

A Broader Picture

52 weekly reflections on the Bible Story

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Welcome,

Sometimes we think that the few pieces of the puzzle we have is enough to inform us about the whole picture. A Broader Picture is suggested as a 52-week reflection that aims to get us to look more widely at the big picture.

You can work through these reflections personally or choose to do them with a weekly group. You will find that I come back to the same books quite frequently – and that's just my own personal preferences coming through, due to the way I think they inform us, in particular, about God's story and plan.

It is typical that new Christians are told to begin reading the Bible with the gospels – this is understandable, it focuses on coming to salvation through and in Jesus. But why would you start a story in the middle? We can only truly grasp the full story by starting at the start. As simple as that sounds, many do not do this, and some have never looked back there.

Jay Ruka (New Zealand author) has written that *'It is impossible for a Christian to live today without the appropriation of yesterday'* I have come to think of this as being true. The future is informed by the past and ignoring it, or overlooking it, can only leave us in a lesser space.

This series cannot cover every aspect of the story, and I am certain I do not know about every aspect. We all have a theology that moves according to what we have read, heard and discussed – and also with the biases we bring from our experiences of life. This is my current position, but many of these things have changed for me over time and will probably change some more. Those who know me will know I could say a whole lot more – but I won't – that's for you to ponder and discuss.

However, I make this offering sincerely with the hope this brings some things into the light that you may not have thought about before. I hope that your journey is enriched and that your faith grows in the time you spend contemplating these things.

Manaakitanga. (blessings) Gareth Bruce

These reflections are solely the personal view and work of Gareth Bruce in response to my own experiences of God. They do not reflect the views of any particular church or other body.

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Some suggested questions to help group discussion are available after Reflection 52.

1. God is Infinite and Eternal

Read Genesis 1:1 – 2:3

There are no cultures known to exist that have been without a concept of religious belief. It is likely unique to humans to wonder about the unknown – to be aware that there can be things beyond our natural perceptions. The bible scriptures open with a simple and clear statement that speaks to this wondering; *‘In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.’*

But not just any god – not of Greek, Roman, Norse, or any other mythology, not Allah nor Brahma, or another iteration of these imaginings. Christian faith holds that it was God who created all that is seen and unseen (*Colossians 1:16*). Not a god invented in mythological story, but the God who revealed himself to humankind and then stepped into *our* story.

God is infinite. It is typically human to want to define everything within our limited thinking and perception – we call it the discipline of science. But God has declared that he is outside of our Universe and holds all that we are in his hands; how can science ever hope to place its physical limits upon such a phenomenon?

Nothing is impossible for God, because he is not constrained by physics and time. He is present in every moment and yet he knows the beginning from the end, and what will happen in any given time in between. That is not to say that everything has been pre-programmed in a robotic, immovable fashion, but it is all known to God, every event and whether it will involve God’s intervention or not.

God’s ways are perfect and just. He is perfectly fair, for he alone knows all things.

There is no box to put God in, no fence that can contain him, no human wisdom that can fathom the depth of his love. The light of God – his all-encompassing knowledge – is infinite and eternal.

Ponder the greatness of God this week. Reflect on his eternal and infinite nature and that the light of his being will go on forever. This is the God who revealed himself to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – and stepped into our lives.

2. There Is an Enemy

Read Ezekiel 28:12-19

God's sovereignty is not unchallenged. In Christianity, Judaism and Islam, Satan is the adversary of God and the leader of evil spirits. Before the earth was created, he was known as Lucifer (Morning Star) in the heavens, but he desired honour and glory for himself (Isaiah 14:13).

Ezekiel 28 associates Satan with the Garden of Eden and speaks of unrighteousness rising in him, bringing him to sin. Sin is a rebellious action that stems from harbouring unrighteousness. In Genesis 3, Satan is understood to be seen at work in the serpent, tempting Eve and leading both Adam and Eve into unrighteousness and sin. And this is the primary commerce of Satan – leading people into temptation and sin.

In Matthew 4, Mark 1 and Luke 4, it is this “tempter” – Satan – who comes in an attempt to corrupt and divert Jesus as he comes to begin his ministry. But the things Satan offers as a reward for rebelling against God, as he did, have no eternal standing. Instead, they lead those who succumb to destruction and eternal suffering. Many people have first-hand experience of the emptiness in Satan's promises.

Satan is described as: the evil one, the father of lies, a murderer, and the accuser of God's people. In reality, he no longer has power because Jesus defeated him when he died at Calvary and rose again to eternal life. The sting of death has gone for the one who puts their trust in Jesus.

Though we still succumb to temptation, which leads us to sin, in Roman 6:11 Paul tells us that we should count ourselves as dead to sin, but alive to Christ in God. The victory has been won, and we can live without sin when we turn everything over to Jesus. A continued confession and repentance are required to ensure that the blood of Jesus continues to seal the new covenant of salvation.

Satan is the speaker of lies and an accuser who relies on deception and shame. But for those in Jesus, there is now no condemnation. Conviction should bring us to turn towards Jesus and not away from him.

The real battle is raged in the heavens, between powers and principalities that raise themselves up against God (Ephesians 6:12). In some way, we are caught in the crossfire as Satan continues to rage against God, toward his final end. When we turn to God, we also become the enemy of Satan, and he knows just how to approach every person in their weakness. Stand firm against him in the name of Jesus and he will flee.

3. The Problem Is Sin

Romans 3:23 *'For all have sinned and have fallen short of God's standard.'*

Most of the world don't want to hear talk of sin anymore – it's distasteful to them, and so it should be. Paul also writes to the Romans that when Adam* sinned, sin entered the world bringing a death that spreads to every person because we all sin.

Yes, sin is the problem. It is not that God hates you or looks upon you as a “bad person”, but he hates our enslavement to sin and the action and power of sin in our lives; and therefore, he longs that we would be free of sin. God has no desire for a person to suffer under the eternity of hell – his goal is to have each of us avoid that. He does not wield a big stick but instead offers a huge heart of love.

People do not want us to talk about sin because it makes them feel “bad” and uncomfortable – me too! One prominent biologist has been suggesting that there is no sin, it is just that we have become “psychologically upset” with ourselves; all we have to do is to wait for a few more million years of evolution and we'll grow out of it. Is that good news?

Without the concept of sin, the world offers no solution to the selfish inhumanity and wickedness we display towards one another. Sin is an external force that leads us into harmful thoughts and actions, and it is therefore not something we can deal with within and of ourselves. We need God's solution.

The law of sin brings death – just as dark clouds bring rain, sin brings about death – but it is a spiritual death, a death that closes us off from the good way of God, who is Spirit. The answer to spiritual death is to align with spiritual life – the life delivered to us by the conquering death and resurrection of Jesus, who was without sin.

Romans 5:18 'Yes, Adam's one sin brings condemnation for everyone, but Christ's one act of righteousness brings a right relationship with God and new life for everyone.'

The problem is sin – the solution is Jesus.

Ponder the idea that sin essentially reflects a lack of genuine love. There is a choice to accept the law of the Spirit of life which liberates and exempts us from the law of sin and death (Romans 8:2).

* Adam (*ah-darm*) is a Hebrew word (*and name*) that means humankind. The simplest understanding of sin is that when humankind sinned (represented in the Adam), it is something we all became enslaved to and became sinners ourselves.

4. Two Trees

In Genesis 2:9 we read; *‘In the middle of the garden he placed the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.’*

Two trees – one with fruit that confers eternal life (*Genesis 3:22*), and the other that reveals a knowledge of evil. God commanded people not to eat of this second tree because he knew the dire consequences of that action – but it was a choice he had to give. Unfortunately, the truth was in the pudding you might say, and eating of its fruit proved deadly.

Something that many of us tend to overlook though, is the important presence of the first tree – the tree of life. Interestingly, just as we first hear of this tree in Genesis – so we see it again at the end, in the Revelation.

In Revelation 22:2, in the eternal Kingdom of God, there is only now one tree – the tree of life. The scripture tells us that it grows on each side of the water of life – bearing twelve crops – a fresh crop every month; its leaves are for the healing of the nations. What an amazing picture.

But there is a problem with this tree in Genesis. To eat of the tree of life is to receive eternal life and to eat of it in the fallen sinful state is to be bound there eternally.

“Behold, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil. And now, if he stretches out his hand and takes from the tree of life, and eats, and lives forever.”
(Genesis 3:22)

To keep us from this fate, God pushed people out of the garden so that he could enact his plan of salvation through Jesus Christ. When God did this, he placed an angel (a being of the spiritual realm) to the east of the garden so that Adam and Eve could no longer “see” that aspect of their lives that they had known previously. Now blind to the spiritual realm but safe from the threat of un-redeemable death, they were left in a somewhat broken existence.

This week, ponder the wonder of God’s determined love. Having tripped up, we could also have eaten from the tree of life with disastrous consequences. But God was not prepared to let this happen. Instead, he provided a further way of rescue, in Jesus. This tree, also present in the very beginning, remains a part of enacting the fulness of salvation in eternity. You see – there really is a bigger picture.

5. Value in Genealogy

The western-shaped mind tends to place less value in genealogies. Most new believers will have little time for reading through the genealogies of Matthew and Luke, not understanding that genealogy demonstrates that there is a meaningful story to identify with; a story that involves our spiritual ancestors – Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

In Genesis 5 we read about a line of sons, born between the generations of Adam to Noah. Most of us are mildly intrigued by the long years of many lifespans here, but because we are not from the culture this genealogy belongs to, we do not see the hidden value within it. Consider this...

Adam means – **humankind**

Seth means – **fallen**

Enosh means – **mortal**

Kenan means – **sorrowful**

Mahalalel means – **the blessed of God**

Jared means – **will come down**

Enoch means – **teaching**

Methuselah means – **his death shall bring**

Lamech means – **faithful**

Noah means – **rest or comfort**

Now read down the bold meanings and hear what is said within the hidden message of this genealogy.

Is it not amazing? Just a few chapters into the Bible and the heart of the gospel is already there.

To a properly taught Jew, this genealogy cannot help but bring enormous challenge – real people (their ancestors), with real names, born across some nine hundred and twenty-six years – carrying a message of salvation that Christians lay claim to – that we *can* lay claim to.

There is value in looking back across the story – sometimes obvious and often hidden – that provides the deep connections that we need to walk into the future; a necessary anchor point. Life and a history with God, related through story, is what the early Bible scriptures are about.

The Hebrew approach to the future was to look back (as in rowing a boat), with your back to the future. In this position you cannot see clearly where you are going, but as with this genealogy, it is possible to get a glimpse of future intention.

Reflect on the idea that looking back on this genealogy actually provides an insight into the future – and Christians can look back on the story of Jesus, reminding ourselves that what he has already done continues to prepare a future for us.

6. The Birth of a People

In the times following the beginnings, the people did not hold to relationship with God but abandoned his way and guidance and entered into increasing wickedness. In the end, God decided to perform a re-set through the flood event. In the scriptures following the flood story we are again given lists of genealogy – leading us from Noah to a man named Abram.

Genesis 12:1-2 'The LORD said to Abram, "Leave your country, your relatives, and your father's family, and go to the land that I will show you. I will make you into a great nation. I will bless you and make you famous, and you will be a blessing to others.*

Through Abram, his son Isaac, and his grandson Jacob, we are led to the forming of a new people based on the twelve sons of Jacob. Also called Israel, Jacob's sons are the beginning of the Israelites and the Jewish nation. The Bible is their history of coming to know Jehovah God.

But there is even more to this. Abram's faith in God was reckoned to him as righteousness (*Genesis 15:6*) and God said that all the nations of earth would be blessed through him (*Genesis 22:18*). It is the faith of Abram (*who was also named Abraham*) on which the blessing of God rests. To take on and have the same faith as Abram, is to become one of the people of God – not Jewish or blood descended – but spiritually joined and descended through faith.

Why is it important to remember story? Because it reminds us of how we connect and belong, providing us with the context of what it is that we have aligned ourselves to. We belong because we are joined to the faith of Abram – we are now a part of the story of God. And (as non-Jewish believers) we are grafted into the root that is the people of God, as Israel (*Romans 11:17*).

A people of God includes all those who profess faith in God and in his Son Jesus, whom we now see and understand. If you believe, you are of the people of God.

This week, consider your spiritual ancestry and the story that confirms your place with God through faith – the same faith that Abram had.

** When you see LORD printed in capitals like this, it shows that God's name YHVH was written in the text. When the proper vowel sounds are added to this four-letter tetragrammaton, God's name sounds as Yehovah (Ya-ho-vah) – and not as Yahweh (Yar-way)*

7. Difficult Times

Read Genesis 15

Though most would prefer it otherwise, God's plan does not exclude difficulties and setbacks. Though God promised great things for Abram, he also warned him that his descendants would be enslaved and oppressed for four hundred years!

The familiar story of Joseph, sold into slavery, but rising to the very top of the ladder in Egypt, leads us to this four-hundred-year period of oppression for the people who became the nation of Israel. And even when that time was over, the exodus from Egypt did not go as originally envisaged – a seven, to eight-day journey turned into forty years of difficult living, in the wilderness areas of the Sinai and Saudi Arabia. However, as we often see in the scriptures of the Bible, hardship and difficulty frequently bring opportunities for growth.



The Chinese word for crisis is made up of two picture symbols – the first depicts a time of danger and the second, a time of opportunity.

Many people have found this profound understanding to be helpful in navigating the serious challenges of life.

God's plan does not provide an untroubled route to salvation and eternal life. The difficulties of life – financial stresses, health issues, addictions, relationship struggles etc, are not miraculously swept away when we come to faith in Jesus – though God can and does intervene when we ask according to his will.

Difficulties test our faith and trust in the promises of God. The disciple, Peter, wrote that we should not be surprised about trials, as if it were something strange. He said that such difficulties and trials make us partners with Christ in his suffering and therefore we will also see his glory at the end (1 Peter 4:12-13). Even Jesus' victory was not accomplished without difficulty and suffering.

This week, consider the fact that difficulty and trial are a constant presence in the life of the people of God. The devil is against us at every turn, trying to derail our progress and steal our joy. But God is faithful: Weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning (Psalm 30:5)

8. The Priestly Order of Aaron

Read through Hebrews 9:1-10 – The old rules about worship

Under the guidance of Jacob's son Joseph, the Israelites grew from the families of twelve sons, into a nation almost one million strong. After 400 years, as they left the oppression of slavery in Egypt, they received a new order for living as the people of God. To dwell with the constant presence of God in the wilderness the people's sin needed to be dealt with – so God did two things.

He gave them the law, so they could know the nature of their sin, but this law did not have the power to make anything perfect (Hebrews 7:19). And God formed a priesthood from the family of Aaron, of the tribe of Levi. This priesthood was established to make sacrifices and offerings that would atone *temporarily* for the sin of the people – but it could not deal with the eternal cost of sin.

The Tabernacle in the wilderness and the Temple that followed it, were only copies of the true place of worship – the heavenly Tabernacle built by God and not human hands (*Hebrews 8:2*). Unfortunately, the earthly Temple became the central focus of the people's worship and became for them greater than the way of God – to live in love and justice.

Today, we can fall into the same trap as the Israelites did, in thinking that our church buildings and our religious rituals and formats (even Pentecostal ones) are more important than the call of God to walk in the fruit of the Spirit as our true witness to God's character and will.

Later on, we will learn about the new and rightful priestly order – an order that is able to deal with sin eternally, and releases us into a life of righteousness under the grace of God.

The Order of Aaron was a part of the system that operated under the giving of the Law (Torah) which we will look at next week. The problem for those who remain in the religion of Judaism is that the Order of Aaron is obsolete, so leaning on its structure is inadequate to deal finally with sin.

The structures of the wilderness were temporary foreshadows of what was to come. It is good to think about the ways in which we might also come to lean on our structures, rather than placing our trust in Jesus.

9. The Law (the Torah)

Read Hebrews 8:6-13

Understanding what Christian Bibles refer to as the *law*, is a difficult aspect. To Jews, this *law* is called Torah, and it actually includes the first five books of the Bible – something that can also be referred to as the Pentateuch. The word is derived from the Hebrew root *yirah* – which means “to guide” or “to teach”. It also holds an aspect of hitting the mark (as in archery), that speaks of the aiming of Torah to teach and to guide the faithful to righteous living.

The problems arise when it is approached and/or practiced in terms of legal law - something the Jewish Pharisee sect of religious leaders tended to do. But the Torah is a guide. The Torah (law) enabled sin to be identified and clarified – it revealed what God saw as unfaithful; and in that frame it then provided a *temporary* appeasement for sin, through the process of sacrifice and atonement.

One of the key things to understand about the Torah is that it was, and is, impossible for a normal person to keep perfectly. Not only did this apply to the written Torah, that we read in the Bible, but also to an *oral* Torah that the Jewish religious leaders also developed. The steady distortion of this led to an increasingly religious and oppressive faith system, that in the end, Jesus came to re-interpret.

The Torah and the sacrificial system attached to it could never provide true freedom and required the continual offerings to God, year after year. This is why the “new” covenant through Jesus, renders the previous covenant of the Torah obsolete (v.13)

While aiming ourselves toward righteous living remains as a key call upon a Christian life, strict legal observance is not demanded to live rightly before God. Instead, through his perfect obedience to God the Father, Jesus fulfilled the requirement of the Torah and met the penalty demanded by the curse of sin. Therefore, he has been given a ministry in a priesthood that is far superior and mediates a far better covenant.

We need to understand the reason that God gave the temporary covenant of Moses and the Torah. And although we refer to the “new” covenant ratified and mediated by Jesus, it has in fact always been the intended way to walking with God – remember Melchizedek and the bread and wine? Without the Torah we would not have properly known the nature and curse of sin, but without Jesus we could not have entered into eternal life.

10. The Priestly Order of Melchizedek 1

Read Genesis 14:17-20 and then Hebrews 7:1-3

Now that we have heard about the priestly order of Aaron, it is important that we understand the order of Melchizedek – even though it won't come back into play until the days of Jesus. This is an area that many Christians are not aware of and so we will plant the beginnings of an important feature to come.

The name Melchizedek means 'king of justice' and 'king of peace. He was already a priest of God, in Salem (*later to be called Jeru-salem*), when Abram was in the land of Canaan. He has no record of father or mother – and no end to his life – he is eternal! When Abram returned from retrieving Lot and his family, Melchizedek came out to bless him, and Abram gave Melchizedek a tenth of all he had gained (*the principle of tithing to the priests or church*).

But Melchizedek did more than bless Abram; he brought out *bread and wine* to share together. The order of Aaron was the blood and ashes of sacrifice, but the order of Melchizedek was *bread and wine* – even before the law and the order of Aaron was established! Just as we read about the story of Jesus in the genealogy of Adam to Noah, here again we are being told that the real order of things will be in the way of Melchizedek.

The way of the law and sacrifices became a position of pride and distraction for the people of Israel. Their story did not begin with the escape from Egypt and the giving of the law, it began with the covenant with Abram, confirmed with *bread and wine* in the order of Melchizedek – to be instituted and confirmed by Jesus at his last supper with his disciples.

Knowing the real background story is essential to understanding the real actions of Jesus more than 1000 years later. Understanding God's presence through Melchizedek in the place that would become Jerusalem, presenting bread and wine – the symbols of the true covenant, and that the sacrificial offering system would only be a temporary measure, can only be known by looking back to the beginnings.

This week, ponder again the importance of knowing the whole story of the Bible and God's plan for salvation – not a Plan B if Plan A fails scenario, but a deliberate intention to bring about the salvation of mankind through Jesus, from the very beginning.

11. A Failed Conquest

Read Joshua 21:43-45 and then Judges 1:19-2:3

Upon reading Joshua 21:43-45, you might conclude that the Israelites took over the whole promised land very successfully, but the next passage from Judges tells us otherwise. Actually, a quick check of Genesis 15:18* will also reveal that they did not even attempt to occupy all the land God originally described to Abram (Abraham) – from the border with Egypt (in the Sinai wilderness) all the way to the Euphrates River in the north and north-east.

The boundaries described in the Book of Joshua cover a much smaller area than those in Genesis 15, and even then, the Israelites did not drive out the inhabitants there but compromised and lived alongside them. But the area and occupation of land is a distraction; one that modern Israel still grapples with today as they continue to survive in the midst of many enemies.

In many places, God told the Israelites to seek peace treaties and to enslave the people. However, as unsavoury and unpalatable that seems to us, it appears that God did command the complete annihilation of some people groups (see Deuteronomy 20). In Ezekiel 33:11, God says that he takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but while God told Abram that the sins of these people were not yet great enough to bring their destruction, by the time of Joshua it seems that the time had come.

Apart from this unpleasant aspect, another key issue sits alongside God's command: the concern of God that the Israelites would compromise their worship of him through not only living alongside pagan religion but also adopting and contaminating themselves with their practices. This remains today as the greatest threat to the follower of God. The identity and nature of the idols and practices may have changed, but the (evil) spirit of rebellion and rejection of God is still very much to the fore.

Israel's problem was not really a failure to take land, but a failure to remain faithful to God and to worship him alone. This challenge remains with us today. There are many things that challenge our faithful devotion to God and his way, and perhaps we are yet to fully learn and experience the blessings he has for those who will obey.

What really matters? Jesus said that the greatest commandment was to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength... and he also said that those who truly loved him are those who keep his commands. Obedience to God is to be faithful in responding to the teaching of Jesus and the guidance of the Holy Spirit – the ordinary stuff of everyday.

12. You Have A King!

Read 1 Samuel 8:1-9

As the Israelites entered into Canaan – the land promised to Abram/Abraham – God established a governance system of judges over them. It is an often-overlooked fact that the people did not conquer the land as God told them to do, and so from the very start of their time in the land, they lived a life that required compromise with the people and religion that was already in place. Instead of receiving the fullness of the promise, they needed to be governed by these judges acting on God's behalf.

The period of the judges was somewhat chaotic and led to the last of these judges – Samuel. When Samuel's sons began to take his place, their greed of money and lack of integrity led to rebellion and the people met with Samuel in Ramah and called for their own king like the nations that surrounded them. This was a mistake.

Although Samuel was offended for himself, the people of Israel were actually rejecting the kingship they were already under, and the failure of a couple of judges caused them to reject God. God was not unaware of the people's rebellion and rejection of him, in favour of the false gods of Canaan, and he told Samuel to warn them of the consequences – but they did not listen.

For the next 1000 years, Israel struggled under the fickleness of human kingship - sometimes experiencing the governance of good kings, but more often-than-not struggling under the foolishness of bad kings. All the while, the people flip-flopped between the faithful worship of God through sacrifice and offerings, and the lure of pagan rituals and gods. And, as we shall hear about later, even with the re-establishment of the Temple and Judaism, the people still did not understand the kingdom and kingship of God.

All through these many years, God's true way was still accessible, but the eventual exile of Israel to Assyria and of Judah to Babylon confirmed Israel's unwillingness to listen to God and take heed of his warnings. While they foolishly believed they were secure in their religious practice, they scoffed at God's prophets and continued to pay the price for rejecting the King they already had.

Think about it. The story we read of Israel between Samuel and Jesus Christ, had the potential to read differently. What if Israel had not rejected God's rule that day – or was Israel's rebellion inevitable? Is the question of God's kingship still at the heart of following him today?

13. Saul and David

Read 1 Samuel 15:10-23 and 16:1-13

When Israel asked for an earthly king, like the nations around them, God gave them Saul. He was a man who stood out, head and shoulders above his peers, a warrior-king in the making who would lead Israel in the ways they had asked for. We may feel a bit sorry for Saul when he falls from grace and God turns his back on him but consider this; Saul set out to do what seemed right, but something about him became problematic – Saul was focused more on himself than he was on God – the very thing Samuel warned the Israelites would happen in seeking a human king.

Two areas where Saul got it wrong, alert us to the way that God looks at things.

The first is obedience. When God commands something, that is what he requires. Jesus said that those who truly love him, are those who do what he commands. Obedience is the sign of devotion, revealing the true condition of the heart.

The second area is humility. When Samuel went looking for Saul, he was told that Saul had gone to Carmel to set up *a monument to himself!* Saul began to believe in his own greatness – that things were going well because of his own strength and ability. But the call upon us is to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul and mind.

David was not like Saul at all. Although dark and handsome, he was the youngest and therefore considered the least of his brothers. God reminded Samuel that the outward appearance (something Saul did have) was not as important as what was going on in the heart.

David made many mistakes, maybe more and even more serious ones than Saul, but there is a difference between these two men. Saul sought glory for himself, but David was described as a “man after God’s own heart” (Acts 13:22). Despite his many bad moments, at the core of David’s life was a desire to follow God and serve him with humility. The Psalms of David are filled with his process of turning back to God when things had gone wrong – repenting and returning again and again to his love for God.

The reigns of all of the future kings of Israel and Judah were compared to the attitude of David in his years as King. Not a comparison of their activity, but of their attitude before God. Those who sought obedience and humility were favoured by God. Perhaps this is the same call upon us today? Are you a Saul or a David?

14. Knowing God

Read 1 Samuel 17:12-51 (David and Goliath)

We tend to place David on a pedestal as an example of what we might aspire to – gallantry, confidence and authority. But actually, the secret of David was simply that he knew and trusted God.

When David heard Goliath taunting the soldiers of King Saul's army, his different perception of the challenge changed the game. What you did not read today was the usual taunt of Goliath (verse 8 of chapter 17) – *"I am the Philistine champion, but you are only the servants of Saul."* While this intimidated Saul's soldiers, it did not intimidate David. Why?

David did not buy into Goliath's jibe at Saul's armies – in David's mind, Goliath was daring to stand against the armies of the living God (verse 36). David did not seek his confidence in the likes of Saul, or his soldiers; his confidence lay in knowing the faithfulness and strength of God. David knew the protection of God as he fought off lions and bears while protecting his father's flocks. When David perceived that Goliath was in fact insulting God, he did not hesitate to take up the challenge of facing this pagan fool.

He selected five smooth stones – the kind he always carried to ward off wild animals – and seeing Goliath as nothing more than a marauding lion or bear, he set off across the valley toward Goliath. Sensing an easy victory, Goliath added further insults, cursing David by the names of his gods. So, David met him on his own terms; *"You come to me with sword, spear and javelin, but I come to you in the name of the LORD of heaven's armies... whom you have defied today."*

Where is the real battle in this life? Who does the devil, and his evil workers really battle against? The living God of Israel – Yehovah! To know God is to have confidence in him having the real control, and in him holding the keys to victory. Goliath was not standing against Saul – he was standing against God!

Knowing God – his sovereignty, his majesty and his almighty power – is where security and prosperity in life is found. God prospered David that day because he honoured the name of God and defended his honour.

Ponder. Do you know God and have confidence in his ability and desire to protect and prosper you? David was a man who sought after God himself, rather than chasing religious ritual and pretence. Are you seeking after this God?

15. A Divided Kingdom

Read 1 Kings 11:26-40

The period of the Kings becomes a rather confusing time following the reign of David's son, Solomon. Although Solomon's greatness was recognized in many ways, in the end he did not remain faithful to God. He married many foreign women and was lured away from God into idolatry, turning his heart from God.

In today's passage we read that Solomon's rejection of God led to a division of the kingdom. After Solomon's death, God tore the kingdom apart – placing ten of the tribes into the new northern kingdom of Israel, warning them that he still required faithful obedience to him alone. However, God did not tear apart the dynasty of David who had obeyed him, leaving the tribes of Judah and Benjamin in Jerusalem, shining the lamp of God's ultimate plan there. While the tribes of the northern kingdom of Israel sustained a continual battle with idolatry, Judah maintained control of the southern area of Israel (the kingdom of Judah) and preserved the line of the Messiah and God's promise of salvation.

Israel's kings did not heed God's warning and suffered under a line of 18 evil kings, before falling to the Assyrians in 724 BC. Judah experienced a mixed bag – 9 good kings and 12 evil kings. In the end Judah too fell to the Babylonians in a series of exiles from 605-586 BC.

Although both kingdoms were continually warned by God's prophets of their impending doom, in the end their kings led them to destruction just as God had told them through the prophet Samuel. Under the kingship of God, the Israelites had a relative stability, but under human kingship the kingdom became divided and fell. In Matthew 12:25 Jesus said, *“Every kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and every city or household divided against itself will not stand.”*

The fate of Israel was not random or an unlucky co-incidence. It had all been foretold by God and came as a result of the people's call for a human king like the nations around them.

The only solid foundation is found under the kingship of God, in his kingdom where his will is done through faithful obedience to his way. When we live as double-minded people, compromising with the ways of the world around us (as most of us do to some degree) we can be sure that the way forward will be unclear, and the path will rarely be straight. Dedicate yourself afresh to the ways of God each day.

16. Ruth

Read Ruth 4:13-22 (I encourage you to read the whole book this week – only 4 chapters)

The story of Ruth is in some ways a strange inclusion in the Old Testament, as it deals with a woman who was not Jewish, but a Moabite gentile. The focus of the Old Testament is Israel's (Hebrew and Jewish) history, so why would a story of a foreign woman suddenly appear in this frame?

When Ruth's Jewish mother-in-law found herself a widow and with two deceased sons, living in Moab, she decided to return to Judah, in Israel. Ruth, the Moabite wife of Naomi's deceased son, Kilion, would not be separated from her and vowed to stay by her side. *"Don't ask me to leave you and turn back. Wherever you go I will go. Wherever you live I will live. Your people will be my people, and your God will be my God. Wherever you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. May the LORD punish me severely if I allow anything but death to separate us."*

In that moment, Ruth the gentile, declared her faith in the God of Israel, even invoking a marriage-like vow to allow only death to separate her from her oath! To show his acknowledgment and acceptance of her, God then did an amazing thing.

Ruth caught the eye of a man named Boaz. He was a Jew and more importantly, he was the son of a woman named Rahab (Joshua 2) – another gentile woman who had also placed her faith in God. Boaz not only recognized Ruth's real beauty but also acknowledged her pledge of allegiance to his God. He said to her; *"May the LORD reward you for your deeds and may you have a full reward from the LORD, the God of Israel, **under whose wings you have come for refuge.**"* (Ruth 2:12)

When Ruth approached the sleeping Boaz and placed herself under the hem of his robe, a significant spiritual symbolism played out. The robe was called a *kanaf* – which also means *wings* – so, she enacted what Boaz had spoken in 2:12 and came under the wings of his robe and became a Jewess by marriage – a symbol of complete salvation.

God's intention of including gentiles in salvation has always been a part of his plan – sitting here in plain sight, in the Old Testament. When we as gentiles confess our faith in Jesus, we too become the bride of Christ – coming under the protection of his wings. Rahab and Ruth – gentiles – became a part of Jesus' genealogy – how cool is that?!

Look at the whole story of Ruth this week, reflecting on her confession of faith and the way that God brought her into his redemptive plan. Thank God that you – as a gentile also – have not been excluded from God's amazing salvation.

17. A Marriage Motif

Read Jeremiah 31:31-32

Because many of us tend to read small snippets of scripture (if at all), we can clasp onto particular concepts and completely miss others altogether. The marriage motif (picture) is one of those aspects we can overlook.

God created people to be relational – with him and with each other. One of the aspects of marriage that is missed today, is that it reflects the nature of relationship that God wished to have with his creation. The bringing together of a man and woman to become one flesh (*in the eyes of God*) is seen in a person coming to faith in Jesus, becoming *one* with him, and therefore *one* with the Father (John 17:21).

Throughout scripture, God speaks to the marriage motif – faithfulness and intimacy, unfaithfulness and infidelity – in our chasing of other gods. An unfaithful marriage partner unwittingly becomes *one* with the other person, and when we align ourselves to other gods, we become *one* with them. This is untenable to God.

In Exodus 19 and 20 we read of the Israelites arrival at Mount Horeb (Mt. Sinai). There, God descended on Mount Horeb in a thick cloud to speak with Moses. The ancient Rabbi's related this cloud to the *hoopah* – a ceremonial canopy held above a couple when they become engaged and entered into a marriage covenant. Here, at Mount Horeb, God delivered a marriage contract (*ketubah*); he essentially proposed to Israel.

In Jeremiah 31:32 God spoke regarding this covenant: *"Not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, although I was a husband unto them, says the Lord"*.

Israel was unfaithful to this covenant. In Hebrews 3, the rebellious wanderers of the wilderness are identified as an *adulterous* generation that did not hold to this marriage relationship, thereby missing the eternal rest promised by God.

In the New Testament, this understanding is that those who come to faith in and through Jesus, become like a bride to Christ, and to God. The marriage motif continues, and God remains faithful to his relational commitment.

Reflect on God's declaration of seeing himself as a husband to his people. In offering us his contract (covenant), God is proposing to us – and in Jesus he is re-establishing his commitment to the deal, but this time under the permanent and unbreakable covenant sealed through the blood of Jesus.

18. Hosea 1 – Unfaithfulness

Read Hosea 2:1-8 (An unfaithful wife)

Israel's unfaithfulness (as God sees it) is well recorded throughout the Prophets. Although they claimed to be the people of God, they were led astray by a procession of wicked kings and polluted their faith with the gods of the Canaanites. Ultimately, this is what they were exiled to Babylon for – forsaking God for false and perverse religion. The book of Hosea provides a good picture of the problem that lies across many other Bible texts.

Hosea's wife, Gomer, was not an unmarried prostitute – she was an *unfaithful wife of whoredom* (see Hosea 1:2). Hosea taking her as his wife reflects the graciousness of God who also brings us into his marriage contract as sinners.

Chapter 3 of Hosea suggests that although Gomer was married to him, she continued to practice prostitution and unfaithfulness. Whenever we forsake God, going beyond temptation and entering into sin, we too are prostituting ourselves before God. This is one way that we can see the impact that our sin (our unfaithfulness) has in maintaining a relationship with God – we are like a wife of whoredom to him.

This is what upsets God most; to have brought the sinner into his loving care and protection, only for us to treat his gracious forgiveness with contempt. In the wilderness, God gave the people a simple set of guidelines to right living before him – and the very first one reads: *“I am the Lord your God... You must not have any other god but me.”*

The greatest unfaithfulness is that of marriage infidelity – under the law of Moses, a couple could be stoned to death for this. The result of this type of unfaithfulness towards God is the placement of children into slavery. The children of Israel's unfaithfulness in the wilderness, bound the people to slavery under the law, where sacrifices could provide temporary atonement – but never eternal salvation. But as we know, there is a covenant that overrides this situation, through faithfulness to Jesus.

Consider this. The call to faithfulness in God is not easy to fulfil. Although God was physically present with the Israelites in the wilderness, and later in the Holy of Holies in the Temple, people did not remain faithful to him. Self-will and determination are not the answer – we need something greater than ourselves to break the curse of sin.

19. Exile

Read Isaiah 5:1-7

There are many passages that provide the reasoning behind God's exile of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah, but this one provides a particularly eloquent reading of the people's failure to live as God had commanded (his way rather than the law).

In John 15:1, Jesus says that he is the true vine, and his Father is the gardener. In Isaiah, God speaks about his desired plan in terms of establishing a vineyard and lovingly tending it. And then he waited to see its fruitfulness, but the crop was a huge disappointment – the fruit was bitter. What more could the gardener have done?

Why God's vineyard gave him bitter grapes lies at the heart of the exile. God thought he had relayed his way to his people effectively – they had all they needed to live righteously before in, waving his banner before the nations around them. The grapes should have been sweet. He expected a crop of justice but found oppression and instead of righteous living he heard cries of violence. Israel had read it all wrong. In addition, other texts make it clear that Israel had mixed in the idolatrous practices of the foreigners they lived with; it is not that they failed to clear the land of the people, but that they had adopted their practices instead of remaining faithful to God alone (see Deuteronomy 6:4).

So, what is a God of justice and righteousness to do? He must discipline his people, imaged in the tearing down of its protections, leaving the vines unpruned and allowing animals to trample the garden. For a time, there would be no more refreshing rain for Israel. Instead, their enemies would lord it over them. Although God warned Israel over and over again, across almost 2000 years, they did not change their ways and proudly insisted that they were in a right position with God. Religious pride!

Exile was a severe slap in the face for Israel. Their idea of salvation was to be secure in the promised land, living faithfully (distorted to legal religion) before God. To be dragged out of the land by their enemies was the ultimate humiliation and punishment. And that is why God did it.

Does the patience and grace of God have limits? We often quote Romans 5:20 – 'where sin abounds, grace abounds all the more' – but this is not a licence to sin wilfully. The extent of God's grace is not about an endless patience, but about God's mighty power to overcome the power of sin – sin can never be so great that God cannot conquer it, for he already has. God gives us room to hear and change, but he also requires a response to his call.

20. Hosea 2 – Restoration

Read Hosea 2:14-20

You might be interested to know that the name Hosea means ‘faithful’ – the same root word that also gives us the names of Joshua and Jesus. While God’s people have a history of unfaithfulness, God remains faithful to his people and his promises. And in Hosea 2 we read these tender words of God as he calls his people homeward once more.

“On that day, says the LORD, you will call me ‘My husband,’... and I will take you as my wife forever... in righteousness, justice, love and mercy. I will take you for my wife in faithfulness, and you will know the Lord...” Even as a male, I can appreciate the beauty and tenderness of these words of God – expressed as a faithful husband to his wife – to see the way in which God truly considers us.

In Hosea 6, a repentant admission is made: *Come let us return to the LORD, for he has torn us to pieces, but now he will heal us. He has injured us, but now he will bandage our wounds. In just three days he will restore us, so that we may live in his presence. Oh, that we might know the LORD!*

The God of justice does allow us to face trials and hardships, and he allows us to face the consequences that are due for our unfaithfulness. But he is also compassionate and merciful, and he has no intention of leaving us to be destroyed under the curse of sin.

The window of opportunity to enter God’s (eternal) rest – to be his beloved wife – remains for those who will turn from unfaithfulness to faithfulness. Even before our fall from grace, God’s plan was for restoration. Knowing of our impending unfaithfulness, he had already prepared for our restoration through Jesus.

This is a picture that God intends us to see and take hold of in our journey with him. Faithful Hosea reflects our faithful God who has taken on a wife of whoredom but loves her so deeply that he cannot let her go. He will not let go of you.

Think about the depth of love that God has for you, his creation. It has never been his goal to send you to an eternity of suffering, but to rescue you and restore you to eternal life. Sin is not an obstacle to God when we confess our weaknesses, for it is in our weaknesses that God can make us strong.

21. Predictive Texts – The Prophets

Read Isaiah 44:24 – 45:13

There are occasions where biblical texts predict future situations and events. God warned Abraham that his descendants would be enslaved for four hundred years in Egypt. Daniel was given a vision and insight that identified the time of the rise and fall of the Messiah. Zechariah accurately described the method of crucifixion, long before the Romans invented it.

But there are also the ones known as the Prophets. These people had a specific role before God, in warning Israel about their behaviour, trajectory and future events. Theirs was a very serious position – proclaiming for God was to put your life on the line, as the call was for complete accuracy without any error. Compare this with the many today who often act as prophets, but their predictions do not come to pass.

Isaiah was known as a major prophet, recognizing his long career compared with some who gave only single prophecies, like Zechariah. Towards the end of Isaiah 44, Isaiah declares God's intention to restore his people to Jerusalem and rebuild the Temple. The man who will bring this about is named Cyrus (Persian). In Isaiah 45, God outlines why he has chosen this man to conquer Babylon and release the Jews from their captivity. Even the manner of Cyrus' victory is indicated – the drying up of rivers. This was written around two hundred years *before* Cyrus' time and the actual exile.

In 536 BC, Cyrus diverted the waters of the Euphrates River into a canal, enabling his soldiers to storm Babylon through the dry river bed! At that time, Daniel (an employee of the royal courts) approached his new boss and presented him with the scroll of Isaiah which named him personally and had foretold his exploits*. As a result, Cyrus issued the decree to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the *Temple* in Jerusalem.

The prophet's role was to guide Israel to faithful worship and response to God. They warned Israel again and again that they were heading off-track, and their credibility was proven in the precise outcome of their prophecies. The prophets are also an important aspect of supporting the authenticity of the Bible as representing the voice of God to the world. Through such predictions, many have come to declare, "Truly, the God of Israel is God alone."

*Historian, Flavius Josephus (Jerusalem) records this in Antiquities of the Jews (94AD)

22. Ezekiel and Daniel

The books of Ezekiel and Daniel are a fascinating addition to the Old Testament canon, because both were prophets during and in the Exile. Although God had exiled the Jews to Babylon, he did not stop speaking at this point and brought some of the most incredible revelations of both the near future and the last days, towards the end of time.

Ezekiel was taken captive to Babylon in 597 BC, but did not begin his work for another five years. He had vivid visions of the majesty and mystery of God – so strange that he is barely able to provide proper descriptions for what he had seen. He was called upon to ensure that the people understood that the Mosaic covenant had come to an end. The time of the tabernacle and the temple, the time of the city of David, was finished – and the people still did not want to hear it.

In essence, their view of salvation – to live securely in the land in obedience to God – had been shattered. God was not pleased with their interpretation, conduct and attitude. Ezekiel's task was to bring the previous epoch to a close and then to announce that a new way was coming – a time was coming when God would put his own Spirit within them.

Daniel had been taken to Babylon around ten years earlier than Ezekiel and found himself elevated into serving the governments of the various kings. Daniel is a reminder to the people that even in exile, their true loyalty is still to God – and it is God who will protect them and release them in due time and bring them home.

Daniel should have been positioned in the palace of Judah's kings, but instead he found himself in the palace of foreign kings, but still advocating for God. As much as the devil tried to destroy the place and power of Daniel in Babylon, his faithfulness to God demonstrates who is still in control.

The dramatic visions of these two men gave the people a glimpse of how God's plan would work out in the future, and of what God expected of those who claim to follow him in the new covenant. The ultimate message of their writings is that there remains a sovereign King who is Lord of all.

It is hard to imagine how the Israelites received such amazing insights from Ezekiel and Daniel – and still did not see the real picture... but we have the benefit of looking back over the whole deal. We should remain mindful of how easy it is to miss what God is doing. We all need to reflect on our own position and check that we too are not getting lost in a distorted picture.

23. Ezekiel

Read Ezekiel 33:1-20

Ezekiel was described as God's 'watchman' (33:7) – responsible for sounding the alarm to warn Israel of their error. If they chose not to listen, it would be their own fault if they died in their sins. But if they listened, God says, they could save their lives.

Contrary to many people's view of God, he takes no pleasure in the death of wicked people. Instead, God's desire is to have us turn from our wicked ways – and live! Conceited righteousness cannot save a person who hides their sin from God – there is no salvation except through owning and confessing our sins and receiving forgiveness through Jesus.

In Psalm 51 David writes that being aware of our sin (and feeling the shame of it) is a good thing because God will not reject a contrite heart. When a person understands and acknowledges their sinful position, God is ready to work in and with that person. This is the choice God asked Ezekiel to put before the people.

If they listened, God had a further proposition for them – he would restore them to protect his holy name (36:22). He would revive those who listened, like dry bones being brought back to life (Chapter 37), opening the graves of exile to raise them again (37:12). A new way would begin.

God himself would cleanse those who would turn to him, washing away their sin. He would remove the heart of stubbornness and give them a new softened heart – and he would put his own Spirit in them so that they could follow his ways in righteousness (36:25-27). These prophecies speak of Israel's near future and of the age to come.

In Chapter 37, God speaks of David being their King again and their prince forever – something only possible through understanding Jesus' position as the eternal holder of David's throne. There would be just one shepherd – Jesus said he was the good shepherd. And God would fill believers with his own Holy Spirit. This feature of the current and the eternal being presented in a singular revelation is key to understanding the book of Ezekiel.

Even at our lowest point, God remains faithful and keeps the window of opportunity open to anyone who will respond. A continual process of reading the Bible will gradually reveal the key themes of God's way, and what it is that he wants us to focus on. In the end, it is God who does the work of salvation and provides for our eternal life.

24. Daniel 1 – Jesus’ appearance is predicted

Read Daniel 9:20-27

The book of Daniel is remarkable in many ways; not least for the visions of the future that Daniel receives. In Daniel 9, the angel Gabriel appeared before Daniel to give him further “insight and understanding” about the things he had been seeing.

Gabriel declared a period of *seventy sets of seven*. Scholars tell us that this idiom refers to sets of years i.e. seventy sets of seven years. It is worth noting what these years cover or include.

The years are decreed for the people of Israel and Jerusalem – to end their time of rebellion and sin against God, to atone for their guilt, to bring everlasting righteousness, to confirm prophetic vision and anoint the Most Holy Place. These things will lead to the *end of all things* (verse 26). This period takes history to the end of our time.

But there’s even something more astounding here – this vision points us to Jesus. Seven sevens will pass (49 years) and then sixty-two sevens (434 years) – a total of 483 years. At the end of those years – the Anointed One, God’s Messiah will appear! And how can we work out when that will be? It’s a mathematical prophecy with the year count starting from the giving of the decree to rebuild Jerusalem.

That decree to rebuild the *city* of Jerusalem (not the Temple) was issued by King Artaxerxes, on March 14, 445 BC (it was Cyrus who decreed the Temple rebuilding that took 49 years – seven sevens, just as was prophesied). Then the sixty-two further weeks apply. By carefully calculating these years*, we arrive on 6th April, 32 AD. On that day (a Sunday) Jesus entered Jerusalem, presented himself and was hailed as the Messiah – the exact same number of days as had been indicated by the angel Gabriel.

This is not a fabricated story – it’s historical fact. Cyrus, followed by Artaxerxes, set God’s plan in motion to begin the count down for the appearance of the Messiah. Perhaps the Magi (wise men) knew of these things, and this is why they set out for Judah when they saw signs in the heavens? God’s word can be trusted – he has a plan.

*The calculation used for this is based on the work of Sir Robert Anderson (The Coming Prince, 1894).

Ancient calendars =360 days 483 years x 360 = 173,880 days (prophesied by Gabriel)

March 14, 445 BC to March 14, 32 AD = 173,740 days

Add in leap year days (116) and days from March 14 to April 6 (24) = 173,880 days

April 6th was a Sunday in 32 AD – as was the eve of Passover a week later, the day Jesus was actually crucified.

25. Daniel 2 – The 70th Week

Read Daniel 9:20-27

It is worth our while staying with Daniel for another week of reflection.

Our passage today speaks of a time frame that leads to the end of all things relating to this earth. Last week we looked at the way the 7 weeks and the 62 weeks - 69 weeks of years – were set to the coming of the Messiah and his death. But then a problem arises. The 70th week speaks of a time that is in the future – even still for us reading this today.

In some mysterious way, there is a gap in this prophecy between the completion of the 69 weeks (and the death of Jesus) and the activation of the 70th week. Jesus also spoke directly about this same 7-year period in Matthew 24. In this chapter (which you may want to read), the disciples ask Jesus about the signs that *will accompany the end of the world*.

There will be many pre-cursors – wars, famines, earthquakes and an increasing general chaos – *but that is not the end*. The day is coming when people will see what Daniel spoke about in Daniel 9:27 – a rebellion and desecration in the Holy Place – indicating that the Temple will be rebuilt again in Jerusalem (an important indicator of the end times).

At this time there will be a great persecution - tribulation. Note that Daniel's vision splits the 7-year period into two halves. In the first half a unifying ruler will make a treaty with the people of earth, but half-way through the 7 years, he will turn on them and bring the great desecration and persecution of God's people.

Jesus says that if this time were not shortened, no one would survive. In the meantime, we should not be deceived. False messiahs and prophets will arise to deceive many – even possibly strong Christians. Many Christians today promote a doctrine of a pre-tribulation rapture which is based on a false interpretation of scripture (see Devotion 50 for this). *No one* knows how long this prophetic gap is, except God himself – not even Jesus knows the exact time the final days will begin!

Christians can become over pre-occupied with end-time scriptures and revelations. While it is interesting to look at and to be aware of, it is important to keep a good perspective. These days are not here yet and we cannot be certain that they will come in our time, but we do have a call upon our lives today – a mission to fulfil – in witnessing to the security of salvation that is realized in trusting in Jesus. Ask him about what is most important today.

26. Silence

Read Malachi 3

When the people of Judah and Benjamin returned to southern Israel between 538 and 515 BC, they rebuilt the Temple in Jerusalem. From this time until AD70, this era was known as the Second Temple Period. Although they may have been called “Jews” (a name derived from Judahites in the late king’s period), the term ‘Jew’ is particularly attached to the rise of the legalistic interpretation and application of the Torah in the Second Temple period. From the finishing of the Second Temple, the scriptures are silent for around 400 years!

We know very little about what happened in Israel in this time. One feature that does seem to have arisen in this period is a focus on the law of Moses – more so than on Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Alongside this is a lack of a singular view and application of scripture – different sects arose with competing ideas about what amounted to best interpretation and practice. Pharisees, Sadducees, the Essenes, and other groups were involved in bringing Israel up to the time of Jesus.

The Jews settled again in the northern areas, including the Galilee. There will no doubt have been a few remnants of the ten northern tribes, but mostly the population was dominated by descendants of Judah and Benjamin. Hence, by the time Jesus is born, the central place of worship is Jerusalem, but Joseph and Mary were living in the area of Nazareth, in the north.

God’s last words to Israel were from Malachi – and it seems that the religious leaders had learned little from their time in exile. They had re-built the Temple, but they had not re-built their faithfulness, and they remained lost to the real ways of God – Jesus called them “blind”. Malachi 3 reveals that the same old problems still plagued their religious system, and they were not caring for the oppressed, marginalized and foreigners – the very same complaint that God had against them throughout the pre-exile years.

Fortunately, the real plan was still in place – God’s messenger and his anointed were coming! Jesus was on his way, and he would see the Second Temple. They had 400 years to think about it, but it seems that few did.

We are always in a hurry, but God is not afraid of silence – even long periods of silence. Who are we that we think that God should hasten all that we think is right and correct in our time. God’s ways are not our ways, and he will bring his own plan into action whenever it suits him. In times of silence, perhaps God is giving us room to consider our position?

27. A Baby?

Read Isaiah 7:14, 9:6-7 and Matthew 1:18

Isaiah lived and wrote more than 600 years before Mary got pregnant and Jesus was born. God was coming. He would be with us – but as a baby?

The people of King Ahaz' s time would not have seen Isaiah 7:14 as a prediction about the coming Messiah – that particular sign had an immediate two-year context. But in hindsight it becomes obvious that this can be linked to the birth of Jesus. And although Jesus was not *named* Immanuel, Christians certainly began speaking of him as being 'God with us.' He was called Immanuel in the same way he was called Everlasting Father and Mighty God.

Why did the religious leaders not see their Messiah/Christ coming? Partly because things are much easier to see and discern in hindsight. It seems so obvious to us, but not to those who had a different Saviour in mind; a man who would rise as a warrior-king and smite Israel's enemies was expected – not a baby!

There are more than 200 recognized prophecies about the Messiah in the Old Testament – Jesus can be seen to have fulfilled them all – including being born as a baby in Bethlehem. Once again, we discover that God's singular plan has been active all along. John asserts that Jesus already existed before anything was created. Paul tells us that everything was made for Jesus and through him, and in him all things have their being and hold together.

A baby who grew to become the man who, more than any other person in history, changed the world. Our societies have been built upon the change in thinking and way of living taught by Jesus. From hospitals to justice systems, ambulances to education, tolerance to forgiveness, Saint Nicholas to Santa Claus – Jesus' life and teaching lays as the foundation of almost every aspect of our modern lives.

It is said that in the Old Testament the New Testament is concealed, and in the New Testament the Old Testament is revealed. That's the story of Jesus – a baby - God's plan all along.

Starting in the middle of the story (in the Gospels of the New Testament) does give an understanding of salvation through Jesus, but it's a story that was put into action long before he was born. When God created people, he knew we would fall victim to sin and death, so he got us out of danger by pushing us out of the Garden of Eden; and then he set in motion the plan for our redemption and salvation to eternal life – through a baby.

28. God Can Be Seen

Read Exodus 33:20 and John 1:18

A little girl was working busily in art class one day when the teacher came up behind her. “What are you drawing today, Suzie?” she asked. “I’m drawing God!” said Suzie confidently. “That’s a bit silly,” the teacher said, “No-one’s ever seen God,” she added mockingly. Suzie never looked up from her work but quietly said, “Well, they will in a minute.”

Exodus 33:20 makes it clear that a person cannot look upon the glory of the face of God and live and John confirms that indeed no one has ever seen him in this way. However, that does not mean that God cannot be seen. John is totally convinced that who God is can be seen by looking to the life and actions of Jesus – who makes God known.

Of course, the religious leaders of Jesus’ day thought they already knew God and had it all sown up. It seems that they did not learn the lessons of exile very well. So, what is it that we need to see about God?

For one thing God holds that obedience is better than sacrifice. My high school motto was ‘*Esse quam videri*’, Latin for, ‘*It is better to be, than to seem to be.*’ Jesus revealed a God of love, justice and compassion. Oh, he is resolute against injustice and sin, but his heart is to save and not destroy. Until Jesus died and rose again, sacrifices were necessary to make atonement for the people’s sin, but obedience to God’s way is far more important.

I am certain that man’s inhumanity to man will be a weighty issue for God at the judgement, and I doubt that anyone is entirely guilt-free on that score. All the more reason to turn to Jesus, to see God for who Jesus revealed him to be, and to seek his kingdom way and eternal life.

Jesus was particularly concerned about followers of God who knew of these things and were not practicing them. Instead, he criticized the Pharisees for tithing even on the herbs from their gardens, but who were ignoring the “weightier issues” of the law and God’s way. Though they claimed to see, they were still blind.

I have often met people who tell me that they do not believe in God. I sometimes ask them if they could tell me about the god they don’t believe in. It is then that I discover that the God they think they see, is not the God who Jesus reveals. I try to encourage them to put aside the (often justified) biases they have received and developed, and look at what Jesus was like, because he said that seeing him was to see God.

29. Walk in the Light

Read John 1:1-9

In Genesis 1, on the very first day, God said, “*Let there be light.*” We read that God separated the light from the preceding darkness and called the two things “*day*” and “*night*”. From this we can sometimes hear the saying that the difference between two things as being like the difference between day and night.

Although God had provided some form of distinction to light and darkness (in verse 3), the sun that supposedly separated them was not created until Day 4 (something to think about). The light that God spoke into being was given to counter the darkness that covered the primordial deep (Genesis 1:2). In early thought darkness represented the unknown and it was the light of revelation that brought order into that darkness and chaos, and wisdom into confusion.

In John 1, John clearly wants to associate the light of God coming into the world, as being Jesus himself. The revelation and wisdom of God present from the very beginning, bringing the very life of God to the earth, through and in Jesus – the true Light of the World! We only exist and know anything of this world and the way and meaning of life, because he enables us to “see” it and comprehend it by the light that he gave.

And then John writes again later (1 John 1 5-10) that God is light and in him there is no darkness – nothing chaotic, confusing, sinful or hidden. If we walk in this light, that is, living in the revelation and teaching of Jesus, then we can be cleansed of all sin, by the blood of Jesus.

Sometimes we are too keen to interpret passages of the Bible literally when in fact there is often much use of metaphor and other imagery to convey principles and other insights. Genesis 1 to 2:3 is actually written intentionally in the form of Hebrew poetry and is not designed to be read literally or be compared with a scientific worldview. John and Paul had a better hold on the imagery that was really being portrayed in Genesis 1. Jesus is the light that God spoke into being to bring order out of chaos.

In writing of the coming Messiah, Isaiah wrote, ‘The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned’ (Isaiah 9:2). Has the light of God, the revelation of Jesus, dawned in your darkness?

Maybe you could spend some time exploring the imagery of God’s light coming into the world to dispel the chaos and confusion of darkness and breaking in with understanding and wisdom (the true meaning of being enlightened).

30. Kingdom and Dominion

Read Matthew 25:14-30

Dallas Willard writes that we all have a “kingdom” – a place where we have self-rule. It is a part of the fallen nature of us that we should seek to raise up our own kingdom – to desire to determine our own path. That’s what happened in the spiritual realm. The problem began in Genesis 3 when the serpent (the devil) deceived Eve and then Adam with cleverly disguised and misleading lies.

The matter is confused by the fact that we are given a level of dominion - things to care for and have jurisdiction over, just as the heavenly beings did. But dominion is not the same thing as the kind of rule God has in his sovereignty. The King has full dominion and grants aspects of his dominion to others – but theirs is not the kingdom. For us it is a limited sphere.

Our own kingdom is limited, distorted and lacking wisdom. Even when we think we have worked out how to self-create a ‘good way’, to bring peace and equality for all, we find that we cannot maintain such a state. If you know George Orwell’s classic novel - *Animal Farm* – you will remember the pigs changing the rules as they went along from “*All animals are equal*” then later adding “*But some animals are more equal than others*”. How typical of the drivers in human kingdom.

Jesus came to bring us a correction in announcing God’s Kingdom. In the parable of the three servants, we see various levels of dominion given to each one. God invites us into a share of his kingdom. The gospel is not that we have been set free to do whatever we want (for God knows that is destructive), but to find the release and freedom of becoming a part of God’s rule and way. So incredible is this invitation that it extends beyond our short earthly lives and continues on into an eternity with God.

However, God’s Kingdom is not a fully delivered article – we are not home yet and our conduct and faithfulness to God’s way counts when God comes to balance the scales. The failure of the last servant to use what the master had given him stands as a stark lesson that to those who much is given, much is required. In the end, that failure results in that servant not receiving the fullness of God’s Kingdom; instead, he is thrown into outer darkness – ouch!

To be in God’s Kingdom requires a surrender of our own kingdom. How many believers have considered themselves to be in his Kingdom, but may find that when they face Jesus, he says to them, “Get away from me, you who practice lawlessness.” (read “you who have held on to your own kingdom”). God’s invitation to us is almost beyond comprehension – to come into his Kingdom and to share it with him. Wow!

31. The Kingdom is Near

Read Mark 12:28-34

When Mark noted the opening words of Jesus ministry, he wrote: *“The time promised by God has come at last. The Kingdom of God is near.”*

Two questions. What time? Where is near?

Jesus did not bring the Kingdom into existence. Kingdom is wherever the king’s will is accepted and done. God’s kingdom (or kingship if you like) has always existed along with God. But God’s kingdom has not always been accepted and appropriated. You may remember we looked at Israel’s abandonment of God’s kingship at Ramah, in 1 Samuel 8? The time Jesus is referring to is the end of this period of abandonment and therefore, an end to the confusing darkness with regards to the way of God. Time is up. Things are about to change.

In Mark 12, Jesus told the religious teacher that he was *“not far from the Kingdom of God.”* In what way was this man “not far” from the goal? God’s kingdom is not a territory won through battle (or destroying your enemy), and it is not a secret place in our hearts, although a surrendered heart is required to see God’s kingdom. This man was close because he had seen and understood the true way of God – that to love God and his neighbour was more important than religious rituals and sacrifices. God’s kingdom is where God’s will is done.

When we pray the prayer that Jesus taught us we say, “Your Kingdom come”, which as Dallas Willard points out, is not a call for God’s Kingdom to suddenly appear as some kind of religious/political phenomenon – it’s a cry of surrender to the will and way of God, expressed in our daily lives.

God’s Kingdom is not far because it has always been there – near - for those who are willing to surrender to the way of God – it’s just a prayer away. But now it has come, because Jesus came to show us the way back into God’s kingship. The Lord’s prayer is a personal prayer of surrender to God’s will and purpose in this world.

Ponder. Certainly, the Lord’s Prayer is worthy of being recited every day. It is not a lifeless ritual, but a living dialogue, enabling surrender to God each day. God’s Kingdom is in heaven, but the will of God’s kingship can be done here on earth, just as God determines it in heaven. It’s that kind of near, and it’s for now.

32. My Kingdom Go

Read Ephesians 1:10-18

God is not the only one with a kingdom. There are evil rulers and authorities, mighty powers in this dark world, and evil spirits even in heavenly places. And then there's me. I have a kingdom – the place where I rule, and things are done according to *my* will.

One of my Pastors once had us make a crown for ourselves, getting us to put a name on it. Because I thought I was clever, I wrote Nebuchad-Gareth on mine (think Daniel) – my mate wrote J.C. (inferring that he was Jesus) on his because those were his initials. And then we both got caught out in our foolishness as the Pastor then spoke about the way we try to assert our own kingdom and our rule over God.

It is important that we understand the nature of the powers and principalities that stand against us – but it is equally true that sometimes our worst enemy can be ourselves. My kingdom gets in the way of God's good kingdom. I repeatedly cast down my crown whenever I find it once again on my head and in my heart, but it is usually not long before I have once again picked it up and given it place over my life.

God's kingdom needs to come, and my kingdom needs to go!

Although Paul was identifying the armour as a powerful protection from the external forces of darkness, some of it can be useful in combatting the ugliness of self as well. The helmet of salvation can protect our minds by not only reminding us to surrender our rebellious thoughts to Jesus, but also to embrace the fullness of the promise of full pardon and release from sin that Jesus' death and resurrection wrought for and in us. Walking in the light of Jesus, in step with his Spirit, is a powerful remedy to the malady of the sin we permit in our own kingdoms.

Although Nebuchadnezzar often acknowledged the superiority and power of the God of Israel, it does not seem that he ever really confessed his own faith in God or truly turned his life over to him. It can be hard to lay our own crown down, but in the end that is what God requires of us if we are to experience the fullness of his Kingdom.

This week, consider if at times, your own kingdom is more at play than God's. Are there any attitudes or behaviours that you could lay down again, allowing Jesus to transform your mind towards the ways of God. Lay down your heavy yoke and take on the yoke of Jesus that is light and easy.

33. Baptism

Read Mark 16:15, Matthew 28:19, John 3:5 & Titus 3:4-5

Baptism can be a sticking point for some Christians, even to the point that they have avoided it, or dismissed it as an unnecessary ritual. However, for the early believers, baptism was a major factor in coming to an assurance of genuine and full faith.

Jesus said some key things about baptism; a practice that the disciples and other early believers took very seriously – there is not a single event of conversion in the Book of Acts that is not accompanied by *immediate baptism*.

Whoever believes and is baptised... According to Jesus, belief and baptism go hand in hand. Is it essential? Possibly not – the thief on the cross was saved by his confession but not baptised (extenuating circumstances perhaps?). But if there is time...

Go and make disciples... baptizing them... A part of the call to evangelize and make new disciples is to baptise them. Again, Jesus is not providing much wriggle room here, Baptism is important.

He saved us... by the washing of regeneration... Here Paul brings an affirmation of what the actions of baptism signify and achieve; a washing of our lives from the contamination of sin. Through this we are regenerated to a new life and prepared to approach God.

Unless one is born of water and the Spirit... Jesus could not be more succinct. He told Nicodemus that without baptism in water and the Spirit, a person *cannot* enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Try squeezing out of that one.

Such a washing was not without precedent; to approach God, the priests had to immerse themselves in a ritual washing. So, we too, are called to such a washing that we may also approach God freely and without condemnation.

If you have been baptized, stand confident in the heavenly cleansing that has been appropriated to you, allowing you to enter into the very presence of God – unafraid. If you believe but have not been baptized, I urge you to ponder this and seek it at the first opportunity – your eternal life may depend on it.

34. Baptised into Death

Read Romans 6:3-4

In this second reflection looking at the importance of baptism, we will consider its association with the death of Jesus.

Paul was a stickler for emphasising that in coming to faith we are “joined” with Christ – becoming a partaker in all that Jesus is and did. The significance of this view is that Jesus is the way into right relationship with God, knowing him and living our lives out with him. When Paul spoke of his personal situation, he presented it as his being “*in Christ*” (over 200 times) in every aspect of his life.

Paul saw baptism as an essential element, representing this being joined with Jesus, even to the point of being joined to his death. *I have been crucified with Christ and it's no longer I who live...* he wrote in Galatians 2:20. Here, Paul's understanding of being joined is seen. Had Paul actually been crucified and killed? No. But he considered that this transaction had somehow occurred spiritually, witnessed by his being baptized.

In the faithful surrender of being baptized, we die to the old nature of sin we were trapped in, and we were buried just as Jesus was. Being buried is permanent. What goes to the grave with us stays there – including the sin that held dominion over our lives. Baptism is the tangible symbol of this death and burial.

But Paul was not unaware of the continued struggle with sin. Having written previously that Jesus' death meant that we are no longer slaves to sin, he then writes, *The trouble is with me, for I am too human, a slave to sin...* (Romans 7:14). Life and temptation still confront us every day, but God's grace is sufficient for those who turn to him.

Baptism gives us the assurance that we are now joined to the work of Christ in the heavenly places – sin has lost its power in our lives and we are no longer slaves to it, because when we died with Christ we were set free from the power of sin. If ongoing sin is an issue for you, remember that Jesus has set you free from it and it is no longer your master – bring it continually to him for forgiveness.

35. Baptised for Resurrection

Read Romans 6:4-11

Last week, we considered the baptism aspect of being joined to Jesus' death, releasing us from the power of sin. This week we want to look at the flipside of death – resurrection.

Because baptism symbolizes a joining of ourselves with Jesus – his person and work – we are also joined to his being raised to new life. *Since we died with Christ, we will also live with him.*

In 1 Corinthians 15:20 we read that, in resurrection, Jesus has become the *first fruits* of those who have died. When Jesus was raised from the dead by the power of God, he became immortal; death no longer has power over him. And so, our being joined to him in his death and resurrection, means that through faith and baptism we too can have immortality.

Of this Paul writes (again in 1 Corinthians 15), *Christ was raised as the first of the harvest, then all who belong to Christ will be raised when he returns.* The assurance of belonging comes through being baptized in water and the Spirit. Ephesians 1:14 says, the Spirit is God's guarantee that he will give us the inheritance promised...

And finally, from Ephesians 1:19-20, we read, *I pray that you will understand the incredible greatness of God's power for us who believe in him. This is the same mighty power that raised Christ from the dead and seated him in the place of honour at God's right hand in the heavenly realms.* One of the incredible promises of Jesus to faithful believers was; Those who are victorious will sit with me on my throne, just as I was victorious and sat with my Father on his throne.

Jesus lived his life to the glory of God. The call upon the Christian is to do the same – an active faith lived out in response to the teaching and revelation of Jesus. We will be raised to eternal life in due time, but we have already been joined to a newness of life here and now. Baptism opens the way.

Contemplate the incredible thing that God has done for us in joining us to Jesus (through baptism) to his death and resurrection. The old person and nature are gone, and a newness of life, here and now, has been opened to us. It's a new and living way – walk ye in it! (Isaiah 30:21)

36. Is Jesus God?

Read Isaiah 9:2-7

There are many prophecies about the Messiah, but today we will consider not if Jesus was this Messiah, but if there are indications that the Messiah would be of God.

The Isaiah 9 prophecy is very important, not least because it predicted that the Messiah would be born as a child – not just that a mighty man would arise, but that being born as a child was an important aspect of the predictions. But let's look at two other interesting features of this prophecy.

Firstly, '*a son is given to us*'. A son? Easily passed over, this short statement carries great weight. It was of great importance for a couple to have a son. The first-born son would be their heir and represent the continuation of the family line. A son being given is therefore of great significance in this prophecy – the Messiah would be seen as God's first-born son – a fact already attested to by David in Psalm 89:26-27. So, this son would be the heir to God, his throne and authority forever!

And secondly, this child, this son, would be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father and Prince of Peace. This Messiah would be called God, and Father! There are many affirmations in the New Testament of this view of Jesus being of God. As the very learned early church fathers debated this issue, they finally settled on a word that spoke of this strange situation – *homoousios* (homo-oosi-oss) – that Jesus was of the same substance as God the Father: not just an agent of God, but out of the very being of God.

In some ways it seems very clear and easy to understand, but then there are other moments that still confuse us. Jesus was also clearly human and spoke of his surrender to the will of the Father – things that seem to suggest separation. One truth of Jesus we can hold to... Jesus was in the Father and the Father was in Jesus (John 14:10).

While various scriptures will cause the debate to continue, I find it helpful to know that the prophetic word of God himself is that he would give rise to a first-born son and heir, and that he would be called Mighty God. On this side of eternity, we may never fully understand the nature of God as Father, Son and Spirit – but I do believe that by faith we are called to believe it.

37. Grafted to the Root

Read Isaiah 11:1-5 (try to read the whole chapter this week)

The root of Jesus' ascendancy was the family line of David – sometimes called '*the root of Jesse*' – David's father. When Israel demanded a mere human king like the nations around them (1 Samuel 8), God had Samuel anoint Saul – the most handsome man in Israel, and a head and shoulders taller than any other man (1 Samuel 9:2). And through him, God showed that the mightiest of men, in their eyes, was nothing compared to the mightiness of the man who would yield and walk with God.

This is why David's line was chosen as the root that would bring forth God's Messiah – faithfulness and obedience. Despite his failings, David was a man determined to follow after God's own heart, seeking tirelessly after righteousness. And God determined that through him, Israel would be saved. But as we discovered through the story of Ruth, God's plan was not only for Israel, but that Gentiles (non-Jews) could also be joined to this covenant.

In plant nurseries, certain plant types are often grafted onto an existing strong and stable rootstock. Although these plants may grow very differently, they share in the same common foundational root. Paul writes about this '*grafting*' in Romans 11. Though they belonged to the root, many people in Israel rejected God's kingship and salvation, and so, God provoked them to jealousy by making a way for Gentiles to receive this same gift. Of this Paul writes:

And you Gentiles, who were branches of a wild olive tree, have been grafted in. So now you also receive the blessing God has promised Abraham, sharing in the rich nourishment from the root of God's original olive tree.

But Paul also warns us that we should not become proud and arrogant in this. As Gentiles, we are grafted, but not the root, which still holds a special place with God. This is something we should be mindful of when considering things that involve Israel. And we should remember that just as 'branches' of unbelieving Israel were broken off to make room for us, we too will not be spared and can be removed again for unbelief.

Although the inclusion of Gentiles has always been a part of God's plan, we should never forget that it has been afforded through the love God has for his people, Israel. The graft should never think itself greater than the rootstock, which provides its source of nourishment. Pray for the salvation of the modern people of Israel today, that they would meet and believe on Jesus, their Messiah (Christ).

38. The True Vine – ‘Remain in me’

Read John 15:1-8

You may recall that we considered the concept of Gentiles being like branches grafted into the existing rootstock of Israel? Though this root is thought of as being the house of King David, in fact the true root is Jesus. In John 15, Jesus calls himself the “true vine” – the real source of nourishment and fruitfulness in God.

Jesus speaks about the way the good gardener (God) tends the vine carefully, cutting out dead branches and pruning the remaining ones to yield a good crop. This is something many Christians find uncomfortable – because it brings God directly into their world and actions and demands accountability.

But this direct engagement and relationship is exactly what Jesus is speaking to in this passage. A branch (you and/or me) cannot produce fruit unless we “remain” in Jesus – the branch connected to the vine. The message and teaching of Jesus (*the real one and not a distorted one*) does the pruning and purifies us for fruitfulness in line with the way of God.

When, and if, we choose to separate ourselves from this truth, i.e. we do not remain in Jesus, we are removed from the vine, cut-off from the rootstock, and are gathered into a pile to be burned – yet another harsh reality often softened or ignored in the teaching of Jesus. The command to “remain” confirms that the inclusion was seen as sufficient to salvation – but the threat of removal suggests that the situation can change...

The Jew and the Gentile are called to see their salvation as being joined to the true vine of Jesus, remaining in him, following his teaching and example of living rightly before, and with, God. Apart from him, we can do nothing.

Many professing Christians have stepped away from faith in Jesus because of the foolishness of other people – an unkind word, a harsh judgement, a sinful action. However, while these may be valid reasons, they do not excuse us from the fray. We are called to remain in Jesus even though there will be many trials and sorrows in our lives – including at the hands of fellow believers. But a life without Jesus will be fruitless.

39. Jesus is the Life

Read John 14:6-7

Today's text shows that you do not need to read huge sections of the Bible to receive something very powerful and profound. The simple, short statement from Jesus – *"I am the way, the truth and the life."* – is incredibly loaded. Jesus has no doubt about who he was and what he represented. And his next statement is no less powerful. There are many people who have taken issue with the exclusive claim of Jesus – *"No one comes to the Father except through me."*

In a Massey University study in 2008, people were asked if they aligned themselves with Christianity – less than 7% of respondents did. However, when the same people were asked if they believed in something greater than themselves – something spiritual – more than 82% responded positively. You see, many people still look or hope for something beyond this life. Could that be because God placed that longing in us?

If you care to go back and read from verse 1 of chapter 14, you will see that Jesus began by talking about the real life that is based in God. We were not created with the intention of living in separation from God (the cost of sin) but in eternal relationship with him. Jesus said that his task included preparing that place for us, that we might live our real lives with him.

But the only way to realize that life is through faith in Jesus, because he alone has provided the way of getting there. The death of Jesus conquered the power of eternal death that sin held, a power that enslaved us and held dominion over us. We once bore fruit for death (Romans 7:5) meaning that we brought out sinful actions, but Jesus' death cancelled our slavery to sin and re-birthed us into the real life – a life hidden with Jesus, in God (Colossians 3:3).

We were created to live in the real life with God – and we began this way in the Garden of Eden. Before sin entered the world, Adam and Eve lived their lives in direct relationship with him, walking and talking with him in the garden. The spiritual life was not hidden to them – it was real and vibrant. Through faith in Jesus, we have the way to return to that relationship, including a foretaste of it in the here and now.

The tangibility of physical life smacks us fresh in the face every new morning. It is not easy to relate to the spiritual life which Jesus speaks of as the greater reality. But that is precisely the issue at the centre of God's story. God is not flesh – he is Spirit and those who choose to follow him must learn about the real spiritual life and how to engage with it.

40. The Cornerstone

Read 1 Peter 2:4-8

When building a stone structure, the most important stone is the foundation stone at each corner; the largest and heaviest stone, used as the primary anchor for the building. Peter described Jesus as the *living cornerstone* of God's Temple – the dwelling place of God himself.

There are several interesting aspects to Peter's words in today's text.

Some Christians may express a lack of confidence and stability in their faith journey. Doubts are a normal part of life, but Peter says that those who really trust Jesus have recognized the honour given to him by God and see him as the vital cornerstone. To those who reject Jesus, he instead becomes the very stone that they stumble over – without realizing it!

But Peter also says that if we trust in Jesus, *we have become living stones* that God is building into his spiritual Temple. Jesus is the living cornerstone, and we are living building stones. A building stone is what Jesus called Peter in Matthew 16:18. *You are Peter* (petros – a building stone) *and on this rock* (petra – foundation stone) *I will build my church* (ekklesia – gathered ones).

Without considering the original Greek text, the real meaning of the words is lost. Contrary to popular interpretation, Jesus was not establishing his church (people) on Peter, but upon himself as the foundational (corner) stone. Peter would be a key building block, and we, as believing parts of this same building are counted as living stones.

The builders (religious leaders of Jesus' day) overlooked the very stone that was needed as the main cornerstone of faith, and he became their stumbling block. It is the same today; some outrightly reject Jesus from the beginning, while others may play around with religion but never truly surrender to him.

Let's not play about with Jesus. He is not something to "try" but is essential to an abundant and stable life here and now, and in the life to come. Without Jesus, we do not have the cornerstone that brings the rock-solid foundation we need in our lives. And neither are we being truly built into the spiritual Temple unless we honour Jesus and follow his teaching and way.

41. The Way of God

Read Jeremiah 7:21-23 and then verses 5-7

God has a way – a way of being and acting as God. His way reflects who he is in his being. Many of the Israelites of the Old Testament thought that God’s way was to religiously follow the law of Moses. It seems that they thought that burnt offerings and sacrifices were the things that God required of them for righteousness; and they had an excessive pride in the Temple as a sign that God was pleased with them – but they were wrong. The way of God is not sacrifice and offerings, religious behaviours, or iconic temples – at least not without considering the nature of who God is in his being.

Hidden amongst the many commands of the Book of Exodus (22:21-23) is one of a social nature: *You must not mistreat or oppress foreigners. You know what it’s like to be one, for you were once foreigners in Egypt* (repeated in 23:9). *You must not exploit a widow or an orphan. If you exploit them in any way and they cry out to me, then I will certainly hear their cry. My anger will blaze against you.*

Interestingly, In Jeremiah 7:5-7, this social call for justice and kindness again rings out before God warns them about their religious deviation, which has drawn them away from truly following his “way” .

And when Jesus begins his ministry, he reads from the Book of Isaiah; he has come to; *bring good news to the poor, to set captives free and make the blind to see, and to release the oppressed.* Jesus’ ministry goals sit very well beside God’s concern for people who are marginalized and looked down on.

The way of God is not witnessed in defined religious ritual and behaviour. Obedience to God is not seen in inflexible demands for false righteousness. God’s way is one of compassion, kindness and forgiveness – the very thing he projects towards us as sinners – that we might turn around and join his way. God’s way is to save those who are lost and weighed-down, weary and anxious, tired and burdened – not to put new burdens upon them.

Think this week about the nature of the real commands of God – his desire and passion to see sinners released from their slavery – that comes from his own heart for the creation he loves. It is a transformation of our lives into this “way” that God wants for us all, that all people would be treated justly, to his glory.

42. Come, Rest, Follow

Read Matthew 11:25-30

Although we feel the need to complicate it and amplify it, Jesus' message was sometimes actually surprisingly simple – come, rest and follow.

The issue was, and still is how can a person put themselves into a right relationship with the God they have rebelled against and wronged? The religious leaders thought that they knew – strict observance of the law (as they interpreted it). To do anything less was to be a sinner to be looked down upon. An interesting approach considering that they themselves could not keep the law.

But Jesus saw the burden that was put upon people, and often still is. He saw the struggles and loads they bore in life, the physical and mental barriers, and the feelings of being isolated from a God they were unlikely to be able to please. Sound familiar? In fact, the solution is far more straight forward than self-confessing wise people imagine it – indeed, it pleases God to reveal his true nature and intention in a child-like way.

“Come to me”, says Jesus, “and I will give you rest.”

As a small boy, when I was overwhelmed and anxious (which I often was), I would run to my mother to be held and assured. She would wrap her arms around me and run her fingers through my hair, until I settled and found peace. I would come to her and she would give me rest. Much of who I am today comes from my mother's love and nurture. Her yoke was light.

Coming to Jesus is an act of surrender. Admitting that we are done and cannot do things well on our own is exactly the approach God, in Jesus, is looking for. Letting go and letting God lays the burdens aside and enables us to take on the path that Jesus would have us walk, bringing a peace into our lives that only Jesus can give (John 14:27). His way of doing life is light.

And then Jesus asks us to follow the way of God, as he revealed it to us in the gospels – not religion, not judgement and heavy demands, but obedience to his teaching.

What is the real gospel of Jesus? A message of “be saved and then be your own boss” or “just believe and then wait ‘til you die”- or an invitation into a newness of life, restored to a right relationship with God here and now, through the actions of Jesus? Jesus' invitation is to begin our eternal lives here and now – come, rest and follow.

43. The God Who Washes Feet

Read John 13:1-17

While the other gospels contain the bread and wine scene at the Passover supper, John tells a story of Jesus washing his disciple's feet. Instead of breaking the bread and taking up the cup, Jesus rises from the table and assumes the lowly position of washing dirty feet.

Peter was mortified! *"You will never wash my feet!"* he cried. And as usual, Jesus cuts to the very core of the situation – *"Unless I wash you, you have no share with me."* Note that Jesus did not say 'wash **your** feet' but, *"Unless I wash **you**..."*

Jesus brings a washing that goes much further than our feet; we are washed in the rebirth of baptism (Titus 3:5) and our sins are washed away through the shedding of Jesus' blood in death. And unless we receive this washing, there is no redemption – no share with Jesus.

Those who cling to a gospel of a "one-time confession" as a sufficient response to Jesus, ignore the difficult things that Jesus said about this – *"pick up your cross and follow me... unless I wash you... not everyone who cries 'Lord! Lord!' will enter."* This is a gospel that is too far "right" – a view of grace that removes responsibility for our actions and permits an ongoing life without real relationship to Christ or his teachings.

Dirty feet are the symbol of our broken, rebellious, sinful lives – lives that need the grace-filled washing of Jesus. And if Jesus is willing to cut through our filthiness and wash our feet – so he calls us to imitate him in washing the feet (the lives) of those around us. For as we have received this grace, so we should pass it on.

Peter's feet were dirty – as are our own - his indignation displaying touches of pride and denial. This feet-washing episode speaks to us in the same way as the bread and the wine – of a God who humbly lowered himself into the filth of our sin and offered us a way home.

Sometimes we can struggle to face our own sinfulness; it can overwhelm us at times in its ugliness. But Jesus is not afraid of our dirty feet and showed us that he was willing to go to the lowest point – even death – to cleanse us and set us free from the curse of sin. How about you? Are you willing to follow his example?

44. Three Days

Read John 2:13-22

A feature of the scriptures that can be easily missed is the way God uses numerology and echoes of this feature. Seven, for example, is the number that reflects spiritual perfection, forty is usually associated with trials and twelve denotes governance and rule – twelve sons of Jacob, twelve months in a year, twelve disciples to begin the church, etc. But today we will look at how “three” plays a part in our understanding of God’s plan.

Three denotes a special completeness – and in scripture, *divine* completeness. The trinitarian nature of God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the three-fold nature of man – spirit, soul and body, and the number of days for the resurrection of Jesus – the ongoing list would astound you.

Jesus rose on the third day. Jesus likened this to the three days Jonah was in the great fish – the only sign that really mattered according to Jesus (Matthew 16:4). Abraham journeyed for three days to offer Isaac – in the same place Jesus was later crucified! In the third hour Jesus was crucified and for three hours the world was shrouded in darkness. Jesus’ title was written in three languages on the cross. It was on the third day that God had land rise out of the sea – a symbolism of the resurrection life that appears as we rise from the waters of baptism. Do you remember “three days” appearing in Hosea 6? (Devotion 20)

God is deliberate. The first Temple was constructed by men, following the pattern of the heavenly places, but Jesus has become the true Temple where God dwells and in whom we dwell. Jesus’ death gave us access to this Temple – the Temple he had raised in three days.

The echo of “three” in the Bible is strong and always points to God’s victory through Jesus. There are also the three gifts of grace – faith, hope and love – and the greatest is love. Whenever we see “three”, or a derivation of this, in scripture, we can be sure that God is in control, that his divine purpose is being worked out.

Ponder the following set of three this week. God is love – we are instructed to ‘walk in love’ (Ephesians 5:2). God is Spirit – we are told to ‘walk in the Spirit’ (Galatians 5:16). God is light – we are told to ‘walk in the light’ (Ephesians 5:8). In these three things we have all we need to walk with God.

45. Rejected

Read 15:18-23

Twenty years ago, I did not hesitate to add my church association and activity on my resumé. Unless it was for another church job, I would have to think more carefully about that today. Questionable church leadership, abuse in care investigations and sincere but pushy evangelists have contributed to sully the reputation and name of the “church” – along with “Christian”, somewhat unpopular words these days.

This lack of respect comes as a bit of a shock to many of us who have lived in a time when being associated with the church was greeted fairly positively. In Jesus’ day and in the early years of Christianity, being rejected for Christ came with the territory. It was to be expected. Two things arise from today’s reading.

In rejecting Christian believers, people are rejecting Jesus. There are many reasons for why someone does this, but there are few excuses in God’s eyes. Despite the incredibly positive and compassionate teaching of Jesus, many people do not like feeling cornered about the way they have lived. Some will feel the pain of shame immediately and respond to Jesus, others will force it under and come out fighting.

Another reason many people feel uncomfortable is spiritual. The truth is that in coming to faith, the Christian has been changed and is no longer considered a part of the world enslaved to sin. If they pick this up, many people take this as an air of superiority in the Christian but is often that they are sensing this spiritual reality without recognizing it. In the next reflection we will come back to this.

Although we are not spiritually a part of this world, we do have to continue living in it – surrounded by it every day. We might hope that Christianity is a walk in the park, or a bed of roses, but Jesus said that if we were to follow him, we too would have to take up a cross of rejection and face the same kind of trials and struggles he did in bringing the good news of salvation. At times, rejection is a part of the journey, but remember the truth is that it is a rejection of Jesus first.

Many are afraid to say too much when situations arise where a Christian witness might be expected. It is natural to feel afraid; no one likes the feeling of being rejected. All through the Bible, the people of God have faced resistance for their assertion of an exclusive way to being saved. People today find talk of “sin” offensive and are more likely than ever to go for anything other than the unsavoury idea of eternal suffering. Do not be discouraged, those who persevere will receive a reward.

46. A New Creation

Read 2 Corinthians 5:1-17

One of the challenging things to grapple with as a Christian is the idea that we have been re-created* and now have a new status before God. This somewhat weird spiritual shift means that we are no longer considered to be under the power and condemnation of sin but have somehow been placed in something of a foretaste of the eternal life to come i.e. in the Kingdom of God. We are in the world, but no longer of it.

Paul thought of this situation as being akin to living in an “earthly tent” – our physical bodies will no longer be our abode for we will have a new heavenly body. This idea of being resurrected not with our earthly bodies, but with some kind of new existence, remained a challenge for many people in coming to Christ. It was a bold assertion.

In addition to this Paul said that we were no longer citizens of earth but were now citizens of heaven (Philippians 3:20-21). It is like God has issued us with a new passport for a new country, that we are yet to see. The same situation is pre-figured with the Israelites in the wilderness. The land of Canaan had been promised to them, but it was a matter of time – time to develop before God and to learn about yielding and trusting in him for their well-being. The same situation applies to us now, on our way home but not fully there yet.

The trick is to find that same place of confidence that Paul had – he had the privilege of having met Jesus in some way, but Jesus said that it was more blessed to believe without having seen him. Paul’s confidence was that to die was in fact gain (Philippians 1:21) because then we would be with the Lord, at home where we belong.

Although we do struggle with sin still, in fact we have been set free to live without sinning, because we have been raised to this new life and it is possible to live without sin through the strength of Jesus, who died for us. So, Paul says, “*Do not let sin rule in your mortal bodies...*” – if you believe on Jesus, you are a new person, re-created for good works.

The plan of God that we see as Christians has frequently been revealed already in the Old Testament – something termed ‘pre-figuring’. Often the best way to understand something we read in the New Testament is to look back to where God may have pre-figured it. That’s why it is important to consider the whole story – the New Testament is always referring to something God has already revealed or tried to reveal to those who are willing to seek and listen. Re-positioning believers in his Kingdom has always been the goal and priority of God for you. Lean into this this week.

*Not reincarnated, which is to die and come back (consciously or unconsciously) in this earthly life as another person or creature.

47. The Priestly Order of Melchizedek 2

Read Hebrews 7:16-22

Near the beginning of this devotional series, we looked at the priestly order of Melchizedek – remember the priest who brought out *bread and wine* to Abram? (Genesis 14). A long way back I know.

When Jesus presented the *bread and wine* to his disciples at the last supper, he was in fact confirming the covenant with Abram – that all nations would be blessed through him. Although we standardly speak of this as the “new” covenant, in fact, it comes from an ancient promise. Noting that Melchizedek was eternal, it is this order that establishes Jesus as God’s high priest forever.

When Jesus died and rose again to life, he conquered the power of sin and death and gained a life that could not be destroyed (Hebrew 7:16). And this is not something that the writer of Hebrews dreamed up, but something that had been understood of God’s Messiah (his Christ) through time – confirmed by David in Psalm 110:4 and by Isaiah in Isaiah 11:1.

But now Jesus has been given the position of God’s high priest forever, mediating the better covenant because the old covenant with Moses and Aaron could never deal ultimately with sin. In Jesus, sin has been dealt a mortal blow and now no longer holds dominion over the lives of those who put their trust in Jesus. He is the kind of priest we needed because he is holy and blameless, without sin and the requirement to offer sins for himself, which was the old temporary order.

God, who cannot lie, bound himself to this action by an oath to Abram, so that we can turn to him with great confidence as our refuge and hope. It is this action that tore the curtain of the Temple in two when Jesus died, opening the inner sanctuary of God’s presence to us who believe. Jesus entered first and we follow him as the eternal high priest in the order of Melchizedek.

Yet again, understanding the actions and achievements of Jesus, relies on our knowing the complete story. It is this treasure that we hold in our mortal bodies and souls when we believe upon this story and history of Israel before God. Think about the amazing patience of God in bringing all of this to pass – and his grace in opening the way to every and any person who would put their trust in him.

48. Death

Read 1 Corinthians 15:21-26

Death is another area where gaining a proper understanding of God's plan requires us to look across the whole of scripture.

Although no one truly relishes the idea of dying physically, I am always greatly encouraged when I meet someone who also has a strong confidence that for the believer in Jesus, death is not the end, but a beginning. D.L. Moody once announced, *"Someday you will read that D.L. Moody is dead. Don't you believe a word of it. At that moment I will be more alive than I am now."*

In Genesis, Eve reported that God had said they were not to eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, or they "would surely die". In John 8:51 Jesus said that whoever obeys his teaching would "never die". The death that both of these scriptures speak about is not the physical, bodily death that is appointed for all people; it is a spiritual death – a death that is irreversible.

When Adam and Eve sinned, sin entered the world, and all people were condemned to spiritual death, because all people sin. If Adam and Eve had then eaten from the tree of life (which sustains eternal life), they would have been condemned to this death forever. That is why God forced them from the Garden of Eden and provided the way of redemption through Christ. The death he died, he died to sin once for all (Romans 6:10) and opened the way to eternal life.

In Revelation 20, apart from those who reign with Christ for the one thousand years, all other people come before the throne of judgement – those who are of Christ to eternal life, but those who rejected him to eternal damnation – termed the "second death". There is no return from the second death. This is why Jesus said that those who obey him will never die. In fact, they have already died to sin when they came to believe and confessed Jesus and have entered into a foretaste of the eternal life to come.

With God our physical death is not the end, which is why D.L. Moody said that he would be more alive than ever! Jesus is the way, the truth and the life – life here and now and the eternal life to come. When Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, he reminded Martha that Lazarus would rise again, but she thought Jesus was only referring to the resurrection of the judgement day. But Jesus was pointing to the life given in becoming a new creation – the second death is overcome at this point for those who will believe.

49. Seven Letters

I encourage you to read through Revelation 2 & 3

In the seven letters of the Revelation, chapters 2 and 3, we have the only direct comment Jesus has about his *ekklesia* (the gatherings of people that we call church). These seven letters are given to the *ekklesia* in places that form a circuit that lies inland from the port of Ephesus, in what is now Türkiye (Turkey).

The *ekklesia* is a phenomenon that no one saw coming and does not seem to be pre-figured in the Bible – at least not in the way that we think of it as church. What it does represent is a new way of considering the people of God. God revealed himself to the Hebrews (through Abraham) and Israel became his people, but now, through faith in Jesus, any person can become a part of God's people – grafted to the root that is Israel.

The content of these letters was given for each individual *ekklesia*, but also for all of the seven *ekklesias* to read – and they also, in some mysterious way, cover the whole life and structure of what would become the global *ekklesia* (church).

The key features are these:

- Jesus knows about the 'doings' of his *ekklesia*. Sometimes it is a positive view and sometimes it is a criticism.
- For some there is a warning about the need to wake up and change their ways, and for some an encouragement to simply endure under hardship.
- There are rewards assigned for those who persevere, overcome and conquer the trials that they face, and remain faithful to the commands of Jesus.
- There is a reminder that a proper understanding is only found in spiritual appraisal and understanding. This requires some deeper study.

There is a stark warning for all of Christ's *ekklesia* in these seven letters. Even though the religious structure of Jesus' day believed they were in a right position with God, in fact, they were not; they were blind, arrogant and proud. Judaism was the *ekklesia* of Jesus' day and rather than giving them a letter, Jesus spoke directly to them about the errors he saw and what they needed to do to get back on track with the way of God.

That corrective approach of Jesus, that he delivered directly to them, is exactly what Jesus is doing for the new wider *ekklesia* in the seven letters to us. We need to listen.

The church has not replaced Israel as God's people – we have been grafted in. However, just like those earlier believers, we too must be careful to be obedient to God's way in order to remain faithful to the salvation we have received. Consider this: as a believer you are now a part of all Israel and called to live as a part of God's people.

50. Rapture

Read Matthew 24:30-51 (read the whole chapter if you can)

This is an area I where I have changed position. Rapture means “a carrying off” and is a doctrine that is often used to refer to a pre-tribulation event (i.e. just prior to the beginning of the 70th week of Daniel 9). The pre-tribulation rapture doctrine arose in the mid 1830’s with a man named John Nelson Darby. Darby began his career as an Anglican clergyman but became disenchanted with this structure and eventually established the Exclusive Brethren. The main scriptures used to support this theory come from Matthew 24:40-41 and 1 Thessalonians 4:15-17 – I think both are mis-interpreted.

There is a rapture, but in Matthew 24, Jesus is answering the disciple’s question about the *end of this world* – not about a pre-tribulation event that they had never heard of. Jesus speaks of his return *following* the period of desecration and persecution of the 70th week of Daniel’s prophecy (Matthew 24:30 onwards).

Matthew 24:40-41. The interpretation is that the one who is carried away is the believer – the one left is the sinner. However, just before these verses, Jesus provides another context. It will be as in the days of Noah where sinners were taken away and the believers stayed (safe in the Ark) – the opposite of the pre-tribulation rapture theory.

1 Thessalonians 4:15-17. The interpretation is that Jesus’ return occurs before the 70th week of Daniel’s prophecy – but Jesus never indicates that he is returning at any time other than at the end – shortening the persecution to avoid total annihilation.

Jesus is coming back at the *end* of the 70th week - whenever that is. Those who are alive at that time will be caught up with Jesus (and humanly dying in the process because physical bodies cannot inherit the Kingdom of God – 1 Corinthians 15:50). Then all people will come before the throne for judgement (Revelation 21).

Jesus is not returning twice to the earth – coming half-way the first time in a pre-tribulation rapture - he is coming once at the end of this world to establish his reign. I know some will find this hard to consider, but it seems to be what Jesus actually said to his disciples about it.

A pre-tribulation rapture and further confusion about end-time events arises when we only consider partial scriptures in isolation and do not consider the wider picture that is drawn by looking more widely across a text, or texts, that speak to the same issue. A pre-tribulation rapture seems to be solely focused on providing a way for Christians to avoid thinking about the difficult years of Daniel’s 70th week, if we were unfortunate enough to be around at the time. I think there are better things to think about.

51. Revelation

Read Revelation 1

The vision of Revelation (not Revelations) is from Jesus, to his bond-servants (his faithful *ekklesia* – the church) to show them the things that would take place as the end of this world approaches. It's a tough book. The visions are dramatic and mysterious, but there is a blessing for those who take some time with them – the only biblical text to declare this.

Although we have seven specific letters to the churches, the whole of the Revelation is for those churches (1:11). If we consider that these seven churches in some way represent a profile of the whole church, then these letters are for all believers, everywhere, and for the whole life of the church.

This means that although millions of individuals will never see the fullness of these things, there will be some who will, if they are alive in the times the end approaches. One of the key purposes of the Revelation is to encourage believers, that no matter when this happens, *God is in control* and the final victorious outcome is assured.

Note that Chapter 1 of the Revelation also ties us directly back to Daniel 10:4-6, where the description of the final messenger to Daniel has an almost identical appearance to Jesus in Revelation 1:12-16. Both of these texts deal with the events of the end-times and note that there is no indication of the church being absent (raptured) in these times, but that believers should prefer that they were not.

This book is full of imagery and metaphor, and it is not wise to speculate too heavily on what and when these things might be; every generation since Jesus has considered that it would come in their time. History says otherwise. There are some key things that are solid indicators that the time is hastening though – for example, a new Temple rebuilt in Jerusalem, the rising of a particular leader and a world-wide peace treaty, a mark being legislated in order to do business. Earthquakes, famines, wars and pestilence are just the beginning signs of what is to come later.

The Revelation is something to be aware of, but not overly distracted by.

Do not be afraid – Jesus is with us always, until the very end of the age. Can I suggest that you now read Revelation 21-22? The biblical account of God's plan for his creation has a great ending – that in fact is actually the true beginning! There will be no more tears, no sorrow, sickness or death. It will be the fullness of what Adam and Eve had a taste of in the Garden of Eden. Are you coming?

52. Go...

Read Mark 16:15-20 and Matthew 28:16-20

Luke and John did not provide an account of Jesus commissioning his disciples to go, but then perhaps they did not need to? Both gospels do have other accounts of Jesus commanding his disciples to go out and continue his work.

Whatever the case, it is clear that the call upon the believer is not only to seal their own restoration with God and eternal life – it is surely to respond by going to tell others this good news (gospel). God is looking for a harvest of souls for salvation but the workers are few and so we need to develop a desire for the harvest.

A part of that is to understand the great value of salvation – a treasure of such a price that a person would sell all that they had to gain it – a treasure that every believer has received in themselves. If no one had come to you with the gospel, where might you still be today? Although God can visit a person supernaturally, it seems that his preference is to have us respond and tell others.

Many are afraid about what to say, or in getting it wrong. Actually, the most powerful words come from our own testimony. Telling people about what coming to Jesus has meant in your own life is not something a person can easily challenge and if they hear that it is the greatest value in your life, they may see some hope for themselves.

The gospel is not about our political and end-time fascinations or concerns. Jesus did not send the disciples out to rally people against the Romans, or to sign up with the activist Zealots (who were crushed with the fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD). The good news is about an individual's release from the power and destruction of sin, that they might instead live with God. It is about being redeemed from a permanent death and being brought into eternal life. Surely that is really good news!

Interestingly, baptism is also about empowering us all to carry on the work of Jesus ministry – it's not our power or striving, but God's power at work, just as it was with Jesus. And his ministry was one of loving first. Maybe we could just try that to begin with?

God has always known that he would create a world and a people that he would need to save. He has always known that he would come to the earth through his only Son in order to achieve that salvation. He has always known the path that would be followed and how it will end. Such has been his knowledge from long ago and all along.

God's desire is that no one would perish, would not have to face the second death and would not have to suffer eternally. Jesus died to avert all of that, and it is our charge to go and tell others of the good news we ourselves have received.

Further questions for thought or group discussion

These questions are aimed at triggering further thought and discussion if you are in a group situation. They are not in any way exhaustive. Please contact me for assistance about engaging with any of these reflections more deeply if you come up against something you would like further help exploring.

1. God is Infinite and Eternal

What is the core feature – the central thing to take hold of - in the Genesis account?

Can you identify ways in which you may have formed some physical or logical “boxes” to contain God? Are they valid?

Do you think we tend to limit what God can do through our own fears, doubt and skepticism? What does that look like for you?

2. There is an Enemy

Is the heavenly realm real to you – angels and evil spirits? Do you consider that Satan is an active enemy of the believer?

If Satan was defeated at Calvary, why do you think he remains in action against us? (Hint for the leader: He has not yet been destroyed and is trying to bring us back into the slavery of sin – that is the basis of having a choice about turning to God)

When you sin, do you wallow in the condemnation of self-pity and shame? What is the alternative action that has been commanded to us? (Hint: confession)

3. The Problem is Sin

Can you come up with a definition of sin? Consider the way in which Satan sinned.

Why do you think many people are wary of talking about sin as the basis for the world’s problems?

Why is it not possible for us to overcome sin in ourselves?

4. Two Trees

Why do you think God placed the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the garden?

Why do you think Adam carried the weight of blame for eating of the fruit? Is it fair?

Did you realize that the tree of life facilitates eternal life? What do you think about the tree of life now?

5. Value in Genealogy

Do you think that considering the past is important to moving forward? Why, or why not?

Does knowing this underlying secret in this genealogy help to build your faith and trust in God and his plan? Expand.

Why do you think Judaism and its followers miss this kind of thing?

6. The Birth of a People

Have you thought about having a spiritual ancestry (through faith) as well as a physical one? Which one matters more? Why?

Why do you think God established a people and nation rather than remaining with a single patriarchal family?

God uses 12 to represent earthly governance and structure. Can you think of other places where 12 indicates this structure?

7. Difficult Times

Why might God still allow trials and difficulties to beset us?

Why do you think we are so eager to avoid a life of trials and challenges?

What do you think about the Chinese crisis/opportunity idea? How does that help you?

8. The Priestly Order of Aaron

Aaron's order was temporary. Why do you think that was the case?

What was the purpose of the law? What was the distortion of it?

In what ways do you think we still fall into legalism in the church today?

9. The Law (Torah)

Can you think of a similar mechanism in Christian faith that mimics the law/Torah?

What is the difference between conviction and condemnation?

Discuss why the law could never bring an eternal atonement.

10. The Priestly Order of Melchizedek 1

Discuss the fact that Melchizedek was a Priest of God, in what would be Jerusalem, in the time of Abram. What might this tell you about God's way?

What other things can you learn about God and his ways in the description and activity of Melchizedek? (use Hebrews 6:19 – 7)

Why do you think that the leaders of Judaism do not see these things in Melchizedek and Jesus?

11. A failed conquest

Why did the Israelites fail to follow through on what God had commanded?

Consider and discuss the idea that being consumed with the "land" could be a distraction to what may actually be more important in the way of God?

Do you think God can be justified in seemingly ordering the genocide of a people group? How would you look to find a possible solution to this unsavoury situation?

12. You have a King

What would you have done in Samuel's place if your sons were not living up to the expectations upon them as judges?

Check out some other events at Ramah – Matthew 2:16-18 compared with Genesis 35:16-20, compared with Jeremiah 40:1. What links can you make?

Leaders Note: Ephrathah is another name for Bethlehem – Jacob left Bethel (north of Jerusalem) and there was still *some distance* to go to Bethlehem when Rachel died. Rachel was buried at Ramah, which is why she cries from there in Matthew 2. Who is she crying for? The lost children of Israel who were gathered at Ramah for exile – and for the lost children of Israel when they abandoned God as their King, at Ramah, with Samuel. Enjoy the discussion.

13. Saul and David

What is God looking for in a person of righteousness? (Clue: it's not just based on outward behavior – check out 1 Samuel 13:14)

Ask if the group participants can come up with some of the Psalm moments of David – how he often began in despair and ended in praise?

Where and why did David learn humility and trust?

14. Knowing God

Can you share about a time where you simply knew that you knew, and trusted in God?

How might we learn to know God as David did? What might we need to do to action or grow towards to make that happen?

How did David put the situation with Goliath into perspective?

15. A divided kingdom

What was the real situation in Solomon's unfaithfulness? Why did God place a division within it?

What was the final result for the divided houses of Israel? What did Jesus say about divided kingdoms? (Matthew 12:25)

Discuss the idea that Satan might use the "divided kingdom" idea against God's church. How might he do that?

16. Ruth

What did Ruth do that qualified her to become acceptable to God? (see also Rahab in Joshua 2:11)

Boaz was a "kinsman redeemer" for Ruth even though she was not directly related? Can you think of how this may also work and be true today?

What do you think shifted for Jesus when he claimed that he had only come for the people of Israel? Why might he have changed his mind? (see Matthew 15:21-28)

17. A marriage motif

Had you ever thought of the idea that God was framing his story and action within a marriage covenant? What does this bring up for you? (good or tricky)

If God described himself as a husband to Israel, what are the connotations for a Christian believer today?

The scriptural voices of God and Jesus often speak of confessors of God as an “adulterous” generation or people. Unpack the complexities of such a label?

18. Hosea 1 – Unfaithfulness

What feelings and reflections come up for you about God’s command to Hosea to marry Gomer? How willing would you be to obey?

What does this story convey about God’s dealing and acceptance of us? Note that Gomer was not a prostitute before Hosea married her.

Can you see the pattern that the scriptures are building of the way God looks upon us as partners to a marriage contract? What does this make you think?

19. Exile (this is deliberately sandwiched between the two Hosea reflections)

How did God try to tend his vineyard and get the message of his way across to the people of Israel? What else could he have done?

Why was Israel taken captive to Babylon for 70 years? (see 2 Chronicles 36:20-21)
Israel failed to keep the 7th year sabbath (Lev 25:3-4) for 490 years – 70 sabbaths owed)

Why did God not destroy Israel completely? How does the exile fit with the previous story in Hosea?

20. Hosea 2 – Restoration

Why does God not give up on Israel / believers, as Hosea was told to not give up on Gomer?

What does the restoration say about God’s grace and how grace works in the way of God? (Think about the discipline that is still due)

How do many people often see God, or how do we often portray salvation? What does his real plan of salvation look like?

21. Predictive texts – the prophets

Why do you think God used prophets (earlier known as ‘seers’) to communicate with people? Why do you think he does not speak directly to everyone?

How would we know if a true prophet was amongst us? Can you think of another way that God might speak to us today in this way?

Does the fact that God has provided accurate prophecies which have come to pass, increase your faith? If so, in what way? If not, why not?

22. Ezekiel and Daniel

Ezekiel and Daniel are frequently underplayed and even avoided by many teachers in the Judaistic faith. Why do you think that might be?

Why do you think that God wanted the focus on the Mosaic Covenant (the Law) to end?

Why do you think that Daniel had to face so many tests during his time in service?

23. Ezekiel

In what ways might Ezekiel's function as a prophet be different from the major prophets who had gone before him?

What is the key essence of the message that Ezekiel delivers to mark the structure of faith in the future? How does it differ from what had come before?

Have you grasped the reality that God can speak in both an immediate and a future tense at the same time? Can you think of other times he has done this? (see Isaiah 7:10-16)

24. Daniel

Given that a calculable prediction is given for the time of the Messiah's appearance is given, why do you think the religious leaders rejected the claims?

Why do you think these visions and explanations were given (to Daniel) in Babylon? What are the possible connotations? (think Magi / Wise men)

Now compare the person in Daniel 10:5-6 with Revelation 1:12-17. Who did Daniel see? What does it tell you about Daniel's visions?

25. Daniel and the 70th week

Compare the indications that warn of the coming end and the things that indicate the actual arrival? How do they differ?

The identity of the ruler is a hot topic amongst those who like to speculate about these things. What is the actual thing that sets this ruler apart from others?

What does Jesus say about being deceived (or misdirected) by these things? What does such a deception cause us to do?

26. Silence

Why do you think God fell silent in this 400-year period? (check out Revelation 8:1 where silence denotes that the next event is significant)

What was the primary mistake made during this period?

Do you think God would have changed his plan (in Jesus) if the people had changed their ways?

Leader Note: There are no conclusive answers to these questions. Jesus has been God's plan for salvation all along – something key people like Abram and David knew all along in some way.

27. A baby?

Do you think you would have discerned that God was intending for the Messiah to come as a baby? How well would that idea sit beside other early indicators?

What are some of the implications – advantages and disadvantages - of the Messiah arriving as a baby?

Why do you think God kept everything a bit hazy in his story? Why did he not just deliver Jesus immediately when Adam and Eve fell?

28. God can be seen

Think back on a time when you may have “seen” God in the way today's reflection considers it. Share your experiences of this.

Who is the God you have seen? Is he a God with a big stick of punishment, or something different from that?

What did Jesus mean when he said to Thomas, “If you have seen me, you have seen my Father”?

29. Walk in the light

What problem arises if we assume that the light of creation was actual daylight? How might that mislead our understanding when we get to the gospel of John?

Reflect on the idea of God telling a story that has various themes running constantly through it. Can you think of the way “light” is a part of that story? Discuss.

In what ways is Jesus to be seen as the true light of the world?

30. Kingdom and dominion

Discuss the potential differences between Kingdom and dominion revealed in today's reflection.

How do we distort the passage of our lives through (often unconsciously) asserting our own kingdom over God's Kingdom?

Discuss the idea that we have been invited to have a share in God's kingdom. How might that affect our approach to our daily lives?

31. The Kingdom is near

Discuss the idea that God's Kingdom is where he is recognized as King and his kingship is in play? How might things look in this frame?

Reflect on the idea that God's kingship had been abandoned in the time of Samuel at Ramah. What effect did that have on the passage of the story?

Discuss the idea that God's Kingdom is not a place, or a ritualized structure – but a state of surrender to God's rule.

32. My kingdom go

Can you think of aspects of your life where you might still be wearing the crown, or that you flip-flop in? How willing are you to relinquish these areas?

In the song "Serve Somebody", Bob Dylan stated that we all have to serve somebody – the devil or the Lord. How true do you think this is?

We often think that every negative thing we do is the fault of the enemy. Is it? What part does self-play in sin and sinning?

33. Baptism

Why do you think baptism is frequently under-emphasized in the church? Why might we reduce its importance in coming to faith?

Check out Acts 19:1-7. What did Paul think was missing from these "believers" lives? What did he do about it? What do you think of this episode?

What are the two elements of the one baptism? Why are they both important?

34. Baptized into death

Have you considered that your baptism (if you are baptized) has joined you to Jesus? What kind of things does this bring up for you?

How does thinking about being a follower of Christ (a Christian) differ from Paul's concept of "being in Christ"? Explore.

How does knowing that baptism indicates that you have actually died to sin, and it no longer has authority over you, affect your view and understanding?

35. Baptized for resurrection

Discuss the idea that the power of resurrection lies in being joined with Jesus through baptism – his being the first fruit of the resurrection and therefore the activator of it.

Read Revelation 20:11-15. What is the status of those coming for judgement? Who gets to move on to the resurrection life? (Leader Note: all who come for judgement are dead and those not given new life at that point (resurrected) are destined for the lake of fire. This may be something you require further help/support with in discussing).

What is your understanding of resurrection now? When does that occur? Was Lazarus resurrected or just resuscitated when Jesus called him out of the tomb?

36. Is Jesus God?

Firstly, can you see how being God's son is important to understanding Jesus as being "of" God? Discuss your thoughts.

What is the significance and implication of the Messiah (Jesus) being called Everlasting Father and Mighty God?

Is there some ambiguity in the name "Immanuel" – in what way do Christians believe that God was with us?

37. Grafted to the root

What is the main feature of the "root" of Christian faith i.e. what is God's story really about?

What should the healthy stance of the Christian be with regard to the root of our faith? Does this mean we should display *total* allegiance with Israel?

Why might God still hold Israel in favour given their persistence with Judaism and denial (so far) of Christ? (Leader Note: Israel is the wife of whoredom, from Hosea, that he continues to love faithfully, even as she continues in unfaithfulness)

38. The true vine

How are we as Christians viewed within the idea of a vine grafted to a key rootstock?

What causes us to be fruitful on the vine? Why does God “prune” us?

What is the fate of branches that are unfruitful? Can you think of other stories where Jesus suggested poor outcomes for those who do not produce fruit in their lives as a result of claiming to be faithful?

39. Jesus is the life

Can you express why it is that Jesus is the way, the truth and the life? How might you explain it simply?

Why is Jesus the only way to right relationship and life with God?

Discuss what the “real” life in God might be and look like – both here and now and in eternity.

40. The cornerstone

Why do you think many people stumble over the person and claims of Jesus?

Reflect on how Peter spoke about believers becoming living building stones of God’s spiritual Temple? Discuss and explore this idea.

Did you know about the two different Greek words in this text? In what ways does that change the way you think about things?

41. The way of God

Can you see the “way” that God has led his story? What do you think the core of that “way” is? How might you encapsulate it? Share your ideas.

Note that God’s “way” is not just revealed in Jesus. What was God revealing all the way back in Exodus?

What is one area you (or us) could begin to work on that might align us better to the “way” of God as his disciples?

42. Come, Rest, Follow

What was Jesus calling us to follow? Where did he get his gospel message from? (Hint: he didn't have the New Testament)

We may understand the call to "Come" very well – how are you doing in the "Rest" space and the "Follow" space?

What is the real nature of the gospel – the "good news". How might we articulate in a better way in our current world?

43. The God who washes feet

Can you see any correlation between John's story of Jesus washing the disciple's feet at the Supper, and the other gospels record of bread and wine? What was he up to?

How does the "washing" theme grow in the gospel stories? What other incidents and events can you think of?

How are your feet looking? Have you allowed Jesus to wash them – or even see them?! How might you surrender into this often-awkward space this week?

44. Three days

Has the reflection this week helped you to think about these types of echoes that occur through the Bible? Do any others come to mind?

Discuss the way in which God has used "three" to present a connected theme throughout his story? Why do we often miss these types of things?

Consider the connection between the story of Abraham going to sacrifice Isaac and the fact that Jesus was offered in sacrifice in the same place? Surprising?

45. Rejected

Have you experienced rejection as a Christian because of your faith? What did that affect you? If not, are you afraid of rejection in this way? Discuss together.

Why do you think people reject Jesus and Christian faith? Are those reasons valid?

Do you think we tend to underplay the difficulties of living a Christian life and the challenges it can bring as we profess our faith before others?

46. A new creation

Consider the “new creation” that we become through Christ and how that relates back to the situation for Adam and Eve. Discuss why being re-created is important in God’s plan.

Discuss the wandering of the Israelites in the wilderness as they sought their promised home. How does this compare to the Christian position as Paul sees it?

Do you have confidence in Paul’s claim that to die is gain? Why, or why not? How does this affect your daily life – if at all?

47. The Priestly Order of Melchizedek 2

Were you surprised by the way God’s story connects the later things with earlier ones? What do you think about the cohesion across the whole of the story now?

Discuss the features of Melchizedek and how they relate to the person of Jesus.

Discuss the primary differences between the Order of Melchizedek and the Order of Aaron (the Law). Do you think Abram understood any of this?

48. Death

Discuss the concept of never dying as it relates to Christian faith. What is this referring to? Could you articulate this well to someone else?

The spiritual death of Adam and Eve would have led all of us straight to the lake of fire. Does this change your approach to the importance of sin and how to discuss it with others?

Death is something even many Christians are afraid of. How do you feel about it? Discuss your feelings with your group.

49. Seven Letters

Why do you think the seven letters were given to us? Can you see a potential parallel in the Old Testament? (Hint: the Prophets)

What do you make of the idea of being ‘rewarded’ for faithfulness and/or perseverance? How does that fit with our claims about ‘faith alone’?

To ‘see’ ourselves well as believers and followers requires spiritual insight. How do we enter into this kind of understanding and grow in it?

50. Rapture

Were you taught about a pre-tribulation rapture? Has this study changed anything for you and how you approach these kinds of teaching? What have you learned?

How important is context when using scripture to support ideas? Does it really matter?

Why do you think some become enamoured with identifying the beast and tribulation indicators, when the idea they follow teaches that believers will not be present for any of those events?

51. Revelation

How have you felt about the Revelation in the past? Has this reflection helped to provide another context for you? In what way?

What do you think the key purpose of the Revelation is? How might your knowledge of Daniel's similar visions also inform you?

What is the final outcome for those who put their trust in Jesus? Does that remind you of anything, or place, earlier in the Bible? Where was that echo? (Garden of Eden)

52. Go

Why do you think the church (we) often struggle so much with the idea of going? How do you think the disciples may have felt?

Is the gospel message just about saving ourselves from the fires of hell? Why not?

Do you think that political and secular concerns can sometimes become a barrier to delivering the good news? Why, or why not? (*Avoid political/secular debates here*)