or not. (and, if we have, we will have the same deep joy and ‘exult’ in God as Paul did!)

For most people who have become part of God’s rescue plan, this is the first step, to experience at first hand the love of God through the Lord Jesus Christ by receiving his forgiveness, his offer of reconciliation. Not surprising, as the relationship needs to be restored before we can go any further. And yes, there is more to discover - this is only the start!

Can I be sure I am forgiven? There is a very helpful passage in **1 John 1:5-10**. One of the key sentences is in **verse 7**, “. . . and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin”, and another in **verse 9**, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness”. The word ‘all’ is very important and reassuring! It really is possible to have a clear conscience! (See also **Hebrews 9:13-14** and **10:19-22**)

‘Confession’ is another easily misunderstood term. It means simply to ‘say the same thing’. In other words, God says that the wrong things we have done are sins and block our relationship with him. As long as we refuse to agree with him, we will not experience forgiveness. But, as soon as we do agree . . . ! **Romans 10:8-10** talks about ‘confession’ and sheds some more light on the need to speak out what we know to be true. The process of speaking out (‘confessing’) brings us into experience of what has already taken place before God in our hearts.

So, in terms of our own individual experience, God’s rescue plan starts with our reconciliation to him. In fact, we are not simply brought into contact with him,

he makes us his children, part of his family. Paul quotes the Old Testament prophet Hosea in **Romans 9:26**:- “*And it shall be that in the place where it was said to them, ‘you are not my people,’ there they shall be called sons of the living God*”, and **John 1:12-13** gives the same message.

One of the results of receiving God's forgiveness and reconciliation is that we are able to share it with other people. Having been let off an unpayable debt ourselves, it is much easier to release others from their ‘debts’ to us. (See **Ephesians 4:32, Colossians 3:13**. Also read the warning in Jesus’ parable in **Matthew 18:21-35**.)

Being sure that we have personally received God's forgiveness through the death of the Lord Jesus Christ is an important ‘foundation stone’ in real Christian experience, the point at which God's **grace** to us becomes real and personally precious. It does not mean that we now claim to be perfect - rather the opposite! Knowing that we have a restored relationship with our Father because of his initiative and his grace, we can continue to experience his forgiveness whenever we fail again. The passage in **1 John 1:5-10** has been a tremendous blessing to me and to countless thousands of Christians over the years!

There is much more to say about forgiveness in practice, and we shall come back to it later. The important thing to make sure of at this stage, before we go any further, is to make sure that we have received God's forgiveness of our sins through putting our trust in the power of the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ so that we can say with Paul,

“Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” (Romans 5:1)

David Taylor

February 2003

3. I've Given Up on Me

It is amazing to be reconciled to God through the death of the Lord Jesus Christ. From our own point of view, there are many aspects to the experience. For example, a new sense of freedom, of guilt gone, of relief, of 'coming home', of being accepted, of fear removed . . . and so on.

From God's viewpoint, he has taken the initiative and reached out to us, offering the reconciliation that we need but cannot make ourselves. He has even given us the grace to receive it. He has taken the first step in the process of bringing rebellious mankind back into line with his great plan.

Being forgiven is wonderful, and seems almost too good to believe, especially when we discover that God doesn't give up on us, even when we fail on the same point again and again.

Moving forwards? Sadly, many Christians come no further than this. You have heard the good news of forgiveness and reconciliation through the death of Jesus, his blood paying your 'debt' of sin, and have started to live in the truth of it. To start with, everything is wonderful, but gradually things begin to go wrong again - ?

Maybe you start down the dangerous road that says, "If God is going to forgive me every time, then I can go ahead and do some of the things I know are wrong, and it'll be OK, he'll forgive me anyway!" Then you come to your senses and say, "How can I go on like this? How can God go on forgiving me when I am so rotten to the core? Why doesn't he change me so that I don't go on doing things wrong?"

Jesus is changing me! Perhaps you find that some parts of your life have changed - 'automatically'! Either you or your friends have seen changes in you which have happened without you realising. The Holy Spirit has been at work changing you - Hallelujah!

But the process sometimes seems incredibly slow. Although parts of your life are transformed, other bits (especially the 'secret' bits which only you and the Lord know) seem to remain stubbornly unchanged. Despite having been forgiven and reconciled to God through the blood of Jesus, you find that you seem to be 'programmed' towards evil - what's wrong?

Trying to grow faster? You may try all sorts of things to put it right. More prayer, more Bible study, more meetings, more stern self-discipline, fasting, outreach, books, training courses - all ways which you hope will help you to grow spiritually. If you have tried all or some of these, then, like me, you may have found that they helped you to feel good about yourself for a while, maybe even for several years. After all, there I was, an apparently go-ahead young Christian, determined to be 100% for the Lord and 'sold out' to serve him. Maybe other people thought the same -?

But, in the secret place of your heart, you know as I did, that it is mostly on the outside. No, not all of it, there is something real there, but a lot less than you would like. Do you want to go on faking it, or have you come to the point where you are ready to say, “**I’ve given up on me!**” - ?

This is the point at which we need to hear what has been called ‘the gospel for believers’, and we come straight back to the death of the Lord Jesus Christ. Maybe we can’t see how that could deal with this problem? Confessing our sins and failures is one thing, but it doesn’t seem to work with getting rid of the ‘sin principle’ - the built-in ‘badness’ that we find inside ourselves!

There IS more! There is more to Jesus’ death on the cross than solely the forgiveness of our sins. As you have seen the value of his blood shed for your forgiveness, perhaps you have wondered whether there is any more significance for you in his death, burial, resurrection and ascension, other than somehow proving that he overcame death? The answer is YES, there is, as we can start discovering together!

The apostle Paul has much to say about this, but let’s start with Peter in **1 Peter 2:24**: “*He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by his wounds you were healed.*” We know about Jesus taking our sins on himself when he died, and we have experienced something of the healing that results - certainly spiritually, perhaps also in other ways - but what is this about ‘dying to sin’ and ‘living to righteousness’?

Paul says it again and again: “*How shall we who died to sin still live in it? Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptised into Christ Jesus have been baptised into his death?*” ; “. . . you also were made to die to the Law through the body of Christ” (**Romans 6:2-3, 7:4**); “*I have been crucified with Christ . . .*” ; “*Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires*” (**Galatians 2:20, 5:24**); “*If you have died with Christ to the elementary principles of the world . . .*” ; “*For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God*” (**Colossians 2:20, 3:3**). Jesus also talked about this, as we shall soon see.

Joined to Jesus. Probably the simplest key to this is to see what God did when he gave us new life in Jesus. He took our sins and placed them on Jesus, leaving us free from the guilt of sin, but that was not all he did. He joined us to Jesus, so that we share in his death, burial, resurrection life and ascension! As Paul writes in **1 Corinthians 1:30**, “*But by his (God’s) doing you are in Christ Jesus*”, and right through his New Testament letters, the commonest term used to describe a believer is one who is ‘in Christ’.

Please don’t dismiss this as a piece of strange doctrine. It may sound strange to us because we don’t often hear it mentioned. In essence it is very simple, and a vital key to growth in the Christian life - perhaps that is why the enemy likes to make sure we disregard it!

Bondage broken. Paul uses the picture of marriage to help us understand. In **Romans 7**, he compares us to a woman who is married to the Law as a 'husband'. ('The Law' here means religious rules telling us what to do and not do, and specifically the Jewish Law, the Ten Commandments, etc.) The 'marriage' continues until the death of one of the partners, but the Law is not going to die, so Paul says, "*you also were made to die to the Law through the body of Christ, so that you might be joined to another, to him who was raised from the dead, in order that we might bear fruit for God*" (**Romans 7:4**)

You may have noticed that there is no 'should' here. Paul and Peter don't say that we should have died to sin, or should have died to the Law. They say that it is something that has been done to us and for us in the death of the Lord Jesus Christ and that we have died.

'I don't feel dead!' At this point I can almost hear you saying, "But I don't seem to be very dead to sin - that's exactly my problem. Are you saying that I should now start pretending to be dead to sin, when I know that I am not?" No, of course not, but there is a way forward, by which we can begin to experience in practice the reality of being dead to sin, dead to religious legalism, dead to our old life with all its 'passions and desires'.

The first step is knowing that what God says about you is true. He says that he has joined you to the Lord Jesus Christ and that, by the death of Jesus on the cross, you have been 'made to die' to your old life. If in doubt, please go over the verses we looked at earlier, and perhaps ask the Lord to make the truth real to you by the light of the Holy Spirit.

The next step is **counting on what God says!** Just as you began to believe that you were forgiven because Jesus took your sins, so you can begin to believe that your old life is dead because it died with him on the cross. This may take a while to sink in, just like forgiveness did! Paul tells us, 'consider yourselves to be dead to sin' (**Romans 6:11**), and the word translated 'consider' ('reckon', 'count', 'think of' in other translations) is an accounting word, used for adding up a column of figures.

Honest reckoning. If you looked in your wallet or purse and found £10, it would be silly to think to yourself that you really had £20 and act accordingly - you would soon be caught out! Equally, if you pretended that you only had £5, you might find yourself walking home because you 'considered' that you didn't have enough for the bus fare. Obviously, when God asks to 'consider' that we are dead to sin, he is not asking us to tell lies to ourselves, he is asking us to count on what he already knows is true, to take hold of the facts of the case and act on them.

Temptation. There are many practical implications. Perhaps the most obvious is how we learn to deal with temptation. In **1 Corinthians 10:13**, we read that we will always be given a 'way of escape'. How have we tackled it before? Prayed to avoid it? Tried hard to resist? Distracted ourselves with

something else, or just muddled through and hoped for the best, knowing that there was always forgiveness at the other end? If we have begun to realise that our old life is dealt with, we can hide in that fact, begin to count on it. If we want to pray in the situation, instead of asking for help to resist, we can thank the Lord Jesus that we are in him and so are dead to sin - what a 'way of escape'! Sounds fanciful? Try it!

So how about personal development? As we saw earlier, there may be areas of our life where we have seen spontaneous change, where we may have been surprised by changes which have resulted from our receiving forgiveness through Jesus. But what about the stubborn problems in our lives, especially what might be called our 'personality defects'? Areas where we might have given up and said, 'that's just the way I am, that can't change in this life'?

If we have seen that our old life has died with Jesus, then we can also see that these characteristics are part of that old life, so we can begin to count them as dead too. We are set free from them by the death of Jesus. In practice, we may need to assert that fact frequently, probably on a daily basis and certainly as the temptation comes to behave in the 'old' way.

Jesus talks about this in **Luke 9:23-24** :*"If anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake, he is the one who will save it."* A cross is a place of death, of execution, and he calls us to bring our old life to join him there - on a daily basis. Much the same is recorded in **Matthew 10:38-39, 16:24-26, Mark 8:34-37** and **Luke 14:27**, though **Luke 9** is the only place where Jesus says 'daily'.

There is **lots more** to look at, as we start to discover more of what it means to be dead to sin, law, our old life and the whole way that Satan's system works. We shall be looking at more of this next time, together with the reality of sharing in the resurrection life of Jesus in our daily lives now. No resurrection is possible without death beforehand!

This is all part of God's grace to us. Perhaps we have thought that 'grace' is only about forgiveness, but it is about everything that he has freely given us in Jesus. God's plan is to bring mankind to the fullness of the potential he has planned for us. The whole 'finished work of Christ', in his death, burial, resurrection and ascension is the way he has given us to begin to share in that glorious plan.

“. . . bringing many sons to glory . . .”
(Hebrews 2:10)

David Taylor

February 2003

4. New Life - New Living

Forgiveness just the start. In God's plan to rescue mankind (and us individually), the first stage is reconciliation. He has reached out to us in the Lord Jesus Christ and offers us forgiveness through his blood shed for us, but this is just the start of the process he has in mind, not simply to restore us to a right relationship with him, but to bring us to the full potential that he designed for us 'before the foundation of the world'.

Purpose - Transformation. God is committed to an amazing purpose. We could look at many passages, but here are just two to give us a taste: - ". . . to become conformed to the image of his Son, so that he would be the firstborn among many brethren . . ." (**Romans 8:29**) ". . . in bringing many sons to glory . . ." (**Hebrews 2:10**) What do these mean? That our Father is committed to making each of us who has put their trust in Jesus to become like Jesus! How can he possibly do that?

Maybe we think that none of that can take place until we die; that suddenly, "we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet" (**1 Corinthians 15:51-52**). That is true, of course (for believers at least), but there is another process taking place before that - being changed now!

To be like Jesus! In **1 John 3:2** it says that, when we see Jesus, we shall "be like him, because we will see him just as he is." Yes, this is talking about the future, when either we die or he returns, but it also highlights an important principle - how we become like him, by 'seeing' him. **2 Corinthians 3:18** says much the same: "But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit." This is not just for the future, this is intended to be our experience now, a transformation process that depends in some way on our 'seeing' the Lord Jesus, and involves the Holy Spirit!

Self-Help? For 2000 years, the New Testament has stated clearly that mankind cannot achieve effective self-improvement, but also that real change is possible, by the power of the Holy Spirit of God transforming us from the inside. This is not just good theoretical doctrine, but has been proved in **real working experience** by countless thousands of people.

The 'self-help' movement has been enormously popular for many years, and people have been told that they can transform their own outlook and revitalise their lives. Some will tell you that they have seen it work. Now some experts are expressing doubts whether self-help is possible, or is really just self-deception, because 'people can't change'. Who is right?

New Life - New Living. The 'secret' of God's transformation process has nothing to do with tinkering with your life to improve it, perhaps to make it more religious or more socially acceptable. No, the secret is the new life of the Holy

Spirit living inside the believer. There are many references to this throughout the Bible.

It is worth recognising that, in Old Testament times, the Holy Spirit was only given to special people and/or on special occasions, so this personal transformation was not available to God's people in the same way as it is now, since Jesus' death, resurrection and ascension. So Old Testament references usually look forward to the promised coming of the Holy Spirit, for example, **Isaiah 44:3, Jeremiah 31:31-34** (quoted in **Hebrews 8:7-13**), **Joel 2:28-32**.

A fresh start? Jesus talks of the coming of the Holy Spirit in **John 14:16-26** and **John 16:5-15** as an event still in the future at that time. He says an amazing thing to his disciples - that they know the Holy Spirit because he lives with them already, but that later he will be in them. How could they know him? Because they have lived with Jesus for the last 3 years or so. Jesus says, "*I will come to you*" and "*We (the Father and Jesus himself) will come to him and make our abode with him*" This is staggering stuff! Jesus is saying clearly that the Holy Spirit will make his home inside the believer, and that the Holy Spirit living inside us is the same thing as the Father and Jesus living inside us! I can think of no better way to make a fresh start.

How to get started. In conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus talks about being 'born again', 'born from above' and 'born of the Spirit' (**John 3:1-21**). Nicodemus was a Jewish leader and religious teacher, and he needed this message - we certainly do! There is an enormous difference between being religious and this new life of the Holy Spirit at work in us.

We have thought earlier about receiving the forgiveness and reconciliation that God offers us through the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ. Have we received that offer, made it our own? If so, then this wonderful process of new birth by the Holy Spirit has started in us. **John 1:11-13** says that those who receive Jesus by trusting in him become children of God, his 'born ones'.

Peter picks up the theme in **1 Peter 1:3-5**, plus he gives us a few clues about how it all fits together into God's great plan for us. Firstly, he says that we have been "*born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead*". **His Resurrection** is the means by which this new life can happen in us, just as Jesus' blood shed for us is the means by which we can obtain forgiveness and reconciliation. We shall come back to that shortly. Then he links this new birth to our 'inheritance' and the 'salvation ready to be revealed in the last time'. What do these mean?

Do you remember that when we looked at God's plans for each one of us, we saw that we had all written ourselves out of his plans by our own rebellion? Well, here is a little of the wonderful restoration that he has planned, just as we have seen in **Ephesians 1:3-14**. 'Inheritance' is what we have coming to us, and 'salvation' is another name for God's complete rescue package for us.

Joined to Jesus. Perhaps you can see that there is a close link between our experience and what the Lord Jesus Christ went through in his death, burial, resurrection and ascension. Let's spell it out a little:-

Through the **blood of Jesus** we are offered **forgiveness**.

Through the **death of Jesus** we are offered **death to our old life**.

Through the **resurrection of Jesus** we are offered **new life in the Spirit**.

Through the **ascension of Jesus** we are offered **the gift of the Holy Spirit** poured out upon us. More of this one next time!

As we started to see last time, God has joined the life of every believer to the Lord Jesus Christ. He has placed us 'in Christ' and, in him, we have been 'made to die' to our old life. We have also been made 'alive to God' in him, and he calls on us to count on that fact too. (See **Romans 6:1-14**). Maybe this table will help to summarise the position:-

DEAD TO	ALIVE TO	References
Sin	God, righteousness	Romans 6:8-14
Law (what I do to please God)	Grace (what God has done for me in Christ)	Romans 7:4, Galatians 2:19-21
The Flesh' (old natural life)	The Spirit' (new life from God)	Romans 8:13, Galatians 5:24, 2 Corinthians 5:17
The world (Satan's system)	The Kingdom of God	Colossians 2:20

Count on Resurrection Life. As we saw last time, when God calls us to count ourselves dead to these 'negative' things, he also calls us to count ourselves alive to him in the 'positive' ones - resurrection life now!

Dealing with Problems. In practical terms, this is how our Father God has given us the means to see our lives changed. It is not just a sort of 'positive thinking', where we try to think about positive things and ignore the negative ones. No, God's approach is to face the problems in our lives head-on. Not only does he offer us forgiveness for the things we have done wrong, but also the way to say goodbye to our old life on a progressive, daily basis and, at the same time, to take hold more and more of the new life which he has given us in Christ.

As Jesus said, *"If anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake, he is the one who will save it."* (**Luke 9:23-24**) Daily dying brings the opportunity for daily resurrection!

Paul describes this process in **Romans 8:13**. Try reading the whole passage (**1-17**) through a few times. You will see that he mentions many of the things we have already seen.

Off with the old - on with the new! **Colossians 3:1-11** says again that we have died and our new life is in Christ. By being included in the death of Jesus,

we have 'taken off' an old set of 'clothes' - the old me - and have put on a new set - the new me, who "*is being renewed to a true knowledge according to the image of the One who created him*" (v.10). Here we have it again! Being changed to be like Jesus! This is an essential part of the Father's rescue plan for mankind. Not just forgiven and reconciled, but being transformed to become like Jesus himself! Again, the death of the old life is needed to allow the new life to develop. See also ***Ephesians 3:14-19*** and ***2 Corinthians 4:7-11***.

Sharing God's Nature? Peter says something amazing in ***2 Peter 1:3-4***. God has given us everything we need for 'life and godliness', through the real knowledge of Jesus (the one who has called us), and we can become 'partakers of the divine nature' by taking him up on his promises to us.

The Fruit of the Spirit. Have you ever wondered about the 'fruit of the Spirit' mentioned in ***Galatians 5:22-23***? Perhaps you have tried to see more of these qualities in your life? If you read the whole passage, **verses 16-26**, in the context of what we have been considering, you will see that the 'fruit of the Spirit' is just that - the result of the new life of the Holy Spirit living in us. We cannot manufacture these qualities ourselves but, by the grace of God, we can learn to take hold of the fact that we are **in Christ**, with all that that means in terms of being dead to sin and alive to God. As we do so, our lives will be transformed, step by step.

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Committed to transformation. Our Father is determined to see us conformed to the image of his Son, but he needs our co-operation. We need to take him up on his whole rescue package, not just parts of it. Forgiveness and reconciliation, death to the old life, entry into new life in the Spirit and tasting the power of the Holy Spirit poured out on us. More of that next week!

David Taylor

February 2003

5. Naturally Supernatural?

We have looked at one aspect of the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the Christian believer, the process of gradual but total transformation of our lives from the inside. We have seen that this is clearly linked to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. Just as we are dead to sin, dead to law, dead to our old life and dead to Satan's world system ('the world') through the death of Jesus on the cross, so we are alive to God, alive to his grace to us, alive to new life in the Spirit and alive to the Kingdom of God through Jesus' resurrection.

This 'newness of life' is unique to the New Testament. When Jesus talked to Nicodemus in **John 3** about being 'born of the Spirit', he was talking about a quality of life that belongs to those who are God's 'born ones', as described in **John 1:11-13**.

'In' and 'Upon'. By contrast, in the Old Testament (with one or two notable exceptions), we do not read of the Holy Spirit being in people, but being upon them, to empower them for a particular task. Very often, this task was to bring the word of the LORD in prophecy. For some examples, see **Numbers 11:10-30**, **Judges 3:9-10**, **1 Samuel 16:13**, **2 Samuel 23:2**, **2 Chronicles 15:1-7**, **Luke 2:25-35**. Although the Spirit of the LORD 'came upon' people and they were used for great works of God, their character was not necessarily transformed. Samson and King Saul are obvious examples!

All Mankind. In the Old Testament, we also see prophecies of a time in the future (from their viewpoint) when God says, 'I will pour out my Spirit on all mankind' (**Joel 2:28-32**). Other examples can be found in **Isaiah 44:3**, **Jeremiah 31:31-34** and **Ezekiel 39:29**.

On the day of Pentecost, Peter stands up to explain to the crowd what has started happening with the disciples of Jesus as the Holy Spirit has filled them (**Acts 2:1-36**). He quotes the words of Joel's prophecy and says that it is being fulfilled there and then. He also says (**verse 33**) that the Holy Spirit has been poured out because Jesus is now exalted to the right hand of God the Father. In fact, he says that the outpouring of the Holy Spirit proves that Jesus is at the right hand of God and 'God has made him both Lord and Christ!' (**verses 33-36**).

Exaltation and Outpouring. Jesus himself made the connection between him going to the Father and the Holy Spirit being given (**John 14:12**, **16:5-7**). In **John 7:37-39**, there is no doubt about the connection.

So here is another link. We have seen that our forgiveness and reconciliation is through the blood of Jesus. We have seen that our being dead to our old life and alive to new life in the Spirit is through the death and resurrection of Jesus. In the same way, the gift of the poured-out Holy Spirit is made over to us through the ascension of Jesus and his glorification at the right hand of the Father. It is part of our inheritance in Christ.

Facts into Experience. We know that, potentially, the blood of Jesus has paid the price for the forgiveness and reconciliation of every single person. We also know that not everyone experiences forgiveness and reconciliation. To enter the experience, each of us needs to acknowledge our need of forgiveness and trust in the provision that God has made available for us in Jesus. In other words, the facts are powerless until we ‘receive’ them personally.

It is no different with receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit poured out upon us.

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The Complete Package. In New Testament times, it seems to have been normal for believers to receive the ‘complete package’ when they first believed. Certainly Peter expected it for those who responded to his words in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost (**Acts 2:38**). He saw the pouring out of the Holy Spirit on Cornelius and his friends and relations as being proof that God had granted them ‘the repentance that leads to life’ (**Acts 10:44-48, 11:15-18**).

Paul saw that something was wrong with the ‘disciples’ he found in Ephesus (**Acts 19:1-7**) and immediately suspected that they had not received all that God had for them. He was right. They had received what was described as ‘John’s baptism’, by which they had simply repented of their sin, without any knowledge of Jesus.

Right Foundations. Before they could receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, Paul needed to take them further. After repentance, they needed to ‘believe into’ Jesus. They were then baptised ‘into the name of the Lord Jesus’. Even from our own brief studies so far, we know that baptism speaks graphically of our being ‘in Christ’, joined to him in his death and resurrection. Paul would certainly not have baptised them without being sure that they had in fact ‘believed into’ Jesus. Baptism otherwise would have been meaningless. It was only then that they received the Holy Spirit.

The Need to Receive. We can see, however, that receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit is not an ‘automatic’ consequence of belief or baptism. In **Acts 8:4-17**, when Philip had been proclaiming the good news of Jesus in Samaria, several people had believed in Jesus and had been baptised (**v. 12**). Then Peter and John visited from Jerusalem and ‘prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit’ (**v. 15**).

What does it mean to ‘receive’? Our English word is somehow too passive, as if ‘receiving’ a gift is something that happens to us. We have often confused ‘receiving’ with ‘being given’. If you buy a present for someone, wrap it up and send it to them, there is no doubt that a gift has been given. But if that present remains unopened on their kitchen table, they have not ‘received’ it, have they? They have not ‘taken it to themselves’ (which is the real meaning of the Greek word translated ‘receive’ in the New Testament), and so do not have the benefit

in experience of the gift which you have so lovingly chosen, paid for and sent to them. Need I say more?

Given for a Purpose. So why has God given us this wonderful gift? Please don't forget what we have seen about the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives, transforming us into the image of the Lord Jesus Christ. That is indescribably precious and essential in God's plans for us. But what about the more obviously 'supernatural' aspects of the Holy Spirit's work, the Holy Spirit poured out upon us?

We have seen how, in the Old Testament, the Holy Spirit 'came upon' special people at special times, to empower them for specific tasks and to bring God's word of prophecy to his people. Not only what we might call 'long-distance' prophecy, like Isaiah about the coming, suffering and death of Jesus. More often, it was God's immediate word for his people, in the situation where they were at the time.

Spiritual Gifts. When we receive the gift of the outpoured Holy Spirit, we enter the same realm, where the supernatural power of the Holy Spirit is given to believers in the Lord Jesus Christ with specific purposes. The well-known passage where these are listed is **1 Corinthians 12**, and we could spend a long time examining it. In summary, though, these are all gifts where God intervenes in a way beyond normal human experience:-

Wisdom where our natural perception cannot reach. Knowledge of information we do not otherwise possess. Faith (the ability to trust him) where we would otherwise be doubtful and untrusting. Healing where we have no means of cure. Miracles ('works of power') which intervene with nature's normal course. Prophecy which declares God's mind to his people. Spiritual discernment which goes way beyond our natural ability to 'read' people. Speaking and understanding languages we have not learnt. An impressive list!

These are individual gifts given to individual believers, but not for individual satisfaction or boasting. They are given in the context of the local company of believers, and always for the benefit of the whole body (v.7). They seem to be of two main types:-

'Miraculous gifts' like healing and 'works of power' (i.e. miracles), which are clearly seen as a demonstration of God's supernatural intervention. We may have heard, read or experienced these ourselves and realise how powerfully they speak to everyone of the power of the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. This is often especially true in cultures where idols and evil spirits are worshipped and treated as 'gods'.

'Prophetic gifts' are chiefly concerned with the Lord communicating with his people. This is similar to Old Testament prophecies, but not limited to a pronouncement along the lines of 'thus says the Lord'. Obviously prophecy itself, together with wisdom, knowledge, spiritual discernment and faith are in this category.

These categories are only to help us understand. Tongues and interpretation, for example, seem to come into both! They are certainly miraculous but, used together, their purpose is communication, roughly equivalent to prophecy (see **1 Corinthians 14:5**).

As in the Old Testament, exercising spiritual gifts is **no guarantee of godliness**. The whole tenor of Paul's writing in **1 Corinthians ch. 12-14** shows that the believers in Corinth exercised spiritual gifts freely but tended to be spiritually immature! See **1 Corinthians 14:1**!

The 'bottom line' is that all spiritual gifts are about God stepping in (through his people) to speak or act in specific circumstances. If we want to learn to function in this way, we need to bear in mind how Jesus functioned. He said that he only did what he saw the Father doing (**John 5:19**). As a next step, we would do well to ask our Father to show us what he is doing and wants to do. We need to learn to hear and recognise the voice of God in our lives - and then get on and obey what he says to us!

Knowing God's Thoughts. One of the main purposes of the Holy Spirit is to communicate God's mind to us. Jesus tells us so in **John 14:26** and **John 16:12-15**. Too often we tell ourselves that we cannot understand what God is doing or plans to do. A classic example is the way we quote **1 Corinthians 2:9**, which says basically that man cannot understand God's ways, but forget to quote the next verses, which say that God has revealed his thoughts to us by the Holy Spirit. Try reading the whole of **1 Corinthians 2**. You will find an amazing statement of the extent to which the Holy Spirit reveals to us the thoughts of God, culminating in the staggering claim that 'we have the mind of Christ'!

Finally, to quote Paul in Ephesus, 'Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?' Perhaps, as Watchman Nee says in his *Normal Christian Life*, we have taken God up on only part of his offer, like taking only one volume of a two-volume set when both volumes have been paid for. Perhaps we have left our Father's gift to us unopened on the table. The gift has been paid for, given and sent. It for us to receive it, to take to ourselves, to make it our own.

David Taylor

March 2003

6. Hang on in There!

We have looked at several aspects of what God has done for us in the Lord Jesus. Some of these may have been unfamiliar to us, but hopefully we have at least begun to see that our Father has a greater purpose for us, more than simply putting us back into right relationship with him.

He certainly has done that, but for the purpose of bringing us to maturity in Christ. Now we may begin to see more clearly how his purpose for us as individuals fits together with his plan 'from before the foundation of the world'.

The Bible makes it clear that Jesus is coming back to judge this world and rule over it, but also that when he comes he will be greeted and joined in his rule by his 'Bride', the church, composed of all those who belong to him. See **Revelation 19:7-8, 21:2** and **21:9-10**. (If you are in any doubt about whether this really is the church, see **Ephesians 5:25-32** and **Galatians 4:21-31**.)

This Bride needs to be ready for her Bridegroom, and that includes being 'in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing . . . holy and blameless' (**Ephesians 5:27**). Jesus himself also prayed that the church would be 'sanctified' (i.e. made holy), that they would be glorious and united, so that the world could know that the Father had sent him and know the Father's love themselves (see **John ch. 17**).

We have a little way to go, haven't we? That is why the things we have been looking at over the last few weeks are essential for us if we want to grow in Christ. **Ephesians 4:16**, especially in the context of the preceding verses, shows us that the church is designed to grow and build itself up, 'according to the proper working of every part'. More of that later.

In summary, then, the Lord Jesus will come back for the Bride (the church) who has been made holy and is ready for him, and the church can only grow up and mature as all the parts (you and I) learn to function as we are designed to. As someone has said, we cannot speed up the working of God's purposes, but we can certainly slow them down.

So our own personal growth is not just personal to us. It affects the readiness of the church for Jesus' return. Awesome! Perhaps this is what Peter means when he writes of us needing to be 'looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God' (**2 Peter 3:12**) - hastening, maybe not by putting our foot on the accelerator, but certainly by taking it off the brake!

How can all these things work out in our lives on a daily basis? If it doesn't work now, then it doesn't work at all, so we need to find out how the Lord intends these truths to affect our lives in a really practical way.

Maybe it is unnecessary to say it again, but the message of the New Testament is that people are changed by God from the inside out, so our

application of truth must be spiritual first, and only be developed into action as the spiritual process is worked out. Don't worry, it is not complicated, but it is different - this is not a religious sort of Christianity, full of rules and regulations. It is spiritual reality in Christ, full of response and relationship.

The central truth of this new life is that when we put our trust in the Lord Jesus Christ, we are not only forgiven and reconciled to God through the blood of Jesus, but also joined to him in a life-partnership. As it says repeatedly in the New Testament, we are 'in Christ', and it is God the Father who has put us there (**1 Corinthians 1:30**).

You might say that the Father has 'moved us in' to our 'new house', his Son, the Lord Jesus. He simply asks us to 'abide' (dwell, make our home) there. How can we do that? A few simple steps:-

1) **Seeing**. The saying goes that 'seeing is believing', and it is true that we usually say, 'I see!' when something becomes real to us.

2) **Knowing**. Seeing leads straight into knowing. This is not just the theoretical knowledge of dry information, this is something we become convinced about. We might say that we have 'realised' something. That usually means that we have 'seen' and come to know that it is true.

3) **Trusting**. At this point, we begin to 'bank on' what we have seen and started to know. It is at this stage that we start to use the truth that we have begun to see and know.

4) **Experience**. If the truth we have put our trust in really is true, then we begin to see results.

A very mundane example might be a supermarket advert for a special offer, 'two for the price of one'. We go into the shop and see the products packaged in twos, with the same offer printed on them. So far, it is all theoretical but, if we are fairly sure the offer is genuine, and if we want the product, the next step is the step of trust (of faith, if you like). We pick up the 'special offer' products and take them to the checkout, where we pay for them and take them home. Then we use them - experience!

For example, we may have known for years that the Lord Jesus came into the world 'to save sinners', but it will not have made any impact on us personally until we 'see' that we need rescuing ourselves. We may examine the claim much or little, but it is not until we 'pick up' the offer that we have begun to trust. Taking God up on his offer is like taking the goods to the checkout: 'I'm taking these goods according to the offer you have made' - and then we experience the reality.

It works the same way with all the things we have looked at. Forgiveness through the blood of Jesus shed on our behalf, paying our debt. Through Jesus' death, being dead to sin and dead to our old life in Satan's realm. Being made alive with Jesus through his resurrection, and so having the Holy Spirit at work within us to transform us. Having the Holy Spirit poured out upon us in power

through the fact that Jesus has ascended and is seated in glory at the right hand of the Father - all of these are basic 'building blocks' of real Christian living.

The initial 'seeing' is the key. Hardly surprising that Paul wanted the Ephesian believers to have 'a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him . . . that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you will know . . .' (***Ephesians 1:17,18***). We have looked at other verses about this before - ***2 Corinthians 3:18, 1 John 3:2, John 16:14,15, 1 Corinthians 2:12***.

When we begin to 'see', we will probably want to check that what we have heard is real, and we need to look from two angles. Firstly, is this objectively true? In other words, is it reliable, is it really what Scripture says, or is it just someone's strange interpretation? Secondly, is it relevant for my situation? Like the shopper in the supermarket, however real the offer may be, if the product is not one she wants, she won't buy it!

Once we have satisfied ourselves on both these counts, then we know, and move straight on to the 'checkout', where we 'settle up' with God. The conversation might go something like this: 'You are offering forgiveness and reconciliation through the blood of Jesus, is that right?' 'That's right; you need to repent and confess your sins, and put your trust in him.' 'I want to take you up on that offer; I realise that I need forgiveness. These are the wrong things I know I have done . . . I am now trusting in Jesus' sacrifice to pay my sin debt.' Those are just the bare bones; we are likely to go through quite a range of feelings in the process!

Experience follows. Ask anyone who has tried it! And it does not just apply to forgiveness and reconciliation, but to all the other parts of the 'finished work of Christ' that we have been looking at.

Does this seem a strange way to grow and develop as a Christian? It may seem very foolish to rely on 'revelation' from God in order to exercise trust (faith) in what he has given us in Jesus, but in fact there is no other way! If we try to 'believe' before we have 'seen', we will end up like the little boy who said that faith was 'believing what you know ain't true' !

On the other hand, once God shows us one thing, it so often leads on to a whole collection of others. The one fact that so obviously opens up many others is that 'God has placed me in Christ'. Once we begin to see this, we discover a whole 'catalogue' of things that are ours, part of the inheritance of being 'in Christ'. Then the Holy Spirit only needs to show us that something else is ours in Christ, for us to be able to 'receive' it, take hold of it and use it in daily life. Freedom from legalism, for example.

As we take up our Father's offers to us, one useful principle to consider:- ***Romans 10:10*** tells us of two stages in our response to what the Holy Spirit shows us. First (and essential) is that we take that step of trust spiritually ('with the heart'). That puts us into right relationship with God. Second, we need to speak out what we have come to believe. That helps to bring us into reality,

personal experience. The example in **Romans 10:10** shows the difference. Belief leads to 'justification', having our slate wiped clean in God's sight. Speaking out leads to 'salvation', which means being rescued out of Satan's domain, in practice. Jesus told us to abide in him (**John 15:1-11**) - he will not do it for us! 'Abiding' is active, not passive - but still peaceful, not stressed or legalistic.

So when the Lord has begun to show you something fresh, it is certainly worthwhile to share it with another Christian believer you trust, maybe with a small group. Apart from the obvious benefits of fellowship and checking things out, just simply sharing it will have the effect of helping to confirm the reality to you. It seems to be a characteristic of the way we are made that speaking out confirms what we already know and believe. The example of marriage springs to mind. By public acknowledgement of commitment to each other, the couple are not saying anything new, but it certainly helps to seal their relationship.

Apart from simply saying it in words, Jesus gave us two specific ways to 'speak out', and they both relate to the things we have been considering. The first is believer's baptism. By asking to be baptised, the believer is taking the opportunity to declare publicly that he or she is is 'dead to sin' through the death of Jesus, and 'alive to God' through his resurrection. The whole of **Romans 6** should help us here.

The second is the 'Lord's supper', sharing bread and wine together. We often read the passage in **1 Corinthians 11:23-26**, but usually avoid the following verses and **1 Corinthians 10:16**, which helps to explain them. By drinking from the cup, we are saying with our actions that we are sharing in the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ. In other words, that the blood of Jesus is effective in our lives for up to date forgiveness, right now! By taking the bread, we are saying with our actions that we have been included in his death. We are not saying that we are perfect, or have 'arrived', but rather that, by the grace of God, we are currently taking hold of what our heavenly Father has given us in his Son.

It is so simple. This is no merely intellectual exercise! Do I know that I am 'in Christ' by the grace of God, dead to my old life? Then I can take the bread. Am I in an up to date 'forgiven' relationship with my heavenly Father, again by his grace, through the blood of Jesus? Then I can drink from the cup. This goes much further than the vague 'remembering' that we often try to do, doesn't it?

Paul's warnings are not lightly given. Let us beware of treating these things superficially, acting out a lie! Corinth saw some serious repercussions (**1 Corinthians 11:27-32**).

All of which leads us on towards seeing God's purposes working out in his chosen framework, the church!

7. Growing Together

As we began to see last week, the church is a vital link in God's plans. We may not have thought much about the meaning of 'the church', assuming that we know what it is.

Probably the commonest idea is that the church is a building. It has slipped into our vocabulary, so that if anyone asks us about the church, we assume they mean a special building, usually an Anglican one but also what used to be called 'chapels'.

Then it might be a religious organisation or denomination. Perhaps 'the church' has a particular belief or policy on certain matters, which adherents are expected to follow. Sometimes this idea gets extended so that 'the church' means those who are employed by an organisation or denomination - the paid staff.

A reaction against these two ideas is the commonly stated understanding that 'the church is the people'. But which people? Christians often seem to use 'the church' as a general term meaning all Christians of whatever denominational loyalty - or none . . .

Perhaps it will be worth seeing what the Bible has to say!

Although you could suggest that the church was in existence when Jesus was travelling around, proclaiming his message, performing signs and training the disciples, most people agree that the church's 'birthday' was the day of Pentecost, as described in **Acts 2**.

On that day, 3,000 new believers were added to the church, and we can see how they came - they responded to the call of God through Peter speaking (**v.39**). This is the first thing about the church - it is composed of those who have responded to the call of God. The word 'church' in the Greek is 'ekklesia', which was a common secular word, used for 'a gathering of citizens called out from their homes into some public place'. They were called out, and also called together. Examples of the use of this word in a 'non-church' sense are in **Acts 19:32, 39 & 41** - a gathering in Ephesus which nearly became a riot!

Acts 2:37-47 shows us how those believers from the day of Pentecost responded to the call of God by 'the obedience of faith'. They received Peter's words. They were baptised. They continually devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, to breaking bread together and to prayer. See how often words like 'together' are used!

So is the church just a sort of 'by-product' of people individually believing, or is there more to it? We looked at **Ephesians 5:22-32** last week. It says that Christ loved the church like a bride, gave himself up for her to set her apart for himself, making her clean, in order to present her to himself, glorious and without any imperfections at all. This church is no mere 'by-product', but the

object of the Lord Jesus' love and purpose! (For more references to the church as Jesus' bride, see **Revelation 19:7-8, 21:2, 21:9-10.**)

In **Ephesians 2:12-22**, Paul outlines the believers' history (how they have become the church there in Ephesus) and their present situation as the church there. Reconciliation to God and each other is a vital part, not just because some were Jews and some Gentiles, but because his purpose is to make them 'into one new man', 'one body'.

Here Paul also uses the picture of the church as a building but on two different 'levels'. First, he talks about the Ephesians being 'fellow citizens with the saints', being fitted together into the whole building which is growing into a 'holy sanctuary in the Lord'. Secondly, they are also being built into a 'dwelling of God in the Spirit', somewhere where God lives. The two 'levels' of church to be found in the New Testament:-
1) Universal, the whole church world-wide . . . and
2) Local, the whole church in the locality. I can certainly find no other levels. Have a look for yourself!

Talking of building, Paul uses the same picture in **1 Corinthians 3:9-15**. He likens himself and Apollos to building workers. Paul has started the building by putting in the foundations; Apollos has built on that foundation. What is the building? The church in Corinth. The foundation? Jesus Christ. He says that there can be no other foundation for the church. Anything else is not a foundation!

Paul has seen them come to faith in Jesus and is concerned that no-one will build with wrong materials on the good foundation he has laid. It is easy to think that we can add some 'good ideas' of our own to build on the foundation. Beware! Gold, silver and precious stones can only be found where God created them! If we need more wood, hay or straw we can find them easily enough. Building on the right foundation is essential, but we also need to build with God's materials. (See **Psalms 127:1**)

We saw a little last week of how the church is intended to grow from the inside, as described in **Ephesians 4:11-16**. There are people with specific tasks whom the Lord Jesus has given to the church (**v.11**), but even their main role is to equip the 'saints' (believers) so that they can get on with serving the Lord and seeing the 'body of Christ' built up. That growth depends on each part working in its measure (**v.16**), and also on at least two other factors.

First, **v.15** talks about 'speaking the truth in love' or, more literally, 'truing in love' or 'being real in love'. Sometimes we may use this verse as a cover when we want to say something unkind to another believer, reassuring them that we love them while we hit them with the 'truth' - not how it is intended! Yes, we sometimes do need to say things to each other which are unpalatable but true, and that definitely does demand real love if the effect is to be positive. But this goes further - dealing completely in truth and reality with each other.

Second, 'being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies' or literally, 'through every joint of the supply'. Supply of what? Whatever our

Father gives us for our growth, individually and corporately. Here 'joint' might be better translated 'connection' or even 'contact'. Our connections and relationships in the body of Christ are intended to be sources of 'supply', both to us and from us!

We looked very briefly at spiritual gifts two weeks ago. These are given to us personally but are very definitely intended to be for the benefit of the whole body. Not, as they are sometimes seen, as some sort of mark of 'spiritual oneness'! See **1 Corinthians 12:4-11**, especially **v.7**. The purpose is to see the 'body' grow and develop. The same applies to the 'grace gifts' in **Romans 12:3-13**.

So how does this sort of 'church life' work out? Having written the passage we have just been looking at in **Ephesians 4**, and then reminding them that they can lay aside their old life, Paul goes on to tell the Ephesian believers how it works out in practice (**4:25-6:9**). All these 'commands' are given on the basis of the spiritual realities which he has been writing about earlier in the letter, and many of them have to do with relationships. If we try to apply the 'commands' without dealing with the spiritual realities, we shall land up with another set of religious rules and regulations - deadly!

For another example of how these realities made a visible difference, see **1 Thessalonians 1:2-10**.

The church does not, as some have said, exist 'for the benefit of its non-members'. It exists primarily for the Lord Jesus Christ, both in its present form and as it will be seen as his Bride. In the meantime, it is the context in which we are designed to grow, as members of a family, living stones in a building (**1 Peter 2:4-5**), parts of the 'Body of Christ' learning to function properly, reach our full potential and be part of the process for other members.

Bread and Wine

As we are sharing bread and wine together in a slightly different way today, here are some thoughts that you may find helpful.

We are probably familiar with the words of **1 Corinthians 11:23-26**, where Paul passes on what he has received from the Lord about taking bread and wine together. He says that by taking the bread and wine, we 'proclaim the Lord's death until he comes'. What does this mean?

In **1 Corinthians 10:16-17**, it says that taking the cup and the one loaf is a 'sharing' in the blood and the body of Christ. This is not just personal, but a corporate thing together with other believers, a wonderful opportunity to demonstrate our oneness in the Lord Jesus and our appreciation of him. The word 'sharing' here is 'koinonia', usually translated as 'fellowship', and meaning 'having in common' or participation. The one loaf speaks graphically of our oneness. Both bread and wine speak of our dependency on what God has done for us in Jesus, our source.

If we are to share in the bread and wine, it is vital that our actions flow out from the reality in our lives, otherwise our 'proclaiming the Lord's death' is a lie and can have dire results. The example of Ananias and Sapphira in **Acts 5** related to lying actions, attempting to deceive God and the church.

This is one of the reasons why Paul goes on with a warning in **1 Corinthians 11:27-34**. In **v.27**, he says that it is possible for someone to eat the bread or drink the cup 'in an unworthy manner', not giving weight or worth to what they are doing.

By drinking from the cup, we are saying with our actions that we are sharing in the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ. In other words, that the blood of Jesus is effective in our lives for up to date forgiveness, right now! By taking the bread, we are saying with our actions that we have been included in his death. We are not saying that we are perfect, or have 'arrived', but rather that, by the grace of God, we are currently taking hold of what our heavenly Father has given us in his Son.

If these things are not true of us, we should not take the bread and wine. It is obviously foolish (and meaningless!) for someone to take the bread and wine if they have not put their trust in the Lord Jesus Christ. Taking the bread and wine will not 'work' for you unless you have already put your trust in the Lord Jesus - it is not some sort of magic!

If you are a believer, but know that there is something blocking your relationship with Father, you may have a choice. If it is possible to deal with the problem here and now, perhaps by confessing sin and receiving his forgiveness, then you can certainly take the bread and wine. It may be especially valuable to you as you are aware of his fresh forgiveness. You may, however, need to go away and get the situation resolved, perhaps with someone else, before you can honestly say that you are forgiven.

A second warning is about distinguishing the body of Christ (**v.29**). The word 'judge' here means distinguish. It is used in **Acts 11:12** to mean 'make a distinction'. We need to recognise that the body of Christ is defined by whether a person is 'in Christ' or not, not by whether they match up to any of our other definitions.

Once we have checked ('judged') ourselves (**v.31**), we can participate freely and with real joy and appreciation of the Lord's provision for us.

8. The End of the Beginning

When I was a new (and teenage) Christian, I heard people talk about Jesus coming back to this earth in his 'second coming', and was a bit bemused. Did these people really believe all these things that they were saying, about Jesus coming down from the sky and the end of the world as we know it? It sounded pretty 'way out' as far as I was concerned. Perhaps it was just a dramatic way of putting things . . . ?

I was looking at Christianity simply in the light of my own spiritual experience. I knew that something real had happened when I was born again, that this was not just another religious system to replace the nominal Christianity I had experienced from childhood, but I had not seen that God's purpose covers much more than personal salvation. As we have seen over the last few weeks, his plan includes the reversal of all the devastating results of the 'fall' and rebellion of mankind.

We start with forgiveness and reconciliation and move on to find God's way of transforming of our lives - through Jesus' death and resurrection - doing away with the old and seeing the new life of the Holy Spirit at work in us. As well as working in us, we find that the Holy Spirit has been poured out on us, and we begin to discover the 'naturally supernatural' ways in which God's power can work through us. These are especially significant in the context of the church, the corporate life in which we are designed to grow together with others who share this new life in Jesus.

But where is all this going? Is God content to forgive us, change us, empower us, give us fellowship with each other and then just take us to be with himself when our life is over? That certainly sounds great, and no doubt very enjoyable indeed, but is there an ultimate purpose to it?

Right from his earliest public appearance, Jesus' message had a recurring theme - the kingdom of God, the kingdom of heaven. Starting with **Matthew 4:17**, he talks about 'the kingdom' as if everyone knows what it is, explaining what it will be like, who will be in or out, and so on, but always as a future event which is coming soon.

But do we know what the kingdom is? The Jews in Roman-occupied Judea had a clear idea. The kingdom of God was the coming time when God's anointed one (= 'Messiah' or 'Christ') would come and rule on the earth. Their Scriptures were very clear about it. And here they were, with the Romans in charge - what better time for the Messiah to come, kick out the Romans and establish his kingdom?

So, when Jesus started talking about the kingdom, they knew what he meant. The buzz that went around was, "Can this be the Messiah?" (See **Matthew 9:27, 11:2-6, 12:23, 26:63, Luke 3:15, John 1:41, 4:25,29, 7:26, 41, 10:24**, just for some examples! (The terms 'King of the Jews', 'Son of David', 'Son of God'

and even 'Son of Man' relate to the Messiah, so there are lots more to find!) Some of the people thought that he was going to act politically or even with force (**John 6:15**), so we often think they got the whole idea wrong.

We may take his reply to Pilate in **John 18:36** to mean that Jesus' kingdom is not to be in this world, but that is not what he said! On the contrary, he made it clear that it would be revealed on earth at a future time. In **Luke 21**, when he has described in some detail what the world will be like just before 'the end', he then talks about 'the Son of Man **coming in a cloud** with power and great glory' (**v.27**), and encourages the disciples to straighten up and lift up their heads, because their redemption is drawing near, and to recognise that the kingdom of God is near (**v.28, 31**).

The reference to 'coming in a cloud' is worth a Bible study of its own, but just look back to **Daniel 7:13-14**. Here is a picture of the Messiah in all his glory, with sovereignty over all peoples, nations and languages - a kingdom which will not be destroyed. (See also **Matthew 24:30, 26:64-65, Mark 13:26, 14:62-63, Acts 1:9-11 & Revelation 1:6-7**. It is clear from many of these that 'coming with the clouds of heaven' is very definitely linked to the coming Messiah.)

But back to **Daniel 7** for a moment. Here are more references to the coming kingdom. Daniel is told in **v.18** that a time will come when the 'saints of the Highest One' will receive the kingdom and possess it for ever, and then (in **v. 21-22**) sees a vision of the time when it happens. In **v.27**, he is told that 'the sovereignty, the dominion and the greatness of all the kingdoms under the whole heaven will be given to the people of the saints of the Highest One; his kingdom will be an everlasting kingdom, and all the dominions will serve and obey him.'

This is the context into which Jesus spoke his 'parables of the kingdom', and what both he and John the Baptist meant when they referred to the fact that 'the kingdom of heaven is at hand'.

We could easily get into another study here, about what the Bible says (and doesn't say) about 'heaven'. In fact, the word, in both Hebrew and Greek, is more often written in the plural than the singular. Literally, then, 'the heavens', with no distinction made between what we might call 'heaven', 'sky' or 'space' - just 'up there' and the dimension where God dwells.

Similarly, the word 'kingdom' does not mean the same as 'country' or 'nation', as we might think, but 'the sphere of authority of a monarch'. So, stripped of the fact that we have become accustomed to the words, John and Jesus said that direct rule from God was coming soon, on the earth! Jesus also told us what it was going to be like.

In a very real way, you could say that the kingdom of heaven started to be seen on earth as soon as the first disciples began to put their trust in Jesus. After all, the King was there, and some had started to obey his rule, so a little 'sample' of the kingdom was there too. Although he said clearly that the

kingdom was to be revealed in the future, Jesus also said that ‘the kingdom of God is in your midst (or within you).’ (**Luke 17:21**)

We have also seen that believers in the Lord Jesus Christ have been transferred out of Satan’s domain of darkness and into the kingdom of God’s beloved Son (**Colossians 1:13**) so, if we are in Christ, we are already in his kingdom. The church, too, made up of those who are in Christ, is like an outpost of the kingdom. A bit like a ‘resistance cell’ in a country under enemy occupation, with a clear allegiance to the rightful king and working for the time when he comes back to take up his kingdom.

So, when will all these things happen? Very much the same question that the disciples asked Jesus in **Luke 21:7** and **Acts 1:6**! I believe he gives the same answer if we are trying to work out dates and times, but we can see it all fitting together into a broad framework of events in **1 Corinthians 15:20-28**. Putting it simply, 1) Jesus returns. 2) The ‘dead in Christ’ are resurrected. 3) The rule of Jesus, to bring all his enemies under his feet. 4) Jesus hands over the kingdom to the Father.

As we have seen, the kingdom is to continue for ever, and we are to reign with Jesus and possess it for ever, so this sequence of events, although it may take a long time to complete, is really only preparatory. At the end of it, evil will have been conquered, the perversion of creation will have been corrected and the ‘saints’ (believers in Jesus) will be resurrected and/or ‘changed’ into a new immortality (**1 Corinthians 15:50-58**). Ready for a new start - details as yet undisclosed!

We often call this future time ‘the end of the world’. How wrong we are! Yes, it will be the end of the world as we know it now, but in preparation for what a future! As Churchill said, “This is not the end; it is not even the beginning of the end. It is, perhaps, the end of the beginning.”

I am not sure where we got the idea that the whole plan of God is for us to ‘go to heaven’ when we die. Certainly there is no doubt that we shall be with the Lord if we die before he returns but it is equally sure that we shall all be involved in his great plans for the eternal future, whether we die before he comes or live to witness his return.

Can we begin to see more clearly how vital it is that we take hold of all that our Father has for us in the Lord Jesus Christ? In **1 Peter 1:3-5**, Peter says that we have been born again to obtain an inheritance which is ‘reserved in the heavens for you . . . a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time’. Paul tells the believers in **1 Thessalonians 1:10** that one of the characteristics of their new life is ‘to wait for his Son from the heavens’. The inheritance we have is ours already (we have the ‘down payment’ already - see **Ephesians 1:13-14**), but a time is coming when it will be revealed, when the veil will be drawn back to show what it is really like. In the same way, Paul writes in **Romans 8:19** about

'the revealing of the sons of God' and in **1 John 3:2** it says that we shall be like him.

All the plan of God for our salvation is pointing towards this time. The Father is committed to 'bringing many sons to glory' (**Hebrews 2:10**) and the process has already started, as we have seen.

We have seen that the church is described as the Bride of Christ, and the time of the 'marriage' is the time when the Bride is presented to the Bridegroom, 'in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing' (**Ephesians 5:27**). In the days leading up to a wedding, everything else pales into insignificance. Yes, normal everyday things need to be done, but there is a dramatic effect on the priorities of life! Other momentous occasions, such as a meeting with the Queen, a VIP, or even an important interview, have a similar effect!

There are similar examples in the New Testament. In **1 Corinthians 15:58**, after describing some of the future events of Jesus' return and our resurrection, Paul encourages us not to waver, knowing that the whole thing is not in vain. In **1 John 3:3**, the result of knowing that we shall be like him is that we let the process start now. In **2 Peter 3:11-13**, we are reminded that the present world order will come to an end, but that we look beyond that to 'new heavens and a new earth' and, again, that our priorities will necessarily shift as a result.

* * * * *

All these things we have looked at over the last few weeks are not just some nice theories, some sort of religious entertainment. If we decide that they are not true, then we need to be honest enough to stop playing at being Christians. If, on the other hand, they are true, then we need to start learning to live in the light of that truth.

We shall not succeed if we simply try to take dry truth and apply it with our own ability and understanding. That is exactly what the Pharisees did. Let us remember again what Jesus said about the Holy Spirit: 'He will guide you into all the truth . . . for he will take of mine and will disclose it to you' (**John 16:12-15**).

**"Now we have received,
not the spirit of the world,
but the Spirit who is from God,
so that we may know the things
freely given to us by God."
(1 Corinthians 2:12)**

David Taylor

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