

SPECIAL DAYS

WEEK 1: BIBLICAL DAYS

In June, Bible talks somehow require a different approach because they come at the end of the church calendar year. They come at a time when people are thinking of holidays or have already started their holidays or implementing their plans for this break in routine. So, in their own way, these months have a character of their own. And, it's a time when you really don't want more challenges, mental or physical. You want time to recharge all your batteries. That means that thinking of a topic for this time of year has to be something that is already familiar to us. Coming to the end of the church year and thinking of the days that have prominence in the church calendar over the year at first made me think that everybody knows what a calendar is, so try that. God's calendar sounded like a good title, so I got to work on it. However, when I tried bring together the days, months, years, times and seasons that feature in God's calendar, this topic was very quickly abandoned. These are the reasons. Take a look at how many times these parts of a calendar are mentioned in the Bible. These figure are taken from the Complete Word Study Bible. I didn't even try to add them up!

Day/days	1691/878	Month/months	251/62
Year/years	379/566	Time/times	690/167
		Season/seasons	56/12

Now, I think you would agree that preparing or delivering that is not exactly what you would call winding down. Yet, these figures alone bring home to us a very special truth about God's overall calendar. We find it in Ecclesiastes.

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 (NIV) here is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens:

**2 a time to be born and a time to die,
a time to plant and a time to uproot,
3 a time to kill and a time to heal,
a time to tear down and a time to build,
4 a time to weep and a time to laugh,
a time to mourn and a time to dance,**

A time for everything and a season for every purpose under heaven. And every single moment of days, months, years, times and seasons is recorded on God's calendar. You can see why it would not just be a mammoth task to talk meaningfully about such a calendar but, an impossible one. Yet, because these divisions of time are mentioned so frequently in the Bible, they cannot be ignored completely. Narrowing the calendar down to days, at first, also seemed to be a reasonable compromise. That, too, however, proved to be equally as daunting, not because the combined use of the words days and days occur 2569 times, but because these words can mean different things depending on the context in which they are used. In other words, a day in the Bible is denotes a segment of time, but not necessarily a 24 hour period of time.

These few examples show the range of what these words can signify.

Genesis 1:5 (NIV) God called the light "day," and the darkness he called "night." And there was evening, and there was morning—the first day.

(NIV) All that day and night and all the next day the people went out and gathered quail. No one gathered less than ten homers.

Psalms 74:16 (NIV) The day is yours, and yours also the night; you established the sun and moon.

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Genesis 8:22 (NIV) “As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night will never cease.”

Psalms 90:4 (NIV) A thousand years in your sight are like a day that has just gone by, or like a watch in the night.

A summary of the references would include studying ‘day’ as a segment of time in Genesis which was established as the description of the period of light. We see it used as the opposite of night, the period of darkness, in Numbers. Only at some future point in history was the cycle of day and night divided into 24 hours. We can see from the covenant with Noah in Genesis 8, that day and night still refer only to the segment of a time of light and a segment of time of darkness. In other words, day and night are used in the context of the whole period of earth’s existence and will continue to be used for that period of time to distinguish the period of light from the period of darkness. Especially, the words of psalm 90 tell us that a day means only what God intends it to mean at any particular time. So, from these verses alone it is easy to see why the topic even of God’s days is a non-starter.

So, I turned the topic around to look at it from the perspective of our calendar days. When we relate them to Bible days we can start to see how they have impacted on special days in the calendars of today in many different ways. There is no doubt that looking back on the days of our lives can affect us in one way or another. The events of some days we will want to remember and others we would rather forget. In our personal lives some days will have more prominence than others, because there is a particular occasion or memory attached to them. Even in the present time, our days carry meaning of one kind or another and, already, the coming days may be ones to look forward too or maybe not, depending on what is being expected of them. We cannot fathom days in terms of God’s calendar, but we can explore the topic in human terms as they relate to God and His word. What justifies this approach is what we learn about God through looking at special days. This talk about Bible days reminds us that in our church calendar we have a Bible Sunday, a day when we remember and celebrate all that God’s word means to us. Especially how it has changed our lives.

So, think first of how God’s word directs our daily lifestyles. This can only be truly understood by Christians for its a choice we have all had to make and as a result we all pray the same prayer, repeated every Sunday.

Joshua 24:15 (NIV) But if serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve.....But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.”

.....Give us this day our daily bread.....

Psalms 90:12 (NIV) Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom

Psalms 139:16 (NIV) Your eyes saw my unformed body; all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.

Proverbs 27:1 (NIV) Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring.

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It can be seen from these verses that our days are not viewed by God in terms of the length of time involved but in terms of how they are spent and they cover the whole of our lives, regardless of how long or short that might be. In psalm 90 the verse already quoted is a measure of God's eternal immortality being the opposite of the quick passing of human life, mainly caused by God's anger against sin. In view of that, a person's best option is to make the most of the days they are given by believing God's word and obeying it in order to live God's way. As the book of Proverbs takes pains to point out: it is the fear of the Lord which is the beginning of wisdom. There we learn also that boasting of having even one more day added to our lives and making ourselves the master of what we will do on that day, is taking a risk with our very lives. Jesus' told the parable of the man who built bigger barns and expected to live for the rest of this days at ease, to illustrate that today is all we can be absolutely sure of. One day at a time, for our times are in God's hands. Psalm 139:16 reminds us that the God who gave us life knows the thoughts, words and actions that will mark our days for good or ill, throughout our whole lives. Yet there is tremendous encouragement in this verse because a life submitted to Him is one under God's watchful eye and one under His protection.

In the context of Bible days therefore, it is what the period known as a day signifies that is more important than its chronological dimension. This is where the Bible also sets the patterns for the special things that make our days count, whether or not they bring joy or sorrow to our doors. But what we learn about Bible days can greatly enhance the joy and mitigate, to some extent, the sorrow.

Think of the days of creation. Not just what came into being on each of the days mentioned, but what they mean to us in our day.

Romans 1:20 (NIV) For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse.

I won't ask you to put your hand up if you remember watching black and white TV. But, if you do remember, think of how everything in the world was presented in black and white and all the intervening shades of grey. Can you imagine what it would be like if you opened your eyes one morning and found that's the only way you could see all that was familiar to you? Think just of the sky, the dry land and the waters without colour and imagine how impoverished we would be if all in nature was black, white or shades of grey. How could we appreciate the colours of glorious sunrises or sunsets? How would gardens appear if plants and trees had no colour? All the colours of our local seas or lakes and the colours we have seen in other parts of the world would not be able to feed our souls with just this one wonder of creation.

And we can see that God did not stop with colour. He added movement, textures, shapes and sizes as well. From something as small as a seed to the redwood trees, the tallest living trees on [Earth](#), reaching up to 379 feet (115.5 m) in height; from the silky softness of a rose petal to the hardness of a diamond; and from the shape of the grasses of the field to the shapes of the leaves of the trees, God has added infinite variety to the world around us. He has not stinted on what He has provided for our pleasure and enjoyment. And we have not even come yet to the fact that we humans, ourselves are fearfully and wonderfully made, with a vast variety of skills and talents and creative ability. On days when we are affected, by the beauty or power of the natural world around us, those are the days when we come closest to appreciating the power and the divine nature of God

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Himself. By every conceivable standard, In terms of Bible days, therefore, the days of creation are, indeed, the first miracle in the Bible.

We can then turn to the days in history that have shaped our Christian beliefs. In terms of Bible days, that history starts with the days of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the forefathers of the nation which gave us our faith. These were the days that laid the groundwork of redemptive history - the process by which God had determined to save the world and establish an everlasting kingdom. Like Jews, we, too, look back to the Exodus as a model of our escape from the enslavement of sin. We look back to the Passover as the model of the Lamb that was slain on Calvary's cross to free us from the curse of sin. We look back to covenants with Noah, Abraham, Moses and David for the the direction redemption history was taking. A previous Bible study showed how each of these found their fulfilment in Christ and how Christianity has been shaped by them.

What was also important about these historical events was the days set aside to commemorate them and those that are still celebrated by Jews today. Those established in Jewish history brought the whole community together and these days could be said to be the precursors of some of what we celebrate today. The special days that have a direct bearing on our church year are the annual Passover, Feast of unleavened Bread and that of Firstfruits, the Day of Atonement and the weekly Sabbath. Unlike many of our feasts and festivals today, however, these special days were set aside to remember and celebrate what God had done of the nation of Israel.

The first one of these, that as from now, is found in our Church calendar is the Feast of Firstfruits. This is usually the first annual special day of the new church year, because it celebrates harvest. I'll say more about this special occasion in another talk. It can be pointed out now, though, that the offering of first fruits took place at the very beginning of the harvest. The first fruits were deemed to be the best and therefore, giving the best to God was a symbol of gratitude to and dependence on God for the sustenance that preserved their lives.

In terms of spirituality, however, three other festivals and one particular 'day' have a direct bearing on our Christian lives. Christianity today starts with the rich teaching taken from the feast of Passover, which took place on the 14th day of the first month of the year. Closely related to that was the Day of Atonement which took place on the 10th day of the seventh month. In the church calendar both relate to the three days of Easter and, of the two, the day of atonement - Yom Kippur - was, and still is, the most solemn holy day in the Jewish calendar. The two come together in our calendar on Good Friday. We remember the lamb that was slain and the blood put on the lintels of doors which enabled the angel of death to bypass the homes of the Israelites. Jesus' blood shed on the cross atoned for the sin that saves us from eternal spiritual death.

The Lenten talks have already showed the consequences of the three Easter days for our salvation. So, just two special days in the Bible calendar can highlight for us, the most important day connected to our salvation.

But being saved from spiritual death required a reordering of how we would spend our days. Of those days, the most important one spiritually, was the day we accepted Christ as our Saviour and committed our lives to live for Him. Coming only second to that chronologically speaking, is the day we will meet Him face to face in glory. What can illustrate that for us is the Israelite feast of Unleavened Bread. This took place over the 7 days following the Day of Atonement. Symbolically, unleavened bread recalled the haste

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with which the Israelites left Egypt, but the instructions about yeast also became very significant, for in verse 14 of Exodus 12, this was to be a lasting ordinance.

Exodus 12:15 (NIV) For seven days you are to eat bread made without yeast. On the first day remove the yeast from your houses, for whoever eats anything with yeast in it from the first day through the seventh must be cut off from Israel. On the first day hold a sacred assembly, and another one on the seventh day. Do no work at all on these days, except to prepare food for everyone to eat; that is all you may do.

Leviticus 2:11 (NIV) Every grain offering you bring to the Lord must be made without yeast, for you are not to burn any yeast or honey in a food offering presented to the Lord.

Modern minds are very sceptical about attributing meaning or accuracy to Bible numbers, but if these were inspired by God, then we must allow for their theological meaning to help to interpret our Scriptures. What follows is one speculative interpretation of the feast of unleavened bread, for the two most important days in the Christian's life. Seven is a particularly significant number because it denotes in Biblical numerology, spiritual perfection. From the Biblical record we are told that on the 1st and 7th day of that feast sacred assemblies were held which the whole community had to attend. No work was to be done, apart from the preparation of food on the first and 7th days which suggest these were days to focus on contemplation of and reflection on what God had done for the people in the aftermath of the Exodus. By the 7th day also, it was expected that all yeast had been removed, otherwise, those who still had it were to be removed from the community. The reason is that yeast came to symbolise something evil, hence requiring a radical removal from the presence of God. That is why it was never to be included in the grain offerings made to the Lord.

If we see the 1st day of this feast as the day on which we committed our lives to Christ and the 7th day as the day when we meet Him face to face, then the removal of evil symbolised by the absence of yeast for 7 days, is relevant to how we live our Christian lives between those two days. The interval between the 1st and 7th day are to be spent removing sin from our lives. We can justifiably make this connection because New Testament writers took up the Old Testament symbol of yeast denoting sin and evil.

1 Corinthians 5:6-8 (NIV) Your boasting is not good. Don't you know that a little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough? Get rid of the old yeast, so that you may be a new unleavened batch—as you really are. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. 8 Therefore let us keep the Festival, not with the old bread leavened with malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

Ephesians 4:31-32 (NIV) Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice.

1 Peter 2:1 (NIV) Therefore, rid yourselves of all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander of every kind.

Every Christian sees the removal of sin from their lives as a mark of true discipleship, because the purpose of committing our lives to Him is to progressively become like Him. Paul uses the image of yeast to exhort the Corinthians, and by extension, us, to put off the old man and put on the new: to be renewed by the Spirit and not governed by the dictates

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of the flesh. And that is a lasting 'ordinance' until we see Christ for He has told us. "If you love me, you will keep my commandments.

Jesus also used the image of yeast to warn against the evil coming from the false teaching, standards and values of both church and state.

Mark 8:15 (NIV) Be careful," Jesus warned them. "Watch out for the yeast of the Pharisees and that of Herod."

Matthew 16:12 (NIV) Then they understood that he was not telling them to guard against the yeast used in bread, but against the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees.

1 John 3:10 (MSG) Here's how you tell the difference between God's children and the Devil's children: The one who won't practice righteous ways isn't from God, nor is the one who won't love brother or sister. A simple test.

1 John 4:2-3 (MSG) Here's how you test for the genuine Spirit of God. Everyone who confesses openly his faith in Jesus Christ—the Son of God, who came as an actual flesh-and-blood person—comes from God and belongs to God. 3 And everyone who refuses to confess faith in Jesus has nothing in common with God. This is the spirit of antichrist that you heard was coming. Well, here it is, sooner than we thought!

We know today that Christianity is being undermined from within the Church and being attacked by those outside it, including anti-God laws passed by the state. We know the pervasive force of the evil that taints our society and our world. The simple truth is that an anti-Christ environment surrounds us. For this reason, taking a lesson from the 7 days of the feast of unleavened bread about eradicating evil from our individual and corporate lives is the only way to progress towards the spiritual perfection that is promised through Christ. For, in Jesus' own words, yeast can have another meaning.

Matthew 13:33 (NIV) He told them still another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into about sixty pounds of flour until it worked all through the dough."

Philippians 1:6-7 (NIV) being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

Ephesians 4:30 (NIV) And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.

Jude 1:24-25 (NIV) To him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy— 25 to the only God our Saviour be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen.

Here the symbolism is that of the kingdom of God growing as the people of God grow in Christlikeness, and preparing themselves for the ultimate Day of the Lord.

Zephaniah 1:14 (NIV) The great day of the Lord is near— near and coming quickly. The cry on the day of the Lord is bitter; the Mighty Warrior shouts his battle cry.

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Matthew 24:36 (NIV) 36 “But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.

1 Thessalonians 5:1-2 (NIV) Now, brothers and sisters, about times and dates we do not need to write to you, 2 for you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night.

In Zephaniah we come to day meaning the era of time when the Lord will come in judgement. The bitter day of the Lord was prophesied in the Old Testament many times and referred to a period of time when a new era would emerge. In the Old Testament the prophecies of the Day of the Lord chiefly refer to the periods of the Assyrian conquest of Israel, and the Babylonian conquest of Judah, which happened over a period of

Hebrews 1:2 (NIV) but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe. For Jews, in the New Testament it would have signified the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple in AD70 by the Romans. Christians accept this description as the period when all the events surrounding Jesus’ second coming will take place. Jesus makes clear, no human being has knowledge of when or what period of time will be involved in those events.

But, if we are in Christ, we have no need to fear the final Day of the Lord, the time when everything will become new. That is because, unlike the peoples of the Old Testament, we have a day they did not have. The day when the Saviour of the world was born. Christmas day on our calendars takes us into the last days in God’s calendar.

Hebrews 1:2 (NIV) but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe.

2 Peter 1:19 (NIV) We also have the prophetic message as something completely reliable, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.

Revelation 22:16 (NIV) I, Jesus, have sent my angel to give you this testimony for the churches. I am the Root and the Offspring of David, and the bright Morning Star.”

2 Timothy 4:8 (NIV) Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.

Just from these few examples, we can see that Bible days are very special because of the events that happened in them, and more importantly, the meaning and purpose they give to our lives today. That is why Christians, every day can, regardless of circumstances, sing. “This is the day the Lord has made. I will rejoice and be glad in it.”

WEEK 2: FATHER’S DAY

In another couple of weeks we will be celebrating what has become a special day in the national calendar - Father’s Day. And, I admit to having mixed feelings about both mother’s and father’s days, mainly because they are 20th century traditions, and are now major opportunities for commercial profit. What we now call father’s day can be traced back to Catholic Europe’s celebration of St. Joseph’s day on 19th March. It was in 1966 that President L. B. Johnson, by presidential proclamation declared the third Sunday in

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June be designated as Father's Day. 19th March is still listed as St Joseph's day in both the calendars of the Church of England and the Roman Catholic church. Mother's day can be traced back to the celebratory days of Greek and Roman goddesses and for the church, celebration of the Virgin Mary. When you look at these days from their original forms, you can see the extent to which they have lost any religious significance. While I can empathise with honouring good parents, I often wonder about the feelings of those who have not had the experience of loving parenting or loss of parent through death or an illness like dementia. Perhaps that is why it is appropriate to use the coming father's day to turn our thoughts, not to earthly fathers but to our heavenly Father. God, not Joseph, was the Father of our Lord and that relationship between Father and Son is the perfect model of fatherhood.

The evangelical church, however, has muddied the waters a bit for us, when we start to talk about the Fatherhood of God. Focusing on Christ as Saviour has led to the unintended consequence of giving the God of the Old Testament a bad press. His harsh judgements on sinful peoples in that era stand in stark contrast to the compassion of His Son who came to seek and to save the lost sinner. From that perspective it is very hard to have a clear picture of God as a loving and gracious Father. But until that is understood clearly, our perception of God will always be a wrong one. We need to put that perception aside and the Old Testament record, carefully considered, helps us to do that.

Genesis 15:16 (NIV) In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here, for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure."

Genesis 18:20-21 (NIV) Then the Lord said, "The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and their sin so grievous 21 that I will go down and see if what they have done is as bad as the outcry that has reached me. If not, I will know."

Genesis 18:25 (NIV) Far be it from you to do such a thing—to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike. Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?"

Here we find a God who is willing to give people the choice of whether to repent or dig themselves even deeper into sin. We don't know how long God gave the people of Noah's day time to repent before He sent the Flood. The four hundred years the Israelites spent in Egypt was the length of time God gave the Amorites to make that choice. When it comes to Sodom and Gomorrah, we see that what was going on there had reached the stage when there was such an outcry that God decided to intervene. It is very clear that this was no sudden burst of outrage on God's part. He assessed the situation before He acted, and was even prepared to listen to Abraham's pleas to save the cities if righteous people were found there.

What we learn from these two episodes is that what seems to be the destructive and barbaric actions of God come at a time when people have brought themselves under judgement. The fatherhood of God is a perfect balance of love and justice. He cannot tolerate sin, and Abraham's words in Genesis 18 are a clear indication that God will judge people correctly and impartially regarding what is righteous and what is wicked, and reward or punish accordingly.

In view of this perceived harsh, judgemental attitude and action of God in the Old Testament, I queried the extent to which Jesus could be associated with it. And, a warning, you may not like the conclusion!

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David often quotes Colossians 2:9 and the writer to the Hebrews says the same thing, using different words.

Colossians 2:9 (NIV) For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form,

Hebrews 1:3 (NIV) The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.

Revelation 3:19 (NIV) Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest and repent.

The Colossians and Hebrew's texts tell us that God and Jesus are one in character and nature. In other words, Jesus' love for sinners and self-sacrifice for their atonement; His compassion and empathy for the lost and the vulnerable in society, are all the characteristics that originated with God. However, His sense of justice and the destinies of humanity also came from God. Jesus tells the church of.....in Revelation, that even the people He loves will be rebuked and disciplined if they do not repent. He, too, was adamant that the righteous and the wicked would not be treated in the same way.

Matthew 3:12 (NIV) His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire."

Matthew 13:30 (KJV) Let both grow together until the harvest: and in the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, Gather ye together first the tares, and bind them in bundles to burn them: but gather the wheat into my barn.

Matthew 25:31-35 (NIV) When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. "Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.

1 Peter 1:17 (NIV) Since you call on a Father who judges each person's work impartially, live out your time as foreigners here in reverent fear.

John the Baptist foretold that making this distinction would be one of His tasks. Jesus also shares with God His hatred of sin and we have to remember that no-one spoke more about hell than the Lord Jesus while He was on earth. Jesus was the one who spoke about the separation of the wheat from the tares and the sheep from the goats, denoting a clear distinction between who were righteous and who were not. Jesus is one with God as far as judgement and punishment of sinners who refuse to repent goes. The text from 1 Peter about God's impartiality in these matters is accepted by Christians to this day. Therefore, to make any distinction between the characters, natures and intentions of God and Jesus, regarding righteous judgement and appropriate reward and punishment, is not only theologically wrong, it is tantamount to blasphemy, for it denies that God and Jesus are one and the same Person.

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None of what has been said, however, negates the overarching character of God as Father. As I've mentioned in talks before, the only difference between God and Jesus is one of function. God desire from before the world was created was to become a Father to all people. Jesus revealed that Fatherhood to the world and made it possible for us to become His adopted children, through His earthly life, death, burial, resurrection and ascension again to the right hand of God the Father.

John 1:18 (NIV) No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.

Galatians 1:4 (NIV) who gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father,

2 Corinthians 5:17-18 (NIV) Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation:

Allowing His only Son to suffer such humiliation and death at the hands of human beings is but one measure of how much God wants to be a Father to us and for us to look to Him as our Father. No earthly father, no matter how good he is, can ever be a perfect father, simply because he will never know his children the way God does, and he can never give them the provision and protection of eternal life. God is first and foremost, above and beyond, anything else, a Father. Once we see this we also can see how all His individual attributes fit perfectly into this image of Him, even when it comes to punishing evil. It is the Lord Jesus Christ who came to give us this understanding of Him, because the primary perception Jesus had of God was as a father. And the saying "like Father, like Son" never has been more accurate than that of the divine Father-Son relationship. And that, in turn, became the key designation for God in the early church. But, as I said earlier, in evangelical circles, this view of God has been somewhat subordinated to Jesus role in our salvation.

It is because of this that we need to go back to the Old Testament to bring us to the ways in which the fatherhood of God has changed from the time of creation. Old Testament writers seldom refer to God as 'father', only 15 explicit uses, although the concept of fatherhood was present in their theology. While there are some implicit references, scholars think that Hebrew reluctance to use the term stems from its frequent pagan use in the fertility cults of the Ancient Near East. I don't think I need to explain how the term 'father' would be interpreted in those kinds of religious rites. Verses from the Old Testament do, however, give us the kinds of perspectives of the fatherhood of God which point us to their ultimate fulfilment in the New Testament writings.

Deuteronomy 32:6 (NIV) Is this the way you repay the Lord, you foolish and unwise people? Is he not your Father, your Creator, who made you and formed you?

Malachi 2:10 (NIV) Do we not all have one Father? Did not one God create us? Why do we profane the covenant of our ancestors by being unfaithful to one another?

In Deuteronomy, the groundwork is laid because God is our Father by the very fact that He made us. God, through creation is the Father of all humanity, and as its Father, He is not willing that any should perish but that all should have everlasting life. That is why we are told by John that God so loved the whole world that He sent Jesus to save it. The fatherhood of God came into existence the moment Adam became a living soul. Thus from the records of the beginning of the nation of Israel to Malachi, the very last book of

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their Scriptures, this belief in the fatherhood of God as our Creator had been preserved. So, in general, people are right when they call God, Father, because humankind exists only because He brought them into being. Unfortunately, the history of the world gives overwhelming evidence that the majority of God's created children have rejected Him as their Father. We can see how that grieves God even in the Old Testament.

Jeremiah 3:19 (NIV) “I myself said, “How gladly would I treat you like my children and give you a pleasant land, the most beautiful inheritance of any nation.’ I thought you would call me ‘Father’ and not turn away from following me.

Malachi 1:6(NIV) A son honours his father, and a slave his master. If I am a father, where is the honour due me? If I am a master, where is the respect due me?” says the Lord Almighty.

1 Peter 1:3-5 (NIV) Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, 4 and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time.

The tone of these two texts make clear that fatherhood was taken seriously by God. On the one hand He would gladly have given a perfect land to His children, for land was and still is a major focus in Jewish minds. In other words, provision and protection in what their heart's desired most. At the same time, He expects to be treated with respect and given the honour due to Him as their provider and protector. No earthly father likes to be taken for granted, especially when he goes out of his way to provide for and please a child. When a great effort has been made, resentment comes naturally, if that child thinks little of it or just regards it as something they are entitled to. We are not entitled to receive anything from God. Yet, His fatherhood has done nothing but give to His human creation from the beginning of time. And, what He was prepared to gladly give in the Old Testament is still on the table as the text in 1 Peter 1-3-5 tells us. The 'most beautiful inheritance of any nation' is already awaiting the arrival of all His adopted children.

This inheritance, however, is only made available to us through the special relationship that the Lord Jesus Christ had with God the Father. In comparison with just the 15 times the term 'Father' is used in the Old Testament, it comes from the lips of Jesus 65 times in the first three gospels and 100 times in the gospel of John.

Luke 9:35 (NIV) A voice came from the cloud, saying, “This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him.” (Transfiguration)

2 Peter 1:17 (NIV) He received honour and glory from God the Father when the voice came to him from the Majestic Glory, saying, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.”

1 John 1:2 (NIV) The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us.

We know that Jesus received confirmation of His Sonship at His baptism by John. It is unlikely that Peter or John were present on that occasion, but both were present at the Transfiguration, so both these statements come from eyewitnesses of the relationship

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which existed between God and Jesus. It was because this relationship was seen to be characterised by love, that we do God a great disservice if we regard Him as any less loving, compassionate or merciful than the Lord Jesus. This was certainly not the New Testament view of God.

1 Corinthians 8:6 (NIV) yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live.

2 Corinthians 1:3-4 (NIV) Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God.

James 1:17-18 (NIV) Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. 18 He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of first-fruits of all he created.

Paul refers to the fatherhood of God around 40 times in his letters. The text in 1 Corinthians 8 tells us that both our physical and spiritual lives have the one source - one God and one Lord. We see the echo of God as the Creator of our physical lives and His activity through Jesus which gives us spiritual life. In 2 Corinthians we have the assertion that it was God's compassion for us in our weakness to deal with sin that motivated Him to send Jesus and He still is the source of all our comfort in trouble. James assures us that God never changes. The God of the New Testament was the God of the Old Testament and every blessing that Old Testament saints received from Him are what He is still graciously giving us today. In fact, we are even more privileged because we have been given assurance by the Holy Spirit that we have been adopted into His family, as co-heirs with Jesus.

Romans 8:15-7 (NIV) the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father." The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.

Ephesians 1:3-5 (NIV) Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will—

A child adopted by royalty and made co-heirs with existing children would be very privileged indeed. How much do we take our adoption into the family of the Almighty Creator and made co-heirs with the Saviour of the world for granted? In many ways, it is something the human mind just cannot comprehend or imagine. In Ephesians Paul tells us we have been blessed with every spiritual blessing in Christ. Note, we have been given 'every' spiritual blessing. Not one has been left out, and God has treated us all equally. I've never really thought about spiritual blessings and, like you, if I had to make a list it would probably start with having God's forgiveness of my sin through the atonement of Christ on the cross. And it seems Paul has included the very greatest spiritual blessing that comes from that - to be 'holy and blameless' in the sight of God, just as Jesus was.

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Given our tendencies to go astray and knowing we are not always what we should be as Christians, this is a truly staggering blessing. We can start to appreciate from this that, while earthly fathers should want to do the very best for their children, no matter what they do, it would pale into insignificance compared to what God the Father has given to His adopted children.

It would probably take more than one series of talks to explore the spiritual blessings we have received from God, but just putting a few of them in the context of what we should be able to expect from earthly fathers, gives us some idea of how superior our heavenly Father's gifts to us are. More than anything else, we expect our earthly fathers to love us. Nothing surpasses the love of God.

Romans 5:10 (NIV) For if, while we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!

1 John 3:1-2 (NIV) See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him.

1 John 4:10-11 (NIV) This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

God's love is not given in short measure and God loves us in spite of our many faults and failings. That love was extended to us even when we were His enemies. If God had not loved the unloveable, there would have been no need for Jesus to come to earth to die. The love however which is lavished on us is because we have accepted the sacrifice of His Son as the atonement for sin. Because accepting Christ as Saviour is tantamount to seeking first the kingdom of God, all the other blessings stemming from God's love for us, come our way.

Our heavenly Father supplies encouragement and hope for our pilgrimage through a difficult world. To that we can add grace, mercy and peace.

2 Thessalonians 2:16-17 (NIV) May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word.

1 Timothy 1:2 (NIV) To Timothy my true son in the faith: Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.

Philippians 4:7 (NIV) And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

God's love for us also, makes Him and understanding Father, whose very throne is grace. He knows all our temptations and weaknesses and will deal with us gently, not harshly. Although, he will not tolerate ongoing, unconfessed and unrepented of sin, He will try to guide us gently back to the right way. His chastisement will never be more than we can bear and will always lead to some good coming from it.

Matthew 26:41 (NIV) "Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak."

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2 Corinthians 12:9(NIV) But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”

Hebrews 4:16 - 5:2 (NIV) Let us then approach God’s throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need. Every high priest is selected from among the people and is appointed to represent the people in matters related to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. He is able to deal gently with those who are ignorant and are going astray, since he himself is subject to weakness.

Time is running out for this talk, but think of how much more God as Father does for us. He clothes us in the righteousness of Christ. In Jesus, He has provided for us the Bread of Life and Living water, to sustain our spiritual lives in the here and now; and to prepare us for the eternal life to come. All guaranteed by the Holy Spirit.

2 Corinthians 5:4-5 (NIV) For while we are in this tent, we groan and are burdened, because we do not wish to be unclothed but to be clothed instead with our heavenly dwelling, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. 5 Now the one who has fashioned us for this very purpose is God, who has given us the Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.

Ephesians 1:13-14 (NIV)When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God’s possession—to the praise of his glory.

Even this brief mention of these blessings help us to see that no earthly father can match what our heavenly Father has done for us in the past, is doing for us in the present and how He has prepared our future. Knowing His Father the way He did, Jesus gave us a wonderful privilege of knowing Him in that way too by teaching us to pray - Our Father, who art in heaven.... For, it is only Christians who can make an earthly Father’s Day an occasion for making it a special day for honouring our heavenly Father Father, who has blessed us with EVERY spiritual blessing.

WEEK 3: BIRTHDAYS

In some ways birthdays are funny things. Not ‘ha-ha’ kind of funny but a ‘peculiar’ kind of funny, because the word itself has two meanings. It seemed logical to follow Fathers’ Day with birthdays, since you don’t become a father or mother until the birth of a child. But, the second meaning is the anniversary of something’s origin or foundation and pioneers who invented or discovered something for the first time are regarded as the fathers of that particular thing. For example, Charles Babbage is regarded as the father of computing because of his invention of an arithmetic logic unit in 1837. Please don’t ask what that means or how that got us to the computers we use today, because computers have changed quite a lot since those days, with Steve Jobs now being regarded as the father of all that is Apple these days. Pioneers abound in other fields as well with James Dyson probably the best known for vacuum cleaners.

Starting, however, with our personal birthdays, looking back it’s easy to see how our attitudes and feelings about birthdays change over our lifetimes. Think of when you were approaching the ones with a nought after the number. Somehow, even subconsciously, you realise that not just a year has passed, but a whole decade, and where has it gone? At one time, once you hit the half century mark, you would have seen retirement looming on the horizon. But, now, instead of only being one decade or less away, it has gone up to

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nearly two. No matter what age we are now, looking back we can see how certain birthdays moved us on from one stage of life to another. And with each new stage came new experiences, new roles and new responsibilities. As we look back on birthdays as well, we may see them as new beginnings in the way our lives changed, for better or worse. For good or ill, they are all special kinds of days and we live with both kinds. My own personal example, is living with the fact that my mother died on my birthday, so, since that time, it is associated with both life and death.

And we find both kinds in the Bible. I'll start with the negative first, so that we can end the talk on a positive note. The term 'birthday' is only mentioned in relation to two occasions in the NIV version of the Bible. Unfortunately, on those two occasions, lives were lost.

Genesis 40:20-23 (NIV) Now the third day was Pharaoh's birthday, and he gave a feast for all his officials. He lifted up the heads of the chief cupbearer and the chief baker in the presence of his officials: 21 He restored the chief cupbearer to his position, so that he once again put the cup into Pharaoh's hand— 22 but he impaled the chief baker, just as Joseph had said to them in his interpretation.

Matthew 14:6-8 (NIV) On Herod's birthday the daughter of Herodias danced for the guests and pleased Herod so much that he promised with an oath to give her whatever she asked. Prompted by her mother, she said, "Give me here on a platter the head of John the Baptist."

These texts remind us people's birthdays can bring much tragedy into the world. Just as there are people, named and unnamed, that we wish had never been born in our day and age, the same could be said of people named and unnamed in the Bible. There are also people like Job and Jeremiah, who came to regret the day of their birth.

Job 3:1-3 (NIV) After this, Job opened his mouth and cursed the day of his birth. 2 He said: 3 "May the day of my birth perish, and the night that said, 'A boy is conceived!'

Jeremiah 20:14-15 (NIV) Cursed be the day I was born! May the day my mother bore me not be blessed! 15 Cursed be the man who brought my father the news, who made him very glad, saying, "A child is born to you—a son!"

While both men may have cursed the day of their birth, the very fact that we have a record of their despair, in spite of their commitment to God, tells us that God may bring us into dire circumstances, but that He will see us through them. We could spend this whole talk on the impact of the births of a few of the outstanding characters in the Bible. We could mention the significance of the birth of Seth, replacing Abel. We could speak of the emotional turmoil of mothers like Sarah, Rachel, Hannah and Elisabeth before they gave birth to Isaac, Jacob, Samuel and John the Baptist. There is the drama surrounding the birth of Moses, which led to the birth a nation. And, what if Esther had not been born? Would the Jewish nation have survived the genocide planned by Haman? Exploring the importance of the births of the Old Testament heroes of faith in Hebrews 11 would take weeks, before we can even start to think of the twelve apostles or Paul in the New Testament. I don't know how many people are mentioned in the Bible, but the fact that they are there is an indication God, who is Father of humankind, intended those people to exist and each and every one of them contributed to His plan for humanity.

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We cannot tell why God permits certain people to be born. We only know that every person born, is born with a choice of how they will eventually live their lives. And that choice now centres on the most important birthday in the Bible, that of the Lord Jesus Christ. It has been said that the birth of Christ defines the very centre of history, because He is the connection between all that came before His birth and all that came after it. It is when we look at birthdays in the sense of when something came into being that we start to appreciate how true this claim is.

Think about the birth of communication. Genesis 1 - God spoke and the universe came into being.

Isaiah 55:8-9 (NIV) For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the Lord. “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

1 Thessalonians 2:13 And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is indeed at work in you who believe.

Romans 10:8 (NIV) But what does it say? “The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart,” that is, the message concerning faith that we proclaim:

We hear a lot about communication networks these days, but the most important one is that between deity and humanity. Divine revelation, in the sense of the origin of every physical and spiritual thing, is a communication miracle. An omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent God, who is Spirit, has found a way to communicate with a mortal, finite being created from the dust of the earth. To bring this about is nothing short of a miracle, because even if scientists did find aliens to communicate with, it would only be at the level of two created species talking to each other - not a dialogue between a divine and a mortal being. For the Creator of all that exists in this universe, to establish the lines of communication by which we can find Him and talk to Him and have Him talk to us, is nothing short of a miracle. And, what makes this miracle very precious is the fact that God didn't have to do it. Given what He knew about the human race, to choose to reveal Himself to us at all is an act of infinite grace.

The Old Testament record stands as a testimony to God's communication with His human creation. From the family of Adam, through the clan of Abraham to the tribes of Jacob and a nation under David, a community of God's people was born. It's a community that is still growing today. It is a community that has its origins in God's word. It is a community that, even today, survives and thrives by this word.

Isaiah 40:8 (NIV) The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God endures forever.”

1 Peter 1:24-25 (NIV) All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, 25 but the word of the Lord endures forever.

Luke 21:33-34 (NIV) Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.

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Then from the time the words of God were disseminated orally and then in writing, we see the birthdays of the orderly organisation of society through law and we see the birth of prophecy, needed because society did not remain orderly. No society can survive without the rule of law. We've seen before how the last six of the Ten Commandments have influenced our criminal law. Many of the other stipulations in Leviticus also find echoes in contract law and torts of trespass and negligence. Think of how washing hands has become so important in hospitals and in personal hygiene and there are echoes of the food laws too. All these kinds of practical laws and directives enable people to live with a degree of stability and safety because, when followed, the not-harming-your-neighbour principle is upheld. Unfortunately, the record also shows that when people ignored the first 4 commandments of putting God first, all the others fell by the wayside. Society ceased to pay attention to the revelation they had been given and communication with God became corrupted or non-existent.

As society got worse and people began to suffer the consequences of despair and devastation in their way of life, God in His mercy and grace gave birth to hope in the form of prophecy. While the individual saints of old had put their hope in God to fulfil the covenant and other promises He had made to them in relatively restricted communities and environments, hope now had to become a very public and widespread commodity.

2 Peter 1:21 (NIV) For prophecy never had its origin in the human will, but prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

Psalms 33:20 (NIV) We wait in hope for the Lord; he is our help and our shield.

Psalms 37:9 (NIV) For those who are evil will be destroyed, but those who hope in the Lord will inherit the land.

Isaiah 40:31 (NIV) but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.

1 Timothy 4:10 (NIV) That is why we labour and strive, because we have put our hope in the living God, who is the Saviour of all people, and especially of those who believe.

Titus 1:2 (NIV) in the hope of eternal life, which God, who does not lie, promised before the beginning of time...

None of us can live without hope. The Greeks depicted hope as the last resort for humanity, when it was found at the bottom of Pandora's box, the opening of which had released all the kinds of evil into the world. While pointing out the evils of society and issuing dire warnings of the consequences of not remedying the situation, the prophets also held out the hope of better days when evil would be defeated and God's law would prevail for all time. Hope is probably one of the most underrated aspects of our being. Many uses of the word amounts to only wishful thinking like 'I hope I win the lottery this week.' Even if our hope is unrealistic, while we have it, we have reason to go on despite unfavourable circumstances. We can hope against hope, as it were. For the Jews of the Old Testament scattered, defeated, conquered and exiled, and destined never, until the 20th century, to become again masters of their own fate, there had to be hope for the whole nation. That hope narrowed its focus to the birth of a Messiah like King David. It is

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that hope that has been kept alive over the centuries by Jewish communities scattered all over the world. That hope is still with the Jews in this day and age.

All that originated by the word of God in the Old Testament found its anchor in the birth of Jesus. He was the fulfilment of the covenant promises, but would take those to a brand new level. He was the fulfilment of the hopeful expectations of a Messiah, who would be Saviour of the world, not just one nation. He came not to abolish the law but to fulfil it, thereby making Himself the atoning sacrifice for the sins of the world. And, in terms of communication, the apostle John sees this birthday not just in terms of the birth of God in human form, but the birth of the very word of God. Henceforth, all that Jesus said and did would be the origin and foundation of Christianity. If a birthday is symbolic of a new beginning, then the birth of Jesus signalled the birth of an even more glorious revelation than the one God had given to the people of the Old Testament, for Jesus embodied God's word as it had been given in the law and the prophets. The birth of Jesus thus fulfilled all that was inherent in God's revelation to Old Testament peoples. Jesus, Himself reminded us of this.

Luke 24:27-28 (NIV) And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.

Luke 24:44 (NIV) He said to them, "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms."

Acts 3:22-24 (NIV) For Moses said, 'The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you must listen to everything he tells you. Anyone who does not listen to him will be completely cut off from their people.' "Indeed, beginning with Samuel, all the prophets who have spoken have foretold these days.

But at the same time His earthly ministry gave birth to a completely new way of communicating with God and a new way of doing business with Him, both individually and corporately. In every sense of the word, the birthday of Jesus was the birthday of a new age. The hope of a Messiah who would usher in an everlasting kingdom was now a reality. And all of that started with the proclamation of a new concept - the kingdom of God.

Luke 1:31-33 (NIV) You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."

Matthew 4:17 (NIV) From that time on Jesus began to preach, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

John 3:3 (NIV) Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again."

John 18:36 (NIV) Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now my kingdom is from another place."

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Before Jesus' commissioning for public ministry at His baptism, the kingdom of God, in the New Testament sense, existed only in embryonic form. The angel's words to Mary was the prediction of a new kind of kingdom which would come into being as a result of the work of her Son. There is no talk of that kingdom until Jesus' forerunner, John the Baptist began to preach its coming. A few months later Jesus began to travel around Palestine preaching and teaching that the kingdom of God was not only near, it was here. What Jesus was preaching and teaching, was that His birth and what He would do in His lifetime, would give birth to a spiritual kingdom. When Jesus spoke the words of John 18 to Pilate, Pilate could only think in terms of a territorial kingdom. He had no concept of the beginning of a kingdom comprising of born again souls, like Nicodemus.

This was not going to happen without the birth of another concept. That of mission

Luke 9:1-2 (NIV) When Jesus had called the Twelve together, he gave them power and authority to drive out all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal the sick.

Luke 10:1-4 (NIV) After this the Lord appointed seventy-two others and sent them two by two ahead of him to every town and place where he was about to go. He told them, "The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field. Go! I am sending you out like lambs among wolves.

John 17:18 (NIV) As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world.

John 20:21 (NIV) Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you."

Acts 1:8 (NIV) But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

Romans 15:24 (NIV) I plan to do so when I go to Spain. I hope to see you while passing through and to have you assist me on my journey there, after I have enjoyed your company for a while.

Even if Jesus had remained on earth, it would have been impossible for Him as a human being to speak to all people, in all places at all times. We can see from these texts that He was already preparing the way by which the preaching and teaching of the coming of the kingdom of God would be communicated to as many people as possible even in His lifetime. The Twelve and the Seventy-two were commissioned and empowered by Jesus to take His message throughout Palestine and this is where the church today gets its mandate for mission.

However, mission came first. Although the 72 came back rejoicing that even the demons submitted when the name of Jesus was mentioned, Jesus had pre-warned them that they would not be welcomed everywhere. Hence His warning to the them that they would be going out like lambs among wolves. We only have the record of the missionary journeys of Paul and the work of Peter and Philip around Palestine in the New Testament. Philip is believed to have gone also to Carthage in North Africa. We know that James the son of Zebedee was killed by Herod and that Paul and Peter suffered martyrdom in Rome. Tradition also attributes violent death to other apostles. Christians in the Soviet Union

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believe Andrew took the gospel there and was later crucified in Greece. Tradition has Bartholmew going with Thomas to India and returning to Armenia and Ethiopia. Matthew is also believed to have gone to what is now Iran and also to Ethiopia. We have no way of verifying any of these traditions, but violent death seems to have been a common feature of them. The record of Paul's sufferings at the hands of the people he encountered on his missionary journeys remind us that Christian mission can still be a very dangerous occupation. Over the centuries mission has remained a major feature of Christianity. Although churches now take a leading role, it has to be remembered that mission gave birth to the church and not the other way around. It was through the witnessing to Jesus to the ends of the earth, and traditions have the apostles travelling north, south, east and west, that the church was born.

Denominational church development saw the beginnings of many different mission societies and some were formed independently of churches. The Baptist Missionary society was 'born' in 1792, although this did not become its official name until 2000. It was originally called the *Particular Baptist Society for the Propagation of the Gospel Amongst the Heathen*. In the annals of each of these societies too, the birthdays of their founders and greatest missionaries are recorded. There are also many more unknown workers in the mission fields, who have contributed in their own ways to building up the kingdom of God and caring for the well-being of those in need.

Today, we see churches giving birth to missionary enterprises, but the birthday of the church, based on the preaching and teaching of the gospel after Jesus' ascension, by common agreement, can be traced back to Day of Pentecost.

Acts 1:15 (NIV) In those days Peter stood up among the believers (a group numbering about a hundred and twenty)

Acts 2:1-4 (NIV) When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. 2 Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. 3 They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. 4 All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.

Acts 2:41 (NIV) Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.

Since most of these people had come to Jerusalem from other places, their experience of hearing the gospel in their own tongues, meant it was taken back to all the places that were mentioned in the Acts account. East to Mesopotamia (present day Iraq/Iran) north to Turkey, south to Egypt and east to parts of Libya and to the Greek island of Crete. From this we can see that it was a very special day when the Spirit came and gave the empowerment to the beginning of what is now a world-wide institution.

It is when we look at biblical birthdays, both from the point of view of the date of a person's birth and from the origin or foundation of something in existence, that we can see how each stage of God's plans has itself given birth to the next stage of those plans. But there is one more very special birthday yet to come.

1 Peter 1:3-4 (NIV) Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of

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Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you,

1 Corinthians 15:54-55 (NIV) When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: “Death has been swallowed up in victory.”

55 “Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?”

1 Corinthians 7:29 & 32 (NIV) What I mean, brothers and sisters, is that the time is short. For this world in its present form is passing away.

A birthday is not really a normal way of looking at the creation of a new heaven and a new earth, but in the sense of the two meanings of birthdays, it does make sense. The new spiritual birth we have been given as a result of being in Christ, will become the actual birth of our immortal and imperishable bodies. Unlike human births, this birth will never end in death. Although Paul expected Christ's return to be sooner rather than later, his words to the Corinthians still holds truth. This world and everything that was birthed in it is passing away. What is birthed in the new heaven and earth will remain forever. That is why there will never be another birthday like it.

WEEK 4: HARVEST DAYS

The Sunday we celebrate harvest is the first special day in the church calendar year. But, how do you rate its importance? The answer to that will probably vary depending on whether you live in an urban or rural environment. Yet, it is the people who live, especially in major urban centres, that should be regarding harvests as extremely important, because, without them, the supermarket shelves of staple foods would be empty. But it has come into the limelight recently for a different reason. Controversy has arisen over the timing of school holidays, because children are being taken out of school for holidays during term time. Originally, school holidays were set to in a time when mainly rural communities and lives depended on the timely harvesting of crops to see people through to the next harvest. It was a case of everybody having to help with the harvesting process. Even children were involved and that is why schools did not start the year until after the harvest had been gathered. Obviously, church congregations too were involved, hence the need to curtail church activities during the months of July and August. In was only in the 20th century when people began to be paid for days they took as holiday, that summer holidays became the norm in public calendars. So, harvest time, historically is the main reason for the cessation of other activities at this time of year.

Nowadays, it is mainly the church that keeps harvest time special. Because our supermarkets are always full of all types of food, only those who produce the food at source take a keen interest in all aspects of harvesting. Yet, when we turn to the Bible view of it, we start to gain a new perspective on just how important the harvest festival is. We realise that what we see in churches at harvest is the end product of a long and laborious process, with its own kinds of concerns and emotions. The Bible tells us that these are both literal and symbolic.

Literally, we have God's approval for making this a special day in the church calendar, for it goes back to a covenant promise.

Genesis 8:22 (NIV) As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night will never cease.”

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Ecclesiastes 3:1-2 (KJV) To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven: A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted;

The very cycle of life is dependent on God maintaining the seasons that He has promised will endure until the end of time. It is significant that Solomon mentioned harvest activity immediately after birth and death, because, in an agrarian society, very often both were affected by whether or not there was a good harvest. The effects of a bad harvest in sub-Saharan Africa, that have become so familiar to us through our TV screens and other media, is the devastation and despair that still faces millions of people in the 21st century. The great Irish famine in the 19th century when the potato crop failed is ingrained in the psyche of the people in the worst affected areas to the present day. Not only hunger, but associated diseases like dysentery add to the misery, often leading to an early death. Harvests, therefore, can still determine life and death.

That is probably why God gave very specific instructions regarding harvests when the children of Israel entered the Promised Land.

Deuteronomy 11:13-14 (NIV) So if you faithfully obey the commands I am giving you today—to love the Lord your God and to serve him with all your heart and with all your soul— then I will send rain on your land in its season, both autumn and spring rains, so that you may gather in your grain, new wine and olive oil.

Leviticus 19:9-10 (NIV) When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Do not go over your vineyard a second time or pick up the grapes that have fallen. Leave them for the poor and the foreigner. I am the Lord your God.

- **Deuteronomy ??????(NIV)Leave what remains for the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow.....**

- **Ruth 2:2(NIV) And Ruth the Moabite said to Naomi, “Let me go to the fields and pick up the leftover grain behind anyone in whose eyes I find favour.”**

He had promised abundant harvests if the people kept the covenant law. Grain for making bread, new wine to drink because of scarcity of drinkable water, and olive oil for cooking and for many other uses including during illness and anointing dignitaries. These were the essential life-preserving and sustaining staples for centuries. While people did the work associated with producing these crops, however, it was the activity of God which enabled them to grow. The seasons promised to Noah provided a guaranteed weather cycle to enable judgement regarding a time to plant and a time to pluck up what was planted. As we've seen today, without rain, human efforts are doomed to failure.

The text in Leviticus, repeated in Deuteronomy also attribute a very important humanitarian ritual to harvest. It was a time also to think of the poorest and most vulnerable in society. In those days the people most likely to be poor were foreigners, widows and orphans. We find the record in the book of Ruth, that both Ruth and Naomi were dependent for a time on this harvest provision, because Ruth as a foreigner, and Naomi, as a widow, fell into the categories that were entitled to their share of what was left in the fields and grape and olive groves. Harvest gifts brought to the church today may be vastly different to the first types of harvest, but they are, nevertheless, a continuation of a stipulation God made about harvests, thousands of years ago.

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And we have God's blessing to celebrate harvest, for it was God, Himself, who inaugurated harvest celebrations. These festivals of Ingathering, of Weeks and of Tabernacles at various stages of harvest time were to be times of thanksgiving and joy.

Exodus 23:16-17 (NIV) Celebrate the Festival of Harvest with the first-fruits of the crops you sow in your field. "Celebrate the Festival of Ingathering at the end of the year, when you gather in your crops from the field.

Exodus 34:22 (NIV) Celebrate the Festival of Weeks with the first-fruits of the wheat harvest, and the Festival of Ingathering at the turn of the year.

Deuteronomy 16:15 (NIV) For seven days celebrate the festival to the Lord your God at the place the Lord will choose. For the Lord your God will bless you in all your harvest and in all the work of your hands, and your joy will be complete.

Psalms 85:12 (NIV) The Lord will indeed give what is good, and our land will yield its harvest.

Psalms 67:6 (NIV) The land yields its harvest; God, our God, blesses us.

A good harvest was a joyful occasion, not only because it was tangible evidence of a job well done to produce the crops, but also because it guaranteed survival until the next harvest. It was a time of thanksgiving to God, not only for the rain which made the crops grow, but also it was evidence of His presence with and His blessing on His people. The psalmist, hundreds of years later associates harvests with the goodness and blessings of God. And this is what we express too in our special harvest hymns, because even the words of Paul, use harvest as a special manifestation of God's goodness and blessing.

Acts 14:17 (NIV) Yet he has not left himself without testimony: He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy."

**We plough the fields and scatter the good seed on the land,
But it is fed and watered by God's almighty hand:
He sends the snow in winter, the warmth to swell the grain,
The breezes and the sunshine, and soft, refreshing rain.**

**All good gifts around us are sent from heaven above;
Then thank the Lord, O thank the Lord, For all his love.**

**We thank thee then, O Father, for all things bright and good,
The seed time and the harvest, our life, our health, our food.
Accept the gifts we offer for all thy love imparts,
And what thou most desirest, our humble, thankful hearts.**

The hymn that sums up much of the literal work of harvests and God's activity to bring that work to fruition is 'We plough the fields and scatter the good seed on the land', just as the Israelites did when they entered the Promised Land. Human effort empowered by the activity of God is the only combination that gives us life, health and food. And, the thing

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that God desires most of us, is the same as what He has desired of His people, also since the times of the Israelites, humble, thankful, hearts.

And it is the heart aspect of harvest that we find in the New Testament,. Harvest imagery occurs many times in both the gospels and the letters, ending with its ultimate metaphorical meaning in Revelation 14. The imagery of harvest and its metaphorical interpretation in the New Testament embraces the concept of the literal and spiritual meanings of harvest in the Old Testament. There is a continuity of ideas, although in the New Testament, these are heavily weighted in favour of spiritual applications.

To try to encompass the different ways the New Testament uses the harvest metaphor, it seemed appropriate to start at the very beginning of the process that leads to harvesting a crop. We start where Jesus started with finding the farmers, the land and the labourers to do the work.

Matthew 9:36-38 (NIV) When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.”

Although the imagery is flexible, the world is seen as a God’s harvest field and vineyard and the produce desired from both is human souls committed to Christ. Matthew 9 speaks of a world-wide field needing the seed of the word of God to be sown in it. This speaks of mission and these verses precede the sending out of the Twelve apostles by Jesus in chapter 10 of Matthew. Comparatively, speaking, missionary work still has too few workers. But, while we may not be able to take part in organised mission organisations, Jesus makes it clear that there is something every Christian can do - that is, pray that God will bring to this work the right people for the job and for those who are already doing it to see fruit for their labour.

However, there are two obstacles to fruitful success, as the seed is sown. The first is disagreement as to who does what. Human personality clashes are as common today as they were then and these occasions point us to the damage or potential damage such rivalries could do.

Mark 9:38-41 (NIV) “Teacher,” said John, “we saw someone driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us.” “Do not stop him,” Jesus said. “For no one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about me, for whoever is not against us is for us.

1 Corinthians 3:6-9 (NIV) I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. The one who plants and the one who waters have one purpose, and they will each be rewarded according to their own labor.

John 4:34-37 (NIV) My food,” said Jesus, “is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work. Don’t you have a saying, ‘It’s still four months until harvest’? I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest. Even now the one who reaps draws a wage and harvests a crop for eternal life, so that the sower and the reaper may be glad together. Thus the saying ‘One sows and another reaps’ is true.

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These texts are quoted at length, because they show that the workers themselves in the harvest field can hinder productiveness. Even while Jesus lived and ministered, there were complaints that other people were 'jumping on the bandwagon' as it were. How many times has the spread of the gospel suffered because one person or group of people have stopped others contributing to mission and evangelism because they "are not one of us." While God wants conformity to Christ's teaching, He does not want or expect the sowing, watering and reaping to be always done by one person or in exactly the same way in every situation and place. It is not for us to judge how God uses His servants.

As Jesus said, we may not approve of certain people or methods, but if they are not against Jesus then they are to be deemed for Him. And as Paul said, each will be rewarded according to their own labour.

Paul made this statement after encountering a very damaging situation in Corinth. He was absolutely aghast to find the congregations making a comparison between himself and Apollus who had already been ministering to them. What was so dangerous was the fact that this was causing schism between those who were choosing to follow Apollus and those choosing to follow Paul. Both were preaching and teaching the same gospel, yet personalities were getting in the way. Paul, quite adamantly put a stop to it, by pointing out that the sowing and watering were the essential human tasks, but at the end of the day, it was only God who could bring their work to a successful harvest. In that, he followed not only the Old Testament belief, but also the words of Jesus who said that both sower and reaper, and by implication, the one who did the watering in between the two, all would share the same joy of seeing a harvest of souls committed to Him.

Such differences about the work to be done is exacerbated by the second obstacle. Fertile soil is not to be found in every part of a fallen world and Satan's activity is directed at keeping less fertile ground unproductive while, at the same time, doing all he can to contaminate the most fertile ground.

Matthew 13:24-25 (NIV) The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. 25 But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away.

Ephesians 6:12 (NIV) For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.

These two texts give the underlying reasons why we are not seeing a greater harvest of souls. The parable of the sower shows that while the world may be a harvest field, the seed will not germinate or last on some of the types of ground in it. The global harvest field is full of pathways, rocky and thorny ground, on which the seed is vulnerable to being destroyed. He also told of the virulent and malicious activity of Satan who will deliberately ruin good seed by planting bad seed among it. In this way the wheat and the tares grow together and it is not until the seeds have taken root that you can spot the difference. While Satan may be powerful enough to ruin a harvest, his success lies in getting people to cooperate with him. He works through giving people enjoyment of the pleasures of sin, to the extent that although they know it is wrong, they simply refuse to confess it and repent of it. Denial of deity is now a commonplace reason. Ignorance that may come from listening to false teachings, which gives people a wrong conception of salvation is as prevalent in our day as it was in the days of the prophets. And sometimes, sadly, the church itself is a barrier because of judgemental and/or legalistic attitudes and demands for uniformity in belief and practice. Or sometimes even adopting wrong methods to attract people into the church.

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In view of how sowing and watering the seed goes, these two obstacles make it absolutely crucial that Christian witness whether corporate or individual is above reproach. The harvest is ripe in every age and every Christian has a role to play in it. Because of the serious eternal consequences, when it comes to the reaping stage, whatever our role is, we cannot afford to let any of these obstacles distract us from serving Christ in the situation where He has put us.

Matthew 13:30 (NIV) Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn.”

Matthew 13:49-50 (NIV) This is how it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous and throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Revelation 14:15-16 (NIV) Then another angel came out of the temple and called in a loud voice to him who was sitting on the cloud, “Take your sickle and reap, because the time to reap has come, for the harvest of the earth is ripe.” So he who was seated on the cloud swung his sickle over the earth, and the earth was harvested.

Every Christian, therefore, has to ensure that he/she does not become a stumbling block in matters of the preaching and teaching of the gospel, evangelism and mission. The consequences for those who need to be saved are too serious because, as the texts in Matthew and Revelation show, the Bible warns that our lives are the time when we have to make the choice to either live it according to God’s way or choose to go our own way. There will be a separation of the righteous from the unrighteous and the imagery in Revelation indicates it is Christ Himself who will decide matters at the end of time. To see a harvest of souls committed to Christ both here and at that end time, we have to be very concerned about how the harvest field is to be worked. As Paul tells us in in Corinthians and Galatians: If you sow sparingly or generously you will reap sparingly or generously. Sow to the flesh and you will reap destruction; sow to the Spirit and you will reap eternal life. (2 Corinthians 9:6-7 and Galatians 6:8)

However, in spite of the difficulties and the responsibilities involved, there is the prospect of the joy of seeing all the fruit produced by a good harvest. Both Old and New Testaments have very positive things to say about the seed that falls on good ground and yields fruit.

Jeremiah 2:3 (NIV) Israel was holy to the Lord, the first-fruits of his harvest; all who devoured her were held guilty, and disaster overtook them,” declares the Lord.

James 1:17-18 (NIV) Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of first-fruits of all he created.

1 Peter 1:23-24 (NIV) For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God.

1 Corinthians 9:11 (NIV) If we have sown spiritual seed among you, is it too much if we reap a material harvest from you?

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First-fruits were those offered to God at the beginning of the harvest, for they were regarded as the choicest and the best of the produce. To think that is how God sees us is the highest compliment we will ever receive. According to Jeremiah, God's chosen people were special among all other peoples existing at the time. According to James Christians, go beyond even that because they stand out from everything else God has created. The imperishable seed of the word of God implanted in us makes us, through Christ a completely new creation. And that is the material harvest that Paul sees is being reaped in the congregations of believers wherever he goes on his missionary journeys.

For Paul, too, not only is the seed spiritually imperishable, it has tangible manifestations in the way believers live their lives.

2 Corinthians 9:10-11 (NIV) Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness. 11 You will be enriched in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God.

James 3:18 (NIV) Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.

Galatians 6:9-10 (NIV) Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.

It comes back again to God being the means by which the seed develops and grows, yielding a harvest of righteousness that comes from being in Christ. James too sees righteousness as the fruit of the harvest. To that Paul adds the generosity that the Israelite harvests shared with others in the opportunities to do good to all people. James adds peace to righteousness. I know it is speculative, but in place of literal rain to bring the seed to its full potential we have been given the peace of God and the righteousness of Christ to bring the seed of the word to its full potential in us.

Unlike the farmers who have a yearly cycle of work to produce a harvest, we will not see the global spiritual harvest until the end of time when Christ comes to gather the wheat into His barn.

Colossians 1:9-10 (NIV) We continually ask God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives, 10 so that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God,

James 5:7-8 (NIV) Be patient, then, brothers and sisters, until the Lord's coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop, patiently waiting for the autumn and spring rains.

But, we can be preparing for that harvest now. We have been given a spiritual cycle to follow in order to bear fruit in every good work. As we grow in the knowledge of God and love the Lord Jesus by obeying His commandments, all the literal harvest blessings God promised the Israelites can be spiritually ours today. And, like the farmers who have to wait patiently for the right time to sow and to reap, we have to wait patiently for the coming

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again of our Lord Jesus Christ. That will be some harvest festival, resounding with joy and with thanksgiving.

WEEK 5: SAINTS' DAYS

There are many special days and this week's are about saints. These men fit in with a holiday theme because in calendars of the past and in the present, celebration of saints were holy days on which ordinary people had a break from their laborious lives. The problem is that in episcopal churches there is a saint celebrated on almost every day of the year. Today, St Patrick's day in Ireland and St Andrew's day in Scotland are bank holidays, and I know that, at one stage, the Welsh Secretary blocked requests to have St David's day made a bank holiday too. The English appear to ignore St George's day, while St Patrick and St Andrew warrant major celebrations. St David also receives plenty of attention in Wales with national costumes, leeks and daffodils taking centre stage. While this may be just a welcome break for most people and a chance to let their hair down, Christians have their very own reasons for remembering these men and celebrating their lives.

If you are wondering why I haven't mentioned St Valentine's day yet, it's because there is no clear record of who St Valentine was. In the 400s AD the then pope declared February 14th as a celebration of the martyrdom of a priest, who had carried out illegal marriage ceremonies in defiance of the Roman emperor's edict that young men, whom he needed for his army, were not to be married. The priest declared this was against God's law and carried out the ceremonies in the name of love, and was thus martyred for it. Having said that, this is only one story surrounding St Valentine. Although we could see it as pointing to God who is love, the link is very tenuous in what is reputed to have happened at the time. This contrasts very sharply with the clear connections to God and the Lord Jesus Christ that we find in the records of the national saints. So as not to show any bias, I'll talk about them in chronological order. The first one is St Andrew because he was a disciple of Jesus, and in view of what follows, a seemingly underrated one.

Matthew 10:2 (NIV) These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon (who is called Peter) and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee, and his brother John;

Mark 13:3-4 (NIV) As Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John and Andrew asked him privately, 4 "Tell us, when will these things happen? And what will be the sign that they are all about to be fulfilled?"

Acts 1:13 (NIV) When they arrived, they went upstairs to the room where they were staying. Those present were Peter, John, James and Andrew; Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew; James son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James.

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St Andrew's day is the 30th November. These texts tell us that Andrew was one of the Twelve from the very beginning. Other texts see him mentioned most often in connection with his brother Peter. We see he must have been close to Jesus because he was included in the group that had a private conversation with Jesus about the signs heralding the end of the world. The last mention we have of him in the New Testament is when he was in the upper room when the disciples received the commissioning and empowerment of the Holy Spirit for their mission of evangelising the world. But Andrew had already played an extremely important role in that process. The main men in the group of Twelve are Peter, James and John. In view of this there is a tendency to underrate the contribution of the other disciples. However, looking at Andrew's role, this is one conclusion that would be very wrong.

One of the main difficulties about the four gospels is that the events they record are not in chronological order. So, to a certain extent we have to rearrange the narratives to reach a possible sequence of events. In terms of the public proclamation of the coming Messiah and the kingdom of God, the New Testament starts with the ministry of John the Baptist and that is where we find Andrew, for he was a disciple of John.

John 1:29-31 (NIV) The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! 30 This is the one I meant when I said, 'A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.' 31 I myself did not know him, but the reason I came baptising with water was that he might be revealed to Israel."

John 1:40-42 (NIV) Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, was one of the two who heard what John had said and who had followed Jesus. 41 The first thing Andrew did was to find his brother Simon and tell him, "We have found the Messiah" (that is, the Christ). 42 And he brought him to Jesus.

Mark 1:16-17 (NIV) As Jesus walked beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. 17 "Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will send you out to fish for people."

By becoming a disciple of John, Andrew had shown his expectancy of the Messiah John was proclaiming. He was actively preparing for that day and when he heard what John had said about Jesus, he had no hesitation in following Jesus to find out more. This was not disloyalty to John; finding the Messiah was what made Andrew a disciple in the first place. We are not told what passed between Jesus, Andrew and the other disciple during the day they spent together. Whatever, it was, it was enough to convince Andrew, who immediately shared what he had found with Peter. We often find it hard to share Christ with our families, but, Andrew's joy at finding the Messiah was too great not to share. To go to his brother first was the courage of conviction. As I said, the chronology of the gospels is complicated, and we don't know how long after this encounter that Jesus decided to call both Peter and Andrew to be His disciples. It may be stretching the imagination a bit too far, but the fact that Peter immediately followed Jesus, could indicate that Andrew had already caught his first fish!! When the facts are seen in this light it was Andrew who brought Peter to the place where he could become prominent among the disciples?

Herbert Lockyer says of this act of evangelism. "Certainly Andrew's brother became a greater man, but there would have been no apostle to the Jews, but for Andrew, whose simple testimony at home gave Peter, the rock, ...to the primitive church."

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It is possible, too, to say that Andrew had found his role in the band of disciples - that of leading people to the Saviour. Twice more, we find him doing just that.

John 6:8-9 (NIV) Another of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, spoke up, "Here is a boy with five small barley loaves and two small fish, but how far will they go among so many?"

Again we have to speculate about this episode, but it is obvious that Andrew was thinking positively. While the other disciples had already concluded that the crowd of 5000 could not be fed, Andrew looked for what was available. He, too, in practical terms didn't think such a small amount of food would go far. But, somehow, he had the insight and faith to know that Jesus could use what was brought to Him. A miracle happened that day because Andrew had the presence of mind to bring a boy and his lunch to Jesus. Andrew, in regard to both Peter and the boy, was working quietly in the background, doing what he needed to do in each circumstance. There are many Christians, by quietly and unobtrusively witnessing in whatever way they can, are leading folk to come to know the Saviour, and are enabling God to work through them to build His kingdom.

A further episode of Andrew bringing people to Jesus, this time involved foreigners.

John 12:21-22 (NIV) They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, with a request. "Sir," they said, "we would like to see Jesus." 22 Philip went to tell Andrew; Andrew and Philip in turn told Jesus.

It is very telling that Philip went to Andrew about the Greeks and Andrew took Philip with him when he told Jesus about the request. It would appear that Andrew could go to Jesus at any time and be sure Jesus would have time for whatever issue was involved in the meeting. This particular issue was a very sensitive one for it involved setting aside all Jewish prejudice against gentiles. Andrew, it appears, took seriously his call to be a 'fisher of men' and he did so recognising that salvation was for both Jew and Gentile, a hurdle which other apostles did not always accept at first. And after Jesus' ascension, tradition holds that he carried on his role of evangelism in areas of Greece, the present Black Sea areas of Turkey, Ukraine, Romania and Russia. He is also reputed to have founded the bishopric of Byzantium which became Constantinople and is now Istanbul. So, as well as Scotland, Andrew is also the patron saint of Ukraine, Romania and Russia. The Scottish saltire depicts the tradition that Andrew was crucified on an X shaped cross. Andrew does not immediately come to mind when we think about the disciples, but although, he never seems to have sought any prominence among the Twelve, he achieved much during his time with Jesus and during the rest of his life. Only heaven will reveal the fruits of his evangelistic efforts carried out almost in obscurity.

Next in chronological order comes St George whose day is celebrated on 23rd April. There is so much legend surrounding St George slaying the dragon that the real reason he was made a saint is virtually unknown today. For Christian's, however, he serves as a role model of martyrdom in the face of immense pressure to renounce his faith

Luke 21:12-13 (NIV) "But before all this, they will seize you and persecute you. They will hand you over to synagogues and put you in prison, and you will be brought before kings and governors, and all on account of my name. 13 And so you will bear testimony to me.

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Acts 7:52 (NIV) Was there ever a prophet your ancestors did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him

Hebrews 11:35-38 (KJV)and others were tortured, not accepting deliverance; that they might obtain a better resurrection: And others had trial of cruel mockings and scourgings, yea, moreover of bonds and imprisonment: They were stoned, they were sawn asunder, were tempted, were slain with the sword: they wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins; being destitute, afflicted, tormented; (Of whom the world was not worthy:) they wandered in deserts, and in mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth.

Persecution has always been a real threat from Old Testament persecution of the prophets to the present day. Jesus, Himself, suffered persecution that ended in death and Stephen was the first Christian martyr. In spite of this ever present danger, Christians through the ages have been prepared to make that ultimate sacrifice and George is one of those people. Indeed, we would probably never have heard of him apart from how he was prepared to cling to his faith in the face of death. It appears that this man came from a Christian family and he was the son of a prominent military official. At an early age he joined the Roman army and was caught up in the Diocletian persecution of Christians in 303AD. This was the first official imperial persecution of people specifically for being Christian, and the persecution started in the army.

George, because of the reputation of his father, had risen rapidly through the ranks and as a military tribune had access to Diocletian. George is said to have objected to the edict and directly challenged Diocletian to withdraw it. Having failed to have it revoked, George publicly renounced it, declared himself a Christian and refused all the emperor's bribes to make him change his mind. As a result of his refusal to renounce his faith, he was hideously tortured and decapitated.

Perhaps it is easier for today's generations to have a much more dramatic legend for remembering St George. Political correctness alone would have silenced his heroism in defending the cause of Christianity. Yet, while he cannot be celebrated publicly for that reason, at least, Christians can keep alive the memory of his sacrifice on his special day.

St Patrick follows in the 400s AD. Again, legends surround his life and no one is quite sure of his origins.

2 Corinthians 13:14 (NIV) May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

Galatians 4:6 (NIV) Because you are his sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, "Abba, Father."

Ephesians 1:17(NIV) keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better.

Ephesians 2:18 (NIV) For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.

What is very certain, however, is that he was a missionary in Ireland. He is credited with explaining the unity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, using the shamrock, which as you know is now the Irish emblem. We've mentioned before that the word 'Trinity' is not found in the Bible, but as these texts show, the concept occurs throughout the New Testament. God

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the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ permeates the gospels, especially that of John. Then there are all the references to the coming of the Holy Spirit, most dramatically manifested on the Day of Pentecost. A Triune God is not easy to understand and it is easiest just to accept that God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit are the same in character and nature and only differ in the roles they play in the process of salvation. St Patrick reminds us that we need to explain our Christian beliefs and faith in ways that ordinary people understand. In this, he took his cue from the Lord Jesus, who taught great truths in the form of parables, using the things familiar to people in their everyday lives. Simple explanations, however, are very often derived from very deep theological understanding. This prayer, attributed to St Patrick is an indication of just how deep that understanding was among the missionaries of those early centuries of Christianity. These are the first, second and the last of 6 verses, with each verse starting with 'I bind unto myself today'. Another version, perhaps of putting on the armour of God. The armour which starts with an unshakeable belief in the triune nature of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

The Breastplate of St Patrick.

First

*I bind to myself today The strong virtue of the Invocation of the Trinity:
I believe the Trinity in the Unity The Creator of the Universe.*

*I bind to myself today The virtue of the Incarnation of Christ with His Baptism,
The virtue of His crucifixion with His burial, The virtue of His Resurrection with His
Ascension,*

Last

*I bind to myself today The strong virtue of an invocation of the Trinity,
I believe the Trinity in the Unity The Creator of the Universe.*

This is deep theology involving the Triune God, with the virtues meaning the importance and significance of the incarnation, baptism, death, burial, resurrection and ascension of Christ. In poetic form we are reading the non-negotiable tenets of the Christian faith. Needless to say, all of these have come in for a great deal of debate and discussion. While St Patrick may have spelled these out for us, it was not long before they were challenged and denied. This started in New Testament times and by the time of St David, a champion against a very pernicious heresy was again needed.

Matthew 24:10-12 (NIV) At that time many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other, and many false prophets will appear and deceive many people.

Colossians 2:18 (NIV) Do not let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you. Such a person also goes into great detail about what they have seen; they are puffed up with idle notions by their unspiritual mind.

1 John 2:22-23 (NIV) Who is the liar? It is whoever denies that Jesus is the Christ. Such a person is the antichrist—denying the Father and the Son. 23 No one who denies the Son has the Father; whoever acknowledges the Son has the Father also.

Revelation 2:6 (NIV) But you have this in your favour: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.

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Revelation 2:15-16 (NIV) Likewise, you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. 16 Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth.

Jesus warned against the rise of heresy and the purpose of the Book of Galatians is to combat the vicious heresy in which the work of Christ was considered insufficient for salvation. In Colossians the worship of angels could indicate gnosticism. These people denied the humanity of Christ and believed they had superior knowledge and understanding of His divinity. John is obviously objecting to the denial of the deity of Christ, while in Revelation he mentions an obscure group linked to the practices of Balaam. Scholars disagree about what exactly that entailed in a Christian context, but a general view is that it was a very liberal form of Christianity which permitted un-Christian behaviour and practices.

By the 500s, a particular heresy was seriously affecting the church. It was started by **Pelagius**, (born c. 354, died 418) At first, his teaching seemed commendable. By the late 300sAD the church in Rome had become morally lax and Pelagius advocated rigorous asceticism. He blamed the situation on the doctrine of divine grace and attacked this teaching on the grounds that it imperilled the entire moral law and he soon gained a considerable following. It was not, however, the attempt to bring morality back into the church that was the problem. It was the fact that Pelagius didn't believe human beings needed God to become moral beings. St David was among those who realised the very dangerous implications of those beliefs. At the Synod of Brevi in 550AD, he argued against the Pelagian heresy because he saw it as the direct opposite of what is stated by both John and Paul.

1 John 1:7-10 (NIV) But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin. If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word is not in us.

Ephesians 2:8-10 (NIV) For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— 9 not by works, so that no one can boast. 10 For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

Whether or not Pelagius taught all that is attributed to him or not, the fact remains that he is associated with one of the most dangerous heresies against Christianity. During his lifetime and after his death, Pelagianism emerged as the belief that human beings are not tainted by Adam's sin. But because human beings were created by God and given free will, they are therefore capable of living a sinless life without divine help. It is true God created us to do good works, but these come through being in Christ through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Pelagius did not take this view. He may have admitted that God's grace assisted every good work, but this still boiled down to the belief that a man or woman chooses to do a good work and God assists in its implementation. Think of the implications of this. If there is no such thing as original sin then there is no need for cleansing of sin. If there is no need for cleansing of sin, there is no need for atonement for it. In other words, Jesus did not have to die on the cross to provide an atonement for sin. In other words, humanity could achieve salvation by its own efforts - salvation by works, not grace. If Pelagianism had gained a strong foothold, the result would have been a form

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of Christianity without Christ. Had that heresy prevailed, the church would have died within a very short period of time. St David can be celebrated as a stalwart of Christian orthodoxy, not in a dogmatic, fundamentalist way, but in defending the very founder of our faith, the Lord Jesus Christ, whose atonement for sin saved the world. St David took literally Jesus' words that He alone was the Way, the Truth and the Life and that no-one could come to the Father except through Him.

I won't presume to tell you the history of St David. You know it better than I do, but it is right to mention here that, although David rose to the rank of Archbishop, he retained his servant heart. He founded 12 monasteries, including Glastonbury, and imposed strict rules, including a work ethic which he followed himself. Work and pray were the two main activities in the monasteries and it is said that in his last sermon in 589AD he included the exhortation to concentrate on "doing the little things in God's presence with conscientiousness and devotion." St David, in spite of his rank and his proven ability to successfully argue his case in one of the most intellectual gatherings of his age, retained understanding that God could be served just as successfully in doing the ordinary everyday tasks well because of devotion to God, and aided by the Holy Spirit.

The lives of these four saints have a lot to teach us about serving God. They may have served in different ways according to the circumstances of their age and the needs of their social environments. The one thing they all have in common, though, is that they were witnesses to their Lord and Saviour and were true to His gospel.

Philippians 4:21-22 (KJV) Salute every saint in Christ Jesus. The brethren which are with me greet you. 22 All the saints salute you, chiefly they that are of Caesar's household.

John 6:28-29 (NIV) Then they asked him, "What must we do to do the works God requires?" Jesus answered, "The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent."

Colossians 3:23-24 (NIV) Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters, 24 since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving.

1 Peter 4:10 (NIV) Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms.

That is all God expects of every Christian. That is why Paul regards every Christian as a saint. And these texts show us the way to a saintly life. Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, realise it is Him you are serving, so do it with all your heart. All of us have been given resources we can use in God's service and being a saint means we regard them as a trust to be used for the benefit of others. That's what our four national saints did and, as role models, they deserve a special day when we can remember and celebrate their faithful stewardship of the gifts they used in their day.

WEEK 6: HOLIDAYS

It seemed appropriate to end this session with holidays, because, for some, this is the time of year when everyone welcomes a break from routine. It's a time to think of leisure instead of all the hustle and bustle of daily life. Over the centuries breaks from routine centred around the religious calendar of Christmas, Easter, Pentecost and the various festivals like harvest and of course, the prominent saint's days. Nowadays, it is very

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difficult to define holiday times because so many workplaces now involve working around the clock and never close. The holiday industry is active all year round, so, in one sense, holiday times have become more a personal preference, than a traditional set period of the year for them. Holidays are also so diverse now. Even the way we travel has changed dramatically, the destinations we reach are further afield and the range of activities available seems endless. In fact, I've read that some people come back from their holidays more stressed and tired than before they went. There are even Christians who object to holidays on the grounds that the devil never takes a holiday. But, as someone has said "Who wants to imitate the devil?" Regardless of what time of the year we take holidays, or the length of time we spend on them, or what kind of activities are involved in those holidays, the Bible gives us some principles that can help to make a holiday the time of rest and refreshment it was always intended by God to be.

I think that we would all agree that whatever else holidays mean, the basic idea of them is a rest from our regular everyday activities. That is why we can turn to the very beginning of the Bible to find the definition of rest as the cessation of work.

Genesis 2:2-3(NIV) By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating he had done.

Psalms 121:3-4 (NIV) He will not let your foot slip—he who watches over you will not slumber; indeed, he who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.

Psalms 24:1 (NIV) The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it;

Work and rest are combined but what was uppermost in my mind was that God rested. Before looking at this topic, it never occurred to me to query why God rested on the seventh day. Surely the God, who neither slumbers nor sleeps, needs rest? Rest, however, in the Bible, never means inactivity. Rest in the Bible is an opportunity to look beyond our daily routines and take a more panoramic view of life. God made the 7th day holy. Holy means separated for God's use and there are several ways in which we can see holidays in this light. For example, the Bible does not tell us why God rested, but there seems to be a clue in 1:31, which comes immediately before these verses. On the evening of the sixth day, God saw all that he had made and it was very good. It may be pure speculation, but the first holy day was a day on which it seemed God took time to enjoy all that He had created. Can you also imagine Adam and Eve's wonder as God took them through the garden and brought the animals for Adam to name? Can you imagine the fellowship that existed between God and His human creation in that environment? Have you ever thought of holidays as an opportunity for God to show us around His world today, whether it be at home or abroad? Holidays give us that opportunity to take time to appreciate all that God has provided for us in the world, for He is the source of everything that we experience on holiday. It is God who has provided not just the wonderful scenery that we can enjoy and the wonders of seeing wildlife in their natural and purpose built habitats: He has provided the health and strength to engage in the physical activities of holidays. He has provided stimulation and enjoyment of the foods, the lifestyles and the cultural traditions of the people of different communities and countries. He has provided opportunities to learn of the past and see some of the modern wonders of the world. In other words, holidays are a time when we can leave our routines behind and see the world in a different light. Just taking pleasure in and refreshment from what we have the time to

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enjoy on holidays is in itself thankful worship of the God who made it all possible.

Yet there is an even deeper reason for God ordaining a period of rest from labour. When God rested from His labours, He gave a pattern which, at the end of the day, was not primarily for His benefit, but for ours. In the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve had jobs to do in looking after it. Since it was not onerous and carried out in fellowship with God, we could view that existence as the pattern of what rest in eternity will be like. But God knew that the idyllic environment He had put Adam and Eve in was not going to last and hard work was going to be the lot of humankind.

Genesis 3:17-19 (NIV) “Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat food from it all the days of your life. 18 It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. 19 By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return.”

I hope I'm not insulting anyone when I say that probably only the oldest generation here tonight has any concept of how hard and laborious work was in the home, fields, mines and factories until the decades after the second world war when the welfare state, workers' rights and labour saving devices in the home became the norm in our lives. Sweat on the brow was literally true because of the effort involved in making a living. And many people could not take a holiday because they were not paid for the time they took off work. We can see that even in the time of Jesus the work being done didn't even give the disciples a chance to eat. Jesus' answer for that situation was a time of rest, because as co-Creator with God He knew the physical and mental limitations of His disciples and of people in general.

Mark 6:30-32 (NIV) The apostles gathered around Jesus and reported to him all they had done and taught. Then, because so many people were coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat, he said to them, “Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest.” So they went away by themselves in a boat to a solitary place.

Psalms 139:14 (NIV) I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well.

Psalms 139:15 (NIV) My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place, when I was woven together in the depths of the earth.

Isaiah 40:6-7 (MSG) "These people are nothing but grass, their love fragile as wildflowers. 7 The grass withers, the wildflowers fade, if God so much as puffs on them. Aren't these people just so much grass?"

Again in Jesus' words and timing we see that the time to rest was after a period of work. Because the disciples' report was about all they had done and taught, it is most likely that they had returned from the missions He had sent them out on and which are recorded in Luke chapters 9 and 10. Jesus knew that periods of the kind of rest that would refresh them, and by extension, us, is essential for good health and well-being. Stress is at epidemic levels in western society. People talk of being burnt out. If Jesus recognised that there was a time to get away from the busyness of ministry and take time for rest, we have been given a divine sanction for holidays from the stresses and strains of our own work. And, everyone does work of some kind today. For those retired or at home, homes

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still have to be looked after, food made, sometimes other family members to be cared for and perhaps responsibilities of a voluntary nature undertaken. Those who have to get up to go to work each day, sometimes find the strain of 'office politics' or impossible demands for more productivity are worse to cope with than the actual work. There is a toll even for children, in primary school, who are now under pressure to perform from a very young age. Then, there are the teenagers facing exams that will perhaps determine their whole futures. Whether from strenuous physical work, or the high pressure or having to meet targets, or from the monotonous drudgery of repetitive tasks at home or in employment, there is wear and tear on our whole being. Often the toll our daily lives are taking on us is not realised until we find ourselves not able to cope with even the slightest addition to our daily tasks. There is a lot of truth in the saying that it is the last straw that breaks the camel's back.

Both God and Jesus set the pattern for a period of rest after having worked at some task. But God did not just set the pattern. He institutionalised it by covenant law. In the Judea-Christian tradition, resting on one day in seven was a stipulation and the sign of covenant made with Moses and the Israelites.

Exodus 20:10 (NIV) but the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns.

Exodus 31:15-17 (NIV) For six days work is to be done, but the seventh day is a day of sabbath rest, holy to the Lord. Whoever does any work on the Sabbath day is to be put to death. The Israelites are to observe the Sabbath, celebrating it for the generations to come as a lasting covenant. It will be a sign between me and the Israelites forever, for in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, and on the seventh day he rested and was refreshed.”

Leviticus 25:4-5 (NIV) But in the seventh year the land is to have a year of sabbath rest, a sabbath to the Lord. Do not sow your fields or prune your vineyards.

Today, the Christian sabbath is just another day of the week. It is no longer regarded as a holy day, sacred to the Lord by the general public.

Unfortunately, too, fundamentalist churches have put so many prohibitions on what can be done on a Sunday, that legalism has robbed it of the joy and the peace that it would have brought to people like the Israelites. Think of them as slaves, working 7 days a week in Egypt. That God ordained one day of rest a week would have been regarded as a great blessing from a gracious God who showed His care for their well-being in such a practical way. People look forward to the weekends nowadays. Can you imagine how slaves would have looked forward to their one day a week of rest? God took the need for rest so seriously that He applied it not only to human beings but also to the animals and the land. It may seem to be a harsh thing to say, but Christian workaholics, who are always too busy to rest, not only ignore the Biblical teaching about rest, but also miss the blessings God intends them to have during those periods. This is also true to Biblical teaching because another indication that God took very seriously the need for rest is the fact that this was to be an everlasting covenant.

Hebrews 4:1-4 (NIV) Therefore, since the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it.....And yet his works have been finished since the creation of the world. For somewhere he has spoken about the seventh day in these words: “On the seventh day God rested from

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all his works.”

Revelation 14:13 (NIV) Then I heard a voice from heaven say, “Write this: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.”

“Yes,” says the Spirit, “they will rest from their labor, for their deeds will follow them.”

1 Corinthians 2:9 (NIV) However, as it is written: “What no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, and what no human mind has conceived”— the things God has prepared for those who love him—

The writer to the Hebrews and John are very explicit in maintaining that God’s concept of rest will be a feature of eternity. And if that is not everlasting, I don’t know what is. The writer to the Hebrews is exhorting his audience to remain true to their faith because their eternal destiny depends on it. Scholars call this passage in Hebrews the ‘Sabbath rest’. In other words, eternity will have the character of the Godly rest after the work of making the world. John also is clear in that eternity is a time of rest from all the work Christians have engaged in while they lived. If holidays are a time of rest, does this mean that heaven will be one eternal holiday? Well, I suppose that is one way of looking at it. However, John also adds that our deeds will follow us. Rest for God did not mean inactivity. Can you imagine what would happen if God decided He would take a complete rest from sustaining the universe every Sabbath day? God is at work every day, through Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit completing the work He started in us and as the text from Paul states, preparing us for the greatest blessing of eternal rest, where our activities will be freed from all the stresses and strains we experience in life.

When we look at Jesus’ teaching about the Sabbath day, we also see that it was meant to be a time of blessing, but not inactivity.

Mark 2:27-28 (NIV) Then he said to them, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. 28 So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.”

Mark 3:4 (NIV) Then Jesus asked them, “Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?” But they remained silent.

Jesus healed on the Sabbath day and allowed His disciples to pick grain on the Sabbath. When roundly condemned and criticised by the Pharisees He made it clear that His authority was greater than the rules and regulations they had added to the 4th commandment. As one with the God who had given the commandment in the first place, Jesus had the authority to judge what the Sabbath could or could not be used for. The Sabbath, as mentioned was for our benefit, so anything that contributed to bringing benefit to others was permissible. The question is how can we apply that thinking not just to the Sabbath day but to holidays as well.

The wonderful thing about God is that He also knows that times of rest and refreshment mean different things to different people.

Philippians 4:8 (NIV) Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.

Colossians 3:17 (NIV) And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the

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name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Christians are no different from the general population in that some like active holidays, others prefer a slower pace. Some like to be in solitary places, others like plenty of company. Some like mountains, others like the sea. God does not proscribe how we should spend our holidays. He leaves that choice to us. However, He does expect us, even in the times we let our hair down, as it were, to still behave as His children and to give Him the glory for all the good that a holiday brings to us. These two texts give us the guideline for what we think, say and do even while on holiday. Because, let's face it, in the busyness of our lives, a holiday is about the only time when we have the leisure to bring these things to mind. In this world today, the chance even of a weekend break a few miles down the road, is a luxury for millions of people. Today, there are millions of people in the world who have never had a holiday and may never have one in their lifetime. There are thousands of such people in our own country. We live on an island, yet surveys show that there are great numbers of people who have never seen the sea. We need to see holidays as a God-given privilege and see them as a time for thanksgiving to the God and Saviour who knows what we need, even if we don't think we need it.

We can see from these Bible passages that periods of rest have to be programmed into the way God has made us. And thankful appreciation of the fact that we can have a holiday at all is perhaps one of the first things that should come to mind. But Jesus also makes it clear that those periods of rest are to be spent wisely. Our holidays can only truly be beneficial if we spend them God's way. When we do we can take on board the promise He made to Jeremiah about His people and consider the words of Jesus.

Jeremiah 31:25 (NIV) I will refresh the weary and satisfy the faint."

Matthew 11:28-30 (NIV) Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. 29 Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

Mark 6:31-32 (NIV) "Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest." So they went away by themselves in a boat to a solitary place.

Add to the words "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" the invitation to "Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest", and we start to get a picture of what a holiday can be for body, mind and soul. A holiday provides a time to draw back from the cares of the world and think about what really matters - and that is giving God the glory. While God wants us to enjoy our holidays, we give Him glory by seeing them as a chance to recharge our spiritual batteries as well. Because of the pace of life we can even be run down spiritually because of the effort involved in being a Christian in this secular world.

Mark 4:18-19 (MSG) "The seed cast in the weeds represents the ones who hear the kingdom news but are overwhelmed with worries about all the things they have to do and all the things they want to get. The stress strangles what they heard, and nothing comes of it.

Galatians 6:9-10 (NIV) Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.

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Hebrews 12:3 (NIV) Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

Ephesians 6:12 (NIV) For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.

These verses recognise that we have to work at being a Christian too. Although we have the help of the Holy Spirit, when our physical, mental and emotional life is disturbed, it is very hard to hold on to faith and hope. The Message translation of this verse from the parable of the sower recognises that worries can dominate our thoughts to the extent that we cannot remember or are too weary to find the spiritual energy to trust God's promises for whatever situation we face. Both Paul and the writer to the Hebrews recognise that spiritually we can be weary in maintaining our witness and it is possible to lose heart. Paul gives us the reason in Ephesians. We have a very powerful spiritual opponents who will use every experience in our lives to disturb, disrupt and destroy our faith. Maintaining God's ways in the face of a world that has no time for Him is never the easiest of tasks. And, possibly because this poses the greatest threat to our achieving the eternal rest we have been promised, this is why God ordained a period of rest, not just once or twice a year, but once every week. We know, nowadays, that even rest on the Sabbath day is becoming impossible for some Christians whose job entails working on that day.

Just from looking at human need for rest, gives a different perspective to holidays. In ordaining times of rest, a blessing which the Lord Jesus Himself took advantage of, God from the very moment of creation had identified and provided for an essential human need. And, wouldn't it be wonderful if holiday brochures promised our holidays would be like what Isaiah describes in 32:2 and that we could make those words a description of our holidays?

Philippians 4:19 (NIV) And my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus.

Isaiah 32:2 (NIV) Each one will be like a shelter from the wind and a refuge from the storm, like streams of water in the desert and the shadow of a great rock in a thirsty land.

Philippians 4:7 (NIV) And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

The context of the verse in Isaiah is God's promise that one day He would send a ruler for His people who would offer all the complete protection that these phrases indicate. We know the devastation caused by winds and storms in a physical sense, but the winds of change in our circumstances and the storms of illness, redundancy, bereavement and other tragic events can be just as devastating in our lives. We know that finding no water in a desert and the heat of the sun can bring death. And, unless we find the Living Water in God's word and the shelter from the fiery darts of atheism, secularism and all the other anti-God 'isms' of our times, then the consequence will be spiritual death. Holidays are times when we hopefully expect to find real rest physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually. This kind of rest provides the holistic peace and joy that can only be found when we are in Christ and following His ways, even on holiday.

There's a very old song called 'Vaya con Dios' - go with God. Our holidays really could become holy days, if we accept them with a grateful heart, take them in the company of God and let His promises bring peace to our hearts and minds. Yet God's promises are

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not just for holidays. Remembering them, believing them and trusting in them, could make every day of our lives special days.