

UNDERSTANDING CHRISTIANITY

Module 3: The New Testament

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UNDERSTANDING CHRISTIANITY

Part 17 – Simon Peter’s Journey of Faith

Key Questions:

- What does faith in Jesus look like? Is there hope for people who fail? Is there anyone who cannot be saved?

Simon the Fisherman meets Jesus (John 1:40-42)

This was the first occasion on which Simon met Jesus. In verse 42 we read that Jesus “gazed intently” at Simon. What did Jesus see in Peter? We have no physical description of Peter in the Bible, but we do learn the following:

- *He was a fisherman* (in partnership with his brother Andrew and the sons of Zebedee, James and John); therefore he would have been muscular with rough hands, probably smelling of a lovely mixture of sweat and fish!
- *His name was Simon bar-Jonah*, so his father’s name was Jonah (we do not know his mother’s name)
- *He had no formal education* (Acts 4:13), but as a Jewish boy he would have studied the Old Testament from age five
- *He was married* (Matthew 8:14 records that his mother-in-law was healed by Jesus)
- *He had a distinct rural Galilee accent easily recognisable in Jerusalem* (Mark 14:70).

Jesus gave Simon a new name, “Peter”, which means “a rock”. “Simon” was the most common name in 1st century Palestine, but this is the first time on record that the name Peter was ever given to someone. Jesus uses the future tense – “*you will be called Peter*” – in other words Jesus is saying this is who Simon will become (not who he is now). In Luke 6:12-14 we read of Simon being called to be one of Jesus’ 12 disciples. Simon Peter is always named first in the lists of the 12 in the Gospels (Judas, the betrayer, was always last), as he became their leader.

It is not until the book of Acts that the name “Simon” was finally replaced by the name “Peter”. The new name signified a new identity: who Simon is becoming by God’s grace. Other people in Bible were given new names (e.g. Abram became Abraham, and Jacob became Israel). Each of these people received a new identity and a new role in God’s plan with their new name. Jesus was going to change an ordinary fisherman (Simon) into a rock on which He could build (Peter).

LESSONS TO LEARN:

- **Jesus changes people.** He always sees the potential of what a person can become when God works in their lives. He is able to transform us so that we become something special in God’s plan if we will follow Him.

Jesus calls Simon Peter to be a Fisher of Men (Luke 5:1-11)

These events happened around one year after Simon first met Jesus. Over the past year Simon had combined his fishing business with following Jesus. He had seen Jesus performing many miracles, including healing his own mother-in-law (Luke 4:38-39). Now Jesus performed the first of two miracles of catching many fish.

Simon’s was humbled as he became aware of his own sin – even though he had obeyed Jesus, he had doubted that they would get any fish. Jesus’ replies with the comforting words: “*Do not be afraid!*” This reassurance from God that we don’t need to fear is often found in the Bible to people who are humble before Him. Peter would become a fisher of men – calling people to follow Jesus. Although this seemed impossible to Simon, Jesus had shown him that it was possible as He is the “master-fisherman” both of fish and men!

After this Simon left his business and began to follow Jesus full-time. He left behind his boat and nets, and even the most profitable catch of fish he had ever made to follow Christ. Simon, afraid and uncertain of himself took this first step of faith in Jesus – because **HE** called, Simon would follow even though he knows his own sinfulness and weakness. Simon was beginning to learn that Jesus could always be taken at His word.

LESSONS TO LEARN:

- **We do not need to be afraid of God if we are humble and admit our need of Him**
- **Despite our sinfulness, Christ tells us not to be afraid, and invites us to know and follow Him.**
- **With Jesus what seems impossible becomes possible.** We can always trust in Jesus.

Simon Peter walks to Jesus on the water (Matthew 14:22-33)

Christ had just miraculously fed over 5000 people using two fish and five loaves of bread. He then commanded the disciples to go out in their boat, and they obeyed. Although they were obeying Christ in faith, they soon got into trouble in a strong wind. They were terrified, and especially when they saw Jesus walking on the water and thought it was a ghost. Again Jesus told them, “*Do not be afraid!*” Simon walked to Jesus on the water. Notice the doubt in his question (“*if it is you ...*”) but the faith he displayed in stepping out of the boat. Faith is taking Christ at His word, and that is what Peter was prepared to do! He waited for Jesus’ command BEFORE he stepped out of the boat. Although he got distracted by the storm and took his eyes off Jesus and so began to sink, when he cried out to Jesus, He immediately rescued him.

LESSONS TO LEARN:

- **Jesus does not promise a problem-free life for people who follow Him**, but He does promise to be with us through all our problems and to help us to rise above the problems if we trust in Him.
- **It is not the amount of faith we have that saves us, but who our faith is in.** Many people have faith in different people or ideas, but their faith will not save them if they are trusting in something that doesn’t have power to save them. Believing in something does not make it true. In reality the things we often depend on are little more trustworthy than water – our own health, financial security, career etc. Only Jesus is completely trustworthy.
- **Jesus will not allow His followers to sink, even if their faith is weak – He will keep them safe**

Simon Peter recognises who Jesus is (Matthew 16:13-26)

This discussion occurred near Caesarea Philippi, the Roman capital of Judea, which was a very multicultural city, and therefore a centre for various religions. Jesus' ministry had reached a turning point – He had been rejected in his home town (Capernaum); John the Baptist had been beheaded by Herod; His family thought He was mad; and opposition from the Jewish religious leaders was growing as they began to plot His death. Against this background Jesus asked his disciples who people thought He was. They answered with three possibilities people had suggested.

Jesus then asked them who **they** thought He was. Simon replied on behalf of the twelve disciples, saying, "*You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.*" This was a remarkable statement of faith. Simon had realised that Jesus was the Christ, and, even more, that He is the Son of God. He had been convinced by the words and actions of Jesus. Jesus commended Simon highly – it was God who had revealed this truth to him.

Then Jesus made an amazing promise to Simon – that starting with this first rock, Peter, He would build His church. Peter later wrote that God was building Christians into His church as "*living stones*" (1 Peter 2:5). Here Jesus lays the first of these stones, Peter, into the building. Together with the other apostles Peter would become the foundation of Christ's church (Ephesians 2:20). Every Christian who comes to the same position of faith in Christ as Peter becomes a stone too.

After Simon's confession, Jesus began to prepare the disciples for His coming death and resurrection. Peter could not accept this, and tried to correct Jesus, but Jesus stopped him. Then Jesus presented an amazing challenge to anyone who wanted to be His disciple. The **ONLY** way to follow Him is by the way that He Himself would take – the way of the cross. Anyone who wants to follow Him must deny themselves and take up their cross, dying to their right to rule their own life.

LESSONS TO LEARN:

- **The central question of the Bible is the one Jesus asked – who do you say Jesus is?** If He is really the Son of God (as Simon said), then He cannot be ignored.
- **Everyone who will follow Simon Peter in putting their faith in Christ will become a "living stone".** Christ will build them into His plan, and into the new community of His people (the Church).
- **To follow Jesus means to deny ourselves and take up our cross.** This means we must die to your own rights and submit to God's will for our life. This is what the Bible means by repentance and faith.

Simon Peter witnesses Jesus' majesty (Matthew 17:1-8)

On this occasion Jesus took His three closest followers – Peter, James and John – up a mountain with Him. There they saw an amazing sight as Jesus was transformed and Elijah and Moses (representing the authority of the Old Testament prophets and Law) appeared with Him. More amazingly still, they heard the voice of the Father speaking from Heaven saying, "*This is my Son, and I am fully pleased with Him. Listen to Him.*"

LESSONS TO LEARN:

This occasion (which is often called the "Transfiguration") confirmed several things about Jesus:

- **Jesus is the Son of God** – the Father said this, and the glory He shone with proves it
- **The Old Testament points to Him and His death** (see Luke 9:31 – they talked about His death)
- **He was perfect and sinless** – the Father could say that He was fully pleased with Jesus

Simon Peter denies Jesus (Luke 22:47-62)

Simon didn't understand that Jesus must die, and so when the soldiers came to arrest Jesus he tried to defend Him with a sword. Jesus, however, knew that He had to die, and so He refused to let Simon fight. Simon followed at a distance to see what would happen to Jesus, but he was very afraid that he might be arrested next. When he was accused of being a follower of Jesus three times he denied that he even knew Him. Then Jesus looked intently at Simon once more (as He did the first time they met – John 1:42), and Simon realised what he had done. This was the worst moment in Simon's life. He was overwhelmed by guilt and fear, and his hope was shattered. Jesus had actually predicted that Simon would deny Him (see Luke 22:31-38), but Peter had been confident that he would remain strong so that he would even die with Jesus. This occasion showed just how weak Simon still was.

After the Resurrection Jesus restores Simon Peter (John 21:1-23)

Here we read of another occasion when Jesus met with Simon Peter beside the Sea of Galilee. Perhaps Simon expected Jesus to criticise or reject him. Surely there was no hope for someone who had denied Jesus? However, three times (mirroring his three denials) Jesus asked Simon whether he loved Him. Jesus was gently restoring Simon. Instead of rejecting Simon, Jesus gave him a new task to fulfil in His name – to look after His "sheep". Simon would still become Peter, the rock. The simple call of Jesus in verse 19, "*Follow Me*", was a powerful reminder to Peter of that time at the shores of this same lake after the first miraculous catch of fish when Jesus had spoken the same words. Jesus had reconstructed that situation – again calling Simon to follow Him after a miraculous catch of fish. Peter's failings during the previous three years were forgiven. All that mattered was Simon's loving relationship with His Lord. This was truly a new beginning and Peter would become the first preacher and a foundation rock of the church. As a fisher of men he would travel widely to preach the gospel, but he would also be the shepherd of the flock, feeding and caring for Christians until his dying day.

LESSONS TO LEARN:

- **Jesus gives people a second chance after failure.** He is ready to forgive if we repent and ask for forgiveness, and He will restore us into a good relationship with God and use us to accomplish God's purpose.

Key Lesson: Jesus patiently leads people to trust in Him

Peter's experience teaches us that Jesus is patient with people. He calls us to trust in Him and follow Him, and He knows us personally. Despite our sin and weakness He sees the potential of who we can become in God's plan. When we realise who He is and repent of our sin and commit our lives under His leadership He will change us to become the person God wants us to be, and He will never give up on us even if we stumble and fail Him.

UNDERSTANDING CHRISTIANITY

Part 18 – Acts - the story of the Early Church

Key Questions:

- How did the message about Jesus spread from a few followers in Jerusalem across the world?

The Book of Acts

Acts is a sequel to Luke's gospel, written by the same author (the physician Luke) to the same person (Theophilus). The name "Acts" is actually an abbreviation of the book's full name, which is "*The Acts of the Apostles*". The apostles were the eleven disciples whom Jesus had trained to become leaders of the Christians after He left earth (there had been twelve, but Judas had betrayed Jesus and was now dead), plus another man called Paul (see *Part 19*). So, this book records the activities (or "acts") of these leaders of the early Church. It begins with the Ascension of Jesus to Heaven, and ends in around AD 62. The key verses to understanding the book's message are Acts 1:8-9. The apostles were still expecting that the risen Jesus might overthrow the Romans and make Himself King right then (verse 6), but Jesus told them that their job would be to spread the message about Him across the world, starting in Jerusalem, followed by the region of Judea, then the neighbouring region of Samaria and eventually across the whole world. Acts tells how the good news about Jesus spread outwards in this way from Jerusalem to many nations across the Middle East, Africa and Europe.

The Holy Spirit comes to live in Christians

The Bible clearly teaches that the Holy Spirit is God and that He is a person who is able to reason and make decisions and who has real feelings, so we must be careful not to think of Him as just an impersonal "force" or source of power. On the night before He died, Jesus promised the Twelve that the Holy Spirit would come after He had left them. His teaching is recorded in John 14:15-31 and John 16:5-16. From these passages we learn seven things about the Holy Spirit:

1. **He is a "Counsellor" who will represent Jesus to His followers** – He does everything for us that Jesus did for His disciples when He was on earth (14:15, 26)
2. **He lives with and in Jesus' followers** (14:17) – this is a very close, permanent relationship
3. **He is the Spirit of Truth who teaches people God's truth** (14:26, 16:13)
4. **He could not come until Jesus had left the earth** (16:7) – this is why Jesus did not stay on earth forever
5. **He convicts people of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgement** (16:8-11) – in other words, He shows people that they have sinned and that they deserve God's judgement so that they will realise their need of God's forgiveness and come to Him.
6. **He brings glory to Jesus** (16:14) – just as the Son gave glory to the Father, so the Spirit gives glory to the Son
7. **He helps the disciples to speak to others about Jesus** (15:26-27)

The relationship Jesus describes is permanent, as the Spirit makes His home in Christians. Although the Holy Spirit was active in the Old Testament, helping people to fulfil special tasks given by God and giving God's words to the prophets, this kind of relationship between all of God's people and the Holy Spirit was something new. In the Old Testament the Holy Spirit was never said to **live in** God's people. He settled on them to give power for a certain job for a limited time. Some Old Testament prophets, notably Joel and Ezekiel, foresaw a time when God's Spirit would be poured out on and live in His people. These prophecies were fulfilled when the Holy Spirit came on the church just as Jesus had promised.

In Acts chapter 1, Luke records Jesus' last words to the apostles before He ascended to Heaven. He told them to wait in Jerusalem for a "*few days*" until they were "*baptised with the Holy Spirit*" (verse 5). The promises about the Holy Spirit given by Jesus before His death were soon to be fulfilled. Jesus gave them their great mission – they were to be His witnesses across the world – but said that this would not be possible until the Holy Spirit came on them to give them power (verse 8). Shortly after saying this, Jesus ascended to Heaven (verse 9).

The apostles waited in Jerusalem as Jesus had told them, praying (verse 14). Finally, on the feast Day of Pentecost (50 days after the Passover, and so 50 days after the death of Jesus), something supernatural happened. Luke describes it in Acts 2:1-13. The disciples heard (verse 2) and saw (verse 3) something unusual, and they were given a special gift of speaking in other languages. This caught the attention of many people in the city who heard them speaking in their own languages, and even their own local dialects. The disciples were speaking about what God had done, and many people began to wonder what the significance of this amazing event was (verses 11-12). Other people in the crowd, however, would not listen and instead accused the disciples of being drunk (verse 13). The attention of the crowd was now focussed on the apostles, and they now had power from the Holy Spirit to speak with courage about Jesus!

Not surprisingly, it was Simon Peter (from now on he is simply called Peter as he has now become the rock in God's church) who spoke to the crowds. The people he was speaking to were all familiar with the Old Testament, as they were a mixture of Jews and Gentiles (non-Jews) who had come to worship God at the Temple (these Gentiles who worshipped God but did not fully convert to Judaism were often called "God-fearing" Gentiles). Peter, therefore, began his message with a quotation from the Old Testament prophet, Joel, who had foreseen a day when God would pour out His Spirit on all of His people (Joel 2:28-32), marking a new age of salvation. Peter's message (Acts 2:14-40) contains several main points:

1. **The supernatural gift of speaking in other languages was a sign of the fulfilment of Joel's prophecy** (verses 14-21). In other words, the gospel is God's plan to save people, promised by Him and now fulfilled.
2. **Jesus is the Lord and Messiah** (verses 22-36)
 - a. God endorsed Jesus' message through His miracles, which they had seen themselves (verse 22)
 - b. The people had executed Jesus, but this was also part of God's plan (verse 23)

- c. God raised Him from the dead as King David had foreseen, and as the apostles had witnessed (verses 24-32)
- d. Jesus is now seated beside God the Father in heaven (verse 33)
- e. Jesus is now pouring out the Holy Spirit on the apostles (verse 33)

Conclusion (verse 36): The evidence is clear – Jesus is the Lord and Messiah!

3. **They must respond to the message** (verses 37-38)
 - a. *Repent* – “turn from your sins” (verse 38)
 - b. *Trust* – “turn to God” (verse 38)
 - c. *Be baptised* (verse 38) [for teaching about the meaning of baptism see *Part 20*]
4. **God will respond when they repent and believe by giving them the Holy Spirit** (verse 38) – Christians believe that our lives can only really change by God’s power, not by our own effort.

This was the first time that the Christian “gospel” (meaning simply “good news”) was preached, and the results were amazing: 3000 people responded and were baptised. This was the beginning of the Church (see *Part 27*).

The Gospel spreads out from Jerusalem

The first Christians were all either Jews or God-fearing Gentiles. The biggest question for the early Christians was whether the message about Jesus was only for the Jews, in which case Gentiles who wanted to become Christians should follow Jewish cultural and religious practices, or whether it was possible to really be a Christian and remain Gentile. In particular they were unsure about circumcision, which was the sign of God’s Old Testament covenant with Abraham. Should Gentiles who wanted to become Christians be circumcised?

Over the first months after the Day of Pentecost, the Church in Jerusalem continued to grow as new people became Christians. God performed miracles through the apostles, and the Christians continued to meet together. Peter and John preached the message about Jesus even to the Jewish leaders who had executed Jesus (see Acts 4:1-22). Not surprisingly, they faced opposition from the High Priest and his closest followers, who had been the most bitter enemies of Jesus. One young man called Stephen was stoned to death by these Jewish leaders for preaching boldly about Jesus (Acts 7). On this occasion a man called Saul was involved. He became the leading enemy of the Christians, trying to destroy the Church (Acts 8:1-3). However, the Christians who had to run away from Jerusalem to escape this persecution took the message out to the regions of Judea and Samaria. The opposition they faced actually helped the Church to grow! The apostle Philip preached to people in Samaria and even shared the good news with a God-fearing official from Ethiopia, who became a Christian (Acts 8).

These new Christians were still Jews, Samaritans (who shared many of the cultural and religious beliefs of the Jews) and a few God-fearing Gentiles (like the Ethiopian official). The question still remained whether the Christian message was for all nations and cultures. In Acts chapter 10 we read about a God-fearing Roman army officer called Cornelius (verses 1-2). An angel told him to send for Peter to come and visit him (verses 3-6). The next day Peter was given a special vision by God. In it he was told to eat various animals that the Old Testament Law did not permit Jews to eat (verses 9-16). Peter received this same vision three times, but he could not figure out what it meant (verse 17). Just then, Cornelius’ messengers arrived. Peter went with them to Cornelius’ house. He finally realised the significance of his vision: that **God will accept people from any nation who respond to the message about Jesus** (verse 34). Many of the Gentiles accepted the message, and they received the Holy Spirit. They began to speak in other languages just as the apostles had on the Day of Pentecost, which proved that they had received the Spirit in exactly the same way as the Jews (verse 47). Some Christians disagreed with Peter about his decision to preach in the home of a Gentile, but when Peter told them that the Gentiles had also received the Holy Spirit these Christians accepted that the gospel was for all nations.

Although opposition to Christianity continued (see Acts 12), the message about Jesus continued to spread. The remainder of the book of Acts (from chapter 13 onwards) focuses on the work of Paul, who carried the message out to many Gentile countries (see *Part 19*). When some Christians still tried to teach Gentile converts that they must be circumcised, the apostles met together in Jerusalem to decide this matter. Paul and Peter spoke about the things God had been doing among the Gentiles. When the others heard this, they agreed that the Gentiles should be accepted as true Christians without having to be circumcised or follow other Jewish religious practices (this event is recorded in Acts 15). Since then, the Christian message has continued to spread across the world to every culture. People do not need to change their culture to become Christians, but they do need to make God’s will the first priority in their lives and allow the teachings of the Bible to shape their culture, strengthening what is good and correcting what is not helpful.

Peter’s two letters

Peter wrote two letters in the New Testament. They are named after him – I and II Peter. These letters were written to Christians who were suffering for their faith (as Christians increased in number they also began to face opposition from the Roman Empire). Peter encouraged them to keep living for God because they have the hope of eternal life. He told them that it is worth suffering for Jesus because God will reward those who suffer for doing what is right. In these letters we also discover what Peter came to understand about the death of Jesus:

- **I Peter 1:18-20** – Peter says that Jesus died as a perfect sinless Lamb (the picture is of the Old Testament sacrifices for sins) to pay the ransom price to free people from their sins.
- **I Peter 2:21-25** – Peter referred back to the great prophecies of Isaiah chapter 53 and showed how Jesus has fulfilled these by dying to carry away our sins (compare these verses with Isaiah 53:4-12)

Peter was fulfilling Jesus’ special command to him to “*feed my sheep*” (John 21:17), by encouraging Christians to keep on growing in their faith. He also challenged all church leaders (known as “elders”) to do the same (I Peter 5:1-4).

Key Lesson: The gospel of Jesus spread because the Holy Spirit empowered the apostles

The disciples were transformed into apostles of Jesus by the Holy Spirit who came to live in them on the Day of Pentecost. They began to spread the good news about Jesus across the world, and it continues to spread today. The gospel is good news for people of all cultures and races, and can still transform lives today.

UNDERSTANDING CHRISTIANITY

Part 19 – Paul’s Journey of Faith

Key Questions:

- Is Christianity relevant for educated people as well as uneducated people like Simon Peter?
- Can the message of Jesus really change people's lives?

Paul’s Background

Paul was born probably some time between 1 and 10 AD in the city of Tarsus (Acts 21:39), which was the capital city of the region of Cilicia, situated on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea in the south of modern-day Turkey. Cilicia was part of the Roman Empire at that time. Paul's parents were pure-blooded Jews from the Tribe of Benjamin, and so they gave him the name Saul (the name of the first King of Israel, who was also from the tribe of Benjamin) and had him circumcised when he was eight days old as the Law required (Philippians 3:5). Saul was also a Roman citizen by birth (Acts 22:22-29), which means that his parents must also have been citizens (this probably also explains why he had two names, his Jewish name Saul and his Roman name Paul). Outside the city of Rome, only people who had a good social standing could become citizens, and so Saul's parents were probably quite wealthy.

Saul's family were Pharisees, members of a group who were very strict about obeying the Old Testament Law (Acts 23:6 – see *Module 2 Study Aids* for more about the Pharisees), and so it was not surprising that they sent him to Jerusalem (probably at age 13 or 14 years) to study the Jewish religion under the leading professor in the city, a man called Gamaliel (Acts 22:3). Saul was trained to be a Rabbi, but also learned skills as a tent-maker (it was common for Rabbis to learn other skills so that they could support themselves financially if necessary). He was a very good student, and became one of the leading young Rabbis, full of passion to follow the Old Testament Law and the Jewish religion (Acts 22:3, Galatians 1:14). Saul does not seem to have been in Jerusalem during the public ministry of Jesus, since he never mentions having been an eyewitness to His teaching or death. It seems likely that during these years he was somewhere else, perhaps back in Tarsus. However, he was in Jerusalem by later in 33 AD when the apostles were beginning to preach the good news about Jesus. His enthusiasm for the Jewish religion caused him to reject the new Christian teaching and become one of its strongest opponents. For this reason, Saul was one of the official witnesses at the execution of Stephen (Acts 8:1), and was afterwards chosen by the High Priest to be the leading persecutor of the Christians. He carried this mission out with his usual great passion, arresting men and women and even causing the death of some Christians (Acts 22:4-5).

SUMMARY: Saul was a very privileged person – from a wealthy background, highly educated, a Roman citizen, and well-respected within Judaism. He was the equivalent of a modern-day upper-class person with a first-class honours degree from a leading university.

Paul’s encounter with Christ

On one occasion, Saul made a special journey to the city of Damascus in the Roman province of Syria (to the north of Galilee) to persecute the Christians there. The record of what happened during that journey is in **Acts chapter 9**, and we also have two records of Paul re-telling the story himself (in Acts 22:6-21 he told it to a crowd, and in Acts 26:9-18 he told it to King Herod Agrippa). The events were as follows:

- As Saul neared the city of Damascus at around midday, a light suddenly flashed around him. Saul fell to the ground. He heard a voice saying in the Aramaic language, "*Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?*"
- The voice also said, "*It is hard for you to fight against my will.*" This phrase suggests that beneath his outward appearance of unwavering loyalty to Judaism Saul had already begun to question in his heart whether the Christian message might be true. He had been struggling with this issue.
- Saul asked, "*Who are you sir?*" The voice replied, "*I am Jesus of Nazareth, the one you are persecuting*". It appears that as well as hearing the voice, Saul also saw the risen Jesus (see I Corinthians 15:7).
- Jesus gave Saul a special mission to take the Christian message to the Gentile peoples (see Acts 26:16-18).
- Saul's companions saw the light and heard some noise, but could not understand the words spoken by Jesus.
- Jesus told Saul to go on into the city where he would receive further instructions.
- Saul could not see after his encounter with Jesus, but his companions led him into the city of Damascus
- In Damascus a Christian called Ananias came to Saul as God had told him to. After speaking to Saul, God used Ananias to restore his sight and then to baptise Paul.

The importance of this encounter in the life of Saul cannot be underestimated. From this time on his entire priorities changed and his life was transformed. The passion that he previously put into following the Jewish Law and persecuting Christians he now put into knowing Jesus more and serving Him. Paul later wrote about this in **Philippians 3:4-11**. There he lists all the things he used to be proud of and hoped would make him acceptable to God:

- He was a true Jew – descended from the tribe of Benjamin and circumcised on the eighth day (verse 5a)
- He did his best to obey the Old Testament Law – he was a Pharisee (verse 5b)
- He was very enthusiastic for his Jewish faith, even persecuting the church (verse 6a)
- If it had been possible to earn a good relationship with God then Paul would have done so (verse 6b)

After he became a Christian, however, his priorities changed. Now he realised that:

- Everything he had done was worthless compared to what Christ had done (verse 7)
- Knowing Jesus was the most important thing for him – worth more than everything else (verse 8)
- He knew that he could never earn forgiveness for his sins, but could only be saved by Christ through faith (verse 9)

- Life was now a relationship with Jesus living in the power that raised Him and with hope for the future (verses 10-11)

SUMMARY: Becoming a Christian means trusting in Christ alone to forgive your sins and to lead you in your life. As a Christian, obedience to Him becomes more important than culture, education or career. For a Christian the number one priority is to do God's will. The Christian life is a relationship with the living Christ.

Paul becomes the Apostle to the Gentiles

Paul's great mission, which was given to Him by Jesus on the Road to Damascus, was to take the good news about Jesus to the Gentile people (see Acts 26:15-18). God used him to bring light to the Gentiles so that they too could share in the forgiveness of sins and be part of God's people (you can follow Paul's journeys in the *Maps* section, and a timeline of his life is found in the *Module 3 Study Aids*). The Kingdom of God would be for all people from all nations (just as Jesus had said when He was on earth – Matthew 28:19). Paul was at the centre of the debate amongst the early Christians about whether the Gentile Christians should obey circumcision and other aspects of the Old Covenant. The apostles realised that God was fulfilling the Old Testament prophecies that the Gentiles would be included in the Kingdom of God (see Amos 9:11-15 and Acts 15:13-21). Paul's preached about the Kingdom of God (see Acts 28:30-31). He rejoiced that God had called Him to reach the Gentiles (see Romans 11:13 and Galatians 2:8), and he worked especially hard to bring Jewish and Gentile Christians together in the churches he worked with. He explained the role of the Law, which was to lead us until Christ came (Galatians 3:24-29) and to show people their sin and need of God's forgiveness (Romans 3:19-20). No one could be made right with God by keeping the Law. The Law no longer condemns Christians, and we are set free by God's grace and have the Holy Spirit living in us to give us power to change.

Paul's message about Jesus

a) Preached to intellectuals in Athens

In **Acts 17:16-34** we read an example of how Paul explained the good news about Jesus to a group of Gentile intellectual scholars in the Greek city of Athens. It may be helpful for us in understanding this message today:

- God is unknown to pagan cultures* – they worship many gods, but the Creator is unknown to them (verse 23)
- God is the Creator and Lord over heaven and earth* – He gives life and all good things (verse 25)
- God created all human beings* and has been guiding human history as King over all mankind (verse 26)
- God is not far from us*, and wants people to know Him and worship Him (verses 27-29)
- God calls people everywhere to repent* – turning from their idols to worship Him (verse 30)
- God has set a day when He will judge all people* in justice through Jesus (verse 31)
- Jesus is the Saviour and Judge* – this was proved by God in His resurrection from the dead (verse 31)

The responses of the people of Athens were interesting – some mocked the message of the resurrection, others said they wanted to think about it and hear more, while others became believers in Christ! How will you respond?

b) Explained in his letter to the Romans

Romans contains the most complete explanation of the Christian message in the Bible. It is worth reading and studying the whole book to understand how Paul explains the Good News about Jesus (the gospel). Romans 1:16-17 tells us Paul's attitude to the gospel message:

For I am not ashamed of this Good News about Christ. It is the power of God at work, saving everyone who believes—the Jew first and also the Gentile. This Good News tells us how God makes us right in his sight. This is accomplished from start to finish by faith. As the Scriptures say, "It is through faith that a righteous person has life." Paul was convinced that the message about Jesus was the only way for people to be made right with God and that faith was the only way to receive the gift of life. The message of the Gospel is true for everyone, whatever their culture or background. In the rest of the book of Romans Paul explains what the message is. We can summarise it by reading selected verses from the book:

1. GOD made us to know Him – Romans 1:20

God created the world and He has made it possible for people to know Him. He shows Himself to people through the world that He created (we can see God's power and learn something about what He is like from the orderly world He made). He has also spoken to us through the Bible and through Jesus Christ, His Son.

2. WE sinned against God – Romans 3:23

Sin means that we have rebelled against God and do what we choose rather than obeying Him. Sin has affected all human beings and means that we will die and will face God's judgement.

3. GOD sent Jesus to pay the price for our sin – Romans 5:8-11

Even though we have sinned, God still loved us and so He made a way for us to come back to Him. He sent Jesus to die for our sins so that we could be forgiven for our sins and have a new relationship with God.

4. WE must repent (turn away from our sin) and believe in Jesus – Romans 10:9-10

God's forgiveness and eternal life are offered to us as a free gift because of Christ's death, but if we are to receive them (to be saved) we must believe in Jesus Christ and confess Him as Lord over our lives.

5. GOD gives new life to those who believe – Romans 8:1-4

When a person commits their life to God in faith He forgives them for their sins (there is no more condemnation), destroys the power of sin over them, and gives His Holy Spirit to them so that they can live life the way He wants them to. Christian living means a daily relationship with God in which they follow the Holy Spirit.

Key Lesson: Becoming a Christian changes a person's life completely

Paul was transformed by his encounter with the risen Jesus. Instead of being an enemy of the Church he now used his education and gifting to spread the good news about Jesus to the Gentiles. The Christian message is relevant for all people from all cultures and races, and it gives us a new priority in life – to do God's will.

UNDERSTANDING CHRISTIANITY

Part 20 – The New Covenant and Baptism

Key Questions:

- What is the relationship Christians have with God like? Do Christians have to follow the Old Testament Law?

A Reminder of the Old Covenant

The Bible tells us that God wants to have a real relationship with people. His relationships are always based on promises, and He can always be trusted to do the things He has promised. God's main aim throughout history has been to **have a people who will live in the place He has prepared for them under His rule enjoying His blessings** (throughout these studies we have defined the Kingdom of God in these terms). The way God has done this has been through **covenants**, which are special agreements with a group of people based on promises. The first covenant mentioned in the Bible was in the time of Noah, when God promised that He would never again destroy the whole earth in a flood. In Genesis chapter 9 we read how God made this covenant with every living creature, including all mankind, and how He gave the rainbow as a sign to mark it. The second covenant in the Old Testament (from which the Old Testament takes its name) was the basis of God's special relationship with the nation of Israel. The sign of this covenant was that all male Israelites would be circumcised. This "Old Covenant" was given in three stages:

1. **Abraham** (c. 2000 BC) – God gave three promises to Abraham, who was the fore-father of the nation of Israel.
 - a. That his descendants would possess the land of Canaan (Palestine)
 - b. That he would have many descendants who would be a great nation
 - c. That all nations on earth would be blessed through his descendants
2. **Moses** (c. 1440 BC) – the nation of Israel received the Law of God, which showed them three things:
 - a. *Moral laws* – showing them what is right and wrong
 - b. *Ceremonial laws* – rules about how to worship God by making sacrifices
 - c. *Civil laws* – rules about how to govern the nation of Israel
3. **King David** (c. 1000 BC) – God added an additional promise, that David's family would be kings for ever.

For their part, the nation of Israel had to respond to the Covenant in faith and obedience. The Old Testament is the story of how sometimes they did this and at other times they did not.

The Old Covenant fulfilled in Jesus

The Old Covenant was fulfilled in Jesus, the Messiah:

1. **He was the descendant of Abraham who brings blessing to people of all nations**
2. **He fulfilled the Law of Moses**
 - a. He was perfect and sinless, keeping the moral laws
 - b. He was the one sacrifice for sins forever, fulfilling the ceremonial laws
3. **He was the descendant of David who will be a King forever**

As a result, followers of Jesus have a different kind of relationship with the Law than Israel had:

- a. *Moral laws* – the standard of right and wrong has not changed, as it is based on God's unchanging character, but Christians do not try to become holy by obeying a written set of rules. Instead we have a new power inside that enables us to do what is right and to avoid wrong (see below).
- b. *Ceremonial laws* – we no longer need to make sacrifices to worship God, as Jesus died as our perfect sacrifice (Hebrews 9:11-28) and Christians no longer need to be circumcised or to avoid certain foods. These laws were signs pointing forward to Jesus and now that He has come they are no longer needed.
- c. *Civil laws* – these laws were intended specially for the nation of Israel. Christians must be good citizens of whatever State they live in (see *Part 22* for more about how Christians view citizenship).

The New Covenant promised and established

Jeremiah's vision of a New Covenant

In around 600 BC, God gave a vision to the prophet Jeremiah. He fore-saw a day when a new relationship with God would be possible – a New Covenant. He wrote about this in Jeremiah 31:31-34. This New Covenant would not be like the Old Covenant which the people of Israel had broken (verse 32), but under it:

1. God's Laws would be written on the minds and hearts of His people (verse 33a)
2. God would be their God and all of His people would know Him in a personal way (verses 33b-34a)
3. God will forgive their wickedness and never again remember their sins (verse 34b)

Jesus instituted the New Covenant, which is sealed with His blood

Jesus spoke about this New Covenant on the night before His death when He shared His last meal with His disciples. He spoke about a cup of wine as "*the token of God's new covenant to save you – an agreement sealed with the blood I will pour out for you*" (Luke 22:20). Jesus was claiming that the New Covenant promised 600 years earlier by Jeremiah was about to begin, and that it would be established because of His death on the cross.

Jesus fulfilled the New Covenant as its High Priest, Sacrifice and Mediator

The book of Hebrews takes up the theme of the New Covenant. It was written to Jewish people who were deciding whether to follow Jesus or to stay in the Jewish religion. The writer compares the Old Covenant with the New Covenant. In Hebrews 8:10-12 he quotes from Jeremiah chapter 31. The letter to the Hebrews describes Jesus as:

- i. **The High Priest of the New Covenant** – Jesus is the One who made the sacrifice for sins that makes it possible for them to be forgiven (Hebrews 8:1-6). Jesus is a better High Priest than the High Priests in the Old Testament, because He is actually present in heaven before God, and is alive forever to save us.
- ii. **The sacrifice of the New Covenant** – Jesus was also the sacrifice that was made to bring the New Covenant into place. He offered Himself up as a sacrifice for sins (Hebrews 9:11-14). Jesus was the perfect sacrifice that paid for all sins once for all because He was sinless and He was both God and man.
- iii. **The mediator of the New Covenant** – A mediator is a person who brings two people together. Jesus brings us into a new relationship with God on the terms of the New Covenant (Hebrews 9:15, 24-28). He is alive forever to ensure that this relationship lasts, and He will come again in the future to take us to live with God.

The promises of the New Covenant for Christians

Christians have an amazing new relationship with God, all because of Jesus' death for us and because He lives forever to bring us to God. This Covenant depends on God's promises to us and what He has done for us, not what we have done for Him. In Christ, the three promises of the New Covenant are true for every Christian:

1. **God's laws in our minds and hearts** – This promise speaks of the work of the **Holy Spirit** in our lives. He changes us from the inside out (rather than us trying to change ourselves from the outside). He makes our minds more like Jesus' mind so that we begin to think more like Him, and He makes our hearts more like Jesus' heart so that we begin to desire the things God wants. This is the power of the Holy Spirit working in us. So, instead of trying to keep a set of written standards like the Old Testament Law in our own power, Christians seek to be filled by and led by the Holy Spirit who gives us power to obey the teaching of Jesus and the apostles.
2. **All people will know God personally** – All Christians can know God in a personal way as our Father. Unlike the people of Israel in the Old Testament, we do not need priests to stand between God and us. Instead, we can come into God's presence through Jesus. So, when Christians pray we are promised that God will hear us, and will answer our prayers in the way that He sees to be best. As Christians we have a personal, living relationship with God.
3. **Our wickedness forgiven and our sins never remembered again** – Because Jesus has taken the punishment for our sins and paid the price for their forgiveness, we can never be found guilty of our sins or punished for them. We are declared not guilty before God because of Jesus' sacrifice for us.

The sign of the New Covenant – the Lord's Supper (also known as "communion" or "breaking of bread")

Every covenant has a sign to remind the people with whom it is made about the promises God has given them, and the sign of the New Covenant is the Lord's Supper, which is celebrated regularly by most Christians (in some churches every week and in others once per month or once every three months). The celebration is based on Jesus' command to his twelve disciples in Luke 22:19-20. After He ate the Passover meal with them on the night before His death, Jesus took bread and wine and shared it with them. He told them to do this in remembrance of Him. The bread represents His body, given for us (in other words His death on the cross), and the cup of wine represents the New Covenant sealed by His blood shed for us. Christ Himself is the sacrifice that sealed the New Covenant.

In I Corinthians 11:23-34, Paul taught the church in Corinth about the Lord's Supper. He explained how important it is because Christians will celebrate it only until Jesus comes again and until then it announces Jesus' death as our hope (verse 26). When Christians celebrate the Lord's Supper they should examine themselves to make sure they are living closely with God and in a good relationship with other Christians. The Lord's Supper reminds us that our faith is only in Christ, that His death is our only hope of salvation, and that we need to keep living in obedience to Him.

Water Baptism

The Lord's Supper is one of only two things (sometimes called "ordinances") that Jesus specifically commanded Christians to do (in addition to loving one another!) The other is baptism in water. Baptism was practised by John the Baptist as a sign that the people who he baptised had repented of their sins and wanted to follow God's ways. Jesus told His disciples that they should baptise all new Christians (see Matthew 28:19), and in the book of Acts this was exactly what they did (see Acts 2:41 for example). Every new Christian was baptised in the "*name of*" Jesus (meaning in His authority – showing that He is now their Lord) and the Father and the Holy Spirit. Different churches have different views about baptism (especially whether babies of Christians can be baptised and whether the person should be immersed in water or sprinkled with it), but this author believes that only the baptism of people who have personally believed by immersion fulfils the biblical pattern.

Baptism is a very powerful picture of what God has done in a person's life (see Romans 6:3-14 for Paul's teaching on this):

- a) **Going under the water is like dying with Jesus** – the person has become a true follower of Jesus, taking up their cross to follow Him (Matthew 18:24-26). They have died to their own selfish ambition and have accepted Jesus as their Lord, promising to follow Him always. Their sins have been forgiven because of the death of Jesus.
- b) **Coming up out of the water is like being raised to new life with Jesus** – the Christian has entered into a new, living relationship with God. The Holy Spirit has come to live in their life to give them power to live for God, making them spiritually alive. From now on they will live for Jesus, making obedience to Him their first priority.

Although baptism is not necessary for a person to become a Christian, and it is only an outward sign of the spiritual reality of what God has done, it is expected by Jesus as an act of obedience and a sign to the whole world that the person now belongs to Him. Christians are only baptised once. If you are a Christian, why not be baptised?

Key Lesson: Christians receive the promises of the New Covenant through Jesus

Jesus made a New Covenant with those who trust in Him – through it our sins are forgiven forever, we know God personally, and God changes us by the Holy Spirit who lives in us. There are two things Jesus commanded Christians to do: baptism (a once off witness to Christ) and the Lord's Supper (a regular way to remember Jesus).

UNDERSTANDING CHRISTIANITY

Part 21 – The Church

Key Questions:

- What purposes did God give the Church? What should local churches do to meet these purposes?

The meaning of “church”

When the Bible talks about a church it never refers to a building. In fact, at the time when the New Testament was written there were no buildings built especially for Christian meetings – the Christians met in privately owned houses or, in some cities, in the Jewish meeting place (called a “synagogue”). In the Bible the word “church” always refers to people, but it is used in two related but distinct senses:

- The one church** (sometimes called the “universal church”) – often the New Testament uses the word “church” to mean all true Christians all over the world. Of course, no person knows all the members of the Universal Church – it is a spiritual reality, and its members are known only to God. Jesus promised that He would build His Church (Matthew 16:18), and so the Church was His plan. In this sense there is only one Church, with its basis in Christ and His apostles (Ephesians 2:20. The Church is united by the fact that we share a common faith, pray to the same Father God, obey the same Lord Jesus and share life in the same Holy Spirit (Ephesians 4:4-6). Of course, this does not mean that we are united with everyone who claims to be a Christian, but that all true Christians are already united in Christ – our responsibility is to keep this unity in the way we treat and speak about each other (Ephesians 4:3).
- The local church** – in the very beginning there was only one local church in Jerusalem (see Acts 2). At that time the Universal Church was able to meet together in one place. As the good news about Jesus spread and people living in other places became Christians this was no longer possible. Christians in different locations began to meet together as local churches, with clearly defined membership and recognised leaders. Strictly speaking this does not mean that there were many different churches, as each of these was a local gathering (or “congregation”) of the Universal Church. Local churches are, therefore, smaller groups of Christians in one town or area who meet together, and they should be miniature, localised representations of the Universal Church. The picture has been confused over 2000 years of church history by many different divisions and ideas which lead to local churches taking different names and organising into “denominations” (groups of local churches who share a common position on some belief or a common history). Most local churches have a membership, and the leaders of the church know who its members are. The aim should be that all members of a local church are also members of the Universal Church – in other words, that only true Christians should be members of local churches. For this reason leaders of local churches often interview people who want to join to make sure that their beliefs and lifestyle are in keeping with the teaching of the Bible.

In modern usage the word has come to be used to describe church buildings as well, since most churches in the West have purpose-built buildings. But strictly speaking, these buildings should be called “church buildings” or “church halls” and the word church should describe the people who meet there.

The first church (Acts 2:42-47)

After Simon Peter preached on the Day of Pentecost, around 3,000 people became Christians and were baptised. Added to the apostles and the other disciples, this made around 3,500 Christians in the city of Jerusalem. The things this first local church did can teach us a great deal about what a local church should be like:

- The apostles’ Teaching** – the apostles were the authorised representatives of Jesus, personally appointed by Him, and their teaching had authority for the first church. Teaching is very important for the church, as Christians believe that even after becoming a Christian people must continue to grow in their faith. It is by hearing God’s word and obeying it in the Holy Spirit’s power that Christians can grow to become more like Jesus. The apostles’ teaching was recorded for us in the New Testament books, and in local churches today the Bible should be regarded as the final authority for any differences of opinion. In most modern church meetings teaching from the Bible is an important part.
- The Fellowship** – the word “fellowship” means simply “sharing”. In the first church the Christians shared their lives with each other. They spent time together including meeting in the Temple courts and eating together in their homes. They also shared their possessions together to meet the needs of any person who was in need. This sharing is summarised by saying that they “had everything in common”. The best way to think of a church is as a community or a family. People meet together because they love each other and care about the things that are happening in one another’s lives. Christians support each other practically and by listening to, praying for, and advising one another.
- Breaking of Bread** – this is a reference to the Lord’s Supper, which Jesus gave to His disciples as a sign of the New Covenant (see *Part 20*). This celebration was important for the first church, and it remains important for churches today. Some churches have the Lord’s Supper every Sunday, while others have it less often (perhaps once per month).
- Prayer and Praising God** – the first church was devoted to prayer. They believed in meeting together to pray to God about many different issues. They also spent time together praising God. To “praise” means to give thanks and celebrate God as the source of good things. From a very early stage Christians began to do this by singing songs (just as the nation of Israel did in the Old Testament using the psalms). In churches today praise remains very important, especially in the singing of songs, which are part of most church meetings. Prayer is also an important part of church

life. Church meetings usually include one or more prayers, and there are even meetings completely devoted to prayer. The reason why prayer is so important to Christians is that God is our King, and therefore His will for us is most important. Prayer expresses our faith in Him and asks for His Spirit to fill us and work in us.

- 5. Witnessing to others** – the first church was very effective in reaching the other people in Jerusalem with the message about Jesus. In fact, their approach to church was so loving and caring that they found favour with the people. The result was that every day some people would become Christians and would join the church. The Christians took every opportunity they had to share the good news about Jesus because they believed that it was the only true way to know God. Churches today are still very active in sharing the message of the Bible with other people and in caring for other people who are in need. Our mission is to be like Jesus in caring for others and to share His love and teaching with others. Christian churches often support mission work in other countries, and even send members across the world.

Pictures of the church in the Bible

A spiritual building (Ephesians 2:19-22)

Paul describes the Church as being like a building built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Jesus being the cornerstone (which bears the weight of an arch, holding the building together). Christians are being built together like stones in the building (see Peter's comments in 1 Peter 2:5) to form a temple where the Holy Spirit lives. This picture shows us that the main purpose of the Church is to be a place where God lives, and so to bring worship to God.

A body (Ephesians 1:22-23)

Paul describes the Church as the body of Christ. Although Jesus is not physically present on earth today, He is present through the Church, and we are here to do the things He wants us to do. He is the head, meaning that He gives the body its direction. Jesus is the only leader of all Christians. In 1 Corinthians chapter 12 Paul uses the idea of the body to show that every Christian has a unique role to play in the local church (in the same way that different parts of the body have different functions) but that all parts are different. God has given every Christian gifts that they can use to serve other Christians in the church. Most work in churches is done by people who volunteer their time without being paid to do it.

A family (1 Timothy 5:1-3)

The relationships between Christians in the church are similar to those between members of a family. The main emphasis here is on the love that Christians have for one another. This love comes from God, and is greater than natural human love. Because God loves us and He teaches us how to love others, we love one another, even though we might be different from each other. This love can overcome any differences of culture, race, language or age.

What do churches do?

The aims of any church are simple – to worship God, to reach other people with the good news about Jesus, to help Christians to grow in their faith, to care for one another, and to serve others in love. Churches have many different types of activities to help reach these aims, for example:

- **Sunday Services** – most churches have their main meetings on a Sunday, since this was the day when Jesus rose again. This was also the day when the first Christians met for their main meeting (see Acts 20:7, 18; 1 Corinthians 16:2). In these services there will usually be singing praise songs, public prayers, teaching from the Bible and announcements about other church events. There may also be sharing from some Christians about their experiences and the Lord's Supper may be celebrated. An offering of money will usually be collected and used to help people in need, to help spread the message about Jesus, and to pay for the salaries of church workers and maintenance of the buildings.
- **Prayer Meetings** – these meetings may be at any time or day of the week. The Christians will usually share about problems they are facing, needs that people have, activities the church is planning, and things to thank God for. They will then spend time to talk to God in prayer, speaking aloud. The other Christians will usually remain silent, sometimes saying "Amen" which means "I agree".
- **Small groups** (sometimes called "cell groups" or "home groups") – these are smaller meetings of Christians, often in the homes of church members, for more informal fellowship. They usually include a Bible study, where the Christians discuss the meaning of a Bible passage and how they can apply it to their lives, and a time of prayer.
- **Sunday School and youth activities** – special activities for children and teenagers where they are taught the Bible and encouraged to love and serve one another. Sunday School often takes place during the Sunday service.
- **Service and outreach activities** – local churches often arrange special activities to help people in need or to care for others, as well as activities where the good news about Jesus is spoken or shared.

Church Leadership

There are many different patterns for how local churches are organised, but the Bible speaks of two types of leader (elders and deacons – see 1 Timothy chapter 3), and most churches have a third type (pastors):

- a) **Elders** – these people oversee the activities of the church. They have a responsibility to care for members, to teach the Bible, and to give overall direction to the church.
- b) **Deacons** – are the people who look after the practical, day to day running of the church business. They often have specific responsibilities (e.g. treasurer or secretary), and work under the guidance of the elders.
- c) **Pastors (or ministers)** – these people work for the church and have similar responsibilities to an elder. In many churches the pastor will have the main responsibility for teaching the Bible and caring for people in need.

Church leadership should be servant leadership. Unlike the normal ideas of power and control seen in leaders in many organisations, the leaders should set an example of humility, love and service for others, just as Jesus did.

Key Lesson: The Church is the body of Christ doing His work in the world

Jesus founded the Church and it is His body in the world doing the things that He commands it to do. Every local church has the responsibility to carry on Christ's mission. Every Christian should be committed to a local church.

UNDERSTANDING CHRISTIANITY

Part 22 – Church History and Present

Key Questions:

- How has the Church continued to grow throughout history? How should Christians relate to the government?

A brief history of the Church

Beginnings and initial spread (33 – 312 AD)

The Church began in 33 AD on the Day of Pentecost (see *Part 21*). At that time there was only one local church, in Jerusalem, but as the Christian message spread across the world, local churches were formed in every city. The Christians faced opposition, initially from Jewish people, and later from the Roman Empire after Emperor Nero turned against the Christians in AD 64. Peter and Paul were probably martyred during Nero's persecution. Although the apostle John lived on for around another 30 years, the age of the apostles was coming to an end. During the following 200 years, the Church became more strongly established throughout the Roman Empire (the Middle East, Europe and North Africa). It continued to face opposition from the Roman establishment in waves, but the number of Christians continued to grow.

Official acceptance and spread to new territories (312 – 1054 AD)

The situation changed in 312 AD when the Roman Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity. He gave freedom to Christians, and later made Christianity the State Religion of the Roman Empire. It is difficult to know whether Constantine was really a true Christian or whether he only took the name of Christian because he thought it would help him keep his Empire united. The freedom Christians enjoyed was a good thing to begin with, but it soon became a bad thing, as Christianity became linked with the State and with politics. This was never the intention of Jesus or the apostles, and it led to interference by rulers in the activities of the Church and corruption of church leaders. During this 700 year period the gospel spread to new regions including Ireland (432 AD), Germany (716 AD), the Slavic countries of Eastern Europe (863 AD) and Russia (988 AD). The difficulty was that in some areas (most notably in Russia) rulers accepted a form of Christianity for political reasons, and the nation became officially "Christian", but only a small minority of people came to a real faith in Christ. Christian thinking began to compromise with culture and with other religious and philosophical ideas.

Division and movement away from the Bible (1054 - 1517 AD)

In 1054 a growing division between churches in the West and churches in the East finally resulted in a great split between these two branches of Christianity. The division was over a range of minor issues, but also reflected political and cultural changes. Over time the teaching of the established State Church in the West (centred in Rome, and later becoming the "Roman Catholic Church") moved further away from the teaching of the Bible, taking in false ideas from other religions and from Greek philosophy, and many people became Christians in name only (that is "nominal Christians"). People believed that they could be Christians just because they were born in a "Christian country" or to "Christian parents" or by going to church services or being a member of the State church. They lost sight of the Bible's teaching that every person needs a personal relationship with God through Jesus. There were, of course, always many true Christians as well as these "nominal Christians", both within the mainstream churches and in separate groups of simple churches where the Bible was taught (for example the Waldensians). One of the saddest developments during this period was the increasing involvement of leaders of the established Church, particularly the Pope, in political affairs. This resulted in corruption in the organisation of the Roman Catholic Church which took large amounts of money from the people to build massive buildings and to make the Pope rich. It also led the Pope to support and even encourage European rulers to take part in Crusades against Muslim armies in the Middle East. The Crusades were a low point in the history of Christianity as armies fought in the name of Christ, whose message was one of grace and forgiveness not war.

Reformation, Counter-Reformation and revival (1517 - 1793 AD)

In 1517 AD a man called Martin Luther nailed a piece of paper to the door of a Cathedral in Germany. The paper was intended to spark a debate in the Roman Catholic Church about some of the main areas where the official teaching of the Church had moved furthest from the Bible. Luther's main concern was to re-establish the truth that forgiveness of sins is received directly from God through faith alone, rather than through the Church as a result of good deeds. The Roman Catholic Church refused to change, and followers of Luther and other Bible teachers were formed to break away from it to form new churches. Some of these churches followed the Roman Catholic pattern of being linked with the State, but others, especially the Anabaptists (who rediscovered the truth of believers baptism) were separate from the State. These new churches became known as Protestants because they protested against the official teaching of the Roman Catholic Church. Protestants became the majority in Germany, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Great Britain, Scandinavia and North America. Unfortunately many people within Protestant churches also became nominal Christians over time, and in the 18th Century there were great revivals in Great Britain and North America as God drew many people back to Himself.

Mission and worldwide spread (1793 - 2006 AD)

In 1793 an English man called William Carey went to India to spread the gospel. He was the first of thousands of Western Christians who went to countries where the church was not yet established or had been present but had died away over the following 200 years as missionaries. Today there are Christians in every country on earth, and the church is stronger in Africa, South America and some Asian countries including China, than in Europe. Christ is continuing to build His Church one person at a time as individuals come to a living faith in Him. After becoming a Christian there are many other things to learn, including truths about the Church, but these are of secondary importance to knowing God personally through Christ. Being a member of a church will not save you – only God can save you through faith in Jesus.

Christians as citizens

Jesus never intended Christianity to be linked with the government of the State, and some of the biggest problems in Church history occurred when either the State tried to control the Church (causing the Church to compromise its message) or the Church tried to control the State (causing Church leaders to be distracted by power and money). So, how should Christians live as citizens of modern countries, especially where they disagree with aspects of government policy?

Christ's teaching about citizenship

Jesus taught that His followers should respect the people who rule over them and pay their taxes as good citizens (Matthew 22:15-21), and He never encouraged his followers to be revolutionaries. If Christians believe that the government of their country is unfair and needs to change they should work peacefully for this rather than rioting or fighting. **Christians should always work peacefully to make their society a better place, more like the Kingdom of God, since they are citizens of God's Kingdom first** of all and only secondly citizens of the land they live in (Matthew 6:33). Although the Kingdom of God is here now among His people, it will not come on earth until Jesus returns (see *Part 23*). Christ's message was one of overcoming sin and oppression through humility and sacrifice, and He demonstrated this by overcoming sin and the Devil through the cross. Christians are called to follow His example and to overcome what is wrong through demonstrating God's love.

The apostles' teaching about citizenship

The apostles' teaching agrees with Jesus' position, and teaches more about our responsibility as citizens. Christians should be better citizens than people who are not Christians, as they will:

- *Respect and pray for those who rule over them* (Romans 13:1-7; I Timothy 2:1-4)
- *Be honourable, and do everything they can to live at peace with other people* (Romans 12:17-18)
- *Be hard working* (II Thessalonians 3:6-13), respectful of others, unselfish, and honest (Ephesians 4:25-28)
- *Be more forgiving and generous and more loyal to their family and fellow-workers* (Colossians 3:12-14)

These qualities make for a very good citizen in any country. So, the Church should never try to control the State, and the State should not try to control the Church, but should allow freedom for Christians to worship God. Only in situations where the law of the State directly conflicts with obedience to Christ should Christians disobey the law, and even then they should do it in a way that reflects submission to the authorities and a desire for peace.

Recognising and dealing with false teachings

The Bible predicted that many false teachers would come in the years after the death of Jesus. Jesus Himself spoke about this (e.g. Matthew 24:23-25), and the apostles wrote about the dangers of false teachers who were already in the churches at the time when they wrote the New Testament letters. This would result in great opposition for Christians, and some people would be deceived by the false teaching (see warnings from Paul in II Timothy 3:12-13, Peter in II Peter 2, and Jude in Jude 3-4). Jesus described them as wolves in "sheep's clothing" (Matthew 7:15-23). It should not surprise us, then, that there are false teachers today. False prophets have even started religious movements (usually called cults) that have gained large numbers of followers. I will mention two here that have been targeting many Chinese people. They are useful examples in helping us think about how to recognise cults. One originated in the West and the other inside China:

Jehovah's Witnesses

This group was founded in America in 1852 by Charles Russell and is very active among Chinese people in the West, where they have some Mandarin speaking teachers. Their literature can always be identified because it says "**Watchtower**" on it. They do not believe that Jesus is God, and they also teach that people must earn forgiveness from God rather than receiving it as a free gift. They use their own translation of the Bible which distorts the meaning of many verses. They may be nice people, but their teaching is not true Christianity.

Eastern Lightning (Dongfang Shandian)

This group was founded by Zhao Weishan in 1989, and claims that Jesus has returned to earth in the person of a 30-year old Chinese woman in Henan province. They claim that only people who believe in this female Messiah can be saved, and that there are "ten standards" that people must aim to achieve, including pure understanding, a sensitive conscience, willing submission and a deep love for God. They reject the authority of the Bible. They enter Christian churches, pretending to be interested in becoming Christians, and then try to deceive Christians and destroy the church.

These are only two examples of cults, but there are many others (another high profile example is the *Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints* or *Mormons*). There are five simple tests you can use to test the teaching of any group to help you know if they are a cult:

1. **Do they have a book other than the Bible?** True Christians believe that the Bible is God's word, and the only book He has given us. They will always try to follow the teachings of the Bible and not any other person.
2. **Did they start with a person other than Jesus who they see as God's spokesperson?**
3. **Do they believe that Jesus was both fully God and fully human?**
4. **Do they believe that the only way to have sins forgiven is through the death of Jesus?**
5. **Do they believe that only people in their group are going to be in Heaven?** Although Christians believe that only people with a personal relationship with God through Jesus will be saved, there are true Christians in many different church groups on earth. Any church or group that claims that people must be a member of their own group to be saved, or that refuses to work with other Christian churches is probably a cult.

Another good test is to ask a mature Christian you know whether they can recommend this group or church to you.

Key Lesson: Christians should be good citizens but their loyalty is first to God's Kingdom

Christians must be loyal to the values of God's Kingdom. This will normally make them good citizens of the country they live in (respectful, honourable, peaceable and hard-working). When the state conflicts with God's Kingdom Christians should protest peacefully but may need to face persecution from the government.

UNDERSTANDING CHRISTIANITY

Part 23 – The End of the Ages

Key Questions:

- How will the world come to an end? What happens to the souls of people after their body dies?

How will the world end?

There are many theories and ideas about how life on earth may come to an end, including global warming, an asteroid collision or nuclear war. The Bible, however, teaches that the end of the entire Universe is connected with the end of the earth and the end of human history. The Bible teaches that of all things God created, human beings are the most precious to Him, and that the planet earth is therefore the most important place in the Universe. It claims that the reason why God created such a large Universe was to show us how great and powerful He is. Just as God created the Universe and set it in motion, He will bring it to an end. Life on earth will not end by some natural disaster, but when God decides to end it through His final judgement. In fact, the date for the end of life on earth has already been set by God. The Bible does not give us all the details about the end of the world, but it does teach that the world will become more evil as time passes, and that many people will reject the message of good news about Jesus. One day, however, God will intervene when Jesus returns to earth to judge all human beings, living and dead.

Jesus will return to earth to restore God's Kingdom

The Old Testament prophets, who looked forward to the coming Messiah, had visions of two kinds: the Suffering Servant and the Conquering King. When Jesus came to earth in 4 BC He lived the life of the Suffering Servant. Although He spoke much about the Kingdom of God, and taught that we can be part of God's Kingdom now, He refused to be made King in Israel, and in fact chose to die on the cross. His death fulfilled the Old Testament prophecies about God's Servant who would die for the sins of the people. However, the other Old Testament prophecies about the Conquering King still remain to be fulfilled – **Jesus must return to finally restore God's Kingdom.** Jesus spoke about His future return:

- **John 14:1-4 – Jesus will prepare a place for His followers and will return for them**
 - Jesus told His disciples that He was going to leave them to prepare a place for His followers to live (verse 2)
 - He promised that He would come again one day to take His followers to be with Him (verse 3)
- **Matthew 24:26-31, 36-44 – the second coming of Jesus will be in power for all to see**
 - When Jesus returns He will appear in the sky in power and great glory and everyone will see Him (verse 30)
 - All Christians from all parts of the earth will be gathered to Him (verse 31)
 - No one knows the day when this will happen, so we should get ready now (verses 36-44)

The apostles also spoke about the return of Jesus. Paul wrote to several churches about the hope it gives to Christians:

- **I Thessalonians 4:13-5:3 – the return of Jesus will reunite all Christians**
 - Jesus will return with all the Christians who have died before He comes again (4:13-15)
 - Dead Christians will be raised to life first, then the Christians on earth will meet Jesus in the sky (4:16-17)
 - No one will know the date when Jesus will come again – it will be sudden (5:1-3)
- **I Corinthians 15:35-58 – the resurrection body for Christians**
 - The resurrection body will be similar to, but different from the present body as it cannot die or decay (verses 35-42)
 - The resurrection body will be full of power like the resurrection body of Jesus (verses 43-49)
 - All Christians will receive a new body, since our current bodies cannot live forever (verses 50-58)

So, one day in the future (the date is unknown to anyone except God), Jesus will come again to earth, but that this time He will be the Conquering King. He will destroy the enemies of God, but those Christians who have died will be raised again and will come with Him, and the Christians who are alive at the time will join them.

What happens to people who die now?

Jesus taught that there is more to a human being than just a body (Matthew 10:28). We have both body (the physical part) and soul (the invisible part that is the centre of our thoughts, emotions and will). When the body dies, the soul continues to exist. The Bible teaches that human beings only live once on this earth, and then they must answer to God for how they have lived. As Hebrews 9:27 says, "*it is destined that each person dies only once and after that comes judgement*". We do not get a second chance at how we live our lives – we live one life and then God will judge us based on how we have lived. The souls of Christians who die return to God to be with Jesus (see II Corinthians 5:6-8, where Paul says that after he leaves his body he will be "*at home with the Lord*"). We do not know if these people are conscious or whether they are unaware, just as if they were asleep. Not much is said about the place where non-Christians go after their death, but we know that they await the future Day of Judgement that will come after Christ returns to earth. On that day all people will be judged by Him, both those who are alive at the time and those who have died (who will be raised to life again).

Heaven and Hell

Jesus taught that there are only two possible permanent destinies for people after the final judgement: eternal punishment and eternal life (Matthew 25:46). These two alternatives are often called Hell and Heaven.

HEAVEN (the New Earth) – Eternal Life

The word "heaven" in the Bible simply means the place where God lives (the plural form "heavens" means the sky and outer space), but people often use it to describe the place where Christians will live forever. Christians will live forever in a physical resurrected body. The whole human person is a body together with a soul, and we will not live forever as spirits or ghosts. The Bible teaches that Christians will live in these resurrection bodies on a New Earth in a new Universe. The prophet Isaiah foresaw this (Isaiah 65:17-25), and Simon Peter also told Christians that they should look forward to this new creation (II Peter 3:13). In the book of Revelation the new Universe is revealed (Revelation 21:1). The New Earth will be created from the same material that the current earth is made from. The earth will be melted down (II Peter 3:12) and reformed into a new planet. Life on the New Earth will be different from now because:

- *All animals will be vegetarian* – just as before the Flood (Isaiah 65:25 – compare with Genesis 9:3)
- *Everyone will be right with God* – there will be no more sin (II Peter 3:13)
- *There will be no more death, or sorrow, or crying or pain* – the Curse God put on the Universe because of Adam and Eve's sin will be reversed (Revelation 21:4 – compare this with Genesis 3:14-19)
- *People can eat again from the Tree of Life* (see Revelation 22:2), from which Adam and Eve were banned from eating after they sinned (Genesis 3:24). This means they will be able to live forever.

On the New Earth mankind will be perfect in their relationship with God, with one another and with the universe, just as God intended. Sin and all its effects will be gone. **God's Kingdom will be finally restored in fullness!**

HELL (the Lake of Fire) – Eternal Punishment

Hell is the place where God and His love are not present. In the Bible Hell is often described as a place of great suffering: the main picture is of a lake of burning fire (Revelation 20:14). This suffering is both a result of the person's own rejection of God and also God's punishment on them for their sins. The Lake of Fire was actually prepared for the Devil as a place where he will be punished (Revelation 20:10), but people who have not responded to God in faith will also be cast into it after the final judgement. There is no hope of escape.

The Final Judgement

Throughout the Bible it is clear that God must judge and punish sin. He cannot ignore it – there is no hope for a future perfect New Creation if sin is allowed to continue. Jesus spoke more about this judgement than anyone else in the Bible. After Jesus returns, He will judge all people by His standard of perfection. **Revelation 20:11-15** tells us how people will be judged on this final Day of Judgement:

- *Jesus Christ will sit on the throne in judgement* (verse 11a)
- *All people will stand before Him to be judged* – there will be nowhere to hide (verses 11b-12)
- *God knows everything we have done* – our actions are recorded in His books (verse 12b)
- *All the people whose names are not written in another book, the Book of Life, will be thrown into Hell* (verse 15)

So, the final judgement will be fair and just with all the evidence taken into account and no miscarriages of justice (see also Romans 2:5-11). The evidence against people will be the sins they have committed, but the reason they will be condemned to Hell will be because their names are not written in God's book of life. The people whose names are written in this book are people who have trusted in God to forgive them.

For Christians there will not be any punishment on this Day of Judgement, because they have had their sins forgiven by Christ – there is no longer any judgement or condemnation for them, rather the return of Christ will mean salvation for them (see Romans 8:1; I Thessalonians 5:9). Remember that the New Covenant promised that God would never keep a record of the sins of His people (Hebrews 8:12). Christians will, however, have to give account for the way they have lived their lives. This is called the Judgement Seat of Christ, and you can read about it in Romans 14:10-12, I Corinthians 3:11-15, and II Corinthians 5:10. The reality, according to Jesus, is that people are either free from the coming judgement if they have believed in Him or they will face that judgement. In fact, those who reject Him have already been judged because they have rejected the truth God has shown them (see John 3:18-21).

How Christians should live in view of the future return of Christ

The promise that Jesus is coming again is full of hope and meaning for Christians. Many New Testament passages challenge Christians to change their behaviour and beliefs in light of this hope. The following are just two examples:

The apostle John – I John 3:2-3

- Christians are children of God, and it is not clear yet exactly what we will be like in our resurrection bodies (verse 2a)
- We know that on the day when Jesus returns we will see Him as He is and become like Him (verse 2b)
- As a result of this hope, Christians should aim to live like Jesus now, keeping themselves pure (verse 3)

The apostle Peter – II Peter 3:3-14

- Some people will mock the idea that Jesus will come again, just as they deny that God created the world (verses 3-7)
- God is not slow at keeping His promise but is patient, giving people an opportunity to repent (verses 8-9)
- When the "*day of the Lord*" does come it will come suddenly ("*like a thief in the night*") and will mean judgement for godless men and the melting down of the whole Universe and formation of a new Universe (verses 7, 10, 12-13)
- Christians should be holy and godly because we are looking forward to the day of God. The return of Christ will bring our final deliverance from the presence of sin, but there is a challenge for us to live lives focussed on God because everything in this world will pass away. Nothing matters more than our relationship with Him (verses 11 and 14).

Key Lesson: After death people must answer to God for how they have lived

The death of our bodies is not the end of our existence. In the future Christ will return to the earth to set up God's perfect Kingdom, and when He returns He will judge all people. Those whose sins have been forgiven will be part of God's Kingdom on the new earth, but those who have not trusted God will be punished in the Lake of Fire.

UNDERSTANDING CHRISTIANITY

Part 24 – Living as a Christian

Key Questions:

- What is different about living as a Christian? How should Christians think and act?

Looking back and forward – salvation past, present and future

The Christian life is lived between two great events – the death of Jesus Christ, and the future day when He will come again to judge all people. Christians look back to Jesus' first coming to earth and forward to His second coming. God has made a way through Jesus for us to be saved from our sin. This salvation is real in the past, present and future:

PAST – God has forgiven our sins, and has brought us into a new relationship with Him. He is our Father, and He has given us the free gift of eternal life through Jesus. We receive this gift of forgiveness and eternal life when we repent (turn away from our sin) and trust in God to save us and lead us from now on. Paul wrote in Ephesians 2:8-10:

God saved you by his special favour when you believed. And you can't take credit for this; it is a gift from God. Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it.

PRESENT – God constantly helps us to live our lives for Him day by day. He saves us from the power of sin through the Holy Spirit who lives in us. The Holy Spirit's goal is to make us more like Christ day by day (see below).

FUTURE – On the day of resurrection, when Christ returns, we will finally be saved from the presence of sin. In the new Universe there will be no sin. At the last judgement we will also be saved from God's anger. This is because of Jesus, who died to take the punishment for our sins, and who is alive now to keep us safe. Simon Peter could, therefore, write about the "coming salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time" (1 Peter 1:5).

So, every Christian looks back not only to the death of Jesus Christ in 33 AD, but also to their own conversion (the time when they first placed their faith in Christ), and they also look forward to the day when Jesus will come again because on that day we know that we will see Jesus as He is and become like Him (1 John 3:1-3). This hope gives great strength to Christians to keep living for God even when things are difficult or when they face opposition.

The struggle with sin and the fruit of the Spirit

The Christian life is about being saved from the power of sin in our lives so that we can do what pleases God – **our ultimate goal is to become like Christ**. Christians can still sin, since we still have the sinful nature we inherited from Adam, but we also have the Holy Spirit living in us. Because of sin we have fallen short of God's standard of perfection (Romans 3:23). When Jesus returns we will be made perfect, reaching God's standard (1 John 3:3). In the meantime, the Holy Spirit is working in us so that we "*become more and more like Him and reflect His glory more and more*" (11 Corinthians 3:18). The Holy Spirit changes our minds and hearts so that we think and feel as God does, but He never forces us to change – He only does this as we surrender our will to Him. The sinful nature in us still wants to do wrong, but the Spirit wants to produce a character in our lives that is just like Jesus. Paul talks about this struggle in **Galatians 5:16-26**. He tells Christians to "*follow the Holy Spirit's leading in every part of our lives*" (verse 25). In **Ephesians 5:18** he tells us to "*let the Holy Spirit fill and control you*". Every day a Christian must decide to allow the Holy Spirit to shape our minds and hearts – we can ask Him every day to give us the power to do what is right and to resist the temptation to do what is wrong. The results of the Holy Spirit's work in a person's life are often called His "fruit". The first quality in the list in Galatians 5:22-23 is love, which is the greatest proof of God's work in a person's life. Christian love cares for other people (even those who are different from us) in the sacrificial way that God has loved us (by sending Jesus to die for us).

A daily relationship with God

Christianity is not just a religion but a relationship with God. As Christians we do not live each day by following a set of rules, but by getting to know God better. There are a number of ways that we can grow in our relationship with Him:

Prayer – talking to God

The most famous prayer in the Bible is often known as the Lord's Prayer because it was taught by Jesus to His disciples. It is found in **Matthew 6:9-13**. Jesus teaches His followers to pray to God as Father, showing the close relationship that we can have with Him through Jesus. The prayer contains six requests:

1. "*May your name be honoured*" – Christians always want God to be honoured in their lives – He is the King!
2. "*May your Kingdom come soon*" – we look forward to the time when Jesus returns to restore the Kingdom.
3. "*May your will be done here on earth, just as it is in heaven.*" – we also pray that God's will be done in our lives and that we can be part of bringing about what God wants to happen on earth.
4. "*Give us our food for today*" – we ask God to provide those things that we need.
5. "*and forgive us our sins, just as we have forgiven those who have sinned against us*" – we confess our sins, keeping open before God, and remember to forgive others, keeping good relationships with them.
6. "*And don't let us yield to temptation, but deliver us from the evil one*" – we pray for God to help us to do what is right and to resist the temptation to sin

There are no right and wrong words to use as we pray – the important thing is that our attitude is right before God – that we are trusting Him and seeking to give Him the honour. Many Christians end their prayers by saying:

- **In Jesus' name** – this means that they are praying in Jesus' authority, not because they think they are important
- **Amen** – this word means "I agree" or "let this happen" and is often said by other Christians after one person prays

In prayer it can be helpful to think of four different aspects of our relationship with God:

- **Adoring God** – simply thinking about God and praising Him by telling Him how great He is
- **Confessing our sins** – admitting our sins to God in the same way that a little child would confess to his father
- **Thanking God** – thanking God for everything He has given us
- **Requests** – asking God to give us those things that we feel we need and for people we love and those in positions of authority in society. However, our prayers are always for God's will to be done, not what we think is best.

Bible reading – listening to God

Christians believe that the Bible is God's word spoken to us. Because of this, every part of the Bible is useful for us to learn how to live our lives. Paul wrote about this in II Timothy 3:16-17. He said that the Bible can make God's people ready to do His good work because it does four things in our lives:

1. *It teaches us what is true*
2. *It straightens us out* (brings us from wrong to right)
3. *It makes us realise what is wrong in our lives*
4. *It teaches us how to keep on doing what is right*

Christians place a very high value on the Bible, and they make it part of their lives in several ways:

1. **Reading it** – many Christians read the Bible each day, asking God to speak to them through it
2. **Studying it** – we spend time trying to understand accurately what it says, both alone and in groups
3. **Meditating on it** – spending time thinking over God's word, applying its truth to our lives.

Many Christians also memorise parts of the Bible to help them to live it out. To understand the Bible it is important to ask the Holy Spirit to help you, to read each verse in the context of the book it is in, and against the background of the message of the whole Bible, and to ask other Christians for help when you find it difficult. Christians can often tell many stories about how God has spoken clearly to them through the Bible.

Disciplines to make time for God

Many Christians make use of other disciplines that help them to make time for God, including spending time alone, spending time in silence, fasting (abstaining from food for a period of time) and writing a journal of their thoughts. However, it is important to remember that we do these things to know God more, not to try to please Him. He already loves us fully, and we must never forget that our salvation and acceptance by Him is completely because of grace, not because we have earned it. We can think about this in terms of a marriage relationship – we do things for our wife or husband because we love them, and we make time to be with them because we want to know them more, not because the vows we made to them force us to. God's grace is freely shown to us; all we have to do is receive it through faith.

Priorities and decision-making

The greatest priority for every Christian should be to bring glory to God by his own actions and by helping other people to know Him. **Our first priority should be to seek God's Kingdom**, and everything else should follow after this (Matthew 6:33). We are God's children and everything we have is a loving gift from our Father (our abilities and our possessions), so we must use them wisely for Him. This principle will apply in every aspect of our lives including:

1. **Church Life** – every Christian should be a committed member of a local church (see *Part 21*), and should discover what abilities and spiritual gifts God has given him to help other Christians to grow spiritually.
2. **Family Life** – Christians have a very high view of marriage and family life. We must respect and care for our parents, and we must bring up our children in a way that helps them to know God. If we are married we should love our husband or wife the way God loved us, and always be faithful to them (see Ephesians 5:22-6:4).
3. **Working life** – a Christian should be hard-working and respectful and should always be honest. We are citizens of God's kingdom first, and must work for Him first (see *Part 22* – the relationship of church to State). We should be generous with our money and possessions, and not greedy to have more money (I Timothy 6:6-10, 17-19).

So, being a good Christian should make us a better citizen and worker, husband or wife, parent or child etc. Our new goal in life is to become more like Jesus and to see God's Kingdom come in every part of our lives.

How do Christians make decisions about what to do in life and what choices to make? There are several tests:

- **God's Word** (Psalm 119:105) – if the Bible says something is wrong, it is wrong. God will not ask us to do anything that He has already told us we must not do.
- **God's honour** – does the thing we are thinking of doing help us to honour God? Will it help us to be more like Jesus (could we imagine Him doing it?). It is always good to ask questions about our motivation for doing things. If our reason is purely selfish it is probably not a good idea.
- **Your purity** – anything that makes it more difficult for you to be like Christ is probably bad for you. This is a good test when asking whether a particular movie, song or website is suitable for you to watch or listen to.
- **Your gifting** – has God given you the ability to do this thing or is this not really your area of gifting?
- **Prayer** – when you pray about this decision do you feel more at peace or more uneasy about it? It is very often when you pray that the Holy Spirit leads you by giving you a desire for what God wants (Galatians 5:25).
- **Wise advice** (Proverbs 20:18) – it is always a good idea to get advice from wise, older Christians who know you well and know God well. They may see problems with your plans that you have not seen, or even something in your character that is not good that you might have missed.
- **Circumstances** – if God wants you to do something for Him, He will make it possible for you at the right time. He always knows the best time, and sometimes you need to wait for His timing.

Key Lesson: The Christian life is a daily relationship with God seeking His Kingdom first

Christians are God's children, and the Christian life is about a relationship with Him which grows over time as we pray and read God's Word. As Christians we seek to do God's will and to see His Kingdom come in our lives and through our lives in the world. Our relationship with Him shapes how we think about everything else.