

SPIRITUAL SHOPPING

WEEK 1: HOPE

If my memory serves me right, this is the first time I have started the talks at the beginning of a year. So, I had to think about what to say, because, like Advent + Easter, this is a special time of year and there are traditions attached to it. First thought was the name of the month - January, from the name of the Roman god Janus who looked both backwards and forwards. But Route 66 already gave us a look backwards + forwards in Bible terms. Then, what about New Year resolutions and diets? Enough said about them because, let's face it, it's easier to make them, than keep to them. What else? January sales! Admittedly a somewhat diluted tradition now, because they start in December. Shopping is not my thing, but what if, as Christians, we had resolved to try to grow + develop our faith this year, what would we look for in the January sales to help us do that?

Unfortunately, you can't find shops giving sales in spiritual goods on the High street or shopping centres, but online, I found this store which some of you might have heard of. The company that owns it is called 'Heaven? Here there are real bargains, for everything is free.¹

Now I don't know what you would put on your 'wish list' of ordinary every day spiritual staples but I do know that God has supplied every essential quality and attribute we really need to do the Master's will. In fact, all the product details of these things and others needed for the Christian life are found in the Bible. Using the example of the 'Grocery Store' to introduce these talks is appropriate because a theme of 'food' and hospitality runs right through the Bible, from the moment Adam and Eve were told they could eat from any tree in the garden, except the one of the knowledge of good and evil. And just as physical food items are combined to create sustenance to keep us alive, so the spiritual items mentioned in these talks combine to provide all that nourishes and sustains spiritual life.

When Jesus said that 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God, He used the example of the food item that was the most basic staple of people's diet, not just at the time, but through all succeeding centuries and even today in many parts of the world. So, in spiritual terms we start with the most basic item for our spiritual diet. It is not mentioned in the store, but it is mentioned 67 times in the New Testament. That item is 'Hope'. Consciously or unconsciously, hope is necessary for life itself. Without it, all aspects of our lives become purposeless and meaningless. The New Year is recognised as a time when people do think in terms of hope. We all hope that the beginning of a New Year will either give us a better year than last year, if it had been a difficult one. Or, if it was a good

¹ For copyright reasons the poem "Heaven's Grocery Store" cannot be included. There are a number of internet sites where it can be found. Just type in the title in your search engine.

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year for us, we hope those favourable circumstances will continue and that nothing disastrous will happen.

But when it comes to our lives as individual Christians and as a church, hope has to be more than just vague or wishful thinking. So, how can we be sure that God has supplied us with all these spiritual essentials? Have Christians a good reason to look to the future with hope? Well, the product details of hope in God's word give us a very clear answer to both questions. Like everything else in Christianity, hope starts with God. God alone is the source and the giver of hope.

2 Thessalonians 2:16 (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, 2 Thessalonians 2:17 (NIV) encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word.

Romans 15:13 (NIV) May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

So what's the difference between the kind of hope God gives and the vague ideas of hope that people conjure up by the self-effort of resolve or by positive thinking. **Firstly**, God given hope comes from grace to and love for His people. From the very beginning of the church, God knew that Christians would face hostility from their environments and sometimes physical danger or death. He knew that without hope in something real and certain converts would not have the incentive to persevere in maintaining their Christian lifestyles and witness to the good news of the gospel. No one could deny that the state of our country and the world doesn't give much of a basis for the hope of a better future. But, because God is the God of hope He gives us a definite and certain foundation upon which to build it. Yes, there are times when hope of God doing something to stop the various forms and degrees of sin in our world seems to be ignored. But God is not going to give us a sticking plaster for a short-term relief. He knows the sin of the world needs radical surgery that will eradicate the disease for all eternity. As we saw in Route 66, God takes a long-term view of where this world is heading and He knows what He is doing. Paul seems to appear overly optimistic about us overflowing with hope, especially when we look at the state of the world. But overflowing with hope can actually happen when we consider God's reality. Think of the reality of the time when we will see everything coming under the eternal sovereignty of God. As we saw in Route 66 that kingdom is already established in heaven and Jesus is preparing a place there for us. The reality of heaven is more real than the reality of the things around us that we do see.

A **second** difference about God-given hope is that it is centred on another reality. To be more specific – a real Person – the Lord Jesus Christ.

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 Jesus Christ

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from the dead, 4 and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you,

1 Peter 1:21 (NIV) Through him you believe in God, who raised him from the dead and glorified him, and so your faith and hope are in God.

1 Corinthians 15:19 (NIV) If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.

Titus 1:2 & 2:13 (NIV) in the hope of eternal life, which God, who does not lie, promised before the beginning of time,.....2:132

Hope focuses on what God has done for humanity in the past which prepared the world for its long-term future. As David said in the Advent talks, Jesus Christ came to earth and took on a real human body. While the whole of the Christ event was essential for salvation, it is His resurrection which laid the foundation of hope for what salvation meant for the future. As Paul stated in 1 Corinthians, worldly hope is useless, but this God-given hope, centred on the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ in the past and His coming again in the future, takes us beyond the confines of this world into eternity. With justification, Warren Weirsbe has called his devotional book on 1 Peter 'Be Hopeful'. Just focus for a moment on Peter's mention of a 'living hope' which is only possible because Jesus lives. The wisdom of Confucius lives on, but Confucius himself is dead. Buddhist beliefs live on, but Buddha himself is dead. Islam is resurgent in the 21st century, but, Mohammed, its prophet and founder, is long dead. Philosophies survive, but philosophers past, present, and future, will one day pass from this world and very few will remember the person who thought these deep thoughts. Only Christianity has a God and Saviour who is alive eternally, and thankfully, He has provided us with all the information and essential spiritual qualities we need to live a life worthy of living. That is because we already share that eternal life in the here and now. That is why Peter can go on to state that hope centred on Christ has already guaranteed an inheritance in heaven already prepared for us.

Peter's expression of a 'living hope' coming through the resurrection of a real Person is backed up by Paul. The verses quoted are just two examples of Paul's conviction of the hope that results from the fact that God raised Christ from the dead. In Acts 17:27-28, he tells us that Christ is not far from any of us because it is in Him that we live and move and have our being. In Galatians 2:20, he asserts that it is not he who lives but Christ lives in him. And in Romans 6:8-11 he declares that if we have died to self and lived for Christ, we will also live with Him in eternity. His words, when he was on trial for his very life before Herod and the Roman governor Festus, boldly stated "I have a hope in God... that there will be a resurrection of both the righteous and the unrighteous. (Acts 24:15)....And now I stand here on trial on account of my hope in the promise made by God to our ancestors (26:6).

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While all scholars agree that hope in the New Testament is eschatological, that is, that it looks forward to eternal life after death and residential citizenship in God's eternal kingdom at the end of time, there is a practical side of hope as we live in this world. The whole purpose of giving us hope is to encourage us to live for God in the present by doing the Master's will as citizens of His kingdom here on earth.

Thirdly, although we might never be consciously aware of it there is another reality. If our hope is grounded in the revelation of God's Son the Lord Jesus Christ, His life and work of salvation, validated and authenticated by His resurrection from the dead, then we can be assured that our spiritual hope is real because it is coming from a divine source and is the result of a very real-life experience. If you want some confirmation of this, ask yourself if you can, or actually are, singing, *with conviction*, the words of some of these hymns.

Alive in Him my Living Head

He lives, He lives...He walks with me and talks with me along life's narrow way.

Because He lives I can face tomorrow

In Christ alone my hope is found - light strength and song

Strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow

My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness

If you can, or are singing them aloud or in your heart, it is because the conviction is being mediated through the witness of the Holy Spirit. This is completely in accordance with what Jesus told His disciples in John 14:26 and 15:26, that is, that it would be the task of the Holy Spirit to testify about Him and teach them all things about what He said and did. It was because the Holy Spirit completed His task so well in the lives of the New Testament writers, that their conviction of the reality and truth of the Christ's life and salvific work gave rise, not just to the words of the hymns we sing today, but to the gospel that gave rise to them and that we as individual Christians, and corporately as a church, are called upon to disseminate to the world.

A **fourth** reality of hope in the gospel is based on the fact that God cannot lie (Titus 1:2; Hebrews 6:18) and the testimony of Jesus Christ is that He will build His church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it.

Matthew 16:18 (NIV) And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.

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Hebrews 6:18-19 (NIV) God did this so that, by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled to take hold of the hope set before us may be greatly encouraged. We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure.....

Hebrews 3:6 (NIV) But Christ is faithful as the Son over God's house. And we are his house, if indeed we hold firmly to our confidence and the hope in which we glory

David has given us valuable teaching about, what the church is and the purpose of its existence. But we all know that the Christian church has ceased to be at the centre of our 21st century multi-cultural society, and it is becoming even more marginalized as time passes. Pundits are even predicting that it will disappear completely within a few decades. If we believed them we would start to despair and start to think there was no hope for its survival. That is why as Christians, corporately and individually, we need hope. One of my mum's favourite expressions was 'if you live in hope, you won't die in despair? I'm not quite sure what she meant by it at times, but in terms of the Christian church, although hope may falter at times and despair may try to overwhelm us, in our heart of hearts we know we have a certain hope because Jesus Himself emphatically declared no power on earth or hell could destroy His church, made up of those who are living their lives aiming to do their Master's will.

The testimony of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of the church, means our hope is not wishful thinking, but the will of the One who has the power and the authority to make sure the church or 'house', comprised of His people, will be victorious over all the world's efforts to destroy it. His words are but one example of what the writer to the Hebrews calls hope - a firm and secure anchor that keeps the soul. It is an anchor that encourages us not to despair and protects against the deceptive lies of a godless world predicting the demise of God's people. The confession of Peter that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of God, is the solid rock upon which we stand. The world may see the church already sinking in sand, but these references from God's word show us that hope grounded in that word is the antidote to despair about either the present or future state of Christianity and the church.

The **final** reality is that if we have been assured of the dual witness of absolute power and authoritative word of the God who is the source and giver of our hope; and the testimony of the work and words of Jesus regarding the Church, hope becomes a quality of our inner lives that enables us to both live in the present regardless of circumstances and look forward to a guaranteed future in the actual presence of God and Christ.

Matthew 6:33 & 28:19-20 (NIV) But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.....Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.

John 15:3-5 (NIV) You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. 4 Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine.

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Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.... If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.

1 Timothy 4:8-10 (NIV) For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come

Hebrews 10:23 (NIV) Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful.

1 John 3:3 (NIV) All who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.

And, if we are convinced of the reality of hope, how are we responding because our response to it is another reality in its own right. The gift of divine hope is a privilege coming to those who are 'in Christ'. And, with that privilege comes the responsibility to nurture and exercise it. Like every other divine gift we are to use it to do the Master's will, which, in effect, is seeking the glory of God and the righteousness of Jesus Christ. This selection of verses from 4 different New Testament writers show we have a personal responsibility to "train in godliness". Christ is our 'life-trainer' and His training will last our whole lifetime. We cannot be disciples if we do not "remain in him". We cannot expect to fulfil the Jesus' commission to make disciples, if we ourselves are not being seen to be training in discipleship, and proving it by living the life of a disciple of Christ. The world has a saying that actions speak louder than words, and it will become very obvious to observers that the effectiveness of our Christian witness is dependent on our lifestyles being seen to match our words about the gospel. The Christian life is not easy, but it is holding on to the hope that we profess that galvanises us to trust and obey the commands that Jesus has given us, and to try in the power of the Holy Spirit to conform to His character. There can be no doubt that the possession of spiritual hope is evidenced by the way we personally nurture and exercise that hope in our practical day-to-day living in the present.

That is why in the New Testament that we see the apostles and Paul combining the conviction of the certainty and reality of that God-given gift of hope with their ethical and moral lifestyles in obedience to God's standards. It was this combination that gave them the confidence to proclaim the gospel to a pagan world where they faced daily ridicule, hostility, dangers and death.

Romans 5:2-5 (NIV) And we boast in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.

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Acts 28:30-31 (NIV) For two whole years Paul stayed there in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him. 31 He proclaimed the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ—with all boldness and without hindrance!

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.

1 Peter 3:15 (NIV) But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect,

Yet up to their deaths they preferred to see their various sufferings and those of their communities in terms of producing hope as a personal spiritual characteristic. Paul goes further for he asserts that hope means he can ‘boast’ or take pride in the glory of God. Hope ensures he will never be ashamed of what he has preached and taught because God’s love has poured it out into his heart through the Holy Spirit. Hope gave Peter courage standing up before those crowds at Pentecost, and Paul, even in prison, the boldness to proclaim the gospel of hope to a world without the hope of salvation because of sin. Christianity today needs that same boldness based on our hope of salvation. Peter insists that we, too, must be prepared to give the reasons for the hope that is in us because, without that hope, we have no personal testimony of salvation and therefore no ability or authority to speak about the things of God.

Just from these references in the New Testament we can see that hope is something real and has a tangible reality for the individual and corporate existence of Christianity. It is what underpins our desire to follow Christ and to do His will, just as He did His Father’s will when He was on earth.

Romans 15:4 (NIV) For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope.

Ephesians 1:18 I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people,

*My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness.
I dare not trust the sweetest frame, but wholly lean on Jesus' name.
On Christ the solid rock I stand, all other ground is sinking sand;*

The hope that God has given to us and the hope that will sustain us as individual Christians and as a church is reliance on the life and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. Hope in God, centred on Jesus Christ and relayed to us by the Holy Spirit tells us that despite the state of the world systems, God has been establishing His kingdom. Spiritual hope gives us the

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assurance that God is progressing His agenda and one day, His people will see all wrongs righted and justice will prevail for all eternity. That is the hope that is based on God's reality. It is the only kind of hope that will give us foundation for the other spiritual essentials we need to do our 'Master's will'.

Questions

- 1a Is it an exaggeration to say that everyone needs hope to get through life?
 - b. Has Christian hope a basis in reality?
2. If you could only pick one thing from the grocery store, what would it be and why did you pick it?

WEEK 2: FAITH

The theme of spiritual food as found in Heaven's grocery store gives unlimited scope for Bible studies. And just as food items have to be blended together to provide sustenance for our physical lives, so these spiritual essentials have to be blended with one another to enable our spiritual lives to grow and develop to maturity. And what has to be first blended with hope is faith. Faith is one of those Christian words that trip so easily off the tongue. And I think I'm right in saying that when faith is mentioned in Christian conversation, there is an assumption that everyone involved knows exactly what is being talked about. But do we really? If a person in the conversation suddenly asked questions like: But what exactly is faith? Where does it come from? Why do I need it to be a Christian? How do I get it? How do I know I have it? How does it supposed to work in my Christian experience? What does it mean to 'live by faith' etc - How would you answer those kinds of questions? Personally, I would have a lot of difficulty trying to answer them in any coherent way, because, I see faith permeating every aspect of Christianity, which is itself a religion often referred to as a 'faith'. It is possible that even trying to give a precise definition that covers how faith influences and affects all aspects of Christianity, might never give all the answers to satisfy all the questions people may ask about it. Yet, since faith is a spiritual essential, we do need to attempt to understand something about its nature and its place in our Christian lives. Fortunately, when we accept that the only place we can go to get understanding is the Word of God, then we have access to all the basic aspects of faith that we need to know to be able to live in faith.

The first thing that has to be accepted is that, like the basic ingredient of hope, faith is a work of God in our lives. It cannot be obtained by self-effort. Even the ability to accept that we get our information about faith from the Bible by accepting it as the infallible Word of God only can only happen when God has given us that ability to believe it.

Romans 10:9-10 & 17 If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. 10 For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are

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saved..... Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ.

John 15:26 (NIV) “When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father—the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father—he will testify about me.

“The vilest offender who truly believes, that moment from Jesus a pardon receives.”

Now, even explaining how that happens is not straightforward but these references help us understand where the ability to have faith starts. Paul clearly states in Romans, faith cannot come unless people have first heard or had access to, the preaching and teaching of the gospel. Paul then goes on to state that while faith requires that people need to hear the message, faith is only made possible when there is a human response to it. While the Holy Spirit can open the doors for its communication and empower those who use all the means of dissemination of the gospel message, what He will not do is force people ‘confess with their mouths’ and ‘believe in their hearts’ the truths of the gospel. What He can do, however, is provide the assurance of the possession of faith, which is the belief in and being conviction that what is revealed in the Word of God is true. Once people are exposed to the message of the gospel, if they provide the willingness to accept it as divine truth, then faith immediately becomes a living and active part of the person’s heart and mind. The Holy Spirit cannot provide this kind of faith to those whose minds and hearts are already set on rejecting the truth of what they hear.

The text in John also makes clear that the essence of sin is disbelief in the truth of God’s word, which amounts to a rejection of Jesus’ role in God’s plan of salvation. That role started when He entered the world to seek and to save the lost. He did so by highlighting the awful sinfulness of the world, the need for righteousness if people were to be restored to a right relationship with God and thereby receive the gift of eternal life; and the judgement to come if they refused to accept God’s offer of salvation through Him. Hence, faith comes by fixing one’s belief, trust and reliance upon, the Person and work of Christ, as the only hope of salvation. The book of Acts records, that empowered by the Holy Spirit, this message of the Person and work of Christ, the invitation to respond to the offer of salvation, and the consequences of refusing or rejecting it, spread throughout the known world through the apostles, Paul, and those who shared their mission. Two thousand years later that same message, in the power of the Spirit, is still being preached and taught all over the world. Moreover, the dissemination of that message is being broadcast, not just by word of mouth, but by every means of communication possible in our world. Never in the history of the world has there been greater opportunity for spreading the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Sadly, there are still too few people accepting its truth and coming to a living faith in a living Saviour.

A major obstacle is that in our modern society, people want physical and empirical evidence before they will even consider believing what the Bible teaches. This was a recognised fact of life even 2000 years ago. That is why when the writer of the Hebrews needed to teach his community about faith, he gave the most concise and precise definition of it.

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Hebrews 11:1 (KJV) Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.

Hebrews 11:1 (NIV) Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.

Hebrews 11:1 (ASV) Now faith is assurance of things hoped for, a conviction of things not seen.

Hebrews 11:6 (NIV) And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.

Like the writer to the Hebrews, although they are unseen with physical eyes, we are justified in seeing hope and faith as inextricably bound together. Faith needs to be added to hope because they complement and strengthen each other. It is absolutely essential to add faith to hope because without it, none of the rest of the what is promised to us in Christ can be appreciated or appropriated as we live our lives as Christians. A measure of how essential it is to augment hope with faith is the fact that, without the combination of these two basic spiritual essentials, we cannot even claim to be Christians. In practical terms, our spiritual testimony collapses, because we cannot give anyone a reason for the hope that is in us if we do not have faith in what we say to them.

Although the wording of these versions of the Bible differ, the points they make about faith are exactly the same and help us to build up a picture of faith in Christian terms. When we talk about something of substance, we usually mean something that has a reality and/or is an essential quality of something. As 'substance', faith, therefore, exists. Chapter 11 in Hebrews showed its existence through the characters who hoped and had faith in all that God had promised to them personally and had done for them as a result of their belief in those promises, and had prophesied about their nation. In the New Testament, its existence is evidenced in the fact that although having no knowledge of the completed atoning work of Christ's death and resurrection, during His lifetime, people put their faith in Him. Hebrews 11:6 tells us that without faith it is impossible to please God. And God can only be pleased if the focus and object of that faith is His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. In the New Testament, it was the presence of this kind of faith focused solely on the Person of Christ that resulted in some of the healing miracles while Jesus was on earth. Matthew records the faith of the centurion in 8:10, that of the friends who lowered the paralysed man down through the roof (9:2), the woman's haemorrhage (9:2) and giving sight to the blind men (9:29-30). Conversely, it was the lack of faith of people of Capernaum that prevented Jesus performing many miracles there. The faith of these people was not based on the atoning work of Christ at Calvary, but on the belief that this itinerant Preacher and Teacher had been sent by God and was endowed with the power of God to conduct His earthly ministry, which included miracles of healing. It was the Person of Jesus alone which inspired this faith and further evidence of their belief comes in the records where the title 'Son of David' is used. The blind men called on Jesus' mercy as

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the 'Son of David'. The Syro-Phoenician woman who sought healing for her daughter addressed Him as 'Lord' and 'Son of David'. Mark records Bartimaeus, who also was healed of blindness shouted out so loudly and persistently 'Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me' - that Jesus stopped and asked him what he wanted Jesus to do for him. On that occasion too, Jesus said faith had been the cause of his healing. Here is an example of a person physically without sight but who had the inner sight of faith to recognise and believe that Jesus was God's divinely appointed agent on earth. The 'Son of David' title was also an implicit acknowledgement that Jesus was the Promised Messiah. For all in the post-resurrection centuries, those who heard or have knowledge of the complete gospel, faith exists in the confidence and assurance Christians have that all they have become and have been promised because they are 'in Christ', will one day become a tangible, visible reality. Faith becomes the firm foundation for belief, trust and reliance in the spiritual reality of the things of God we cannot yet experience with our five senses. It is because of the conviction of the truth of God's word revealed to us in the New Testament that we are prepared to accept what we cannot see in the present, but hope to see in the future.

We then have to consider that if we are convinced that faith exists and that it points us to the reality of the existence of an unseen spiritual realm, is this the evidence that real, living, saving faith is at work in us? A positive answer to that question is evidenced by faith that turns our focus from the things of the world to the things of God.

John 16:13-15 (NIV) 13 But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. 14 He will glorify me because it is from me that he will receive what he will make known to you. 15 All that belongs to the Father is mine. That is why I said the Spirit will receive from me what he will make known to you."

John 14:16-17 & 26 (NIV) And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever— 17 the Spirit of truth.....But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. ...

James 1:6-8 (NIV) But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. 7 That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. 8 Such a person is double-minded and unstable in all they do.

We begin to realise that the world's systems and the world's values pale into insignificance when compared to the glory of God's eternal kingdom. That does not mean that everything and everybody in the world no longer mean anything to us. It means that we start to see all that is connected to our lives in this world in the light of eternity, and our attention is given to how God wants us to live our lives in word, thought and deed in the light of that. A statement in the Evangelical Dictionary article on faith asserts - "To place one's trust (faith)

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in Jesus is to open the door for radical change in the meaning of life itself.”² Again, that comes as our faith submits to the leading of the Holy Spirit who directs, guides, empowers and galvanises our whole being to live for Christ. That is why, regardless of what circumstances we find ourselves in, the faith that will sustain us will be the belief of the presence of Christ with us in the Person of His promised Spirit. Once this belief and trust is firmly established, our lives start to manifest the faith we profess. It has been said that faith is an attitude of mind which then involves activity. That is why, faith takes us from belief, to what it means in practice. It is the meat that takes us beyond the basic tenets of faith, which also includes becoming aware of the dangers to faith and the effort we need to make to stand firm in it.

Faith is not simply believing what the Bible says about God, Christ and their interaction with this world through the Holy Spirit. Faith may begin as a spiritual attitude of mind, but it is established by actual forms of activity which contribute to the increase and strengthening of that confidence, assurance and conviction in the truths of the gospel. Faith becomes active when it accepts and believes all that the Bible teaches about Jesus. But, in this day and age, when doubts about the existence of Jesus as a real human being and debates about whether or not there was a physical resurrection from the dead, are circulating even within Christian circles, Christians have a choice to make. When it comes to what the Bible says about Jesus, you cannot pick and choose what to have faith in and what to have reservations about, or not believe at all. Although stated in the context of prayer, the point James makes is very relevant to faith, because logically, if you didn't have faith that believed God existed and answered prayer, you wouldn't bother praying. Doubt undermines these basic premises of faith, especially since Christians have been told to pray 'in Jesus' Name'. Doubts about any aspect of what has been revealed by God about His Son Jesus Christ results in a person being “double-minded”; one who leaves him/herself open to being swayed by any old or new theory or speculation about the whole Christ event. When Peter took his eyes off Jesus, he began to sink and would have drowned had not Jesus saved him. His doubt serves as an illustration that doubt is a perennial and pernicious enemy because, unless used constructively to sincerely seek to learn and understand more about Jesus, it can actually lead to the destruction of our Christian lives.

However, when Jesus promised the coming of the Holy Spirit, He was providing us with the power to hold on to the kind of faith that believes the Bible gives us the truth about Him and all that He taught while He was on earth. The Holy Spirit, in a sense, is faith's inner sight and insight that enables Christians to see the invisible things of God. Jesus' words to the disciples make clear that the truths conveyed to us by the Holy Spirit come directly from Him. When Jesus said that it is the work of the Holy Spirit to convince us of the truth of what is said about sin, righteousness and judgement (vv8-11), faith believes what is said about these things in the whole of the Bible. With faith in what God had revealed to them in the Old Testament

² Evangelical Dictionary. Article on Faith (p238)

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and what Jesus had taught them about His role in the plans of God, faith became active in the evangelistic and missionary activity that we find in the book of Acts. It is here too that we find faith underpins every other aspect of Christianity.

Acts 2:38 (NIV) Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."

Acts 4:12 (NIV) Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved."

In the preaching and teaching of the first Christians, faith gave the assurance of our spiritual status before God as a result of basing that belief and reliance on Jesus' past earthly ministry, His present position in heaven; His rulership of the Kingdom of God on earth, and His future coming to establish that kingdom for all eternity. It was this faith in action that resulted in the emergence of the church. 'The Name of Jesus' became the standard expression for everything that was said and done in matters of salvation and the people and events that progressed the spread of the gospel. The verses mentioned sum up the gospel. As you read through Acts you will also find that faith is connected to the Holy Spirit, repentance, confession, forgiveness, baptism, grace, healing, justification and sanctification. If faith is the basis of all these developments in the Christian life, both individually and corporately, it can be seen that, faith is an absolute essential for the growth and development of the Christian, both individually and corporately.

Acts also sets the precedent for the activity of faith in practical Christian service.

Acts 6:3-4 (NIV) Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word."

Acts 11:28-30 (NIV) One of them, named Agabus, stood up and through the Spirit predicted that a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman world. (This happened during the reign of Claudius.) 29 The disciples, as each one was able, decided to provide help for the brothers and sisters living in Judea. 30 This they did, sending their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul.

James 2:14-26 (NIV) What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? 15 Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. 16 If one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? 17 In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. 18 But someone will say, "You have faith; I have deeds." Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by my deeds.

Acts 6 records the dissent that arose due to the complaint that the widows of Grecian Jews were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food (v1). It was clear that the apostles

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had to prioritise the ministry of the word and so it was decided that others should be appointed to take responsibility for this practical service. The chief qualification was that those chosen should be full of faith. We see a further connection between faith and practical service in Acts chapter 11. As a result of Agabus' prediction of the severe famine which spread over the whole Roman world in the reign of Claudius, (sometime between AD41 and 54), a collection was made to help the Christians in Judea, verse 30 stating the gift was brought there by Barnabas and Saul. But it is James, who was the head of the Jerusalem church, that explicitly states the relationship between faith and practical service. He is, in effect, telling his audience to follow the practice first started in that church. That is, if by faith, a person professes to be a Christian, then that faith should manifest itself in practical ways especially where a physical need is obvious, and people are suffering through lack of the basic necessities of life. James gives the example of faith in action in obedience to loving and, therefore, providing for the neighbour in need.

Unfortunately, while faith in Jesus Christ was changing the world, not everyone in the world welcomed the change. And as the church extended, the opposition to the faith increased in intensity.

1 Peter 5:8-9 (NIV) Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. 9 Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that the family of believers throughout the world is undergoing the same kind of sufferings.

James 1:2-3 (NIV) Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, 3 because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. (Diaspora)

1 Timothy 6:12 (NIV) Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made your good confession in the presence of many witnesses.

2 Timothy 4:5-7 (NIV) But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry. 6 For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time for my departure is near. 7 I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.

Four hundred years before Christ was born, Plato, a pagan philosopher, nevertheless recognised that faith was spiritual essential to endure and persevere in a hostile world. And it was in the hostility of his Graeco-Roman world that Christianity emerged. Although different to the kinds of hostility in Plato's world, what Christians faced demanded all the faith they could muster.

The church was bombarded by heresy within, which Paul calls Jewish myths (Titus 1:12-14) and "hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the

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elemental spiritual forces of this world rather than on Christ” (Colossians 2:8). External hostility came in the form of verbal, political, social, economic and physical persecution, in some cases leading to death, all of which is depicted in graphic form in the book of Revelation. But in the face of all of this, Christians were exhorted to activate their faith by taking courage, being strong and standing firm. (1 Corinthians 16:13). The writer to the Hebrews giving Christ as the example, warns against complacency and laziness (6:11-12) while Paul states Christians need to examine and test themselves to see whether they are in the faith (2 Corinthians 13:5). Paul warns Timothy of things that could destroy and turn people away from the faith. Tolerance of false doctrine was a particular threat (1 Timothy 1:3-6). Paul actually names two men Hymenaeus and Alexander, who rejected true teaching and thus “suffered shipwreck with regard to faith” (1 Timothy 1:18-20). The love of money was another lure from the faith (1 Timothy 6:10), and it was in view of these kinds of threats that Timothy is urged to fight the good fight of faith. Bearing in mind that the words to Timothy were written from a prison where Paul was facing death, it is clear that it was his faith that brought him through all the hardships he had faced during his missionary journeys, and what was sustaining him in his present trials.

Time simply does not permit reference to the many, many more verses about faith which illustrate and explain the aspects of it mentioned in this talk. But, those that have been quoted clearly show that, far from being a vague or passive notion about belief alone, faith is a real and living feature of Christian life which can produce tangible and visible evidence of its existence. And all that faith is and all it accomplishes in the personal life of a Christian and in the work they do in the world because of possessing it starts and ends with these words of Jesus – the Author and Perfecter of faith

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

It is only when we do that, that the words of Corrie Ten Boom** take on meanings that only the spiritual essential of faith can understand – the existence of God giving the world a Saviour, in the Person of His Son, who was willing to voluntarily die a horrific death to reconcile rebellious enemies to God, and to give them the gift of eternal life.

** Faith sees the invisible, believes the unbelievable, receives the impossible.

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WEEK 3: UNDERSTANDING & WISDOM

First I got some Patience and a bag or two of Faith
And Understanding, a basic need, so the Holy Spirit saith.
I got a box of Wisdom, Strength and Courage for life's race;

Although the 'Grocery Store' lists the spiritual essentials as individual items, in the Christian life they are all blended together and are interdependent. All have to be integrated into our lives if we are to increasingly become more Christ-like, which is the ultimate goal of Christian maturity. As we saw last week, faith is a priority when it comes to spiritual essentials and it comes by hearing. But other things have to be added to faith if we are to progressively become like our Master and to do His will throughout our lives. As St Anselm wrote – faith that comes from hearing the gospel leads to a desire to know more about the things of God, and the more we know about God and His Christ the more we come to understand what He has revealed to us in His word. Summing up, Anselm states that if he did not believe in the first place, he would not understand anything that was said in Scripture about what he believed. So when the Grocery Store puts understanding on the shelf, it begs the questions – Why is it a basic need and why is wisdom next to it on the shelf?

There are a lot of things about what the Bible means by understanding that Christians need to be aware of. First and foremost, human nature is not capable of spiritual understanding. As will be said many times, without the help of the Holy Spirit, we could have knowledge of every word written in the Bible, yet have no understanding of their meanings and how they should affect the way we live.

Secondly, without the inspiration of the Holy Spirit the Scriptures would not exist. Without those Scriptures, we would have no knowledge or understanding of God. Both Luke and John, explicitly state that this is the prime motivation behind the production of their gospels.

Luke 1:1-4 (NIV) Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, 2 just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. 3 With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, 4 so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.

John 20:31 (NIV) But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

In spite of other people having already written about the Christ event, Luke, states he has carefully considered all that has already been written about Jesus, together with oral

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information given by the eye witnesses to the events of His life, in order to give Theophilus certainty about what he has been taught about the Christian faith. Both the gospel and the book of Acts were written by Luke to fulfil this single purpose. John shares the same purpose giving examples of the kind of knowledge and understanding needed to increase the faith of believers in the Person of Christ and in all that has been promised to them through belief in Him. It is the knowledge of the certainty of what Luke records that will enable Theophilus to come to an understanding of Jesus being the prophesied Messiah, sent by God to redeem the world and grant believers eternal life. The purpose, explicitly expressed by Luke and John, is implicit in all the works of the other New Testament writers. They wanted to provide the information to give their audiences the understanding of what the coming of Christ into the world meant for salvation, for the way they should live in this life, while looking forward to eternity when that life came to an end through death.

Thirdly, it is only the dynamic of the Holy Spirit that gives you the desire to understand God's word and brings you here tonight. Having believing faith you want to understand more about what God has revealed in His word. It was the Holy Spirit who put that desire there.

Luke 9:44-45 (NIV) Listen carefully to what I am about to tell you: The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men." 45 But they did not understand what this meant. It was hidden from them, so that they did not grasp it, and they were afraid to ask him about it.

Matthew 11:27 (NIV) "All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.

1 John 5:20 (NIV) We know also that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true. And we are in him who is true by being in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life.

Now we may think there are things we don't understand, because there is no point in denying that some parts of the Bible are difficult. So, it's good to know that even Jesus' disciples didn't understand Him at times. The verse in Luke, is also recorded in Matthew and Mark. The disciples did not understand this first prediction about His death which came just after Peter, James and John had witnessed the Transfiguration of Jesus and the appearance of Moses and Elijah with Him. After His resurrection, too, Jesus had to open the minds of the men on the Emmaus Road and the disciples so that they could understand the Scriptures referring to Him. That is what we have to apply our minds to as well.

Christianity is the only world religion that gives the knowledge and understanding of a God who knows who belongs to Him and who, in turn, have been given His revealed word in order that they may know Him. Way back in 1982, Dan DeHaan wrote a book called "The God You Can Know". It's one I go back to every so often to remind me of the who, the what, the how and the why John states that the only truth worth believing and basing our lives upon, ©Greenfield Baptist Church, Llanelli.

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is knowing and understanding God through all that has been revealed through the Person and work of Jesus Christ. Jesus' words in Matthew explicitly state that there is a mutual, intimate and complete knowledge between God the Father and God the Son. Therefore, the more we know and understand about the life and work of Christ, the more we will know and understand the God who worked through Him to save the world from the consequences of sin and grant eternal life to those who put their faith in Him.

Fourthly, however, there is one danger to proper understanding that we need to be aware of. Because we are blessed in this country by having free access to all versions of the Bible and all the various forms of media broadcasting and disseminating its words, we have a personal responsibility in respect of making sure that our understanding is based on what the Bible actually teaches.

Colossians 2:4 & 8 (NIV) I tell you this so that no one may deceive you by fine-sounding arguments.... See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the elemental spiritual forces of this world rather than on Christ.

2 Peter 3:15-16 (NIV) Bear in mind that our Lord's patience means salvation, just as our dear brother Paul also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction.

There are so many persuasive Christian voices in radio and TV broadcasting, in print and online sites, that it can be difficult to know which are promoting true Bible teaching. It might be some comfort to you to know that this is not a new problem. Paul's fury (and that's not an exaggeration) at the Galatians was caused by them believing a 'different gospel' i.e. that faith in Christ had to be accompanied by circumcision. These two verses are examples of how new ideas and interpretations, some leading to heresy, had crept into the early church. The gospel in the Colossian church was being affected by a clamour of new and different interpretations of the gospel. Even Peter admits that while there were things in Paul's writings that were difficult to understand, nevertheless, what people did know of them was being distorted by those who had no true understanding of what was being preached and taught. That is why Paul warned Timothy that studying to come to a proper understanding of God's word was a work that required time, effort and dedication. Timothy was urged elsewhere (2 Timothy 2:4), that a soldier did not get entangled in civilian affairs but tried to please his commanding officer. He exhorted Timothy to guard the gospel he had been given because a lot of godless chatter and opposing of ideas of what is falsely called knowledge was infiltrating the church, leading to disruption and ungodly practice within it (1 Timothy 6:20). God has a zero tolerance policy of those who falsify or distort what is taught in Scripture to suit their own agendas. In a very practical sense, real understanding involves taking the apostle John's advice to test the spirits to see whether or not they are from God, because even in his day many false prophets had gone out into the world (1 John 4:1).

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Fifthly, understanding is absolutely essential if we want to acquire spiritual wisdom but the question here is – How are the two connected?

1 John 2:3 (NIV) We know that we have come to know him if we keep his commands.

Romans 12:2 (NIV) Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.

Wisdom that comes from understanding involves our doing. We can look at this connection in two ways. Bridging the gap between understanding and wisdom is obedience. Understanding what God wants of us involves our thinking. It involves the 'renewing' of our minds which directs them towards the things of God and not the social norms and values of the world. It involves thinking through God's will for our conduct in word, thought and deed. Understanding then takes us to the place where we act according to all that Jesus has commanded. When we do that we've bridged the gap and reached wisdom.

But we've got to renew our mind because Einstein spoke true when he stated that the problems of our world cannot be solved by the same kind of thinking that created them in the first place. All our problems today stem from the fact that Adam and Eve chose to act according to human thinking, ignoring God's warning of consequences if they disobeyed the only prohibition He had placed on their existence. And would we be here tonight if Jesus had heeded Peter's plea for Him not to go to Jerusalem, especially as Jesus had already predicted He would be crucified there? Peter's common sense, human thinking recognised going in the opposite direction would have been the wisest course of action to avoid that fate. But Jesus acted according to His knowledge and understanding of what God's intentions for His life and work were and what they meant for the salvation of the world. Even though it meant His death, Jesus by obedience to God's will demonstrated the meaning of wisdom. As Paul stated in 1 Corinthians 1:30 (NIV) it is because of the choice Jesus made, that we are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption.

Thankfully, we don't need to be an Einstein to be able to understand Jesus' formula for wisdom. You all know the story Jesus told of the two builders and the consequences of building on rock and sand. What most people do not notice is that the wisdom of the man who built on rock was conditional on not just hearing Jesus' words, but putting them into practice. The Christian rock is the gospel of Jesus Christ, so hearing it plus understanding it plus obeying it equals wisdom. Christ exemplified wisdom by combining knowledge, understanding and obedience to God's will even when it took Him to a cross. In the final analysis, the ultimate test of whether or not we have spiritual wisdom is if we can say we have combined our knowledge and understanding of Scripture with obedience to what it has revealed to us. Unless we adopt this formula for our lives, we will never possess spiritual wisdom.

Unfortunately, the bad news is, this is much easier said than done.

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Romans 7:18-19 & 22-23 (NIV) For I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. 19 For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing..... For in my inner being I delight in God’s law; 23 but I see another law at work in me, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within me.

Matthew 7:7-8 (NIV) “Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. 8 For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened.

James 1:5 & 3:13 (NIV) If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you..... Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom.

This was something even the apostle Paul struggled with. He recognised that although in his inner being he delighted in understanding God’s word and had the desire to be obedient to it, he kept failing. He recognised there was a battle going on in his mind and it was a daily battle to do God’s will. Most of the time as Christians, we can clearly see the difference between right and wrong actions and have the wisdom to choose the right option. Yet, there are also times when, sometimes in difficult situations, we feel either we have no choice as to how to act, or have only the choice of the lesser of two evils. What if we have to act but do not know which option is the wiser course of action?

As James tells us and Jesus exhorts us, we have to ask for wisdom and seek wisdom. It is a prayer that God is more than willing to answer, for God never stints in His giving. We are promised that if we seek we will find it, because imparting it to genuine seekers is a prime function of the Holy Spirit. Yet, as already said, although we can have knowledge of what the Word is, sometimes it’s hard to understand it, and that is why we have to persist in knocking on the door, until the Holy Spirit opens up its meaning to us. The whole purpose of the sermons and the Bible study sessions in the church is to provide the Spirit-aided means by which believers can be helped and encouraged to ask, seek and knock on the door so that God’s word can become a part of their very being. If you have genuinely sought God’s will, and acted on what gave the greater peace of mind about the decision you reached – then you have acted wisely in whatever the circumstances were.

What this also tells us is that wisdom is not a ‘one-off’ gift. Wisdom is something we need daily, so we have to ask for it daily. You face different circumstances every day of your life – physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually. That is why you need the understanding of God’s perspective on all that is going on in your life. God’s word speaks to every situation and circumstance facing you as an individual, the church corporately and humanity in general. That is why Jesus told us that *‘Man shall not live by bread alone but by*

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every word that proceeds from the mouth of God'; and taught us to pray to be given daily bread which will enable us to live wisely each day. In James' words, that means showing by the way we live our lives that we have the wisdom that can only come from the knowledge and understanding we have of God's ways and purpose for our lives.

That brings us to what our responsibility is knowing what we do about the connection between understanding, obedience and wisdom. First, we have to recognise that that spiritual wisdom does not come naturally. Like hope and faith, God given wisdom has to be cultivated. We do that by co-operating with God in striving to become more like Christ.

2 Peter 1:3 & 5-8 (NIV) His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness... For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; 6 and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; 7 and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love. 8 For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Anyone who has a true understanding of the Person and work of Christ appreciates how He made wise choices in spite of the opposition and hostility He faced. So, conforming to His character takes priority. This passage from 2 Peter gives details of the Christian lifestyle attributes that should develop as a result of their understanding of the gospel of Christ. The list starts with faith then adds, goodness, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, mutual affection and love. They are comparable to the fruit of the Spirit which Paul describes in Galatians 5:22- 23. Paul's exhortation to the Corinthians applies to us as well. We need to examine and test ourselves to ensure we are in the faith because Christ is in us (2 Corinthians 13:5).

It is possible for every Christian from the child who has reached the age of understanding to the oldest person alive, to have spiritual wisdom. The formula is simple, live your life in accordance with the knowledge and understanding of God's word. Because the Holy Spirit is your personal trainer, guide and teacher, that means Christians will be at different levels in applying this formula. That's why Jesus told Christians not to judge each other as to our spirituality. However, because the Holy Spirit is present to help believers, there is no excuse for not seeking more understanding of God's word. The activity of wisdom in this sense is a matter of choice.

And we do have the help we need to add these things to our knowledge.

1 Corinthians 15:1 (NIV) Now, brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand.

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2 Timothy 1:6 (NIV) For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands.

Regardless of age, normal minds cannot remember, and immediately recall, all the knowledge and understanding we absorb in the course of our ordinary lives. The amount of information now available to us from what we get even just from conversations, to the astronomical content of the internet, means we have to make a choice of what knowledge we value most. It's the job of the Holy Spirit to give us recall of the appropriate words for each situation we encounter, but we have to make the choice between focusing our attention on the wisdom that comes from the knowledge and understanding of God's word, or the kind of wisdom that comes from the knowledge and understanding of the world's ways. Given the state of our world, there would appear to be 'no-contest', but, unfortunately, the majority of earth's inhabitants do not see it that way. In order to filter out the 'chatter' of the world, we need to be regularly reminded of the whole revelation of God's plans and purposes, especially as they all centre on the Lord Jesus Christ. It is because Christians today have so many ways of accessing the word of God, that we need to keep using any means at our disposal to keep reminding ourselves of all the essential truths of our faith. We have been given much - spiritual wisdom demands we make use of it. Even a spark in the embers of a fire can be fanned into a flame. And we have seen the effect of forest fires when the flames have been fanned by strong winds. It makes you think what effect Christianity could have, and how it could spread in the world today, if every individual believer kept on fanning the flames of hearing, understanding and obeying the word of God and witnessing to the gospel by their actions and lifestyle.

And there are serious reasons why we need to follow the formula.

Romans 13:11-14 (NIV) And do this, understanding the present time: The hour has already come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed.

1 Peter 4:17 (NIV) For it is time for judgment to begin with God's household; and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who do not obey the gospel of God?

Both Paul and Peter clearly state that once we have knowledge of God's word and understand the implications of it for our Christian lives, we have to take seriously that our salvation is even nearer now than when Paul wrote to the Romans nearly 2000 years ago. God's salvific plans and purposes are 2000 years closer to their fulfilment. The world in general is already under judgement for rejecting Christ. The kingdom of God on earth, the church, is already under divine judgement as to whether or not it is fulfilling its commission to preach and teach the good news of the true, unadulterated gospel of Jesus Christ; and to make disciples of those who come to faith accordingly. But, on the other hand, this negativity is balanced by the fact that Jesus promised great blessing to those who continue in their quest for knowledge, understanding and the way of obedience to all that is revealed about God and His Christ in His word. That amounts to the 'hunger and thirst for righteousness' mentioned in the Sermon on

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the Mount. For that reason, understanding and wisdom will always be spiritual essentials, throughout the whole of our Christian lives, especially when it is bolstered and encouraged by the love and grace we'll look at next week.

WEEK 4: LOVE and GRACE

My basket then was getting full, but I needed Love and Grace.

The hardest part of preparing these talks is not deciding what to include, but what to leave out. Mention of these two spiritual essentials brought that difficulty into sharp focus. We could have spent the whole 6 weeks, if not more, exploring the NT use of the terms as separate spiritual needs. Add to that the fact their link with each other in being attributes of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, as well as being inextricably integrated into the other essentials of hope, faith, knowledge, understanding and wisdom, and some desperation sets in about how you deal with them in one talk. There is also a problem because both these terms are used in so many different contexts that their exact meaning is hard to pin down. Now, I'm assuming that you don't want me to go on about the problems, but want some solutions instead.

I can provide some relevant information, but have to compare this contribution to not just the tip of the iceberg, but the tip of the tip of it. Tonight, for example, you are here because you already know and understand the need for spiritual sustenance and have the wisdom to use the means to get it. You know Christians are called to live differently to the rest of the world and in order to do so, we need all the spiritual support God provides for us. Peter tells us we need to be reminded of these things even though we know them (2 Peter 1:12). Paul reminds us that the "depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God" are unsearchable (Romans 11:3), so there will always be something more to be learned about not just love and grace, but all the other spiritual essentials which are the means by which we develop as Christians. In Paul's prayer, for example, love is said to abound more when it is engaged in gaining the knowledge and depth of insight to discern the right way to live.

What is not immediately apparent in this verse is that the love Paul is referring to is the mutual love between him and the Philippian church, which has given him much support during his imprisonment in Rome. He makes it obvious, however, that the primary focus of their love should be Jesus Christ, which translates into giving glory and praise to God. Paul thus directs their attention to the source of love itself. We all know that God is love and John 3:16 is probably one of the most well-known verses in the New Testament. Unfortunately, simply stating that 'God is love' is probably one of the most misunderstood statements in preaching and teaching, for the world will immediately retaliate by questioning why a God of love allows so many evil things to happen in the world. Even Christians find it difficult to see God as a God of love when bad things happen to good people. What answer can we give when terrorists, quite literally, get away with brutal murder, when Christian lives are cut short by disease or

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accidents? Much of our confusion and questioning stems from the fact that the world has a different perception of what love means in Biblical terms. It is also likely that the world will not accept God's version of love because it involves recognising that loving the world enough to send Jesus to die to save it, also involves judgement for those who reject that love. That is why we need to be reminded of what the Bible teaches us about the love of God.

I've mentioned before that the Greek language has four words for love, each with a specific target. It is true that the word 'storge' which refers to family love, is not found in the Bible. But 1 Peter 2:17 explicitly exhorts his readers to "love the family of believers"; and in 5:9 he mentions standing firm in the faith with the 'family of believers' who are suffering throughout the world. Hebrews 2:11 is even more direct, because this writer states that the One who makes people holy and those who are made holy are of the same family, adding, "so Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters. John endorses this statement by insisting that anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister. Given the perception that the NT writers had of believers being a family of faith, it can be said that the 'storge' form of love has been conflated with and subsumed into the 'philia' kind. As the definition explains it is the kind of love that Christians practice towards one another. It is the type of love that is manifested best in respect for and tolerance of one another, and being willing to give help and support when, where and how it is required. It is the type of love that extends not just to fellow Christians, but to all peoples wherever in the world they may be.

Eros type of love is the kind of love that dominates our world because it appeals to our five senses – seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling and feeling, either physically or emotionally. This kind of love is motivated by self-gratification. Eros love is only invested in the things of life which John in the Message version of the Bible calls wanting your own way, wanting everything for yourself and wanting to appear important. In other words, love is invested only in the things that conform to the current social norms and values of the world. Ultimately, it is love of self.

And that brings us to the highest and most noble form of love – the love of God which is 'agape' love. This love is not simply an emotion; it is eminently practical. It does break God's heart to see His world in the state it is in. That is why He has taken steps to offer the salvation which it cannot acquire for itself. Very bluntly put, God sees a humanity cursed by sin, an unimaginable affront to what He created in His own image as holy and pure and righteous and just. Yet, in spite of human rejection and rebellion, God still loves the people He created. In practice, His love is expressed in the fact that He sees humanity, not just unable, but also incapable of saving itself. It is unable because it cannot gain salvation by its own efforts. It is incapable because Satan has blinded the eyes of people to the truth of God. God's love recognised that only divine intervention could make sinful humanity fit for heaven, living eternally in His presence. God is not willing for any to perish but for all to have eternal life. Hence, the sacrifice of Himself in the Person of His Son Jesus Christ.

What God the Father and God the Son went through spiritually, and in terms of physical

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suffering in that battle to save our souls from a lost eternity, is beyond any human concept of the meaning of love. Paul spoke the truth when he said c2000 years ago that very few people would be prepared to die even to save a really good person. None of us can even claim to know such a person, because in the eyes of God, every sin from a lie to mass murder, means every human being has fallen short of the glory of God. Without Christ we were those people, we are the sinners God lavished His love upon and a pictorial measure of it is the vastness and the depth of the ocean. And, the truth is, God's love will never diminish or fade. Nothing can separate us from it, in spite of the fact that we still are all sinners, saved only by the love of God demonstrated by the atoning, sacrificial death of the Lord Jesus Christ on a cross at Calvary c2000 years ago.

That's where grace comes in. That is why we can say with conviction that we possess 'God's riches at Christ's expense. It is "God's redemptive and cleansing envelopment". The 'loving kindness' that pours through the floodgates of God's mercy as a vast and gracious tide, brings us to what we need to know and understand about grace.

As the love of God has shown, it comes at a price, nothing less than the death of His beloved Son. When you realise what sin did to Christ, you get a better picture of the conflict between God's holiness and sin. The enormity of cost to God cannot be estimated in human terms, yet it costs humanity nothing. It cannot be earned and we don't deserve it. We speak and sing of the love and grace of God and Christ, and take them for granted, yet we sometimes never really stop to think about their importance and implications for our lives spiritually. Paul speaks of God not sparing His only Son to secure our salvation. Peter reminds us that our redemption was costly, but goes on to speak of what we inherit as a result of it.

The Holy Spirit can give us insight to what our salvation cost, but it is beyond human ability to appreciate that to its fullest extent. The quote by Lamott perhaps sums it up because she says that we may not understand the mystery of grace, but we can know for certainty that it met us where we were, dead in trespasses and sin, but did not leave us there. Grace saved us. Through it we are "ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven". We have been transferred from being slaves of Satan in the realm of darkness to becoming children of God in the kingdom of light. As a new creation we are justified and sanctified, a new creation that already has the assurance of eternal life.

Knowing all that about love and grace, what should our response be? Both should help us to realise that we have been called to live a different lifestyle to that of the world in general.

Romans 12:1 (NIV) Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship.

Ephesians 2:10 (NIV) For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works,
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which God prepared in advance for us to do.

Ephesians 4:11-12 (NIV) 12 to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up

Philippians 2:13 (NIV) for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose.

Someone has said that grace is not a little prayer you say before receiving a meal, it's a way to live. Both love and grace gets the Christian to that point, but it takes love and grace to progress that life, by what has become known in the church as discipleship. Philip Yancy's book "What's So Amazing About Grace" gives many examples of believers' grace in action, but to my knowledge the most outspoken and adamant proponent of grace coupled with discipleship was Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the pastor hanged by the Nazis just a few days before the second world war ended. He spoke against the church for making grace cheap by not preaching and teaching discipleship. He took seriously Paul's words about becoming a living sacrifice, willing to die to self in order to serve Christ. And as the verses from Ephesians and Philippians show God has prepared in advance works of discipleship to build up the church and to do good in the world.

To do that, Jesus taught that the first principle of discipleship is love.

John 14:21 (NIV) Whoever has my commands and keeps them is the one who loves me. The one who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love them and show myself to them."

John 13:34-35 (NIV) "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. 35 By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

That love is first directed to Him and proved by the keeping of His commandments. Secondly, it then has to be channelled to others. What has to be emphasised is that the love Jesus speaks of is agape love. Although it may create emotions in us, to love God and to love others as ourselves is an act of will, because we will often be called upon to show love to the unlovely. Agape love manifests itself in obedience to God, as exemplified by Christ. We often say it is love for the sinner, while recognising and condemning the sin. It is the kind of love that calls sin and evil exactly what they are and voices objections to their influence and practice in society, just as the prophets of old and the writers of the New Testament did. At the same time, at an individual level it is love which seeks, in an appropriate manner, to rebuke and correct, as Paul did in his letters, with a view to bringing the wrong-doer to recognise their sin, repent of it and be reconciled to God. At a personal level, it is the kind of love that is willing to forgive the wrongs done to us and leaving judgement to God. By doing so we will enjoy the "envelopment" of God's grace. As Jesus states in John 21, this 'encloses' the believer into a three-way relationship. That is a spiritual relationship which is secure, permanent, unbreakable

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and eternal. This spiritual connection alone merits love and grace being classified as spiritual essentials.

Yet, we still have to go the extra mile by channelling that love and grace to others. Love and grace have been given to us as free gifts which are to be used for God's glory and the extension of Christ's kingdom on earth.

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.

Such are the needs of the world that we may feel we cannot do good to all people. D L Moody put that feeling into perspective. He recognised he was only one person who could not do everything. But he recognised that he could do something and resolved to do it. God only asks that we do what we can, where we are and as the Holy Spirit leads. Many "somethings" we can do cost nothing – a smile, kind word, a hug, a prayer. Other "somethings" can involve a cost in terms of time and/or using our abilities to help others and/or financially. Every time one or more of these assets is used to help someone else, we are serving Christ. Remember the 7 men 'full of faith' in Acts who were appointed just to distribute food to the Greek widows. Jesus makes it even simpler, stating just giving someone in need a cup of water will be rewarded in heaven. Paul in Galatians 6:9 tells us the one thing we should never weary in doing good, and as verse 10 states, to do so as God gives the opportunity. Someone said, 'when you give of your time, you give of your life.' That in itself, is an act of dying to self. But it is the gifts of love and grace that God has bestowed on us through Christ, that help us to bear that cost, because they play an absolutely essential role in doing good to all people. All God asks of us is that we do what we can, where we are, and in keeping with our age, strength and ability.

SLIDE 12

It can be seen that love and grace play an essential part in the process of becoming true disciples of Christ. Unlike faith, hope and wisdom which can be difficult concepts to define, there is no problem with love and grace. This list in plain language paraphrases Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 13. Patient, kind, not envious, boastful, proud or rude. Not self-seeking or easily angered. Keeping no record of wrongs means not bearing a grudge or holding on to resentment or a desire for revenge. Love abhors evil but loves to see the triumph of truth. It protects, trusts, hopes and perseveres and never fails. Love lasts forever, because when we reach heaven we will no longer have to walk by faith. We will be walking with the sight of the fulfilment of all that has been promised. We will no longer need hope because all our hopes of a blissful eternal existence will have been realised. But love will remain, because God is love and that will be the central ethos of the new heaven and new earth.

In the meantime, we still live in the light of God's grace. We need to manifest His generosity of spirit, which He manifests in His infinite capacity to tolerate us when we fail Him because His grace is bigger than our sins. Then He makes allowances to accommodate our weaknesses, in which His grace is made perfect (2 Corinthians 12:9). And above all else, to

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forgive our sins when we confess them and repent of them (1 John 1:9).

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.

Romans 8:37-39 (NIV) No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. 38 For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, 39 neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

From what has been said, it is clear that love and grace are indispensable ‘must-haves’ when we go spiritual shopping. Perhaps that is why Paul finished his letters with the words we are so familiar with at the end of services. It is only the love of God, the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ communicated to us through the fellowship of the Holy Spirit that make us ‘more than conquerors’ in our desire to return that love by living in accordance to the new commandment Jesus gave to His disciples, and extending that love and grace to others.

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WEEK 5: PEACE AND JOY

Peace and Joy were plentiful displayed on the last shelf;

Two more spiritual essentials for you this week and they are probably two of the most elusive ones to acquire and retain. They involve engagement with the mind and the heart and sometimes the two refuse to co-operate, resulting in the loss of both peace of mind and joy or happiness of heart.

It is probably true to say that there is no greater wealth in the world than peace of mind. We have a saying in Northern Ireland when the world is getting you down and/or someone is really annoying you. The usual response is 'just go away and give my head peace.' The saying is so common that the BBC even made a comedy sitcom in Northern Ireland with that title. It concerns a dysfunctional family consisting of both protestant and catholic members and when the bickering and the arguments start to involve 'Ma' her punch line is 'will yousuns (you ones) give my head peace.' When we look at our own communities, our country and around the world, there is very little contributing to giving our heads peace. Troubles of all kinds disturb our peace of mind to such an extent that stress and mental illness are now being taken seriously as public health issues. Additionally, our minds are constantly bombarded with noise and information in various forms no matter where we go. Even social media is said to be served by the 'chattering classes'. The world's answer to this search for the peace of mind that results in joy in living is through organisations like the UN and Peace and Reconciliation bodies, in meditation through yoga, mindfulness and other self-help avenues. While these may be helpful and useful in some situations, none can truly fulfil the hope of getting and keeping the peace of mind and joy that only come from a divine source.

What the world does not seem to have grasped, or has point blank refused to accept, is that in the final analysis, the only place to find peace of mind and the joy that accompanies it is from God through Christ and the Holy Spirit. One reason for the world's failure to understand or embrace Christian peace from this source is that, unfortunately, these two spiritual essentials are hard for Christians to explain to non-believers, because they are inner qualities that Christians can possess regardless of the circumstances they find themselves in. Another reason is that the only time the two seem to come together in the Christian calendar and in the eyes of the world at large, are at Christmas. Talking about peace first, for the unbeliever, emphasising peace on earth is more readily understood as the absence of conflict at home and abroad. It is the kind of peace that is manifested in the cessation of hostility ranging from those between family members to the stopping of actual wars, resulting in joy or happiness that nobody else is going to get hurt more or suffer more. However, like the biblical meaning of love, biblical peace, while including the meaning of absence of hostility, goes far beyond this aspect of it.

It is the Hebrew word Shalom which expresses the spectrum of what is involved in Biblical peace. Those who experience peace have, at the very least, the knowledge that God is

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present with them, even if their feelings do not reflect this fact. We have the divine promise that we will never be left or forsaken and Jesus stated explicitly He would be with us even to the end of the age. The fact of the indwelling Holy Spirit enables this to produce the holistic well-being physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually, which in turn should produce, according to the definition, harmony with every other created thing. While it is true that as human beings Christians can experience mental and emotional problems, at least they have the assurance that God is in control of their lives and His grace and strength can help them through them. That's where joy comes into its own.

Joy is said to be the settled assurance that God is in control of all the details of our lives. It gives a quiet confidence that ultimately everything will be alright, again because of the promise that all things work together for the good of those who love the Lord. Then thirdly, praising and thanking God in all things is not something to be determined by our feelings our circumstances, but is to be a determined choice because His promises, one way or another will be fulfilled in our experience.

This will happen because a Christian's peace and joy involve the pro-active involvement of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit and are intertwined with the other spiritual essentials like grace and hope. But first things first, you cannot expect a sense or realisation of peace and joy or the ways in which they relate to the other essentials if you do not have peace with God. The basic fact is that you cannot experience true spiritual peace until you are at peace with God through Jesus Christ.

Acts 10:36 (NIV) You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, announcing the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all.

Romans 5:1 (NIV) Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ,

2 Peter 1:2 (NIV) Grace and peace be yours in abundance through the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord.

Peace is connected to hope and knowledge and faith and grace. The preaching in Acts 10:36 was of the good news of peace. In 2 Peter 1:2 he states it comes through the knowledge of God and Jesus. Last week we looked at God's grace and love, the loving kindness that sent His beloved Son to die a horrendous death to atone for the sins of the world. For the first time in the history of the world, the good news of peace was that through faith in Jesus Christ, humanity was given the certain hope of believing in a salvation which promised eternal life. And it is only wisdom given by the knowledge and understanding of, and obedience to the things of God, that provide the basis for acquiring the peace with God comes through being in Christ. In a search for true peace and joy, it has to be recognised that this harmony and soundness of the whole person will never happen until humanity has a right relationship with God. In very practical terms, peace is a fruit of righteousness for justification by faith is God's

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forensic declaration that we are righteous in His eyes. He credits us with Christ's righteousness, because like Paul in Philippians 3:9, we cannot claim a righteousness of our own.

In the past when preachers and street evangelists urged people to 'Get right with God', this was not a mere slogan.

2 Thessalonians 3:16 (NIV) Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times and in every way. The Lord be with all of you.

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

Paul's words to the Thessalonians came in the context of being at peace with each other within the church there. Behind the simplicity of the words was the fact that until a person resolved to be at peace with others none of the benefits and blessings proceeding from all the other spiritual essentials could be given to him/her. These are just two verses illustrating what a blessing peace is. It is only as we do our part the peace that passes understanding will be given to us. Probably the only 'wholeness' we will sense is that this does 'settle us down', make us a bit calmer, with a sense of quiet confidence and contentment that God will work things out for our good. This is something as stated in 2 Thessalonians 3:16 applies at all times and in all ways.

We can be certain of this because the peace that we are given is Christ's peace. It is something that is promised to all the citizens of His kingdom.

John 14:27 & 16:33 (NIV) Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid..... "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."

What is so amazing about these statements is that Jesus make them in the knowledge that in just a few hours He would be arrested, humiliated and tortured, all of which would lead to a death by crucifixion. When Jesus contrasted His peace with that of the world, He was making it clear that what He was bequeathing to His disciples then, and to His followers since, was a peace that came from a divine source. If anyone had the right to a troubled, fearful heart at this point in time, it was the Lord Jesus. Yet, here He was exemplifying the inner serenity of knowing that God was in complete control and the greatest good would result from His coming ordeal. This is the kind of peace that comes through believing in Him, because it gives the believer the assurance of having a right relationship with God. And, as a result of that, all the other blessings of the promises of God would be ours, the ultimate one being eternal life. Let's face it, is there any kind of peace in this world that can give us this certainty that we have made

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the right life choice leading to the guarantee of an eternal, blissful existence in the presence of God and His Christ?

What is also amazing about these passages in the gospel of John, is that Jesus also speaks of His joy.

John 15:11-12 & 17:13 (NIV) I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. 12 My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you.....but I say these things while I am still in the world, so that they may have the full measure of my joy within them.

Hebrews 12:2 & 22 (NIV) fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God..... But you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly,

For some reason or another, joy is not a word you immediately associate with Jesus yet in both verses in John, this joy is a personal possession which He wants His followers to have as well. Leon Morris in his commentary on John (p598) gives probably one of the best descriptions and/or definition of Jesus' joy. He states that it is the joy of knowing He has been obedient to the will of the Father and has finished the work He was given to do. The writer to the Hebrews appears to endorse this view because the joy set before Jesus was the joy of knowing that what was about to happen to Him was the means by which the whole of humanity from that time forward would obtain salvation. It was the joy of knowing that as a result of the cross and His exaltation to the right hand of the throne of God, the kingdom He had proclaimed while He was on earth would come into being. It was the joy of knowing that the Church, which would form the kingdom of God on earth, would comprise of those whose faith in Him would lead them share the joy of joining the joyful assembly in Mount Zion, the city of the living God. Regardless of what happens to us on earth, like Jesus, there will be joy in obedience to His commands, especially that of loving each other as He loved us and gave Himself as a ransom for our sin. There will be joy in knowing that even while we remain on earth, our place at Mount Zion is already secured, and we are just waiting for the moment when it becomes a reality for us.

But believing all of this, like the faith and hope it has already created in us, is also communicated to us by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Luke 10:21 (NIV) At that time Jesus, full of joy through the Holy Spirit, said, "I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children.

Acts 13:52 (NIV) And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.

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Romans 8:6 & 14:7 The mind governed by the flesh is death, but the mind governed by the Spirit is life and peace.....For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit,

Jesus' joy and praise was His response to the reports of the joyful reports of the 72 disciples He had sent out to proclaim the coming of the kingdom. Jesus' joy was seeing God's will being done on earth and how He was also working through Jesus' followers. This was a practical example of the joy that comes from knowing that God is working through a person who has wholeheartedly committed his/her life to Christ. We see this same response in chapter 13 of Acts. Paul and Barnabas had been greatly blessed by the response of crowds in Pisidian Antioch in the province of Asia, but the Jews stirred up persecution and had the disciples expelled from the whole region. They did what Jesus had told His disciples to do. If rejected (Luke 9:5) they were to leave and shake the dust of their feet as a testimony against those who had caused the trouble. Their joy came from knowing they had completed the ministry they had been given in that region and that their leaving was not because of any wrongdoing on their part, but as God's control of their circumstances and the prompting of the Holy Spirit to move on to their next destination. They did so in spite of the fact that the troublemakers followed them and at one point had Paul stoned to the point of death (Acts 14:19-20). Belonging to the kingdom of God does not promise us an easy life, but it can and does provide us with the Holy Spirit inspired sense of righteousness, peace and joy, if we take our responsibilities as citizens seriously.

We can see that from the examples of Jesus and all the disciples, that peace and joy were present in their experiences in spite of the hardships they suffered.

James 1:2-3 (NIV) Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, 3 because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance.

1 Thessalonians 1:6 & 5:23(NIV) You became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering with the joy given by the Holy Spirit.....May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

They are examples, too, of the many kinds of trials and sufferings that come as a result of faithfulness to God and to Christ. James mentions those which come to test our faith. He states that testing there is aimed at promoting the perseverance or endurance to strive towards Christlikeness. Like the suffering of the Thessalonians, joy in the testing of faith as well as actual persecution produces joy only when it is realised that God is allowing these things to happen to make our whole spirit, soul and body fit for our heavenly environment. Someone, I can't remember who, wrote that God's chief concern is our character, not our feelings of happiness. That is why the God of peace is sanctifying us so that our whole spirit, soul and body will be blameless when we finally come face to face with our God and Saviour. And that only can happen because, through the work of the Holy Spirit, God equips us to endure

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whatever befalls us. We can have a joy in knowing that God has our backs and He has promised to supply all our needs according to the riches we already possess when we are in Christ. Paul also tells us in 1 Corinthians 10:13 that what Christians will face in life are common to the whole of humanity, but that a faithful God will not allow us to be tempted beyond what we can bear and will always provide a means by which we can endure our difficult times, circumstances and situations.

1 Corinthians 10:13 (NIV) No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it.

All of this information combines to show us that God, through the Christ event and the enablement of the Holy Spirit, has provided these spiritual essentials to give us a serenity that nothing else in this world can produce.

Ephesians 2:14 (NIV) For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility,

Colossians 3:15 (NIV) Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful.

Ephesians 4:3-4 (NIV) Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. 4 There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called;

1 Corinthians 14:33 (NIV) For God is not a God of disorder but of peace—as in all the congregations of the Lord's people.

However, like the other essentials we have mentioned, we have a responsibility to nurture the means of retaining peace and joy in our own beings and also to make sure we are not the means of taking it away from others. Just as peace and joy are necessary to enhance the vertical relationship with God, they are also necessary to maintain the horizontal relationship with others, especially with those within the church. During Route 66 we saw that the first major hurdle the expansion of the church had to overcome was that between Jew and Gentile. An absolute necessity because, to Jews, it was inconceivable that God would grant salvation to Gentiles whom they regarded as degenerate, being steeped in pagan religion and immoral practices. It was Peter's encounter with Cornelius that dispelled this belief once and for all and it is the breaking down of what was an insurmountable ethnic barrier at that time, that Paul is referring to in Ephesians 2:14. It is because Christ has been the peacemaker through making all people equal in terms of salvation, that we, too, have to do our part in maintaining that peace. The church is one body, under the auspices of the one Spirit and it is God's will that all its individual members should do their utmost to preserve that unity. In the real world we know that no earthly church is perfect in every respect because it consists of fallible human

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beings. And fallible human beings can and have made mistakes and made bad decisions that do affect the unity of the congregations. But often, bitter schisms in the church past and present testify to the fact that Christians have not always taken their responsibilities to go down the peace-making route first seriously enough. Often personality clashes and disagreements over matters not directly related to the non-negotiable aspects of our salvation have taken precedence over first trying to break down the walls of hostility. This was something Jesus achieved only by sacrificing His own self-interest and dying in order to achieve the peace that comes when people submit to the will of God. God is never the author of confusion within the church so, as members of the church, we have a personal responsibility to make sure we are not its authors if the peace in the church is threatened.

Another key reason why the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace within the church should be paramount is because the world is watching it. Whether we accept the criticism or not, the fact is, that the world judges the church by the way Christians relate to each other.

Galatians 5:22-25 (NIV) But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23 gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. 24 Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. 25 Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.

There seems to be no coincidence in the order of the fruit of the Spirit in which peace and joy follow directly on from love. It was Jesus Himself who gave the new command to love one another and explicitly stated that it was the manifestation of such mutual respect, regard and care for the well-being of others within the communities of believers which would demonstrate that they were His followers (John 13:34-35).

We read in Acts 2:47 that numbers were being added to the church daily because of the fellowship among believers. In catering for both the spiritual and practical needs of the fellowship, the disciples demonstrated the love of Jesus to all by obedience to His command to show love, and by practising what they preached. This is the substance of Paul's exhortation to the Galatian church in 5:25 not just to live by the Spirit but to keep in step with Him as He leads us into the way of life that produces the spiritual essentials of peace and joy. When we are in step with Him, peace and joy come as naturally as breathing. Seldom, if ever, do we consciously think we are continually inhaling and exhaling, but we know we are breathing the oxygen that keeps us alive. Similarly, we may not always be consciously aware of having the peace of God that gives serenity of mind, and the joy of life in knowing that whatever happens, we are safe in His hands. But we do know when someone or something causes a disturbance in our minds and a lack of joy in our hearts. If, and when, that does happen, it just might be helpful to remember you can go back to the grocery store for some more peace and joy – it is still free and there's plenty in stock!

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Questions.

1. It's a loaded one, but what do you see as the main causes of lack of peace among Christians both worldwide and local?
2. In what ways can individual Christians use each 24 hours given to contribute to promoting peace and joy both in and outside the church?
- 3.

WEEK 6: STRENGTH and COURAGE

I got a box of Wisdom, Strength and Courage for life's race;

As we come to the last week of looking at the spiritual essentials we need to put into our shopping baskets, I think we could agree that God's Grocery Store contains all that we need to enable us to do the Master's will as citizens of His kingdom.

And it is the combination of all that is provided that produces the strength and courage for life's race. All the other essentials have been talked about in terms of the source being God, revealed to us through Lord Jesus Christ and administered to us through the Holy Spirit. This week will follow the same pattern, but for the source being God it seemed right to take a look at what the Old Testament had to say about strength and courage as well.

Exodus 15 (NIV) 2 & 13 "The Lord is my strength and my defence; he has become my salvation..... In your unfailing love you will lead the people you have redeemed. In your strength you will guide them to your holy dwelling.

2 Timothy 4:17-18 (NIV) But the Lord stood at my side and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. And I was delivered from the lion's mouth. 18 The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom. To him be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

Around three and a half thousand years ago, after the miraculous crossing of the Red Sea these words from the song the people sang are as relevant today as they were then. Today the Lord is still our strength and defence. Today we are the redeemed people of God He is leading to His holy dwelling. The psalmist asserted that God was his refuge and strength and a very present help in trouble. Paul's words came when he was arrested and faced imprisonment and death and everyone had deserted him. In that situation he proved the words of the psalmist, asserting that the Lord stood by him and strengthened him, when like Daniel, he felt he had been thrown into a lion's den. Peter agreed stating that in spite of suffering, through God's grace, His people would once again be strengthened to carry on with life's race. It is notable that both love and grace figure in these references to strength.

Then, Isaiah recognises around two and a half thousand years ago that God is so understanding of our human constitution that He gives strength to the weary and increases the

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power of the weak. Isaiah's statement about hoping in the Lord being the means of renewing strength pictures that giving as the ability to soar on eagle's wings. He goes on to say that with strength renewed people would run and not grow weary and walk and not be faint (Isaiah 40:28-31).

Just these few verses show that in Christian terms God's strength and human weakness are the two sides of one coin, yet the contrast between the two could not be greater.

1 Chronicles 29:12-13 (NIV) In your hands are strength and power to exalt and give strength to all. 13 Now, our God, we give you thanks, and praise your glorious name.

Psalms 68:35(NIV) 35 You, God, are awesome in your sanctuary; the God of Israel gives power and strength to his people.

Ephesians 1:19-21 (NIV) ... 19 and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is the same as the mighty strength 20 he exerted when he raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, 21 far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked, not only in the present age but also in the one to come.

It is humbling, yet amazing to know, that the divine strength that upholds the whole universe, at the same time, is so aware of human weakness that He has given each of us a portion of that divine strength to enable us to live our lives. It is even more amazing when we consider the level and product description of the strength God has put on the shelf for our use. God is omnipotent – all-powerful - and as the writers in the Old Testament affirm, God's strength is equal to that power. Paul states this explicitly in the letter to the Ephesians when he asserts that God's power is the same as the mighty strength that was exerted to raise Christ from the dead. He echoes the words of the Chronicler when he says God exalted Christ and seated Him in glory. God exalted Christ "far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked, not only in the present age but also in the one to come". That is the level and description of the strength an omnipotent God makes available to people who are constantly prone to grow weary and faint. And the writer to the Hebrews echoes the Psalmist for he tells us the Lord Jesus Christ, the One who can truly sympathise with us in our weakness, has already entered the sanctuary of God and is giving that strength to us through the power of the Holy Spirit. So, millennia later, like the Chronicler, this is a fact we should forever be praising and thanking Him for.

But, do we really need that level and kind of strength. Both the writer to the Hebrews and Paul reckon we do as they both compare life to a race. When we think of races we can think in terms of running in the Olympics or running marathons. In New Testament times, the marathon would have been uppermost in their minds. Already in their day, the annual Greek games celebrated the famous run made by a soldier from the town of Marathon to Athens to tell the news of the Greek victory over the Persians around 490BC. The distance was reckoned

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as around 26 miles, hence the distance of today's marathons. Today, you can either walk, run or even participate by wheelchair in a marathon. Whatever pace you go at, it still takes courage to undertake the task in the first place and then strength to keep on going to the end. Now, to complete a 26-mile marathon is no mean feat and no-one should underestimate the perseverance and endurance needed to finish the race. But while people may enter two or three or even more marathons in a year, these pale into insignificance when you realise that the Christian race is run twenty-four hours a day, 7 days a week for the whole of our lives. Even while we sleep, that is still a part of keeping going. So, when the poem says that we need strength and courage for life's race this is not an idle statement when you consider what Paul and the writer to the Hebrews wrote about what was involved in it.

The writer to the Hebrews puts this in the context of Christ's example.

Hebrews 12:1-3 (NIV)And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. 3 Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

He clearly sees that there is a race in life marked out for us just as there was one marked out by God for Jesus. He also clearly sees that in running our race there is a danger of growing weary and losing heart. Although the gospel writers mention that Jesus was troubled about His approaching crucifixion, they nevertheless also record that He resisted attempts to stop Him going to Jerusalem. God-given strength and courage enabled Him to overcome opposition to the point where that opposition led to His death on the cross. Just as Jesus' race was focused on doing His Father's will even when it led to that fate, so our race involves facing whatever uphill or downhill circumstances life brings our way, relying on God's strength to get us through. Apart from Jesus, God never asked any human being to bear the guilt of the sin of the whole world upon his/her shoulders and to suffer spiritually and physically for it. Just as the omnipotent strength of God was vested in Christ, so, for believers, His sacrifice is the effective means by which we can claim that same strength when we ask for it in prayer.

Like Jesus, we have a glorious future ahead of us, an eternal future so it is worth persevering through and enduring the difficulties we encounter during our race. Growing weary is another way of saying strength is failing. Losing heart is another way of saying courage is failing. The fact that this comment is made shows that God understands our human condition and our frailties and failures. And the race is not just for individuals, there is a race to be run by the church as well. The church can take encouragement from Christ's words to the church at Philadelphia. This was one of the two churches He did not adversely criticise. Jesus recognised the weakness of the Philadelphian church and commended it for its patient endurance in continuing to be faithful to Him and His word. He promised He would keep them spiritually safe from the judgement that would come upon the world, thus giving them hope for the future. Today, in the western world the church appears to be weak in having no effect in influencing the moral compass of the nations. Yet, Jesus has promised that if, like the church

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in Philadelphia, today's church is faithful in continuing to preach and teach the gospel, the gates of hell will not prevail against it, for it is no longer under judgement of eternal exclusion from the presence of God and His Christ.

Paul is of the same opinion as the writer to the Hebrews as he uses the same metaphor of life being like a race. In 1 Corinthians 9:24-25 he states that all the competitors in a race go into strict training, but only one of them will win the prize, a crown that will not last. In contrast, all Christians who go into training in the spiritual essentials to run life's race will receive a crown that will last forever.

Acts 20:24 (NIV) However, I consider my life worth nothing to me; my only aim is to finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the good news of God's grace.

2 Timothy 4:7 (NIV) I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.

This is what Paul did from the moment of his conversion. However, as his letter to the Galatians showed, there are people and circumstances that will try to thwart and divert Christians from completing their race. Two things kept Paul on the right track – keeping the faith and by completing the task the Lord Jesus had given him. And, in contrast to how the world would see it, Paul attributes reaching this point to his sufferings which produced perseverance, which made him the missionary that he was. Even in these last days of his life he was maintaining his hope in what he had put his faith in three decades before. His strength and courage even in the face of impending death is testimony to the operation of the other spiritual essentials at work in his very being. Both living and dying in Christ sustained Paul.

In addition to finishing the race and keeping the faith, Paul adds the significant statement that he had “fought the good fight” something he exhorted Timothy to do as well (1 Timothy 6:12). Fighting for a cause when all the odds are against you takes extraordinary strength and courage.

Acts 4:13 (NIV) When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus.

Acts 23:11 (NIV) The following night the Lord stood near Paul and said, “Take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome.”

Philippians 1:20-21 (NIV) I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. 21 For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.

Courage was something the apostles, Paul and all who came after them had in taking the gospel to the Jewish world steeped in harsh, unyielding dogmatism of the Mosaic law and

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the Graeco-Roman world steeped in paganism and immorality. When Peter and John were brought before the Sanhedrin and commanded not to speak or teach about Jesus, Peter replied that they would obey God by speaking about what they had seen and heard. The Lord's word came to Paul in Jerusalem where the Jews were plotting to kill him. On both these occasions their God-given courage was based on the fact that they were doing what Jesus had said they would do – to be His witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth, which at that time was Rome. When it is remembered that Paul is writing to the Philippians from prison awaiting death, his concern is that he will have the courage to continue to testify to Jesus even in those circumstances.

Add to that what Paul had already faced in his ministry - 2 Corinthians 11:23-28 (NIV) imprisoned, flogged, stoned, shipwrecked, experienced hunger, thirst cold, sleeplessness and nakedness. Faced death time and again. In danger from Jews, Gentiles, rivers, bandits, in the city and in the country and at sea. Add to that his daily concern for all the churches.

Add to that his thorn in the flesh which he had pleaded three times with God to have removed.

2 Corinthians 12:8-10 (NIV) Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. 9 But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." For when I am weak, then I am strong.

Philippians 4:13 (NIV) I can do all this through him who gives me strength.

What Paul had suffered for Christ is a measure of the courage he was given. But from our individual perspective, talking about strength and courage is one thing, living through times when it has to be exercised is another story. Paul's example of prayer answered negatively, is another prime example of physical weakness contributing to spiritual strength. God's power was energising him to the extent that it produced strength and courage to carry out his ministry in spite of his physical weakness. We cannot deny there have been many, many examples of God's people throughout the centuries since Paul, who through this power have overcome the most serious physical conditions to live victoriously for Christ. The best news for us is that that same strength and courage is ours for the taking. It's already on the shelf. The question is then, how do they operate in our lives?

You've probably heard of the song "When the going gets tough, the tough get going". The Bible says the same thing, only in a different way. This quote sums it up. 'God doesn't call the equipped, He equips the called'. In other words, when the going gets tough, turn to God for the equipment that gives you strength and courage. When equipment is mentioned most Christians think of the armour described in Ephesians 6. In one sense this passage is about the passive way to fight. Paul's expression of fighting the good fight of faith clearly points to the battle he sees Christians having to engage in. I don't know what you think of the idea that you can fight the good fight of faith by just remaining standing. But that is what the

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armour of God is for. One of Paul's most frequent exhortations in his letters is to "stand firm in the Lord". Our strength and courage to do so, individually and corporately, will depend on how much confidence or belief we have in the strength and power of that equipment, how much reliance we put on it and how effectively we deploy it in whatever circumstances we find ourselves in. The equipment of the breastplate of righteousness is our foundation for our righteousness is that given to us by God and guarantees our acceptance by Him. It guards our hearts – the core of our being; and to guard our minds we have been given the helmet of salvation. We have the sword of the Spirit which is the Word of God to guide our conduct and the belt of truth assuring us that our cause is just. The shield of faith is needed to help us persevere when the going gets tough and to deflect the fiery darts of doubt and lies that the world, the flesh and the devil wants us to believe about God.

Yet, sometimes when the going gets tough when we do feel weary and downhearted, it can even be difficult to remind ourselves that we have these things to give us the strength and the courage to go on. Paul recognised this too because he tells us in Ephesians 4 that we cannot do this alone. We need to be supported by those whose feet have been shod with the gospel of peace who have brought it to us in the past and are still doing so in the present. The word 'equip' is only used twice in the NIV New Testament, once in Ephesians 4:12 and in Hebrews 13:21.

Ephesians 4:11-12 (NIV) So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, 12 to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up

In practical terms, while we may not think of evangelists, pastors and teachers as equipment, these are what Paul states in Ephesians 4 have been given to us to equip us to mature in the faith and not succumb to all that would distract us from the battle or destroy our ability to "take time out, shed a tear, dust ourselves off and get back to fight like we've never fought before". God does not condemn us for getting weary or discouraged, but He does expect us to call on His strength to get us back on an even keel again. That's what Paul had to do time and time again till he got to the point where he could declare that God's strength was made perfect in his weakness and that he could do all things through Christ who strengthened him. The more we use the means by which we can be reminded and taught about all these things, the greater our strength in the faith will grow to maturity and it is that strength that will give us the courage to stand up for what we believe and not give ground to those who would try to undermine our faith through implanting doubt or other forms of threats.

The second mention of 'equip' in Hebrews takes us to our personal exercise of God's strength, which in some situations may require a great deal of courage to accomplish.

Hebrews 13:20-21 (NIV) Now may the God of peace, ...21 equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

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Mark 12:30 (NIV) Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.'

1 Peter 4:10-11 (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. they should do so with the strength God provides.

In the doxology of his letter the writer requests that God will equip His people with everything good for doing His will and the equipment given should be used to do what is pleasing to Him. Paul agrees, stating in Philippians 2:13 that it is God at work in each of us to will and to act in order to fulfil His good purposes. Fulfilling His purpose as Moses told the Israelites and as Jesus told us, is to use our strength to love God. Loving God sometimes will take the courage to do the right thing when there is pressure to do otherwise. That may mean sacrificing a habit, a friendship, an employment opportunity or social status or a myriad of other things that might compromise our testimony and obedience to Christ.

Then Peter tells us that the equipment we have been given is to be used in the service of others. And this, too, has to be done with the strength God provides. Both strength and courage are needed to willingly and graciously serve the obnoxious neighbour and even more will be required to love and serve an enemy. Yet this is what Christ's followers are called to do.

Someone has said that God gives the hardest tasks to His strongest soldiers. Last week I quoted Mother Teresa who said that she knew God would not give her something she couldn't handle, but wished that He didn't trust her so much. One way or another I think it's true to say that we have all felt at times that God has given us far more than we can cope with. Yet with the benefit of hindsight or even in present difficulties we know that our ability to persevere and endure the pressure is only because God is giving us the "strength and courage for life's race".

And it seemed a good way to end these talks with a reminder that strength and courage are not stand-alone items in the grocery store. They are part of a package of spiritual essentials that blend together to into one amazing picture of the providence of God that we possess because we are in Christ. Just to recap what's available. (repetition of poem).

And it seems right as well to add our 'Amen' to Paul's prayer that God would strengthen us with power in our inner beings so that through faith we will know and experience the indwelling of the Christ who said He would never leave nor forsake us.

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