

A BOOK FOR LIFE

WEEK 1 – SPIRITUAL LIFE

Books! Love them or loathe them, they have been with us for a very long time. And I think it's true to say that most of the stories we know come from books. You may not read Agatha Christie, but you will have heard of or seen Poirot or Miss Marple on the TV. Look for Tess Gerritson or Kathy Reichs on the Asda book shelf and think "Rizzoli and Isles" or "Bones" – two current American TV series. And what about Sean Connery, Roger Moore, Pierce Brosnan and now Daniel Craig. Where would they be if Ian Fleming hadn't invented James Bond in book form first? We may not have much time for books, but I don't think anyone can say that they don't like a good story. And about this time of year you start getting advice in magazines and newspapers about "holiday reading". The assumption is that when you go on holiday you will have the time to sit down and read a good book. I read an article last year about holiday book snobs – people who judged others by what they saw them reading on the beach or lying on a sunbed or whatever. Apparently such people are now quite put out because so many people are reading from the like of Kindle and tablets that they can't see what others are reading now.

Sad to say however, the one book that is never recommended for holiday, or any other time of the year reading, is the Bible. The Bible, to too many people, is an antiquated text only taken seriously by weird people who want to return society to the strait-laced Victorian past on the one hand; or the really weirdoes who still believe in mumbo-jumbo and fairies in the sky on the other. So many see the Bible as so removed from the modern world, that it is simply not worth taking under their notice. Yet nothing could be further from the truth. But how do you convey that to people who see this book as irrelevant to life as we know it? That question highlights two connected problems.

The first one is "How do we, as Christians, view the Bible"? Is it 'a book for life and for living to us? It's an important question because our view of the Bible will determine how we live our lives as Christ's followers in this world and how we see the workings of the how life is lived in our 21st century environment. Yes, the Bible can be difficult to understand at times, and there will be times when we genuinely are at a loss about where we stand with God and what His will for us is. But, it was Mark Twain who said that it wasn't the parts of the Bible he didn't understand that disturbed him most, it was the parts that he did understand that disturbed him. The implication of his words is that what he did understand meant that something in his life had to adjust to that understanding and it was an adjustment he didn't want to make. Oswald Chambers has said that the key to growing closer to God is not intellect but obedience. David has said that it is when we believe that we will be shown the

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truths of God's Word and it is when we are obedient to the light that has been given to us, that God can then take us on to the next level. That is why the New Testament talks of new believers being fed the milk of the Word while more mature believers need "strong meat." We are all at different stages in our Christian experience. God treats us as individuals as far as our relationship with Him is concerned, but our growth and progress in our faith is dependent on our approach and obedience to His Word, for that is God's primary way of revealing Himself and His ways to us. This is not just another book, it is the very words God wants us to know and He has given us the Holy Spirit to help us to understand and to obey what we read. The Bible is rejected by so many people because it demands a form of lifestyle that is different to that of the world in general. It is a way of life because it is ordained by a living God, for as I've mentioned before, Christianity is the only world religion which believes its God is alive and active in human affairs.

The second problem is "How, in an increasingly secular society, can we show people that the Bible is worth taking a look at"? Given the derisory anti-Christian attitudes of so many people, we would be laughed at if talked about the Bible as God's living Word. We would be regarded as being clueless if we insisted that the Bible addresses all the key areas of our modern life. Again, nothing is further from the truth as I hope some of the talks in this session will show. Also, we would be regarded as deluded for believing there is an eternal afterlife of bliss for those who follow the pattern of life contained in the Bible.

I had originally thought I could have said something in answer to both these questions in one talk, but the more I thought of the Bible, the more I realised that the Bible is an aspect of life we Christians need to focus on before we can look with clearer sight at any other aspect of life. We ourselves need be strengthened in our belief that the Bible is a book worth building our lives on, because if we are not convinced about God's Word, others won't be either. Especially, in the face of the world's opposition to it, we need to be reminded that these are the words of an omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent God, who has our best interests at heart. We need the encouragement of the assurance that what the Bible says is not a kind of "pie in the sky" self-hypnosis, but is the only way to a truly fulfilling life, with an even more fulfilling eternal future at the end of it.

I realise I am in a sense 'preaching to the converted' for I would say that everyone here believes the Bible is the Word of the living God and, as such, is true. Paul tells 2 Timothy 3:16

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

Have you ever thought about why we believe that? Have you ever thought why we take that so much for granted? I could be 'devil's advocate' and say you believe it because that is what David has preached or some other Christian has told you – and you believed them. If that is the case then your beliefs about the Bible are human-centred. But if you say that it has become part of our psyche – it's just part of who you are and that the Bible is the major influence ruling your life, it is because

1 Corinthians 3:9 For we are God's servants, working together; you are God's field, God's building.

Ephesians 3:7 Of this gospel I have become a servant according to the gift of God's grace that was given me by the working of his power.

Belief in the Bible as the Word of the Living God is a divine work channelled through human agents in various ways. But, from start to finish, the process by which we come to believe by faith that the Bible as the Word of God is through the work of the Holy Spirit giving us that assurance.

To be called 'God's field, God's building' suggests that God is taking a personal interest in the pattern of our lives. The working of His power, which is the Holy Spirit, in us, is aimed at conforming us to the Person of His Son. It is a process that will only be completed in heaven, because no-one on this earth will ever be perfect. In other words, it is a lifetime's process and the only way that progress towards this goal can be made is by following the Maker's instructions. That is why we need to see the Bible as 'a book for life'.

Think about aspects of human life. What do we need to sustain it and what makes each of our lives unique? Firstly, to sustain life we need food and drink. From the manna and quail in the desert to the feeding of the 5000, this is something the Bible recognises and God provides for. What is true of the physical life is even more true of the spiritual one for Jesus is both the Living Water and the Bread of life. **John 4:14 "but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life. John 6:35 Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty.**

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If the purpose of God for Christians is conformity to the likeness of His Son, then we must fix our eyes upon Jesus, because it was Jesus who taught us to pray **“Give us each day our daily bread.”** We need food daily to sustain our health and well-being. Our spiritual health and well-being also depends on being fed daily on the Bread of Life and drinking from that Living Water – and the source of both is only to be found in God’s Word.

Then, the most essential thing we need to stay alive is a healthy heart. Everyone knows that a defective physical heart causes major problems. In the same way, the spiritual life is only as healthy as we look after our hearts. We’ve seen that right from the very beginning of God’s dealings with His people in the Pentateuch that the “heart” was the key to a proper relationship with Him. The RSV mentions the word ‘heart’ 550 times and the plural ‘hearts’ 165 times. That gives you some idea of how important character is to God for the heart is at the core of our being and determines who and what we are.

David prayed for clean hands and a pure heart. And it is ‘a book for life’ that shows us how to look after the spiritual aspect of our hearts. The writer to the Hebrews puts it like this.

Hebrews 4:12 **Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account.**

This is what Oswald Chambers meant when he said that “God educates us down to the scruple.”

The Bible also deals with the heart’s spiritual companion – the mind. Psychiatrists tell us that the main difference between human and animal life is the mind. It is the combination of the heart and mind that leads to the development of our personalities which, in turn, determines our characters. And this is something which is of major concern to God.

Jeremiah 17:10 **I the LORD test the mind and search the heart, to give to all according to their ways, according to the fruit of their doings.**

God tests the mind and the heart for one thing only – to what extent does it conform to the mind and heart of Jesus. And there are other references to this. Romans 12:2but be transformed by the renewing of your mind

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Philippians 2:5 **Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,**
So when we sing *“Let the mind of Christ my Saviour live in me from day to day. By His love and power controlling all I do and say.”* and mean it, God will provide every resource to enable us to work towards that goal, described in **Ephesians 4:23-24 as: ... to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.**

Another thing that distinguishes human life from animal life is the human ability to be self-aware. In general terms we know “what makes us tick”, what “floats our boat” and other ways to describe how we see ourselves in our physical environment. The Bible also tells us how to be spiritually self-aware.

2 Corinthians 13:5 **Examine yourselves to see whether you are living in the faith. Test yourselves. Do you not realize that Jesus Christ is in you?**

Romans 12:2 **Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will.**

The only way to do this is through the method Jesus used Luke 24:45 **Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures.** We discussed “test the spirits” in our study of I John. When Scripture is applied to our hearts and minds, by the power of the Holy Spirit, we not only will be aware of, but will also experience that

Philippians 4:7 **.... peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.**

Self-awareness also determines what we do with our lives – what we do with our time, our talents, our wealth and other resources. The Bible even gives us a summary of how we can judge each of these things.

Philippians 4:8 Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.

This too came up in David’s study on John – the ‘do not be conformed to the world’ discussion. I’ve questioned it myself and I’m sure you might be wondering too how we can ever hope to “examine” ourselves to the extent that we are always doing what Paul is demanding of us. We have to live in this world with all its daily ups and downs, joys and sorrows, good things and bad things, nice people and sometimes downright obnoxious people. The thing is that when we know what the character of Jesus is like – and we can only get this

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from the Bible – the Holy Spirit will in some way bring our wrong feelings, intentions or thoughts to our notice. It is when this happens, that we really need to consciously examine ourselves and ask the simple questions – Is this what Jesus would want of us?

But while it is the work of the Holy Spirit to convict us when we do deviate from the path, we have no excuse before God if we fail to find out what the path is. And this takes a lifetime's time and effort. The psalmist tells us that God's Word is **a lamp to our feet and a light to our path.**

And the rest of Paul's words to Timothy tells us what we will find in that Word when take the time and make the effort.

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

The Bible is ultimately the only dependable book that gives us the true picture of what God is really like and all that He has done for the people of this planet. This verse sums up how God wants us to use it. First of all, what we are taught in the Bible enables us to recognise what earns God's disapproval. When we are rebuked, we are being reminded that we have done or said something that is not in accordance of the standard expected of us. A usual reaction is feeling ashamed that we have let someone down, especially God, and regret for that. But God's rebuke is not to demoralise us. Good teachers point out a student's failure to reach a particular standard in order to show where the student has gone wrong so that he/she can avoid the same mistakes in future and thereby reach a higher standard. That is why the Bible also shows us the way to correct our behaviour or thinking. We are being bombarded in this day and age with wrong ideas about what it means to be a Christian. We are being told that what the Bible says is wrong, is in fact, right for the 21st century Christian. Cults and sects are actively evangelising and deceiving people into ultimately worshipping a god of their own making. Only God can be relied upon to give us the correct picture of all that He is and does and that is why knowledge of what the Bible says about Him enables us to correct all alternative views. That is why Paul told Timothy to 2 Timothy 2:15 **Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the world of truth.**

And we need to correctly handle the word of truth because as well as a battle to be fought against the world, the flesh and the devil, we have a service to render to God. The Bible trains us not only to be right in our relationship with God, but right in what we do for Him.

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Colossians 1:10 joins 'good works' and the 'knowledge of God'.

10 so that you may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God.

Philippians 2 shows us we will have all the help we need to do it. **13for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.**

Philippians 1: 6 **I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.**

Ephesians 2:10 **For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.**

And these texts bring us back to where we started. We have seen that God has provided us with all the nourishment we need to need to keep us spiritually healthy; and the guidance and instruction to build up our spiritual character, which is a lifetime's procedure. All of this is directed towards progressively conforming us to Christlikeness. Our service to God in using whatever God has given us to do good is part of achieving that aim. And we do it for one overarching reason – because it was Jesus

That is why **Titus 2: 13-14 who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds.**

The Bible tells us that an omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent God has paid the highest price to redeem us; and took the time and effort over 1500 years – for that's how long it took to compile the Bible - to make sure we could know and understand Him and know what a proper response to Him is for our lives. That is why the Bible is not just for holiday or any other season reading. For Christians, it truly is 'a book for life'. And perhaps our ending prayer should be

**May the word of God dwell richly in my heart from hour to hour
So that I may see I triumph only through His power.**

WEEK 2: RATIONAL LIFE

Tonight's talk may take a little while longer for, during the last week a TV programme and a newspaper article have both contributed to this aspect of the Bible as a book for life. Both run contrary to today's secular view that Christians are deluded or has been brain-washed into believing what the Bible tells us. Last week, we saw how the Bible is crucial to our spiritual life for that is what the Bible is primarily concerned with. Unfortunately, that is the aspect that people we meet today don't want to know about. But it is only when this aspect of life is resolved that we can begin to know and understand that the Bible has something to say about our rational, physical lives. The Bible is not about pie-in-the-sky, self-induced imaginary experiences. It is a Book solidly grounded in the here and now of our lives. So, how can we show so-called rational people in this scientific age that believing what this book tells us about God and life as it is, is worth taking notice of? How can we show that our faith is not blind, but has a very rational basis. I know that taking a 'rational' approach to the Bible may not sit well with some Christians and I am very aware that human reasoning cannot convince anyone; that it is the Holy Spirit who convicts of the truth of any matter. So, this talk is more about underpinning what we believe spiritually about the Bible, than the means of convincing others. In many ways, when I have been tempted to doubt the Bible, these practical things have brought truth back into perspective for in any situation in life, nothing speaks louder than evidence. It is also true, however, that the Holy Spirit can use some of the facts we will mention, for as 1 Peter 3:15 tells us, **but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. Always be ready**

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to make your defence to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you;

We should be able to give a reason for the hope that is in us, and these facts do give us very rational basis for believing that the Bible is not just any book. It is a Book that addresses situations in life that everyone is familiar with – and if it hits the nail on the head about these things, then we can't ignore what it says about God and His work in our lives.

Mainly, this talk is about the credentials of the Bible and, as I've said, nothing speaks louder than evidence. Some of the information has been taken from Josh McDowell's 'Evidence That Demands a Verdict.'

If you're going to buy an expensive work of art, you first ask about its provenance. You will want to know its pedigree. This is what people have discovered about the Bible. Over 40 people took around 1500 years to write about God and His world? That fact alone is amazing and it is even more so when we take a closer look at the writers for they came from all walks of life. Royalty was involved because the first writer, Moses, was brought up in an Egyptian palace and was the leader of the nation which still exists to the present day. Joshua was a military general. One king – David by name – wrote one of the first poetry anthologies in the world. Another king, wrote on life saying that "there was nothing new under the sun." Nothing he wrote is irrelevant, for it is the kind of advice that would enable people to avoid many of the pitfalls that land them in trouble today. Then there are government servants and statesmen. Nehemiah and Daniel could be said to have been members of their respective Privy Councils. Isaiah was kind of secretary of state in the court of King Uzziah. Then there was the taxman – Matthew, who knew all about tax dodging. Paul may not appreciate the analogy but he would have been the equivalent of a cardinal in his religious order. And then we have people who were involved in the ordinary trades and occupations of the time. A herdsman like Amos or fishermen like Peter, James and John. Each of these men from whatever walk of life, brought a unique, we believe, God-given insight into the character of God and how He envisaged how life should be lived.

Not only did the people come from all different walks of life and live at different times during that 1500 years, they also wrote from different places and under different circumstances. The earliest writings come from events recorded

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in an Arabian desert by the leader of stateless and homeless people who were constantly moving from place to place. Today those people exist as the Jewish nation in the state of Israel whose boundaries were defined in the Bible and that is why there is so much hostility over borders today. Other writings originate in the settled royal courts of what are present day Israel and Iraq and Iran. Jeremiah and Paul wrote from prison cells. David wrote in times of war; Solomon in times of peace. Two were written by a doctor while travelling as a companion on the roads or the shores around the Mediterranean Sea. John wrote from the barren Isle of Patmos off the coast of Turkey, a place of punishment for exiled enemies of the state. Some wrote in a mood of joy, others from the depths of sorrow and despair.

Amazingly too, the story is told in a wide variety of literary forms – history, poetry, teaching materials, parable and allegory, biography, personal correspondence, prophecy and apocalyptic. Josh McDowell asked a salesman of the “Great Books of the Western World Series” to take just 10 authors from one walk of life, one generation, one place, one time, one mood, one continent, one language, and just one controversial subject and ask the question. “Would all those authors agree”? The answer, of course, was ‘no’. Yet the Bible, in spite of the period of time, people, places and circumstances that went into producing it, gives a continuous and unbroken revelation of an almighty, eternal God who is living and active in human life.

We hear a lot today about globalisation and globally speaking, this book was the product of work done on the three continents of Asia, Africa and Europe and the three languages in which it was written – Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek were the common languages of all the people living in these areas at the time. In other words, its contents were available to every single person living at any time during the times in which it was written. Today, the Bible is the only Book that has been translated from those original languages, not only into every major language in the world, but such is the demand for the Bible in peoples’ own language, that work is continuing to translate it into even some of the most obscure local dialects. To give just one example. Over 50 languages were spoken among the 350 students at TCNN where I worked. There are hundreds more languages among the 162 million or so population. Today, there is a Bible

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Translation department run by Wycliffe in that college, training Nigerians to translate the Bible into as many Nigerian languages as possible. That is a pattern of what is happening all over the world. What other book has ever seen this level of demand for its contents in people's own native tongues.

As far as our own language is concerned, the topic of Melvyn Bragg's documentary broadcasted last week was about William Tyndale, who translated the Bible into English and was burnt at the stake for doing so. Reported in the Daily Telegraph, Bragg said of him

"he loaded our speech with more everyday phrases than any other writer before or since. We still use them, or varieties of them, every day, 500 years on. Here are just a few: "under the sun", "signs of the times", "let there be light", "my brother's keeper", "lick the dust", "fall flat on his face", "the land of the living", "pour out one's heart", "the apple of his eye", "fleshpots", "go the extra mile", "the parting of the ways"

And even quoted Bob Dylan's use of Tyndale's translation of Matthew 20:16

Bob Dylan. (Tyndale, Matthew 20: 16, "So the last shall be first, and the first last: for many be called, but few chosen." Dylan, from *The Times They Are a-Changin'*: "And the first one now will later be last, for the times they are a-changin'.")

Another article in the Independent and covered also by the Mail was the news that the newest translation of the Norwegian Bible had entered the best selling list selling 160,000 copies and beating 'Fifty Shades of Grey'. This shows how the seed of the word is being sown even in a country where 72% of citizens claim to be atheists. And God has promised in His Word that it will not return to Him void but will accomplish what He wills.

So, from just examining the provenance of the Bible, you cannot come to any other conclusion that it is a unique book. Some may say that the writings are fake, but the fact that they existed in the first place and the numerous copies of these works still in existence have convinced experts in these matters that they are genuine writings of their times. The discovery especially, of the Dead Sea Scrolls, which included the whole of the Book of Isaiah on one scroll is irrefutable proof, that Isaiah, and by extension, the other Biblical writers, existed. And given the literary quality of their writings, they were all far from being stupid. If these people were real and believed that the people and events

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they wrote about were real, why should we doubt them when they assert that the God, who is the focus of their works, is not a product of their imagination. And, as far as I am aware, imagination is not infectious.

In fact, if that was possible, then contagion with imagination is the longest lasting epidemic in history, with no sign of a cure, because according to the latest world census statistics 54% of the world's population trace their recorded ancestry back to Abraham, whom the Bible claims was chosen and appointed by God to be the father of a spiritual nation that would last for as long as the world lasted – and then beyond it. Again, the evidence, up to the present time, is there for all to see. Also, according to the latest UK census 59.3% of people in the UK still claim to be Christian. We are in the company of 33.2 million people according to the latest census.

These are all rational grounds for believing this is a Book we need to take seriously. It is a rational assertion because all that has been said can be tested and proved to be correct – which is the whole goal of science. For many, though, this will not be enough. They will still regard it as removed from ordinary life and fail to see the extent to which the Bible is involved in the normal everyday way the world works. What, for example, has the Bible got to do with academia, publishing, employment, finance or remedying social ills? What has it got to do with political and military life or wealth and poverty. What has it got to do with communication in a cyberspace age? Over the next four weeks we will be looking at four of these areas in more detail, but this week, let's just take a general look at some of the familiar areas of life that exist because of the influence of the Bible.

Because books and education have been inseparable, this seems a good place to start, but, as we shall see, what starts in universities has a far wider impact. A great deal of academic and technical expertise is being invested in Bible related projects. I also don't mind being called stupid when I realise I am in the company of such people. Whole university departments are engaged in research into the Bible records. Such is the wealth of information in this Book that it has become an inter-disciplinary area of study and research. According to one reference book “to name only some” we find disciplines in theology, archaeology, Egyptology and Assyriology, textual criticism, linguistics, history and sociology, literary theory and feminism. The author adds, “No comparable

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collection of texts has been subjected to such sustained critical examination and elucidation over such a long period of time.” And whether or not these academics are Christians, a key fruit of all this research is that although some findings may have caused controversy over some Bible statements, none of the findings have definitively proved any substantive aspect of the Bible wrong.

The counter argument here could be that such academics in their ivory towers are too far removed from the normal pursuits of life to make any difference. Or that they are only in that occupation for the status or financial rewards they might gain. The fact is, that the vast majority of academics and students never become famous or multi-millionaires. Collectively, however, they do contribute to multi-million pound commercial enterprises which have an impact on ordinary life in the form of employment. Take the major Christian publishing firms such as Zondervan, Baker Books, I.V.P., T & T Clark, Tyndale House and many others, They, in turn, employ thousands of people in the production of their publications, their distribution and sale. Next time you are in a Christian bookshop, just take a look at the variety of Christian products that are still being used by people today and think of the thousands of ordinary people who are employed in the 21st century making them available to us.

Then take the financial aspects of our world. Wealth, or lack of it, is a major concern to all. How does the Bible contribute to wealth generation? Just one example is the tourism industry. A visit to St Paul’s cathedral and Westminster abbey are musts for overseas tourists to London and the same can be said for other such buildings in Europe and America. Moving closer to the influence of the Bible, according to an internet report, 2010 was a record year for tourism in Israel thanks to a lull in violence. There were 3.45 million visitors in 2010, 14 per cent more than the previous record two years. Mark Feldman, who heads the Israeli travel agency Zion Tours, says tourism is booming.....It's bringing in \$20 billion of revenue....Most of the visitors were Jews and Evangelical Christians. Many Christian tourists are also visiting two biblical towns under Palestinian control, Bethlehem and Jericho, both of which welcomed a record number of people in 2010. Some 1.5 million tourists visited Jesus' traditional birthplace in Bethlehem, 50 per cent more than the previous year.

Bethlehem businessman Ibrahim Salah says it is a boost to the Palestinian economy. "We want business," said Salah. "This is what we want, you know,

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to bring food to the table to our children and our families.” And what more aspect of life could be more basic in this day and age than bringing food to the table of some of the more disadvantaged folk in our world?

And the availability of all this information can ultimately be traced back to the Bible, the original edition of which is now the most expensive book in the world. In 1987 A Gutenberg Bible Old Testament was purchased by a Japanese buyer at Christie's for around £3.6 million, a record at auction for a printed book. Today it is estimated that a complete copy would cost between £29 and £40 million. Individual leaves now sell for £23,000 and £115,000 depending upon condition and the desirability of the page. For ordinary people in the 21st century, these prices may seem ridiculous for a book or pages of a book, but our access to books started with this process. Before Gutenberg produced this Bible in the mid-15th century, every book produced in Europe had to be copied by hand and only the very rich could afford books. This was the first example of mass production in Europe and it laid the foundation for the commercial mass production of books. Over the next two centuries not only books, but also newspapers were produced. The success of printing meant that books soon became cheaper, and ever wider parts of the population could afford them. More than ever before, it enabled people to follow debates and take part in discussions of matters that concerned them. In this sense, the Gutenberg Bible had an incalculable effect on the history of the printed book because it was the beginning of the process whereby printed materials became affordable by the mass of ordinary people and the means by which ordinary people could aspire to an education.

And education opened up opportunities for ordinary people to be able to appreciate and see for themselves many aspects of culture that we take for granted today. Architecture, art, sculpture are all around us in the physical presence of the great cathedrals and churches in towns and cities all over the western world or in world famous museums and galleries which hold some of the greatest Bible inspired paintings and sculptures in the world. Musicians too, gave their talents to works inspired by the Bible. Bach's "Jesu, joy of man's desiring", Beethoven's "Ode to Joy" and Handel's "Messiah" being just three examples.

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And finally, what good has the Bible been in remedying social evils? Well, Christians like William Wilberforce spearheaded the abolition of slavery in the British Empire. Thomas Barnardo took the lead in providing a home for orphaned and destitute children. Florence Nightingale brought compassion and comfort to nursing wounded soldiers and the Leprosy Mission was the first organisation to reach out to people regarded as ‘untouchable’. Elisabeth Fry highlighted appalling prison conditions which led to penal reform. Today, individual Church and mission organisations are involved in all kinds of charity work helping those most in need of the basic necessities of life like food and clean drinking water, education and medical assistance. Christian Aid and Tear Fund are internationally recognised bodies working in some of the most inhospitable places in the world and under some of the most harrowing conditions.

All the evidence mentioned emanated from the contents of the Bible. If you were to delve deeper into each of the areas mentioned, you would find that I have only made a small scratch on the surface of the mass of work that has and is being done in each of these areas. What’s more, unlike many of the generalised claims made by opponents of the Bible, everything that has been said can be verified. No-one, who is being honest with themselves, can deny the influence of the Bible has had. I’ve read many books, but this is the first time I’ve wrote about a book and writing about what the Bible has inspired in our materialistic, rational, physical world, without exaggeration, was exhilarating.

As Christians, we take for granted that God is the Creator and Sustainer of the universe. We know He is all powerful, all knowing and present everywhere, but somehow, focusing on how His Word has led all kinds of people to make contributions to the practicalities of life, has brought His involvement in our world so much closer to home.

Bearing in mind that it is the Words in a Book that has brought about these ways of life, is it then rational to deny that Someone spoke and inspired these very words. Going back to the provenance of the words, is it rational to deny that a single mind, which knew the beginning of the story from its end, and how it would affect every area of life during that time, had to be the single author of the Book, who used human agents to record His words. Yes, as Christians, we

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accept that the Bible is the infallible word of Almighty God by faith. But, a look at what the Bible has to say about all aspects of life, gives us perfectly rational reasons for believing it truly is, not only a divinely inspired ‘book for life’, but is the only book that depicts how life should be lived because it deals with every major aspect of it.

WEEK 3: POLITICAL LIFE

Politics – or more precisely, politicians – don’t some of them make your blood boil? Apparently, they are the most distrusted people in society and it’s so easy to see why. They find it difficult to answer straightforward questions, they lie to get into office and don’t do what they say they are going to do once they get there. Nowadays, isn’t it funny how the country is on the verge of bankruptcy, but they can find millions of pounds for the projects they want to promote. Because of the feelings politicians arouse in some people, according to etiquette advice, politics tops the list of what you should never discuss at a dinner party. And, let’s face it, politics are not the ideal sermon material either. That is why Bible studies like this give us the opportunity to see what God’s Word has to say on this issue.

In fact, the Bible gives us three pictures of government – divine government, satanic government and as-good-as-you’re-going-to-get-in-this-world kind of government. God has a perfect understanding and knowledge of our problems

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with government and rulers, because it was God who instituted human government. Think back to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – the fathers or the leading patriarchs of the Hebrews. Then go to Moses, trained for government in and Egyptian court and Joshua, the military leader of the twelve tribes of Israel. Then go to the judges, who, with the probable exception of Deborah and Samuel, were a pretty motley crew. Then go to Saul, David, Solomon and all the other kings of Israel and Judah that followed them. Think of the two kingdoms under the thumb of the Assyrian and Babylonian conquerors, followed by rule by the Greeks and by the time we reach the New Testament, by the Romans. From the very start of the Biblical record people were governed by good, bad and downright ugly rulers.

From all of this evidence, we can come to no other conclusion than that government has been instituted by God, so it is important to emphasise that government is part of the will of God for humanity, and, as such, has a valid right to exist. But like everything else in God's creation, government is conducted by an imperfect, sinful humanity, hence the problems created by what God intended to be an institution for the well-being of humanity. Looking at our own government and those around the world today, we have plenty of evidence to show that they fall far short of what God intended. And there is no excuse for we have Biblical evidence to show what God's perfect government would be like.

It's primary characteristics should be righteousness and justice. Isaiah 32:1-8 gives us the image of people ruled by these concepts. **See, a king will reign in righteousness, and princes will rule with justice. Each will be like a hiding place from the wind, a covert from the tempest, like streams of water in a dry place, like the shade of a great rock in a weary land.**

Then the eyes of those who have sight will not be closed, and the ears of those who have hearing will listen. The minds of the rash will have good judgment, and the tongues of stammerers will speak readily and distinctly.

A fool will no longer be called noble, nor a villain said to be honorable. For fools speak folly, and their minds plot iniquity: to practice ungodliness, to utter error concerning the LORD, to leave the craving of the hungry unsatisfied, and to deprive the thirsty of drink. The villainies of villains are evil; they devise wicked devices to ruin the poor with lying words, even when the plea of the needy is right. But those who are noble plan noble things, and by noble things they stand.

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It is a picture of safety, security, sight, hearing, good judgement and proper speech. Evil will not be called good or good evil – something that is happening today. People will not plot evil and the needy will be catered for. This is the kind of government God can call noble in every sense of the word. It is the pattern of good government ordained by God, but unfortunately, it will not be achieved by human effort. One Person alone is capable of establishing this form of government and we are told about Him in

Isaiah 9:6-7

For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom, to order it, and to establish it with judgment and with justice from henceforth even for ever. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will perform this.

Colossians 1:15-16 tells us **He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him.**

No one who has or ever will live on this earth can be compared to God and none will ever be able to equal Him when it comes to good and perfect government. But we can prepare for the time when God's eternal government will be established by becoming citizens of His kingdom here on earth.

Unfortunately, there is a lack of will to do this. The one thing in history that has not changed and never will change, is human nature, and while the obsession for power and wealth remains, good government is of no concern.

1 Samuel 8:10-18 spells this out for us.

A king would use the young men to serve in his armies and to make weapons of war to make himself more powerful.

Men and women would be conscripted to provide him with whatever he desired. He would take at least one-tenth of everything that people possessed and would take the best of their land and possessions to enrich himself and his friends.

He would eventually make slaves of the people.

The story of Ahab's and Jezebel's seizure of Naboth's vineyard is just one example of how this prediction came tragically true for the people of Israel and

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Judah in the following centuries. This is what is happening in many places in the world today. The people of Niger in West Africa, still only have the status of slaves under the present government and so many other people in this world are slaves, in all but name, to their rulers.

But an even more heinous form of government is described in the Bible in Revelation chapter 13 which David referred to when the anti-Christ was mentioned in the epistle of John study. Revelation 13 is a chillingly modern description of some regimes in our own world. Essentially, Revelation 13 describes the ultimate form of a deliberately chosen anti-God form of government. Many people say John is describing Christian persecution under Roman rule, but at this stage, the Romans had no policy of persecuting people because they were Christians. It is true that they were persecuted under Nero, but then they were being used as scapegoats to divert attention away from the accusations that he had started the great fire of Rome. The Roman historian Tacitus records that it was peoples' revulsion of his cruelty that made that persecution stop. Mostly, when Christians were attacked it was for more localised reasons, especially economic ones – the loss of income when Paul relieved the slave girl of the divination spirit, and the complaints of the tradespeople when people were abandoning the temples of Ephesus to follow the new movement.

In Revelation John is describing what ultimately government will become when it abandons God's standards for government. We are told that it is instigated by Satan, who gave the 'political' beast its authority. A telling verse is that people worshipped this political figure. His character was shown in the fact that he blasphemed God and slandered His name, His dwelling place and those who lived in His domain in the heavens. Also, he would make war against God's people on earth and would have victory over them. **“If anyone is to go into captivity, into captivity he will go. If anyone is to be killed with the sword with the sword he will be killed.” V10.** Isn't this a picture of atheistic regimes that have and still exist in our world today. It is even more modern when we read in verse 14-15 that the 'religious' power of the time set up an image in honour of the political leader and would have all who refused to worship it, killed. From Nebuchadnezzar to Stalin, Mao Tse-Tung, Saddam Hussein and the Kim Il-Sung, his son and now his grandson in North Korea, we see John's words happening in our world today.

But the chapter goes even further, for the political leader appoints a religious order to bolster his political power, and it is the religious order that determines who is and who is not an enemy of the state or a heretic. I won't insult your

intelligence by going any further than saying, isn't that a picture of fundamentalist, militant Islam today?

Government is bad when it is blatantly anti-God government, but we need to bear in mind that it is God Himself who allows this to happen. The world view of the time was that whether the divine institution of government was derived from the Jewish Yahweh, the Graeco-Roman Zeus/Jupiter or the Christian God, the fundamental belief system recognised a theological basis for the existence of the governing authorities. Revelation 13 emphasises that power was 'given' to Satan and the political and religious authorities. Chapter 12:12 makes clear that even this power ultimately comes from God who allows the dragon to operate on the earth for a limited time. But perhaps the most compelling evidence for this worldview is that given by Jesus himself. During his trial before Pilate he states that Pilate would have no power over him if it had not been given from above (John 19:11). What Pilate will do, whether he recognised it or not, arose "essentially not from his own weakness or the Jewish animosity but from divine will."¹

God's will still applies to the existence of government and only God knows what purpose governments are serving in His direction of the world. What we do know is that Isaiah 40:23-25 recognises God's power over governments. **It is God, who brings princes to naught, and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing. Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown, scarcely has their stem taken root in the earth, when he blows upon them, and they wither, and the tempest carries them off like stubble. To whom then will you compare me, or who is my equal? says the Holy One.**

And that control is also over the 'good as you're going to get in this world' government is described by Paul in Romans 13:1-7. Again, bearing in mind that no government will ever be perfect, this nevertheless gives us an idea of what a good government should aspire to, and to some extent we experience this in a democratic form of government. And Paul starts off in the first verse by acknowledging what we have already mentioned. **"for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God."** Paul goes on to say that rebellion against authority is rebellion against God and that gave rise to the doctrine of the 'Divine Right of Kings' which only became obsolete in Britain as a parliamentary democracy started to emerge.

¹ Kenneth Grayston, *The Gospel of John*. (Epworth Commentaries). (London: Epworth Press, 1990), 158.

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Thus, despite what Paul or Christians thought of the Roman government, Paul reminds his readers that a key characteristic of the ruling authorities is their servant status. He makes it clear that the emperor and all his officials are ultimately servants of God, with the implication that they will all be held accountable for the way in which they fulfil their designated roles. Jesus said in Luke 12:48b

From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded.

Our present governments either do not believe or choose to ignore the fact that they are ultimately responsible to God for what happens on their watch. Our present government's blatant disregard for God's order of creation in promoting the gay marriage bill is already under God's knowledge and judgment. The actions of many of the world governments, including our own, often disgust and dismay us. Our only assurance in the face of much state evil, is that God is in control and that one day, within history or beyond it, those in government will come under God's judgement.

So what should governments be doing? Paul goes on to describe what good governments should do. Governments are in place to 'reward good' and 'punish evil'. In this passage scholars are agreed that good and evil are not moral attributes but are used in relation to civil order, which is endorsed by God to the extent that he requires order, not anarchy. It is often ignored that the great *Pax Romana* gave to the Mediterranean world two centuries of peace which the western world has never since experienced. To a large extent, subject peoples were left to carry on their own ways of life because Roman jurisprudence brought a semblance of consistency of justice to society and Paul personally benefited from the privileges of Roman citizenship (Acts 22:25).

Today, Roman law underpins the laws of most western European states and it follows closely the Ten Commandments. Latin is the legal language and probably one of the most commonly known words derived from Latin is 'homicide' – the murder of a human being. The 5th commandment tells us to honour our fathers and mothers and so serious was the murder of a parent or close family member that the Romans had special terms for it – patricide, matricide, fratricide, sororside and infanticide – words still used by the legal profession today. And any form of theft was punished severely by the Romans. The word perjury comes from Latin and is the equivalent of the commandment not to bear false witness. Today, adultery is not a crime, although it still carries

the death penalty for the woman in some societies; and very little notice is taken of the command not to covet. This is included in the Ten Commandments because it underlies the thought process or motivation behind the other offences. In criminal law the prosecution has to prove that the intention to commit the offence was present and that is why establishing motivation is so crucial. Covetness is a prime motivation, for it is the obsessive desire for something you have no right to have. The most direct offences resulting from this motivation are all forms of theft, but, indirectly, it does play a part in the other offences as well.

In terms of how Paul viewed the rule of law in his time, however, it appears that he viewed the state as ‘doing good’ when it fulfilled its duty to maintain law and order and to prevent the anarchy of civil unrest. Perhaps Paul may have thought of the words of Proverbs 28:2. **When a land rebels it has many rulers; but with an intelligent ruler there is lasting order.** We hailed the so-called ‘Arab Spring’ but now we know the truth of this text since no-one knows who will emerge as the majority supported rulers in the countries affected by the uprisings. Car bombings and other forms of aggression between rival factions are a fact of life in present day Tunisia, Libya and Iraq. And we just have to look at Syria to see the misery, death and destruction wrought by armed rebellion.

The obverse of ‘rewarding good’ is a more contentious issue since Paul makes clear that punishing evil can involve the use of the ‘power of the sword’ given to rulers. We will come to that next week for many, especially in the pacifist camp, see this as symbolic rather than practical. Debate often revolves around whether or not this applies to capital punishment or military combat. In Paul’s time it was likely to apply to both, as a Roman army presence in Palestine and the crucifixion of Christ shows

In spite of the faults of the Roman rulers, Paul is in no doubt that people had to live under that authority and had obligations to it. The most prominent obligation in Romans 13, reinforced by Titus 3:1 and 1 Peter 2:13, is submission. No qualification of the injunction is offered by any of the writers. No doubt many saw and experienced the punitive and unjust side of Roman government, yet neither Paul nor Peter saw this as an excuse for any form of unlawful opposition to the state. Titus, for example in chapter 3, was instructed **“Remind the people to be subject to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready to do whatever is good, to slander no one, to be peaceable and considerate and to show true humility toward all men.”**

‘Submission’ appears to have presented no major problems for these writers but it has incurred much debate among scholars but there is now a consensus that it means 'be subject to' rather than 'obey'. Most commentators therefore rule out an understanding of absolute obedience to the state from this verb. This would also be totally consistent with the New Testament view that absolute obedience was due only to God. In fact, Jesus’ words to ‘Render unto Caesar that which is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s’ puts this matter into perspective. Government is to be obeyed, except when it conflicts with what God has commanded. It is only then, that conscientious objection, passive resistance and lawful protest is permissible for Christians.

The second obligation mentioned by Paul probably touched a raw nerve and given some of the publicity we’ve had about it, it probably touches a raw nerve with us too. Taxation. This was one area of life where all citizens of the Roman Empire felt the touch of the state. Taxation gave rise to much unrest and Paul urged Christians to pay their taxes and not participate in any unrest that occurred. We know just how much anger and controversy surrounds taxation today with most of that being directed at those who do not pay enough tax or avoid it completely, so we have some idea of how people in those times must have felt. Verse 7 gives the clear instruction to **“Give everyone what you owe him: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honour, then honour.”**

And this brings to a third obligation. Paul reminds us to pray for rulers in 1 Timothy 2:2. One scholar has said that **“What this prayer shows is the church’s awareness of civil government as an institution ordained by God, as well as the need to live and minister in a way that observes this responsibility.”**²

It would seem that what this summary of what the Bible has to say about political life shows us that even the political regimes of Bible times are still relevant to the 21st century. The Bible shows us the fundamental principles that underlie all forms of authority and we can see for ourselves the existence of those principles in our own day. It is hard to deny, that given what we can see in our own experience, the Bible is still very relevant as a Book of political life. But we have the assurance that, ultimately, God’s kingdom of righteousness and justice will prevail for all eternity.

² I. Howard Marshall, *The Pastoral Epistles*. (International Critical Commentary) (London: T & T Clark Ltd., 1999), 420 & 422

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WEEK 4: MILITARY LIFE

What do these books have in common? Both the Bible and War and Peace are regarded as literary classics. Both address the subject of war and peace, but in comparison to the many who know of the existence of these books, very few have read them. When it comes to the Bible, Christians will talk a lot about peace, but what the Bible has to say about war is often ignored. Perhaps it is even true to say that unless we have knowledge about what the Bible says about war, we will have no true understanding of the kind of peace which the Bible promotes. And that involves facing up to questions we would rather avoid. We would rather avoid them because they make us feel uncomfortable, or because we can't give a definitive answer to them, or because we get answers we don't want to hear.

War is a fact of life. Jesus made the prediction that there would be “wars and rumours of wars.” And that these things **MUST** happen (Mark 13:7). If all of God's Word applies to us then along with Jesus' own statement we have to accept the word of Ecclesiastes 3:8 which tells us there is **“a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace.”** We have found the truth of both statements from the history of Israel in the Old Testament and the fact that war has never been absent from the world in the 2000 years since the birth of Christ. If anything, today's projections indicate that they are more likely to increase in frequency and intensity in the future as the demand for natural resources for an increasing population and industrial output rises.

The Bible also tells us that the first war occurred before this earth came into being and who started it. It occurred in heaven and was started by Satan. He is the author of war. The Easter Bible studies showed that the war between good and evil will last for as long as this world lasts and physical war is the greatest manifestation of evil known to humanity. Revelation also shows us the picture of Jesus as the Divine Warrior who will wage the final war of history against Satan. All of this does raise the inevitable questions. If God is in control of what happens in this world, why does war happen, and when it does, why doesn't He stop it? These questions are unavoidable if we accept that the Bible is a Book for military life.

Asking why God does not stop war is the same as asking why does God allow evil to persist? What we do know is given in Revelation 12:12

Rejoice then, you heavens and those who dwell in them! But woe to the earth and the sea, for the devil has come down to you with great wrath, because he knows that his time is short!”

Satan has been permitted to operate on earth for a God-specified time. What we do not know is why? That is a question that cannot be definitively answered this side of eternity because as Isaiah 55:8-9 tells us: **For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.**

But, think for a moment about what lies behind our questioning of why God doesn't stop wars. That question implies God is responsible for war happening in our world; that He is to blame because He does not stop it. And that implies that there is a defect in His character. To make excuses for what God permits, or orders to happen, implies that God has acted wrongly and it also negatively affects His reputation for righteousness and justice. It implies that God's plans and purposes for humanity are not in accordance with the divine will described in Romans 12:2 as **what is good and acceptable and perfect.**

If God's dealings with His creation are good, acceptable and perfect, then perhaps we are asking the wrong questions. We have an expression now called the 'blame-game'. When something goes wrong we try to shift the blame on to somebody or something else. Isn't that what we do when we try to shift the responsibility for war unto God? Do we throw this question at God because we don't want to take the blame ourselves? Shouldn't we be asking instead: "Why do wars happen?" And that's a question God has answered for us in His Word and He has given answers the majority of people in this world do not want to hear.

Listen to James 4:1 **What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You want something but don't get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight.**

If this can happen among the Christians that James is writing to, how much greater is the pressure to kill and covet among those who do not have the restraints of the Holy Spirit?

Another familiar text that David has quoted is John 3:19-20

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And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed.

A brutal fact of life is that wars happen because men choose to follow the ways of Satan rather than the ways of God. When it comes to war, as Paul tells us in Romans 13:4, God has given governments the “power of the sword” and has appointed them as agents of His wrath to punish wrongdoers. In other words, governments are responsible for judging what is wrongdoing, and choosing how and when to use the power of the sword they have been given.

Pacifists argue that the sword mentioned here is to be taken symbolically or metaphorically, but the Greek word used is that used for the physical weapon. The sword in this passage is as real as the taxes Christians were exhorted to pay. We saw last week that it was God’s will for governments to exist and it was to do good by defending its right to exist, protecting its citizens from anarchy, and dispensing justice. When an army is used for these purposes, according to Paul, they fall within the will of God. In this respect, in the New Testament period the Roman army was doing just that.

Today, also, in most democracies an army is established for defence rather than conquest. Wars happen when that legitimate use of an army is used to serve the pride of individuals and groups who seek to seize power and the wealth and status it brings at the expense of weaker peoples. Looking at the motivation lying behind war gives us clear guidelines as to the kind of military conflicts which fall within the parameters of power God grants to a state and what falls outside of that.

Let’s face it, if governments were Christian in the Biblical sense of the term, war would be eradicated from this planet. But that will never happen and so we must face another unpalatable fact of life. Those who have deliberately chosen not to accept God’s gracious offer of salvation in Jesus Christ remain under judgment and, at times, will have the wrath of God visited upon them. While God does not start wars, people do; God sometimes uses war as a means of divine judgment. The order to the Israelites to annihilate some of the Canaanite people is one example. We find that order difficult to reconcile with a God of love, but God gives us His reason for doing it in Deuteronomy 20:18. Failure to destroy the Canaanite peoples would lead to them teaching the Israelites “to

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follow all the detestable things they do in worshipping their gods, and you will sin against the Lord your God.” The peoples God ordered to be destroyed had reached such a level of evil that it threatened the future of the people of God. We know from the Old Testament record the truth of His words, leading eventually to the judgment of the Assyrian and Babylonian conquests of Israel and Judah.

God is ultimately patient with humanity, not willing that any should perish but that all should have everlasting life. But for those who stubbornly and persistently refuse to follow God’s ways, within or beyond history, His judgment will come. And we have no excuse for as Paul says in Galatians 6:7-8

Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow. If you sow to your own flesh, you will reap corruption from the flesh; but if you sow to the Spirit, you will reap eternal life from the Spirit.

This is in line with Jesus’ words to Peter.

Matthew 26:52 **Then Jesus said to him, “Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword.**

Peter was using his sword as a personal response to the situation, a response that was not in accordance with God’s will at that time.

God holds human beings responsible for the choices they make, including the choice of whether or not to go to war. And this brings us to the people who have to fight wars. Soldiers are servants of the state when they serve the state for the purposes God intends and behave in a manner consistent with God’s standards. That is a matter for a Spirit guided conscience for each individual soldier, and Romans 13:7 is a useful yardstick regarding motivation behind war. What a soldier can be sure of, however, is that the New Testament gives many indications that military service is not incompatible with Christian faith and practice. If it were, why did John the Baptist not tell soldiers to leave the army when they asked what they should do? Why would Paul use military language and regard himself as a fellow-soldier with Epaphroditus. Why would he compare the Christian life to one of perseverance and enduring hardship like a good soldier. Why could Paul, without any qualification, tell those who had come to faith **“Each one should remain in the situation which he was in when God called him.....Brothers, each man, as responsible to God, should remain in the situation God called him to.”** 1 Corinthians 8:20, 25.

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Looking too at the incidents involving soldiers in the New Testament we find no condemnation of that profession. Remarkably too, apart from the Jewish ruling authorities, the only occupational group to have recorded interaction with all four leaders of the Christian movement are soldiers. And every interaction is significant for salvation.

John's meeting with soldiers recorded in Luke shows us soldiers are capable of repentance. The soldiers who came to John could have come from garrison towns like Jerusalem or Sebaste or from the other fortified towns or fortresses in the various areas mentioned. The key ingredient of John's message was repentance involving confession of sin and a change of behaviour. . From the Lukan viewpoint John's words did have startling impact for even the soldiers ask the question "What must we do?" (3:14). There was the implicit comprehension that by confessing sin, repenting of it and being baptized, they could not continue as they had been. A changed lifestyle had to result from the experience they had undergone. A cursory reading of John's demands about soldiers' behaviour is not adequate to relay the accurate precision of his diagnosis of their main failings. The three commands given are a brilliant summation of the abuses generally associated with contemporary military forces. It meant, in terms of employment, an unquestioning acceptance of pay and conditions; and in terms of social interaction the immediate cessation of the use of force on and abuse of authority towards the civilian population. Military historians have evidence that extortion and bribery was commonplace and pay was a cause for discontent. To demand the abandonment of such practices by repentant, baptised soldiers was nothing short of revolutionary. Compliance with the commands would set such soldiers apart from their comrades and would undoubtedly have been the empirical evidence supporting a conversion process. There was the probability that other soldiers did behave with integrity, but an encounter with John the Baptist provided a spiritual foundation and ethic for such behaviour – and the more radical the change, the greater the impact that had been made. On Old Testament criteria alone, a view that soldiers had made their peace with God and had become part of his kingdom is justified.

Jesus' encounter with the centurion at Capernaum. demonstrates soldiers are capable of great faith. In Matthew, this is the first mention of the word 'faith' in the gospel and Matthew, like the other Evangelists was writing to confirm the faith of his readers. There is no point to the inclusion of Jesus' words at this point if the faith of the centurion was confined only to the performance of a miracle. Associating this kind of faith with the kingdom of God leads one

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scholar to say that Jesus' words imply "that the faith of the centurion will gain him not only the cure of his servant but also his own entry into the kingdom."³

To publicly approach Jesus and to express the conviction that Jesus' mere word would be sufficient to effect a cure required a tremendous leap of faith and while a desperate physical need may have been the driving force, it is obvious that unless belief in a supernatural power was strong enough this action would not have been taken. But, the centurion's reference to his own level of authority and that he gives Jesus the respectful title of Lord indicates he recognises Jesus status as coming from that higher power. There is no doubt the miracle alone would have made an impact, but these details indicate that the encounter involved more than a miracle. Thus, the presence alone of 'faith' is the pointer to how Matthew's and present day audiences can justifiably interpret the situation of this soldier in relation to faith leading to salvation.

Jesus' encounter with the soldiers at the crucifixion are mixed but shows that even in the midst of the angst and brutality of this event, the Holy Spirit can penetrate into the hearts and minds of the most hardened individuals. The mockery before and during the crucifixion indicated that the soldiers were aware of the charges against him and that, allegedly, he claimed to be God's Son and/or 'The King of the Jews'. So, the statement "Truly, this man was the Son of God" was an amazing utterance, coming from a soldier, in all probability hardened to the task at hand. The fact that three of the four evangelists attribute the final words at the cross to a centurion is significant, for in their estimation, the statement stands as a testimony to the centurion's perception of Jesus at a particular moment in time. We have no record of that soldier becoming a Christian: there is a tradition in the Roman Catholic church that he did. But what we can say is that his statement implies that the Holy Spirit was working in his life.

The conversion of Cornelius is a well-known story. What is not often said is that Peter's encounter with Cornelius, a soldier, was world changing event. Scholars call this incident "the Pentecost of the Gentile world." It was the moment when the Gospel message broke through the barriers of Jewish exclusivism and took the message of salvation into the rest of the world. It was the moment when the Church became universal in scope. It is very significant too that at the Council of Jerusalem, Cornelius, a soldier, was the case study for the admission of the Gentiles into the church. Had the leaders of the church had

³ Robert H. Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1993), 145.

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any qualms about military personnel being part of the Church or doubts about whether or not they could maintain Christian faith and practice, that Council would have been the place to discuss those reservations. Those questions never arose.

Also they never arose during Paul's missionary journeys. This map shows that wherever Paul went, contact with soldiers was probable for many of these towns had military garrisons or strong military connections. Even Christian church historians admit that soldiers were among those who carried the gospel wherever they went, including to Britain. When we see the correlation between where Paul preached and taught and the military presence in those places, can we assert with absolute certainty that no soldiers were converted under Paul's ministry? If we did that we would be either doubting or denying the effectiveness of Paul's God-given mission to the Gentiles in these places. We are left with a question mark over Paul's influence over Julius, the centurion who guarded him on his journey to Rome after his arrest, but we have been given more positive feedback about what he achieved as a prisoner in Rome.

Chained to guards, but free to preach, Paul had the means to evangelise the most elite regiment in the Roman army – the Praetorian Guard. **Philippians 1:12-13**
Now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel. As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else, that I am in chains for Christ.

A special study of the word “advance” in Greek has established that it is a military term used for an army successfully advancing and making progress towards its goal. Scholars also see this as the reason for the gospel entering “Caesar's household” – Philippians 4:22 – for soldiers were guards both within and outside the emperor's palace and also served as the civil servants in his administration of the state. Equally significant is the fact that this letter was written to Philippian Christians. The jailor who was converted at Philippi was probably a soldier and scholars have established that Philippi was a main recruitment centre for the praetorian guard, for soldiers from this legion retired there and their sons would have followed them into the profession. Thus Paul's imprisonment not only evangelised the soldiers with whom he came into contact, but reached beyond them into military families, where the tradition was to follow the religion adopted by the father.

Just from these glimpses into what the Bible has to say about military life leaves us with the impression that God is involved in that area of our existence and His

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Holy Spirit can work in even the most tragic and brutal of circumstances. We have been given enough information, not to answer all the questions that arise about war and Christian participation in it, but to have guidelines by which we can judge whether or not a state is using the power of the sword for self-glorification or is using it to guard and protect its citizens as God intended.

These issues will probably always be a matter of debate among Christians, but a careful reading of what Romans 13:1-7 tells us about the state and what it should do with the power of the sword is as relevant today as it was in Paul's time. And over and above all else, the Bible is a book for military life, because a soldier's soul is as precious to God as a civilian's. Soldiers, too, need Christ.

WEEK 5: SOCIETY LIFE

What can you say about this? Margaret Thatcher said there is no such a thing as society; David Cameron talked about the 'Big Society' which seems to have been quietly buried recently. Someone has got their wires crossed somewhere for there seems to be no agreement of what society is or even if it does exist. I have news for everybody. There is such a thing as society for it God who created human beings as social creatures. It was God who inaugurated social connections through families, then through tribes and subsequently through nations. The primary dictionary definition of 'society' is "the aggregate of people living together in a more or less ordered community. Unless we become a total recluse on a desert island, we cannot escape the impact of society upon our lives. The Bible has recognised this from the very beginning. Remember Cain's caustic reply to God when he was challenged about Abel's death – **Am I my brother's keeper?** It took time, but the definitive answer emerged in Deuteronomy as **Love the Lord your God with all your heart And your neighbour as yourself.** In God's order human beings have responsibilities towards others within any given social situation within any given society.

Generally speaking the Bible views society from 4 perspectives.

1. Those who are **materially rich but spiritually poor.**

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- Materially rich includes the power, status, influence and privileged lifestyle that accompanies wealth. Spiritually poor means wealthy people who have no time for God and use their riches for self-centred purposes.
2. **Materially and spiritually rich**
 - Materially and spiritually rich are those who are rightly related to God and use their riches according to God's will.
 3. **Materially and spiritually poor**
 - Materially poor and spiritually poor. The materially poor are those who have none of the advantages of the rich in terms of wealth, power or status, often as a result of being marginalised by society or disability or lack of skills. Those who are spiritually poor also have no time for God and, as a result may choose lifestyles that do more harm to themselves and society.
 4. **Materially poor but spiritually rich**
 - The materially poor but and spiritually rich are those who suffer through material disadvantage but, nevertheless rely on God to meet their needs and live a life pleasing to Him.

All that is said about rich and poor in the Bible apply both materially and spiritually. And the Bible makes it clear that in both senses there will be inequality. We are told in Deuteronomy 15:11 **Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, "Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbour in your land."** Jesus echoed these words in John 12:8 **You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."**

Inequality in society is and always will be a fact of life. Bible society was one in which money, status and power determined one's social standing. In fact, in Jewish thinking, these things were regarded as evidence of God's approval and blessing. The Bible, however, shows us how wrong this assumption was for the Jewish Scriptures give an accurate picture of the causes of social inequality and the guidelines for determining what is right and what is wrong in their view of wealth, and all the advantages it brought it.

It is undeniable that when the Bible refers to rich people, there are more words of condemnation than there are of praise. We find numerous examples in the prophetic ministries of the Old Testament; and Jesus' woes and parables which

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adversely criticise the rich and powerful in His day. But condemnation came for specific reasons and in order for Christians to get a balanced view of how the Bible deals with wealth and poverty, which to a very large extent determines everyone's situation in society, we need to understand those reasons from material and spiritual perspectives.

The first reason for adverse criticism is found in 1 Timothy 6:10 **For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains.** Paul recognised that even those once committed to Christ can be seduced by material riches and all that goes with them. This text also shows us, however, that it is not money itself that is wrong. Paul echoes Ecclesiastes 5:10 **The lover of money will not be satisfied with money; nor the lover of wealth, with gain. This also is vanity.**

What God is against is the love of money and we see this in our own society. Where once it would have been an achievement to be a millionaire, now people are not content until they become billionaires. This is the root of Jesus' statement in Matthew 6:24 **No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon.** In New Testament use, mammon was the god of unjust and rampant materialism. In other words, when money becomes a god, a clear breach of the first commandment to have no other gods has been made. These examples show us that the wrong attitude to the acquisition of wealth is, in the first instance, directed against God. It amounts to idolatry.

And this attitude also leads to self-reliance; a view that sees no need for God in one's life. Proverbs 18: 11 **The wealth of the rich is their strong city; in their imagination it is like a high wall.** The Jewish view that the rich were already under the blessing of God gave them a false sense of security as the parable in Luke 12:15-21 shows. The rich man wanted to build bigger barns, lay up things for many years, take things easy and eat, drink and be merry. The

parable ends on the ominous note in v20-21 **“But God said to him, ‘You fool. This very night your life will be demanded from you.... This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God.”**”

Wealth itself is not evil, but if not mastered, it becomes a master as the example of the rich young ruler shows. **Matthew 19: 21-22 Jesus said to him, “If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.”** When the young man heard this word, he went away grieving, for he had many possessions. Jesus loved this young man. He wanted him as a disciple, but it was clear that his wealth was more important than discipleship under the Lordship of Jesus.

Another thing that incurs condemnation is the wrong use of wealth especially as very clear guidelines are given regarding its right use. Deuteronomy 15:11 gives us the most obvious one. **“.....Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbour in your land.”** God’s command is clear. He has provided all the resources that are needed to sustain a healthy and just society, but it is up to human beings to use those resources for the benefit of all, especially those who are in need and He even told them the way to do it.

Exodus 22:25

If you lend money to my people, to the poor among you, you shall not deal with them as a creditor; you shall not exact interest from them.

Leviticus 19:10

You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien: I am the LORD your God.

Leviticus 23:22

When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest; you shall leave them for the poor and for the alien: I am the LORD your God.

Deuteronomy 24:14-15

You shall not withhold the wages of poor and needy labourers, whether other Israelites or aliens who reside in your land in one of your towns. You shall pay them their wages daily before sunset, because they are poor and their livelihood depends on them; otherwise they might cry to the LORD against you, and you would incur guilt.

In our society today, there are major problems about lending. The banks are refusing to lend and those providing loans are charging exorbitant, if not extortionate amounts of interest. The references to the vineyards and land harvests are reminders that the food that sustains life is often commercially and politically exploited for increased profits or power over others. And Deuteronomy makes clear that a living wage is due to those who work for it. Malachi 3:5 includes “**those who defraud labourers of their wages**” among the soocerers, adulterers and perjurers, those who oppress the widow and orphans and deny justice to the alien. All will come under God’s judgment. The failure to pay what is due is also roundly condemned by James, who asserts that God takes notice of this 5:4 **Look! The wages you failed to pay the workmen who mowed your fields are crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty.**

Proverbs 29:7 makes it clear that there is no excuse. **The righteous know the rights of the poor; the wicked have no such understanding.** And according to Proverbs 14:31 and 17:5, God takes this personally. **Those who mock the poor insult their Maker;**

It was the failure to adhere to these commandments that led to the glaring social inequalities of Bible times. It is a failure to adhere to the principles that underlie them that has led to so much inequality globally in our world today. Such wrong attitudes to wealth and wrong use of wealth however has consequences reaching beyond this life for it affects an eternal destiny.

Matthew 19:23-24 records that Jesus told His disciples: **“Truly I tell you, it will be hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.”**

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Jesus summed up their condition when He asked in Mark 8:36-37 **For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul? Luke 12:21 So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.**

Those who are not “rich toward God” risk what Jesus describes in the woes of In Luke 6:24-26 **“But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.**

“Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry.

“Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep.

“Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.

Wealth only comes in for adverse criticism when it becomes a barrier to a relationship with God and results in absence of love for one’s needy neighbour.

In spite of adverse criticism, however, rich and poor are equal in God’s sight. as texts from Leviticus, Job and Acts make clear

Leviticus 19:15

You shall not render an unjust judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great: with justice you shall judge your neighbour.

Job 34:19

who shows no partiality to nobles, nor regards the rich more than the poor, for they are all the work of his hands?

Acts 10:34

Peter said “I now realise how true it is that God does not show favouritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right. God is no respecter of persons and the wealth or poverty of a person makes no difference to Him.

God is not opposed to wealth for, ultimately, it all comes from Him. Examples of wealthy people rightly related to God include Abraham, Job and Solomon. We find too that Jesus was often in the company of rich and powerful people.

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Some, like the centurion at Capernaum, who was rich enough to build a synagogue for the Jews, came to Jesus and his faith was rewarded. Zacchaeus was not asked to give up all his wealth, but his new-found relationship with Jesus, led to him making restoration to those he had defrauded and giving to the poor. A rich man provided a tomb for Jesus.

Wealth rightly used meets with God's approval. James 1:27 is a good summary. **Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.** The exploitation of the widow and orphans epitomises the lack of compassion and justice for the disadvantaged in society.

John the Baptist's instructions to those who came to him summarise what God expects. The 'haves' should share with the 'have-nots'. Those who had two tunics should give to those who had none and to do the same with food. The instruction to the tax-collectors against taking more than their due and those against extortion given to soldiers all indicate that people are not to be exploited for personal gain just because some have the power to do this.

In other words, a rich man will not be condemned because of his wealth, but will be judged according to how he uses that wealth and whatever status and/or power comes with it. The caveat is that, like Zacchaeus, the right use of wealth must be based on the spiritual principle of first believing in Christ. First must come the acceptance of the Kingdom of God and obedience to its principles.

And encouragement to share comes from Proverbs 19:7 tells us that God will reward those who do give to the poor.

Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the LORD, and will be repaid in full.

Coming to the poor, we find that generally speaking the poor are the under the benevolent scrutiny of God.

Psalm 12:5

“Because the poor are despoiled, because the needy groan, I will now rise up,” says the LORD; “I will place them in the safety for which they long.”

Isaiah 41:17 17

When the poor and needy seek water, and there is none, and their tongue is parched with thirst, I the LORD will answer them, I the God of Israel will not forsake them.

James 2:5

Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him?

Again, these assurances are conditional. I suppose that we should be thankful that the present government doesn't know of 2 Thessalonians 3:10-11 **For even when we were with you, we gave you this command: Anyone unwilling to work should not eat. For we hear that some of you are living in idleness, mere busybodies, not doing any work.**

These words are extremely harsh, but come in the context of the expectation of an imminent parousia and people gave up their daily activities waiting for it. Paul's principle however is clear. However, from God's perspective, everyone should be contributing to the building up of society. Anyone, to whom God has given the health and strength to work should be working at something. Paul led by example, supporting himself by tent-making verse 7-8 **For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us; we were not idle when we were with you, and we did not eat anyone's bread without paying for it; but with toil and labour we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you.**

Paul has identified those who make no contribution to society even though they have the means to do so and find themselves in a disadvantaged situation through deliberate life choices. Of course, they have to be distinguished from the genuinely needy in society who are materially poor through no fault of their own and that includes those who are willing to work but where no work is available for them. Not all who are poor will accept Christ, so we need to ask, why did God assure the poor of Bible times that He was concerned about them.

He communicated that concern through the prophets who criticised rulers for their greed, corruption and injustice. In that way, the poor were assured that

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God was taking note of their plight. Then when Jesus came His first public words were Luke 4:18

“The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because He has anointed me to preach good news to the poor.” It is true that most of the miracles performed by Jesus were for those most in need. But many were also qualified by the words **your FAITH has made you well.** Jesus is concerned with the literal condition of people, but he is more directly concerned with spiritual needs. It is also true that the poorer sections of society were the ones who responded more readily to the news of the Gospel, because, probably for the first time in their experience, Jesus gave them a sense of self-worth. This is most clearly seen in the miracles for the widow, the lepers, the blind, the lame and the acceptance of children or the thief on the cross, all of whom would have been regarded as under God’s curse by the rich and powerful. It can also be clearly seen in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. The ‘poor’ person is materially poor, lacks any social status, and is presumably disabled, if he is left begging outside a rich man’s house. Any one of these three conditions would have rendered him a social outcast. But Jesus dignifies the poor, crippled beggar with a name, while a rich man remains anonymous. The ‘good news’ was that poverty did not exclude people from the Kingdom. To learn that God regarded the disadvantaged as equally blessed would have come as a culture shock to those who regarded themselves as rich and secure.

In other words by his very presence on earth, Jesus was already redefining how society should be working and, at the same time, showing what society in the coming Kingdom would be like. Can you imagine the reaction of both rich and poor to statements made in different contexts by Matthew and Mark?

Matthew 20:16 So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

Mark 10:31 But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.”

Or the news that those regarded as outcasts who believed in Jesus would become the children of God and co-heirs in the eschatological kingdom where there would be no inequality?

Just from these examples of how society has fallen so far short of what God envisaged gives us a stark picture of how the world is and how it will continue to be if we don’t obey the love commandment. In the divine economy

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stewardship and sharing of all our resources, which include time and talents as well as wealth, is what God requires of us. But to be approved by God, it must be built on the spiritual principle **“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength, and your neighbour as yourself.”** God first, then others. That is the only basis upon which a well-ordered and equitable society can be built.

WEEK 6: CYBERSPACE LIFE

First, I’m going to ask Tim not to laugh – at least not laugh out loud, because, if I’m not mistaken, he is going to be the first one to recognise that I’m starting off tonight’s talk by talking about something I know nothing about. At least, I don’t know about radio and micro waves, but, like most of us, we know some of the jargon associated with them. Cyberspace is one of them and it was a word coined by William Gibson in a short novel published in a Canadian magazine way back in 1982. In 1984, his novel “Neuromancer” publicised the word and it entered into computerspeak. In the computer world, it describes the non-physical environment used by online systems. Nowadays, you can rent a space on a “cloud” in cyberspace where you can store your data, photos and music and it can be accessed from anywhere in the world. If you’ve ever seen the film “The Matrix” that will give you an idea of an electronic world existing beyond our physical environment.

And all that can happen because of the existence of electro-magnetic fields from which we get radio waves and micro waves. I only understand them when they get to the point where I can see and use what they make possible. And that’s when one new arrival in the language starts to make sense – Wi-Fi. Remember the days of all the cables you needed for the computer, the monitor, the printer, the modem and all the other bits that went with computers - nearly all done away with because of wireless technology. Just plug in one little box and attach it to your telephone cable and cyberspace is your oyster.

So what has all of this got to do with the Bible. Basically, global communication is now possible wirelessly through the emergence of online

technology. Communication moves through cyberspace, which to my simple understanding is somewhere in the great beyond. Somewhere we cannot see, somewhere that cannot be defined physically, someplace where unseen resources exist, but which at the same time can be harnessed to make the connections needed for communication to take place. In many senses, this is a kind of environment we find in the Bible. It was God who created the heavens and the heaven of heavens - for the want of a better description – the divine cyberspace. We know today that scientists have mapped the visible sky but see a vast, unmeasurable space beyond it. We know that beyond what we can see is God's domain and the dwelling place of the angels and the departed souls of humanity. Is there life in outer space – looking at it this way, we know there is – it's just not what scientists are hoping to find.

And somewhere, out there, God has provided the resources to enable a connection to be made by which God can communicate with humanity. Christians sometimes talk about having a 'direct line' to God – a picture of the physical telephone line. But with the concept of cyberspace, we can begin to think in terms of a vast, limitless environment encompassing the earth and the whole vast universe. It adds new meaning to the Psalm 139:7-10 **Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast.**

The Psalmist is saying that God is present in unseen places, but yet His guidance and His assurance of safety is communicated to him. Just as we cannot physically see how communication takes place in cyberspace, so we cannot see how God communicates His presence to us. In both cases, wireless communication takes place in ways that impact on us in our physical environment.

Although, I would love to know all about the ways and means of electronic communication systems, I know that this knowledge is not essential in order to enjoy the benefits that they bring. In a similar way, it is not essential for us to know the actual process of God's means of communication. What is much more crucial is to know God does exist in the unseen world somewhere, out there, and that He communicates with us in real and practical ways. In ways, in fact, that make an even greater impact on our lives than all the technology at our disposal. Today, we have the product of His communication – the Bible. I hope the last five weeks have shown that what it contains concerns every facet of human existence. We also know from what is written in the Bible how God

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communicated with particular people and how He then went on to guide Biblical writers as to what should be recorded about their lives. And it was all done wirelessly.

We know that Adam and Eve and Cain and Abel communicated with God. From that time God's communication with humanity has shaped our lives today. We wouldn't be here if God had not warned Noah to prepare for the coming flooding of the earth. The human race exists only because God sent that message to Noah. As I said, we don't need to know the mechanics of how God did it; the essential knowledge is that we are here because of it. Preserving the existence of the human race is something that can only be imagined in the virtual reality dimension of cyberspace.

Then take God's dealings with Abraham. We are not told how Abraham was contacted by God or how Abraham knew it was God who had contacted him. What we do know is that the impact of God's call was so real and so clear that Abraham was prepared to leave the urban setting of Ur and embark on a nomadic life that would last for three generations. Time and time again we find a process of communication throughout Abraham's life that resulted in him becoming the forefather of all those who live by faith to the present day.

For Moses, the burning bush may have been what attracted his attention, but how the voice became connected to the bush and made arrangements for the Hebrews' exodus from Egypt is another matter. The significance of that encounter, together with that at Mount Sinai when the Ten Commandments and the Law were given, has influenced humanity's response to God and to each other in so many ways. As mentioned just a couple of weeks ago, six of the ten commandments are the basis of law in western democracies to the present day.

When it came to the prophets, the formula of "The Word of the Lord came to" is so familiar to us. Do we ever stop to question how that Word came or how the prophets were so convinced of its reality that they risked rejection, ridicule, and even death to proclaim it? We could go on and on giving so many individual examples from the Old Testament of what God communicated to humanity. Today, we are the beneficiaries of all the intangible means of transmission that gives us all this evidence of communication through the Old and New Testaments and its impact on life then and for future generations. Today we have this 'Book for Life' recorded for us by writers who received from God by invisible means all that is needed for a close relationship with Him.

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Cyberspace life is as real in the Christian sphere as it is in the technological one because building and maintaining a relationship depends on two-way communication. And we will be engaging in that two-way communication process in just a little while. Prayer. Anytime, anyplace, anywhere. True cyberspace communication, which doesn't even need the physical equipment of antennae, nor the routers, nor phone towers, nor the hot-spots, nor any of the other hardware that makes wireless communication possible. All that is really needed to make prayer effective is initially, a repentant heart ready to forsake sin and accept Christ as the only atonement for sin. Then, the desire and a willingness to put one's life in God's hands and to build up a relationship with Him through the prayerful study of and obedience to His Word.

That two-way process started way back in Genesis 4:25 when in the time of Enosh, the son of Seth and grandson of Adam "men began to call on the name of the Lord." And prayer becomes a major facet of Old Testament saints. A study of the prayers of the Old Testament show that God always answered prayers and all answers to prayer contributed to the revelation of God's will for humanity and progressed through to the even greater revelation of the New Testament. In the majority of cases in the Old Testament, prayers were concerned with secular or temporal blessings – like those of a child for Abraham and for Hannah. Prayers were of an earthly nature, although in the Psalms we have glimpses of David's desire to come closer to God in a very spiritual way. **Psalm 42 "As the deer pants for streams of water so my soul pants for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God for the living God. When can I go and meet with God?"** In spite of the expression of despair in that psalm, David goes on to say in verse 8 **"By day the Lord directs his love, at night his song is with me – a prayer to the God of my life."**

How was this communicated to David? We cannot answer that. We only know in that vast divine cyberspace, God's consolation came in a very real way in answer to David's prayer. As we saw in the second week, the rational mind cannot accept that this is an avenue of divine communication which is real to believers and which leads them to work for the advancement of the Kingdom, even sometimes if it means risking their lives to do so. Just as I cannot give you a physical demonstration of how communications travel through cyberspace, so it is impossible for us to explain to non-believers how our knowledge and experience of God comes from an unseen and indefinable source. However, in the same way that we can point to the reality of a computer, a tablet or cell phone as the receivers of unseen means of communication, so we can point to the existence of the Church, the existence of Christianity, the experience of our

own lives and the fact that what prayer has accomplished over millennia is still at work in our world today.

Just as technology advances in our world, the quantum leap in the divine cyberspace emerged with the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. I couldn't help but see Christ as the divine router through which prayerful communication was established between God and believers. Jesus, while on earth, prayed to God and taught His disciples to do likewise. Prayer became an integral part of the faith and practice of the early church. **Acts 3:42 They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship to the breaking of bread and to prayer.** Again, we just have to look at the many answers to Christ's prayers and those of His followers to see how they enabled the church not just to survive, but to witness growth and development that is still going on in the present. But it was Jesus who made this possible. **John 14:13 I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it. John 16:23-24 Very truly, I tell you, if you ask anything of the Father in my name, he will give it to you. Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, so that your joy may be complete.**

Of the 17 mentions of the phrase 'in My name' in the Gospels, 7 of them are in John and all are in the context of prayer. One word in verse 14 is very significant. The word 'anything' makes this promise very wide indeed. It signifies that there is no limit to the power of prayer. When we think not just of the vast needs of our world, but all the needs of the world that is past and the world that is yet to come, we start to see that the divine cyberspace can cope with not only limitless amounts of communication traffic, but all the ways in which it will be made and answered. And we know it will be answered according to God's will because in these verses Jesus assures us that He will answer prayers made in His name.

That is why it doesn't seem frivolous to speak of a divine cyberspace where God is connected to humanity via Christ. And later New Testament writers give us further details of this link. **Romans 8:34 ³⁴Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us.**

Hebrews 4:14-16 Since we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace

with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

This too only becomes possible by another major development – the agency of the Holy Spirit. **John 14:25-27. “I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.**

Verse 25 reminds us that the Holy Spirit too comes ‘in My name’ and His purpose will be to bring back to the disciples’ minds all that Jesus taught and commanded during His earthly ministry. Again we do not know how this will happen but Luke 21:12-17 puts this function into an earthly context.

“But before all this occurs, they will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name. This will give you an opportunity to testify. So make up your minds not to prepare your defence in advance; for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict. You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. You will be hated by all because of my name.

The history of the church down through the ages shows how Jesus’ prediction in Luke 21 is still coming true in the persecuted church of today. Yet in spite of all, the wisdom of testimony of Scripture still stands. We also know from the stories of persecuted Christians how their testimonies have been the means by which some of their persecutors have come to faith. Perhaps too, in those situations, Jesus’ command not to let hearts be troubled could have been remembered because it was accompanied by His promise of peace.

I said in the military life talk that I was not going to say anything about peace except that the primary Biblical definition of peace is different to the modern pacifist’s one. This is a major example. The peace of which Jesus speaks is an inner peace that comes from being rightly related to God through the name of Christ. We cannot show physically how that peace is to be transmitted from Jesus to believers, but we all have experienced at some time or another, a peace that we know could only come from a divine source.

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We know too that with the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost, a wireless link has been established between God and believers as individuals and collectively as they meet together as a church. We are told in Matthew 18:20 "For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

Romans 8:26-27 Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

These verses tell us that we have a secure link that takes us to the very throne of God. Romans 8:26-27 however, reminds us that any weakness in the link is ours alone. Yes, we will receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need, but it will always be "according to the will of God." 1 John 5:13-15

I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life. And this is the boldness we have in him, that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have obtained the requests made of him.

Someone has said God has three specific answers to prayer "Yes", "No" and "Not yet." Answers to prayer sometimes come immediately and sometimes over and above what we are able to imagine or think. We need to understand too that "No" to a prayer is not a negative answer. From God's perspective that answer is always with our best interests at heart. Maybe a "Yes" answer would do us more harm than good. It is also connected to His glory and what will best further His purposes for this world. Oswald Chambers has said "We look upon prayer as a means of getting things for ourselves; The Bible idea of prayer is that we may get to know God Himself." And sometimes, God brings us closer to Him by saying "Not yet". That's when we need to walk by faith and not sight. When you think of it, walking by faith rather than sight is another example of that intangible process that connects us to God through an indescribable and unfathomable cyberspace, divinely designed to make our relationship to God through Christ possible.

In ending these talks with cyberspace life which appears at present to be at the cutting edge of all communication systems, it becomes clear that the Bible is a book for life even in this respect. It's clear that our connection to God goes far beyond what any earthly communications networks or technology may devise even in the future. What we can be thankful for today is that God has provided the means and the process by which a divine non-physical, indefinable

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unbreakable and unbreachable link keeps communication flowing between God and ourselves. With such a resource at our disposal, we can truly say with the hymnists - Although He's the Lord of all glory, He is only a prayer away. Truly, What a privilege it is to carry everything to God in prayer.