

# Home Growth Group Notes

# More About Christ

Spring 2024

Part Two





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## Group Bible Study

The priority of any Bible study is to seek to understand what the Bible is saying to the people for whom it was first written as well as to understand its application for our particular day and generation.

Here are some pointers to help you as you study the Bible:

- **PRAY** - Our preparation for any Bible study should begin and end with prayer. We need to ask God, through the help of the Holy Spirit, to guide us as we read the Bible and prepare for study.
- **ASK** - In order to understand the Bible properly, we need to keep six important questions in mind:
  - 1. Who is speaking?** Everything in the Bible was written by men who were inspired by God. Though every word was inspired by God, sometimes the writers record words which come from the hearts of evil men. So, dealing with the question “Who is speaking?” will help us to know whether the words we are reading are words that we should obey.
  - 2. Who is spoken to?** We need to realise that not every command that comes in the Bible is a command for us today. For example, the command by God to Noah to build an ark is relevant for Noah, but not for us.
  - 3. When is the writer speaking?** In answering this question, we will need to make a distinction between those who are living under the Law and those who live under the guidelines and principles as outlined to us in the New Testament, the Way of Christ. Therefore, the principles we see regarding worship in the Old Testament may have a relevance to us but we need to read them in the light of the New Testament. It is always important to bear in mind that one part of the Bible can often help us to understand another part.
  - 4. What type of language is the writer using?** The languages used are usually one of two types: literal or figurative. Sometimes both are mixed together in one passage. For example, Jesus is spoken of as the Lamb of God - a figurative form of speech. However, He is also described as the One who

takes away the sin of the world, which is literally true for those who believe. So, Jesus was not an actual lamb, but the One who became the offering for our sins.

5. **What are the writer's circumstances?** If we can grasp the writer's particular circumstances, it helps us understand what he is saying.
6. **What is the context of the Bible passage?** Think about what has just been said and what is about to be said in the particular book of the Bible, as well as the context of the passage within the Bible as a whole.

The Bible is indeed God's inspired Word - His revelation to all mankind. So, in order for us to understand it, we must seek to study it properly. Only then can we "*correctly handle the word of truth*". If we keep these six simple questions in mind, we will find that we can indeed get to grips with God's Word.

- **PLAN**

For those who are preparing and leading a study, the following steps should prove helpful:

1. Try to break the passage into clear sections.
2. Think about what you don't understand and therefore what others also might not understand. What parts do you need to gain more information about? Be ready to deal with questions from others. So, for example, when studying John 3, people might ask 'What is the kingdom of God?', 'What is a Pharisee?'.
  - a) **Understanding** - Questions about what the passage is saying.
  - b) **Significance** - Questions that aim to highlight the significance of the passage in the light of the particular book and against the backdrop of the whole Bible.
3. Having broken the passage up, plan your questions. You can use the questions that are in this book or devise your own. Focus on the following question types in this order:

**c) Application** - Questions which apply to the situations we are facing today.

### **ADDITIONAL COMMENTS**

Do make use of the St. John's Church team, commentaries and other Christians who have a maturity which you can rely upon when seeking to tackle Bible passages.

It will sometimes prove helpful to have more than one translation as this will give you fresh insights.

As we come to study the Bible, we need to keep in mind that all the books of the Bible have one great theme: God's plan to save mankind from his sins through Jesus Christ.

Fundamentally, make sure that whatever you do, you seek to do it to glorify God.

## Introduction

If you undertook our first set of studies on the life of Jesus, then you will realise that He is truly amazing!

Jesus Christ has made a fantastic difference to this world and to the next. We Christians place our entire hope for salvation upon the shoulders of a promised Redeemer who the Christian church has identified as Jesus Christ of Nazareth.

As we look at Jesus, we begin to realise that He was not only an extraordinary man, but also God.

Christians attest to the fact that if Jesus were no more than a man then, remarkable as he might be, He clearly could not be the Saviour.

It goes without saying that many of His miracles would either have to be attributed to someone else or be explained in a completely new way.

On the other hand, if Jesus was not only a man but also God, then nothing is impossible for Him and whatever God has promised, He will fulfil.

The question of Jesus' deity takes us right to the very heart of who He actually is. This is the main question that we will explore.

I can genuinely say that I have enjoyed both the preparation of these studies as well as embarking on them. This new set of studies reminds us of some of the things which make our one life so significant.

When we come to Christ in the scriptures, we come to the very heart of the New Testament and the fulfilment of the Old Testament.

Jesus is the pivotal point of all history. He is the completion of every Old Testament hope. He is the heart of all New Testament revelation and the core of salvation itself.

In our first set of studies, we walked through the pages of the New Testament to discover something of Jesus Christ's ministry.

It is an honour that every Christian has to walk again the dusty roads of the Holy Land with our Lord Jesus through the eyes of the inspired writers of the New Testament.

It is here that we encounter the greatest personality of all history. To study the life of Jesus Christ is to witness God in human form. For Jesus is not only the image of God, He is also the disclosure without stain or distortion.

The writer of Colossians said, “For in Him all the fullness of God dwells in bodily form.” So, it should encourage us that as we get to grips with the New Testament, we get to know the real Jesus.

He is the Christ, not of our imaginations, but of history. He is the Way, the Truth and the Life. As we encounter Jesus Christ, we find that he leaves us no room for neutrality. We are either for Him or against Him.

The teaching of the New Testament is about a life lived out for us, to save us and to rescue us from our sins when we could not rescue ourselves.

Christians have been taught much about Jesus’ life and death but in these studies, we will go on to see not only what He is doing in our present day, but also what He will do on that day when He comes again.

Jesus Christ is the determining factor between life and death, heaven and hell. Jesus is the most important person who has walked through the pages of history.

When the last day comes and we stand before the judgement seat of God, He will not ask us what church we joined or how many Tesco points we have earned or how much money we have in the bank – no, he will ask us this one question, ***“What have you done with my Son, Jesus?”***

## Study 1 – John 20: 1-18: The Resurrection- A Clear Truth

It is amazing to realise that when people are in a state of shock, they sometimes don't notice the most obvious things.

I recall my car accident many years ago when I crashed into a bridge. Moments after the event, I looked round the car. What did I see? Did I see a wrecked car or smashed glass? No, I saw the cough sweets that were scattered around the car!

In moments of pressure, we sometimes miss the most obvious things whilst some things become crystal clear. These are the memories we will never forget.

The Resurrection of Jesus Christ is without doubt the greatest miracle in all history. Of course, it is only the greatest miracle if you believe in miracles! It would be fair to say that this has been debated by more people than probably any other historical event. It has been analysed from every side. In the last 30 years, it has been taken for granted in our modern and scientific age that the story of the Resurrection is a step too far.

Yet, if we look at our world today, we see the tide is turning. No longer are miracles off the agenda. We see that things once thought impossible have become possible. Many scientists who have probed their own disciplines to the point where they recognise their limitations are now prepared to concede that miracles, however unlikely, could indeed happen.

With deep regret, the idea of agnosticism has now taken a firm hold in our educational system in Britain. These half-baked ideas and outdated ways of thinking have become the currency that passes as debate in sixth forms and universities. This rise of unbelief should not deter us as we come to study the important events that took place on that very first Easter. The same kind of scepticism was around in Jesus' day.

It doesn't take a rocket scientist to realise that men and women across our world do not normally come back from the dead. Investigation and historical analysis will get us so far, maybe even as far as the empty tomb, but it cannot make us believe in the miracle. For that, we need the power of the Holy Spirit as He works in the hearts and minds of those who meet the risen Christ.

## **The Characters at the Tomb (verses 1-9)**

The opening verses of John 20 give us a brief summary of the experiences surrounding the Resurrection of Jesus Christ that first Easter.

Who do we see?

- Mary Magdalene - a former prostitute
- Peter - leader of the disciples
- John - the beloved disciple of Jesus.

Mary is the first one to reach the tomb that day. The other gospels add that she was part of a larger group of women who were coming to embalm the body of the dead Jesus who had died on the Friday before. His body had been in the tomb untouched by human hands until that day.

When the women arrive, they noticed that the stone had been rolled away. Mary ran to tell Peter and John and they came to see whether her story was true.

Yes, the tomb was empty – well, not quite empty because the grave clothes were still lying there but the body had gone. Next, John simply tells us that they went home.

The other gospels record that an angel appeared to them, to tell them that Jesus had risen from the dead but even that does not seem to have made any lasting impression.

Peter and John were unable to understand what has happened because they did not yet know the Scriptures and the prophecy that Jesus himself had spoken to them – that He would rise again (see Psalm 16, Psalm 110, Isaiah 53:11-12). It is remarkable that they had witnessed it with their own eyes, heard the teaching from Jesus Himself, and yet they still did not believe!

The previous day, Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea had lovingly wrapped the disfigured body of Jesus in linen and spices (John 19:40). No body-snatchers would stop to unwrap a body; they would take the body, linen cloths and everything together.

The linen head-cloth had been neatly rolled up. John's memories are clear. He recalls hesitating by the entrance, seeing Jesus' burial cloths, going in after Peter and both of them seeing that only the folded grave clothes remained. The Lord of Glory had come out, not bound like Lazarus in John 11, but freed by the power of God!

### **Mary's Encounter (verses 10-18)**

When Peter and John had gone home, Mary stayed in the garden. We find her in tears. What struck the disciples as a form of intellectual curiosity, touched Mary as a deep feeling – the loss of the body of Jesus. She was concerned that someone had taken away her Lord.

Mary had no idea of a Resurrection but she did have a personal relationship with Jesus that went deeper than purely intellectual considerations. Jesus had accepted her, forgiven her sins and drawn her into His fellowship.

So in spite of the hard life she had lived, she knew that she was valued and loved by God. Now we see something amazing. Jesus meant so much to Mary that she was prepared to confess Him as her Lord, even to a stranger. How markedly different this was from Peter, who found he couldn't even tell a common girl that he was in fact a disciple of Jesus. Then comes a wonderful moment. As she confesses that Jesus was her Lord to this stranger in the garden, Jesus reveals himself to her!

Surely, we are being told that when our love for Christ has gone past the point of shame or doubt, when we are prepared to follow Him even when we face death and despair, then we will see Him for ourselves.

Mary's memories of that day were clear. A dreamer or liar would have said, "I knew it was Jesus standing there." But Mary owned up that she thought He was merely a gardener (verses 13, 15).

On hearing her name spoken in Jesus' accent, Mary realised that the man who had given her life (Luke 8:2) was alive and she knew that Jesus trusted her to tell the truth to others (verses 17-18).

The time for Mary to worship Jesus had not yet quite arrived. She would have to wait until He entered His Glory before presenting her petitions and requests.

The Ascension of Jesus Christ is not just a postscript of the Resurrection, but an important event in its own right, as we will later learn.

### **Jesus appears to the disciples (verses 19-23)**

Mary went back and told the disciples that she had seen the risen Christ. The disciples, that brave bunch of men, had hidden themselves for fear of the Jews. We are told quite remarkably that Jesus appeared in their room. He showed them His pierced hands and side and then He breathed on them so that they would receive the Holy Spirit.

Here we find that Jesus gives them His peace and appoints them to a mission – to teach about the role and work of Christ. He also gives them authority to forgive sins.

So during those 40 days between Jesus' Resurrection and Ascension, He went with the disciples, teaching them in a way in which He had never done before. They were alone with Him now, not part of a wider crowd. Jesus no longer went about and debated with people like Nicodemus, but kept Himself just to His chosen disciples.

It would be these disciples who would be given the task of passing on Jesus' message, just as He had taught it to them. It would be the power of the Resurrection which would change these men and change our world.

### **Questions on John 20:1-18**

**Warm Up Question:** When did the truth of the Resurrection of Christ first impact you? Why is it important?

2. In verses 1-2, what do we learn about Mary Magdalene and her expectation of Jesus that day? What discovery did she make and what did she do and say?

3. Peter and John arrive at the tomb in verses 3-9. How did they react and what did they learn about Jesus? What is the meaning of the empty tomb?
  
4. What did Peter and John discover in the tomb and what puzzled them? What did John think about what he saw? What are we discovering about Jesus?
  
5. In verses 10-13 the disciples go home but Mary stayed. What did she see and hear? What reason did she give for crying? In verses 14 and 15, Jesus spoke to her but why didn't she recognise Him at first?
  
6. Read verses 16-18. When did Mary recognise Jesus? What does this scene reveal about Jesus and about Mary? What commission did Jesus give Mary? What did this message mean? What was the good news she told them about Jesus Christ (verse 18)? Why is seeing and believing important in this passage?

## Study 2 – Acts 1:1-11: The Ascension of Christ

The biggest need in our world is to hear the Gospel proclaimed in power. The final command the Lord Jesus gave to His disciples before He ascended into Heaven was that they should declare the Kingdom of God to all nations (Matthew 28:19-20).

Yet today, Christians are almost silent in terms of declaring God's praises. We may sing God's praises in church, but most of us remain silent once we leave the building. The watching world does not often hear the voice of Christ being proclaimed by his people.

If we take a moment to think about all the words that we speak during a day, how often do we speak of our Saviour, Jesus Christ? I think most of us would have to say that we are almost silent when it comes to declaring the praises of Christ.

The Book of Acts speaks about such world evangelisation as a priority. In this study, we will focus on Acts 1. Together we will examine the mandate to the church 40 days after Christ's Resurrection, for it was He who not only declared the Gospel, but gave us a mission and made us messengers.

The Ascension of Jesus Christ into Heaven 40 days after the Resurrection is probably one of the least understood events in the Bible. Some people deny the Resurrection and others will of course doubt the Virgin Birth but the Ascension is somehow overlooked even by Christians.

Theologians may write at great length about the Cross and the Resurrection, but often seem to overlook the significance of the Ascension of Jesus Christ. For some of these theologians, Christ Himself was exalted through the Resurrection, though the Bible never says this.

The Bible teaches us clearly that there was a period of 40 days between the Resurrection and the Ascension.

This period of 40 days echoes the 40-day period of temptation right at the very start of Jesus' ministry when He was taken out into the desert to be tempted by

the Devil. It was during these 40 days that Jesus Himself was to teach His disciples vital truths from the Bible about His work, message, and their mission (Luke 24).

The Ascension is recorded in detail in one single book, the book of Acts. We also get some details in Matthew 28:16-20 and in Luke 24:50-53 and find it mentioned by the apostle Paul in the book of Ephesians (Ephesians 4:8-10). The book of Revelation is written on the assumption that the Ascension has taken place.

The mistake we must avoid is to think that the early Church thought this event was unimportant. Surely the early Church saw the importance of Christ's Ascension since it was included in the statements of faith: 'He ascended into Heaven'.

The fact that this is included whilst other events such as the Fall of Adam are not, shows us that the Ascension of Jesus Christ was important to the early Church and therefore should be important to us. We need to understand it and its implication for us today.

### **The Author**

The writer of the book of Acts is Luke. This can be seen in the link between the introductions to the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts. We find them both dedicated to a man named Theophilus (Acts 1:1).

Who was Luke? Well, he was the person who had travelled with Paul. He had been one of Paul's close companions. We can also learn when we study part of the New Testament that Luke was almost certainly a Gentile convert and a physician. So, we know that he was a highly educated man, who was a co-worker and admirer of Paul.

We also know that Luke was a careful historian and for that we must be extremely grateful because he takes great time to record particular details of events.

### **Verses 1-2**

The book of Acts opens with reference to his earlier book, the Gospel of Luke which describes how Jesus began His ministry and what He taught until the day of His Ascension.

The book of Acts goes on to record what Jesus continued to do and teach from Heaven. We need to see this, because it is Jesus who is building His Church, and the Church is not yet finished!

We can see at once that there is an application for us today. The Lord Jesus will use the power of the Holy Spirit for the expansion of His Kingdom.

In the Book of Acts, the Holy Spirit's ministry is a dominant theme. However, we need to recognise that this work of the Spirit is linked to the person of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. We need also to recognise that the ministry of the Holy Spirit does not begin in Acts, rather it continues.

The Book of Acts begins with Luke providing us with powerful evidence for the Resurrection. Jesus was seen by the disciples over a 40-day period and spoke about matters concerning the Kingdom of God (Acts 1:3).

This 40-day period is very important because it is during this time that He provides many convincing proofs so that the disciples will know that He really had risen from the dead.

This is echoed by the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:3-9. He also wanted people to know the certainty of the Resurrection. We must not forget that it was the apostles who witnessed it.

Look at how the book of Acts is divided up. It is particularly striking that chapter 1 gives us the only account of matters prior to Pentecost. The remaining chapters depict Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4), its impact (Acts 2:5-13), the interpretation of what took place (Acts 2:14-40), and finally its implications, from Acts 2:41 right through to the end of the book.

The book of Acts picks up precisely where Luke's Gospel leaves off. The first 11 verses of Acts 1 deal primarily with the 40-day period when Jesus had risen from the dead, but had not yet ascended to the Father.

In verses 1-2, we find the link between Luke and Acts. The Book of Acts is clearly a sequel to be read in conjunction with Luke's Gospel. What we find is that the book of Luke closes with Jesus' final words - His commission to His chosen apostles.

The purpose of the book is to provide an account of what Jesus continued to do through His people. We discover that what Jesus first began to do and to teach, the Holy Spirit would continue through the Church.

### **Verses 3-5**

In verses 3-5, we have a review of Jesus' ministry after His Resurrection and before His Ascension. In verse 3, we are told that Jesus set aside once and for all the doubts of the disciples concerning the facts of His Resurrection.

We recall that at the end of Luke's Gospel, the disciples were doubtful about our Lord's Resurrection but at the start of Acts, they are entirely convinced. We discover that Jesus presents Himself alive to them on various occasions over a period of 40 days. The evidence was certain.

We are given the content of the teaching of our Lord during the 40 days, which can be summed up by the phrase 'the Kingdom of God'.

Jesus announces the Kingdom of God has come. This immediately reminds us of the opening of Mark's Gospel and v15.

We then have a link with what is about to take place with the coming of the Spirit and the empowering of the apostles to proclaim the Kingdom of God to the watching world.

It is important to realise that not only is this fulfilling Old Testament prophecy, but it is also fulfilling what Jesus Himself had said to them (v4). It was the apostle John in his Gospel who told his readers that Jesus was baptised with water but now He would baptise men with the Holy Spirit and with fire.

### **Verses 6-11**

In verses 6-11, the disciples have a Q&A with Jesus. It seems clear from the question posed in verse 6 that one of the things that Jesus had not spoken about was the timing of the coming of the Kingdom. So, it is not surprising to find that the disciples ask Jesus when it would come.

I think they wanted to know if it was just around the corner. They also needed to bear in mind the radical things that had taken place because of the Resurrection. Surely, this had changed their whole viewpoint about the present and future.

Yet we see that even Pentecost, with the coming of the Holy Spirit's power upon the disciples, did not produce changes in their attitudes and lives.

We learn that the timing of the Kingdom was within the sovereign purposes of God and knowing times and dates clearly was not beneficial for the work of the Church as it entered this new era.

The Holy Spirit would come upon the disciples, giving them power so they could be witnesses to the world.

In verse 8, we discover a geographical outline of how the Gospel would move out of Jerusalem into the world and in connection with this, we also see the growth of the Church.

This is reflected in the book of Acts as it develops over the ensuing chapters. Verse 8 is the key to the front door of the Book of Acts.

From the writing of Luke, we discover that God's plan and purpose is to save the Gentiles as well as the Jews. In Luke 1:30-33, the Angel Gabriel spoke of the Lord Jesus in terms of Israel's hopes, and Mary spoke likewise, but the angel also went on to speak to the shepherds and said that He will be a joy for 'all people' (Luke 2:10).

Our passage ends with the actual physical Ascension of Jesus from the Earth. While they looked up, Jesus was taken up into the clouds, disappearing from their sight. It seems that the disciples must have stood there for some time, gaping and wondering if He was about to reappear.

Then we are told that two angels gently rebuked the disciples and sent them on their way with the assurance that the Lord Jesus would indeed return in a similar way, but also informing them that their standing here looking into the sky was not where they should remain.

### **Questions on Acts 1:1-11**

**Warm Up Question:** How would you explain what happen at the Ascension to a group of 7- to 9-year-olds and why was it important?

1. Looking at the whole story, how was Jesus' time filled between His Resurrection and his Ascension into Heaven? How would these things prepare the disciples for His departure?
2. Why couldn't they begin spreading the word of the Kingdom immediately? What did Jesus mean by "the promise of the Father"? (See John 14:16-17, 25-26 for more background.)
3. What are some of the things that we can learn about our tendencies as disciples from this passage? Jesus set up a job description for a Christian. What is it?
4. After Jesus ascended into Heaven, why did the two angels address the disciples as "men of Galilee" (verse 11)? What have we discovered about Jesus Christ from the Ascension?
5. Why do you think that the Ascension has been forgotten by many Christians? Why is this event important to us and to Jesus?
6. How could this passage help a local church with its mission to the community?

## Study 3 – Hebrews 9:11-28: What is Jesus doing today?

### **Introduction**

From the beginning of time, men and women have desired a priest or mediator to represent them before God. When we travel the world, we find that men and women universally know that there is a God and that this God has been offended by the wrong things and selfish acts that we do. In all the great world religions, there is a search for a way to find a right relationship with this God. What we find in this universal desire is the creation of an order of priests in all cultures across all nations.

The writer to the Hebrews clearly sets out the necessary qualifications for a Jewish high priest: “Every high priest is selected from among men and is appointed to represent them in matters related to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. He is able to deal gently with those who are ignorant and are going astray, since he himself is subject to weakness” (Hebrews 5:1-2).

It should be noted that the two vital ingredients to be a high priest are:  
(1) to have fellowship with men – to understand and not be ignorant of human society, and to have sympathy and compassion with those who seek the help of such a priest.

(2) to have authority from God. The high priest must be appointed to act on behalf of people in relation to God. He cannot be self-appointed. The appointment must come from God Himself.

One quick glance at Jesus Christ shows that He fulfils both these requirements. This gives us an insight into the kind of work Christ is doing for us today. Unlike the high priests of old, who each year would have to offer a fresh sacrifice for sins, Jesus offered a once and for all sacrifice.

In John 14:2, Jesus told His disciples that He was returning to the Father to prepare a place for them. He was also going to give them new spiritual power so that they could be His ambassadors here on Earth. By the power of His Spirit, He would be at work in their midst (John 16).

When we think of Christ today, we think of His kingly rule. He is able to rule because He is both the prophet and the priest.

In the gospels, a huge amount of space is devoted to the death of Christ. It is clear evidence that this finished work is of vast importance for the Christian. Of course, this great work would have failed but for His presence in Heaven to continue the work on our behalf. This is the unfinished work of Christ – yes, He died once for all, but He always lives to make intercession for us (Hebrews 7:25).

So, it was the aim of the writer to the Hebrews to show that Christ alone was qualified to fulfil the role of the Great High Priest. Jesus affirms that He holds this exalted office by divine appointment and further qualifies Himself by identification with humanity through His incarnation.

His triumphant shout of “It is finished” upon the cross means that as the Great High Priest, He is able to enter the holiest place of all and reveal His own blood to be a fragrant sacrifice, showing a life and death devoted to God and to our freedom. This work allows Him to act as both our Mediator and our Intercessor. This is the great climax of the incarnation – Jesus, the God-man, still clothed in the robes of humanity, is there before the Father Eternal, representing us and accepted by God.

So, God’s work today in Christ is supremely about his kingly rule, through which He is able to send the Comforter into our lives to strengthen His followers here on Earth.

We can be the people we are and can do the things which he has commanded us to do because Christ is seated at the right hand of God the Father.

### **What is Christ doing today?**

First, we need to remember that Christ is reigning and has defeated the forces of evil who opposed Him. We still experience evil in the world today and struggle against temptation but the battle itself has been won. We are now involved in the final throes of that war. A helpful picture is that of the battle of Stalingrad. Here Hitler was defeated, yet the war did not finish until 1945.

The Cross, Resurrection and Ascension were the great moments in the war. Satan was defeated at the Cross, yet we still know that today Christians are occupying a world in which Satan has control, just as the Allied Forces marched across Europe to occupy the land which Germany had held.

The second thing that Christ is doing today is giving us a new allegiance. We are now servants of a King – a heavenly King and our home is Heaven.

The third aspect of Christ's work today is that He gives us gifts (Ephesians 4:8), so that we can effectively be His subjects here in this world. These gifts have been given to us by the Comforter, the Holy Spirit, whom Jesus sent. So, a Christian, then, is a person in whom the Holy Spirit dwells.

We need to hear again the warning that Paul gives to the Corinthian Church, not to give the wrong impression so as to turn people away from the good news of Christ. We need to hear exactly what it means to be a Spirit-filled Christian.

First of all, a Spirit-filled person is someone changed in heart, mind and behaviour. This is a fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22).

We also need to see that the fruits of the Spirit are not optional, nor are they divided out among different believers in the way the gifts are.

So a Christian does not have to speak in tongues in order to be a believer. A believer is someone who shows something of God's love, as Paul clearly reminds the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 13). It is against the context of the fruits that the gifts of the Spirit are then made manifest.

Throughout the New Testament, we see an emphasis on some of the gifts in terms of their importance but clearly the gift of speaking in tongues for example comes somewhere low down the list.

The greatest of the gifts is clearly apostleship, which was given to the disciples who saw the risen Christ.

The second most important is that of prophecy which has been given to the Church. The prophets could well be referring to those who had been given the task of preaching and proclaiming the Word given through the apostles. However, one thing is sure. Preachers, who are our prophets today, are called to encourage people to hear and obey the Word of God.

Third on the list are evangelists. Their responsibility is to spread the good news of Christ through the entire world, which is part of the missionary task of the

Church and something that Christ Himself is encouraging from his position as King reigning in Heaven.

Next come pastors and teachers. Many people associate these roles with those who have been called to the ordained ministry. Clearly, in each of these areas there is a degree of overlap.

So, in summary, we learn that Christ governs his Kingdom from His position at the Father's right hand where He intercedes for us. He is seated upon His throne, reminding us that He is Head over the Church and giving gifts to His people. We learn that prayer is the means by which we open ourselves up to God and discover His will for us day by day.

### **The letter to the Hebrews**

It is good to remind ourselves that the letter to the Hebrews is a marvellous book which tells us about the person and work of our Lord Jesus Christ.

We live in an age when many people are seeking spiritual experiences of one kind or another but here in this book is the basis of authentic Christian experience, for we are being pointed to the real Jesus.

The letter itself was sent to Jewish Christians (Hebrews). These men and women were facing persecution and considerable difficulty in living their Christian lives, so much so that many were contemplating leaving the Christian faith and returning to Judaism.

It is because of this background that the force of the argument in Hebrews is so persuasive, making us realise the importance of what Christ is doing.

A key word throughout this letter is 'better'. Christ the Great High Priest is superior to the priests and high priests of the Old Testament. The sacrifice which Christ offered on the Cross is far better than the sacrifices that were offered in the temple at Jerusalem.

### **Hebrews 9:11-28**

We now turn to Hebrews 9:11-28 (see also Leviticus 5:11-13 and Numbers 16:46-48).

As this chapter begins, the writer wants to emphasise the superiority of the New Covenant by describing the significance of how worship was undertaken under the Old Covenant.

It is helpful to consider that under the Old Covenant, people worshipped God using blood sacrifices. This of course is well beyond our experience today but we need to remind ourselves that Christ's death upon the Cross was in a sense a blood sacrifice. He shed His blood so that we might live.

This study is therefore an opportunity to dispel any misunderstandings that we might have about the sacrificial system and to realise the benefits that flow to us.

It will also be useful for discussion, to start to unpack something of the shape and meaning of the Lord's Supper. Let's not get bogged down in the details but see it as an act of worship that we want to understand more fully.

We know that to offer blood was to offer life. It was a sign of the seriousness of sin, and an acknowledgement that humanity had polluted the holy purposes of God. The dedicated offering of lifeblood was perceived to be an appropriate way of expressing the depths of repentance that might bring God's cleansing and renewal.

In the old system, the life offered was that of animals. It was something apart from the human experience – an offering that did not necessarily reflect people's inner attitudes and could only bring assurance of outward cleansing.

By contrast, the new system is based on something gloriously different. There is still an offering of a life, the life of Jesus, but it is a life without blemish because it is a life that is the human form of the life of God.

Wonderfully, God has done in Jesus what no sinful high priest could ever do. Jesus gave His life as a sign of total love and commitment towards us.

We may find the sacrificial system somewhat confusing and remote to our own personal daily experience but we need to look deeper to see that the truth of this event is as relevant today as it has ever been. God's love for us knows no

limits, even though it involved the most appalling suffering of our Saviour, Jesus.

### **Questions on Hebrews 9:11-28**

**Warm Up Question:** How do we think of God as “living”? How does He occupy His time? What does that mean to us?

1. Looking right across the passage, list the things which Christ’s blood (death, offering, sacrifice) obtained for us (there are at least six).
2. How seriously do non-believers think about sin and being cut off from God? In verses 11-12, what do we discover that Jesus did by coming as the last and greatest high priest? Looking at verses 13 and 14, what has Jesus done and what do these verses teach us about Christ?
3. How do verses 16 and 17 answer the age old question “*What about the thief on the Cross*”? How does it help us think more clearly about salvation?
4. In verses 18-25, Christ is at the Father’s side praying for us. Is our experience of forgiveness better than that of believers in the Old Testament? What we do we discover about Christ from this passage?
5. What are the consequences of Christ’s sacrifice? How can it affect what happens to us when this life is over (verses 18-28)?

## Study 4 – John 21:1-24: Jesus Christ the Lord of our lives

The final chapter of John's Gospel is best seen as the end of one story and the start of another. In some ways, it takes us back to the start of Jesus' earthly ministry, yet the circumstances are entirely different.

The Resurrection has taken place. Life for Jesus and the disciples will never be the same again. Jesus has risen and his followers' world has been transformed. Yet the disciples are returning to their homes and old occupations. Most had been fishermen by the Sea of Galilee, and it is there that John now takes us in chapter 21.

I find it somewhat mysterious that the disciples returned to Galilee after the incredible events that had taken place in Jerusalem. We might have found it more likely if they had retreated after the Crucifixion. Yet the Gospel writers tell us that after Calvary, the disciples stayed in Jerusalem even after the first Resurrection appearances.

It seems most likely that Jesus had told the disciples to return to Galilee. It would be in Galilee that He would meet them once more. Clearly this is what is understood in Matthew's Gospel (Matthew 28:7). So, at the start of John 21 we see some of the disciples gathered near the town of Tiberias.

Peter takes the lead once more and they go fishing. As usual, the other disciples follow.

This fishing expedition proved a failure as they caught nothing. Maybe they felt they had lost their old touch? However, here in John 21 we discover that this was all part of God's plan.

The disciples needed to learn that they could not now go off and do anything they wished; rather they needed to be ready to go where Jesus commanded them to go.

It is amazing to think that many Christians today think and react like Peter. They have an idea, and they persuade others to adopt it. They set their course, but they never consider whether their great proposal comes from God or not. They are led by an impulse, or a feeling, but not by the Word of God.

We also learn that many Christians are often tempted to go back to their old way of life which they should have left behind. Is this because we find security in known things? This echoes God's people in the wilderness who begged Moses to take them back to Egypt. How often do we rail against the task and responsibility that Christ gives us in the face of suffering and difficulties?

Reflecting on this 40-day period after the Resurrection, we see that the main objective was to provide the disciples with the undeniable evidence that death had been defeated. Jesus showed Himself alive after death and gave undeniable proofs. He lingered long enough on Earth to satisfy his followers of the truth of His Resurrection because these men were not easily convinced.

Jesus turns them back to the Scriptures to explain exactly what has taken place and why (Luke 24). The disciples had to be so completely persuaded so that they would never doubt again. So here in John 21, we find Jesus seeking to unpack and underline the importance of their ministry in the future.

### **The appearance by the sea, verses 1-14**

The chapter opens with the impression that an interval of time has elapsed (verse 1). This is Jesus' third appearance to the disciples after the Resurrection (verse 14). We can work out that these events must have taken place between the beginning of the second week and the Ascension.

Interestingly John is the only New Testament writer to use the name 'Sea of Tiberias' for the Sea of Galilee. John gives us an account of a special event that takes place, giving us an insight both into Christ and his disciples' characters and minds.

We learn in verse 2 that the seven disciples who were present included several previously named in the Gospels. It seems that the disciples had gone back to Galilee either to escape the scrutiny of the mob in Jerusalem, or more likely, to follow the command of Jesus.

They were now certainly under the leadership of Peter (verse 3). It could also be that they were seeking to earn some money so going back to the family business was the simplest way of raising cash for any future return to Jerusalem. However, this is guesswork on my part.

We know that the plan to go fishing was a failure because “that night they caught nothing” (verse 3).

In verse 4, the situation changed. Jesus appeared early in the morning just after daybreak. The fishermen would have been cold, almost certainly wet and obviously discouraged. Looking to the coastline they didn't notice Jesus standing there. Could they have been too preoccupied with themselves and their failure to catch fish? In verse 5, Jesus calls out to these disciples asking them if they've caught any fish, and the reaction from the disciples is a blunt 'No'!

At this stage, Jesus gives them a command to cast their net from the boat. He may have been testing their faith by recommending a procedure the Galilean fishermen never used, or it is possible that He had seen a school of fish from the shore.

Whatever the reason, the disciples evidently felt that it was worth one more attempt and the result was a catch so great they could not get the load into the boat!

Once again, this reminds us of Luke 5:1-11 but there are also some differences. In this account, the fishermen were still on the lake, not on the land. Jesus was not immediately recognised, whereas Luke states that Jesus had been talking with them previously. This event occurred shortly after daybreak, where Luke says it was after Jesus had been teaching for a period of time. It seems that this event caused the disciples to remember that it was indeed Jesus standing on the shore.

John tells us that the disciple whom Jesus loved was the first to recognise the mysterious stranger on the shore. But once again it was Peter's reaction which draws our attention as he flings himself towards Jesus. This eagerness to see Jesus is consistent with the Peter who is revealed to us in the pages of the Bible.

We are told simply in verse 8 that the other disciples pulled the net into the shallow water where they could disembark and sort out the catch.

In verse 9, the scene now moves to the place where Jesus had a fire going and was preparing breakfast. He suggests that the disciples bring some of the fish that they have caught. He continues to multiply and bless the efforts of the disciples. This echoes what had taken place previously in the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand (John 6:1-14).

In verse 11, we are given one of those facts that seem to be strange. We are told about the exact number of fish -153 - that had been brought in from the catch. This is probably a fisherman's perspective – an unusual catch, so important that they actually even spent time counting the fish.

I think it is fanciful to think that this particular number stood for anything at all. What would probably be far more important was the way in which the total number of fish would be divided up amongst the disciples as they sought to sell their catch to the merchants on shore.

By verse 12, we are told that Jesus is asking them to come and enjoy their breakfast. The attitude of the disciples is that they dare not even ask who it is, even though they know. They discover that Jesus had once again come to Galilee.

It appears that Jesus may have changed in outward appearance to the disciples, but spiritually his identity was clear. No doubt His serving of fish and bread to the disciples would have an echo of the Last Supper.

In verse 14, we are told very clearly that this is the third appearance to the disciples since the Resurrection. Those who are observant will know that this was in fact Jesus' seventh appearance. Apparently, what the apostle John meant by the third time is linked to the word 'disciples' because it was the third time Jesus had appeared to the official group who were often described as 'the twelve'. The other two appearances are in chapter 20, to the disciples in the locked room and then to Thomas.

### **The re-establishment of Peter, verses 15-23**

The chief reason for this story being included is to let us know what happened to Peter after his denial of Jesus. The three questions Jesus addresses to Peter stand in contrast to Peter's three denials.

The other disciples were aware of Peter's denial of Jesus. So, when Jesus is with the disciples, He now re-commissions Peter. This must have been a reassuring word not only for Peter but also for all the disciples. The wording of the first question, "Do you truly love me more than these?" (verse 15) contains an ambiguity.

Three times Peter gave the same reply, though it is clear that he was a little annoyed at being asked to repeat himself! But Jesus knew Peter, and he knew what he was like. He knew that Peter had made this kind of confession before.

Jesus makes Peter repeat himself more than once so that he will not forget the lesson he is learning. Peter needed to learn humility. Was his love for Christ stronger than his love for fishing? Was his love really stronger than the love of these other men around him?

Jesus requires us to love Him with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. The love for our job or our family or friends or our pleasures needs to take second place. We need to put Jesus first. It is love for Christ that is the key to keeping a Christian on track. It is not enough to want to be successful or to do good, or to leave this world a better place. We will only become disillusioned.

What we also learn in this passage is that Jesus' command to Peter also came containing some fine distinctions:

2. Feed my lambs (verse 15) – the focus here is on pasture.
3. Take care of my sheep (verse 16) – here we see the work of a shepherd.
4. Feed my sheep (verse 17) – again, pasture.

The first and the third imply only the sheep in pasture where they are fed but the second implies the total guardianship of a shepherd.

What we witness here is a call to service. Peter is called to the work of a shepherd and a pastor of the church of God. His responsibility would be for the young (the lambs) and the older and more mature Christians (the sheep). The lambs must be fed with the appropriate food and the sheep must be cared for, watched over and fed.

For Peter, this would mean a lifetime of leadership in the Christian Church. It would not be an easy task and eventually he would die a martyr's death. Certainly, this is what Jesus pointed to.

We see here that Christians may indeed honour God not only in the way they live, but also by the way they die. Yet we need to realise that not every Christian is called by Christ to such a task or to end their life in such a dramatic way. The Lord Jesus has a plan for each of our lives.

It is here that Peter notices John following them and says "Lord, what about him?" (verse 21). Jesus' reply helps us to understand the importance of personally following Him. He doesn't encourage jealousy or even curiosity about what is planned for others. We each have a journey to take, a path to walk, and the key is to walk with Christ.

The book closes with the testimony of the disciple who has recorded these words for our good and for our benefit. Here is the account of Christ - our Saviour and our God - the Risen Lord in whom we can put our faith and confidence.

### **Questions on John 21:1-24**

**Warm Up Question:** What do you normally have for breakfast during the week? In what way might you welcome Jesus as Lord to your day?

2. How does the story in this chapter pick up on fishing, forgiving, feeding, and following? How does this story compare and differ from Luke 5:1-11?
3. In verses 1-14, what did the risen Lord reveal about Himself and the work that the disciples were to do? In the light of this, how does this affect our own life and work? What do we learn about Jesus meeting us in our place of work?

4. What is the important lesson in verses 5-6? What do we notice about Peter's reaction to seeing Jesus on the shore? What is especially commendable about Peter being the one to try to get to Jesus first? Why was the memory of the Cross so painful? But why is Jesus so important to him?
  
5. Why does Christ ask Peter three times if Peter loves Him (verses 15-19)? Why was Jesus asking Peter the questions about his love for Him - doesn't Jesus know all things? What do we learn about Jesus from this chapter?
  
6. What do we discover from verses 18-23 of the different ways in which the Lord directs the life of each one of his people? What lesson was Peter learning from this and what might we learn?
  
7. In what ways can you serve and follow Jesus today?

## Study 5 – Acts 4:23-31: Christ and the Church - Introduction

The Church refers to everyone who belongs to the Lord Jesus Christ. These people belong because He has purchased them by His blood shed upon the cross.

In the Bible, we find a whole range of images and ideas that express and define the Church. It is called the body of Christ, the family of God, the people of God, the elect, the bride of Christ and the communion of saints. There are of course, many others besides these.

In the New Testament the word for Church, from which we get the word 'ecclesiastical', means 'those called out'. The Church is seen as those who have been gathered, elected and called out of the world away from sin and into God's grace.

Jesus indicated that there would be both weeds and wheat growing together in the same field. So we need to remind ourselves that not all those who honour Christ with their lips will honour him with their hearts as well. It is only God who can read the human heart and see the secret depths of our commitment and love for Him and His Son - our Saviour, Jesus Christ.

It is both the privilege and opportunity of every Christian to be united to the Church of Christ. It is our solemn responsibility not to neglect the gathering together of Christian people as we come together in corporate worship. As we meet together, we are nurtured and disciplined in the life of the Church. It is the Church's responsibility not only to teach the faith, but also to go out into the world and proclaim the good news about Jesus Christ.

So the Church is not so much an organisation as an organism. It is made up of living parts and called the Body of Christ with Christ Himself at the head.

Pentecost is without doubt the event that marks the birth of the Christian Church. It was here that the Christian people were given the great commission by Jesus to go out into the world and proclaim the gospel. On that day, the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out upon his people so as to dynamically enable the Church to be Christ's ambassadors.

In Acts 2, we read of a marvellous outpouring of joy and celebration as well as the proclamation of the good news to Jerusalem, Judea and eventually - the whole world.

In one way, the New Testament reads as a remarkable record of missionary movement, beginning as it did with a small group of disciples in Galilee, then exploding in Jerusalem and going out into the world. This world is often hostile to the Gospel and we need to recall that first century Christians were often subject to stresses and strains that are similar to the ones that we face in our present age.

The Book of Acts is a story of the Church as it begins its bold history of taking the gospel out into the world. It covers a period of roughly 30 years, beginning this new era of God, as His Spirit is being poured out into people's hearts and lives when they turn to Christ as their Lord and Saviour.

We need to recall that it was the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on those people on the day of Pentecost that marked the birth of the Jerusalem Church. In its early days, we see transforming power as the Church seeks to proclaim and make known Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour.

### **Christ and Spiritual boldness – Acts 4:23-28**

This is the second big prayer meeting in the book of Acts. We are told that the apostles have been commanded by the authorities to stop preaching about Jesus Christ. Their response is to keep on preaching! In verse 23 we do not know exactly where the believers were meeting but a good guess would be in the upper room that had been mentioned in chapter 1.

It is interesting to note the content of the believers' prayer in verse 24. There are certainly some surprises lurking in this prayer for us to see! We find that the believers do not weep, wail and complain. Neither do they ask for protection or deliverance from future opposition and persecution. Instead, they thank God for being sovereign.

Not only is God sovereign, He is also the Creator of the heavens and the earth. What the passage shows is that the believers continue to praise God because they see this as a fulfilment of prophecy that has been given through his servant, David, centuries before.

In verses 25 and 26, the believers quote Psalm 2:1-2. “Sovereign Lord, you made the heaven and the earth and the sea, and everything in them. You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David: ‘Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the Lord and against his Anointed One.’”

Here we see the believers rejoicing in God because He had predicted this very opposition that they were now facing. Such knowledge would have made them feel safe in the hand of their sovereign God. What had they been doing? They had been speaking about Christ, the Head of the Church and Saviour of the world. In their prayer, they become even more specific, reminding us about how the political leaders of the day conspired against God’s holy servant, Jesus, whom God anointed. Having outlined the situation that they are facing, they now call upon God to work within them, for they say in verse 29, “Now Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your Word with great boldness.” Amazingly, they are asking for boldness - even in the face of the threat of violence and possible death!

Just as this prayer gives glory to God for His sovereignty over all creation, it also focuses on the person and work of Jesus Christ. God’s sovereignty is seen clearly in the death of Jesus on the cross, for it is Jesus himself who is the focus of God’s plan for the world.

We discover here that the cross of Jesus Christ is central to Christianity. Christianity is not first and foremost a system of morality or a form of religion. It is a message of salvation from the power and penalty of sin. That is why Jesus Christ came. So, when we place our faith in Jesus Christ as our Saviour, God forgives our sins, gives us eternal life and adopts us as our children.

### **Acts 4:29-31**

In these verses we discover that these early Christians met together to pray and began with praise for God’s sovereign reign. They see themselves as part of the saving plan of Christ. Only after this affirmation, do they mention their particular trouble.

In verse 29, they pray that God would empower them for ministry, specifically that He would empower them to have boldness and courage in sharing Jesus Christ and bring glory to His holy servant, Jesus.

This is certainly challenging for Christians today. These early believers had the priority of building God's Kingdom and we see it coming out of their prayer life. It would be interesting to do an audit of our own prayers to see whether or not our prayers reflect the kind we read of here in Acts 4.

Do not make the mistake that this is just a prayer of Peter and John. No, the sense here is that the whole of God's people who are taken up by this desire to be His ambassadors and to speak boldly about Christ.

The passage closes with this wonderful verse: "After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the Word of God boldly."

Now it doesn't matter if the building shakes or not but we need to be filled with the divine power of God's Spirit so that we can speak and proclaiming His Word boldly. We need to pray and not to lose heart; we need to keep asking, seeking, and knocking. We keep praying so that we are filled with the very presence of Jesus Christ, the Head of the Church.

It does not matter whether you are outgoing or softly spoken, God can use anyone to bring people into His Kingdom and He wants you to be his servant. So as we come and pray together, remember that Jesus Christ is Head of the Church and that it is the power of His Holy Spirit at work in our lives which will enable us to speak the Word with great boldness.

### **Questions on Acts 4:23-31**

**Warm Up Question:** What do you particularly love about St John's Wimborne? If you could change one thing, what would it be?

1. Read Acts 4:23-27 again. What takes place after Peter and John are released from prison? What is the first thing they do? How does the Church community respond to the situation and to opposition?
2. Look at verses 24-28. How is God described? What do these different descriptions tell us about Him?
3. As the believers are praying together they quote Psalm 2 which refers to the coming kingship of Christ (see Psalm 2:1–9). How are the experiences spoken of in this psalm comparable to the events recounted in verses 27-28?
4. The people recall how in the past God dealt with those who conspire against Him. What did they discover? How was this an encouragement to the believers? Now look at the rest of the prayer in Acts 4:29–30. In light of what God has done in the past, what do they ask Him to do for them now? What is surprising about the prayer?
5. Jesus Christ is Lord of His Church and attack upon Christ's people is an attack upon Him. What do we learn about Christ and the key weapons that defend the Church? Looking at the passage as a whole, can you see the reason, request and result of this prayer meeting?
6. How would you like to improve the way we pray as a Church family?

## Study 6 – 1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11: The Second Coming

We must not think that Christ will remain in Heaven for ever. A great day is still to come – the day of His return! The story of Christ has not ended.

The Bible tells us in many places that Christ will come again in order to take us to be with Him and put an end to sin, suffering and death. This was very much the hope of the early Church and it has sustained God's people both in the face of dangers in this world and from the attacks of the evil one. It has also played a key part in helping the Church to grow in the face of opposition.

Some modern biblical scholars believe that the early Christians expected Christ to come at any moment which greatly affected the way in which the Church went about its evangelistic activity. These early Christians, it is said, paid little attention to church organisation, doctrine or the practice of structures or hierarchy. These scholars say that the Church only became more concrete and structured once the first generation of Christians had died out. It is said that they moved from a loose structure to becoming more organised with their hierarchy and developed a system of discipline.

Now it hardly needs to be said that this is an oversimplification of what was actually happening in the first century. Any reading of the New Testament shows that the reality was very different from the caricature painted above.

The Church has always had a structure of authority which came primarily from Christ and was delegated in the first instance to the apostles, then to men who were appointed as elders over the church.

The Church has also always had a clear notion of right and wrong over matters of doctrine and areas of morality. This can be seen in the book of Acts through the discussions that took place over the question of whether or not to admit Gentiles into the Church.

It also needs to be stressed that even the earliest Church was very much aware that there were many false teachers who had to be disciplined and sometimes excommunicated. (Acts 8:18-19).

It is against this background that we need to look at the whole truth regarding the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. The Church had accepted the promise made by the angels as Jesus had ascended into heaven and would return again at an unspecified time in the future (Acts 1:11).

There is little or no evidence that this hope diminished or that the Church changed its character or outlook because of any disappointment at the delay in Christ's return.

We may recall that, during the Second World War, General Douglas MacArthur, Commander of the American forces in the Far East, had to flee the Philippines with the onslaught of the Japanese attacks. But before he left he made a very final speech to the people of the Philippines by saying, "I shall return!" and surely he did.

We need to remember the angel's words from Acts which said that Christ, who had risen from the dead and ascended into Heaven, would at some future time personally return to the Earth. We are told that when He returns it will be visible, literal and personal.

The reason for Christ's return is both to usher in the End of the Age and to receive His Bride (the Church). There are a number of compelling reasons for us to know that he will indeed return:

- He will return to redeem His own promise. He said He would return and will keep His word.
- He will return to complete the fulfilment of many of the promises made both in the New Testament and the Old Testament (Luke 4:16-20).
- He will return to vindicate the prediction of the angels at His Ascension (Acts 1:11).
- He will return to complete the work of Redemption. His atoning sacrifice at Calvary redeemed His people from the penalty and power of sin, but there is one aspect of redemption that yet remains to be completed; our adoption as sons and the redemption of our bodies (Romans 8:23). Christ's return will usher us not only into our new bodies, but also into our new home!
- He will return to confirm the truthfulness and trustworthiness of the scriptures. Jesus spoke of His return many times.

- He will return to execute judgement on those who have rejected the Gospel and spurned God's love. Those who have rejected Christ in this life will face judgement when He returns (Matthew 25:31-32). When Jesus comes, it will be as King to claim His Kingdom and people.

Where at the moment we see only dimly as through a mirror, then we shall see Him face to face!

### **Introduction to 1 Thessalonians**

This letter was written in about AD50. It was almost certainly one of the first letters written by the apostle Paul. Paul himself had established a church there on his second missionary journey. His decision to make this journey is recorded in Acts 15:36. Originally, Paul and Barnabas had planned to make the trip together, but there had been a disagreement on whether or not to take Mark. In the end Barnabas and Paul separated. So we then read of Paul's trip to Thessalonica in Acts 15:37-40.

Thessalonica itself is roughly 100 miles south-west of Philippi - the first port of call that the apostle had on his missionary tour into Europe.

As we read in Acts 17, Paul began his ministry, as was his custom, by opening and teaching the Scriptures on three Sabbaths in a row.

As Paul launched his mission in Thessalonica, we find that there were three main things that he stressed: (1) that Christ had to suffer, (2) that Christ had to die and be raised from the dead, and (3) that Jesus is the Christ (Acts 17:3). He did this by showing that it was all taught and promised through the Scriptures.

Over the course of time, there was tremendous opposition to the Gospel message in Thessalonica. The hostility was so great that Paul and Silas were forced to flee and go to the next city, Berea.

From the opening of the letter to the Thessalonians, we learn that Paul continues to pray and be concerned for the believers, and now reunited with Timothy, is sending him back to find out what is happening.

He writes the letter firstly to express thanksgiving that they are standing firm and secondly to deal with those who are accusing him of being merely a travelling speaker wanting money.

One of the key themes of both Thessalonian letters is the return of Jesus Christ. In the first letter, the idea seems to revolve around the Rapture of the church in chapter 4. As we study, we will see this theme unfold very clearly in the second letter as well, where Paul develops the idea of the Second Coming of Christ to set up His Kingdom.

In the first part of chapter 4, Paul's focus has been on walking in a manner that is pleasing to God. In the first 8 verses, he encourages the Thessalonians to abstain from sexual immorality. Paul seeks to make clear that unbelievers are controlled by their sin. Believers, however, have the power of the Holy Spirit available to them. So those who practise sexual immorality are in fact turning their backs on God.

Then, in verses 9-10, Paul commends the Thessalonians for the love of their brothers, demonstrated not just in Thessalonica but to other believers as well.

### **1 Thessalonians 4:13-18**

As we get to verse 13 we find that Paul changes gear and now focuses on prophecy. In fact, if we were to think of one subject that characterises the entire letter, prophecy is that subject. In particular Paul is thinking of the return of Jesus Christ.

What seems to have happened is that Timothy has returned and given a report that the Christians in Thessalonica have been disturbed about what happens to Christians who die before Jesus returns. In these verses, Paul discusses this subject in what is probably a classic New Testament passage on the Lord's return.

The lack of knowledge of the Thessalonians concerning Christian teaching on Jesus' return, and in particular what happens to their fellow Christians who have died, leads Paul to write in order to reassure and inform them.

Paul wanted to deliver his readers from the grief experienced by the rest of men (verse 12). The non-Christian has a deep sorrow and pity for those who have

departed and ventured into what is for them a completely unknown realm. The Christian, though feeling the pain of loss, does not have the same deep sense of sorrow on behalf of believers who have died, for their grief is tempered by the fact that they know they will see again those who have trusted in Christ.

Grief on behalf of the living and the loss sustained when a loved one dies is of course legitimate for Christians (Philippians 2:27), but that kind of grief is not in view here.

Paul explains in verse 14 that relief from sorrow is related to what is going to take place in the future. Just as Jesus died and rose again, so will those who sleep in Him be raised when God brings them to Heaven with Jesus at his *parousia* (return). It is in fact the death and resurrection of Jesus that guarantees their resurrection.

In verses 15-17, the authority that validates Paul's affirmation in verse 14 is nothing less than the Lord's own word. In these verses Paul is first of all saying what will not happen. Believers "who are still alive and are left" will not go to meet Jesus before the dead in Christ do so (verse 15).

When Paul uses 'we', he appears to place this event within his own lifetime which of course raises the question of his own death. However, any such speculation ends immediately when we realise that in chapter 5, Paul himself realises that the day and time is not yet known.

I think Paul wants to stress that the next great event in the Church's history will be when Jesus Christ gathers up His people. That is what he believed and taught.

Verses 16 and 17 are indeed glorious because we know that the Lord Himself will come down from Heaven. He will issue a command which will wake those who have fallen asleep in Christ. It is after this (verse 17) that all living Christians will be caught up for the meeting with Christ. The key point that we need to realise is that as Christians, both those who have died and those who are alive, we will meet Jesus and be with Him forever. Surely these are words of great reassurance not only for the Thessalonians but also for us!

## **1 Thessalonians 5:1-11**

Having dealt with the issue of those who have died in Christ, Paul now turns to a new subject, though it is not completely separate from the previous one. He addresses why the Coming of Christ has not yet occurred.

This seems to have perplexed not only the Thessalonians but still perplexes many Christians today. In verse 2, we see that the focus will be on the Day of the Lord. This day is associated with the ultimate overthrow of all of God's enemies (Isaiah 2:12). It will be a day of national deliverance for Israel and a day of salvation, but it will also be a day when God's anger comes to bear upon his enemies (Amos 5:18; 1 Thessalonians 1:10, 5:9).

In verse 3, we see that this Day will unfold in two ways. For those who are not in Christ and therefore unprepared, the consequences are far from cheerful.

The unbelieving world will find this a day of judgement. Just as disaster overtakes the unsuspecting householder when set upon by a robber, so catastrophe will overtake the living that are outside God's Kingdom. Surely these are salutary words for us to reflect upon as we think about our Lord's return.

In contrast, verse 4 tells us that the believers in Thessalonica (who Paul now affectionately calls brothers) do not need to live in darkness but have the light of God's Word so as not to be surprised by the thief.

In verse 6, Paul provides a solid base for the ethical behaviour he now urges the Thessalonians to adopt. As they wait for the Lord's return, He urges them to have a lifestyle free from moral impurity.

To explain his encouragement in verse 6, Paul appeals to everyday experiences, such as sleep and drunkenness, which no doubt were as familiar to the Thessalonians as they are to us.

In verse 9, Paul summarises the reason for the guarantee of salvation. He first does this negatively; "God did not appoint us to suffer wrath" and then positively; "but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ".

By verse 11, with the Thessalonians having such a guarantee, Paul hopes they will now be equipped to encourage and support one another. Surely these words should also encourage us as we look for the day of Christ's Return – for He will return as our King and Judge.

### **Questions on Thessalonians 4:13-5:11**

Luke describes the time of Paul's ministry among the Thessalonians in Acts 17:1-10. Some scholars think he stayed there for several months. It is clear that the issue of the Lord's Return was causing them trouble.

**Warm Up Question:** If you knew that Jesus was coming back in seven days' time how would you spend your last week?

1. What is the general attitude about death today? How do you feel when someone you know has died? In what ways is grief different for a Christian than it is for a non-Christian (4:13)? What is the difference between our reaction to the death of a non-Christian loved one and that of a Christian loved one?
2. What is the progression of events that Paul says will occur when Christ returns (4:16-17)? In view of these coming events, what should we do? What have we discovered about this worldwide event (verse 8)?
3. How would you recommend people prepare for Christ's return? Should people fear Christ's return (5:1-3)? Why are the examples of a thief (5:2) and labour pains (5:3) good analogies of what will happen on the Day of the Lord?
4. What will people be saying when the Lord comes (5:3)? Why will the Day of the Lord not overtake Christians as a thief (5:4-5)? What dangers are associated with living in darkness (5:5-7)?

5. What instructions does Paul give for living in the light (5:8)? How can one “live together with Him” whether awake/alive or asleep/dead (5:10)? What do we discover about Christ from this passage? And how does it differ from His first coming?





