GOD SPEAKS TODAY

A BASIC BIBLE INTRODUCTION

By Gerhard Nehls

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The design on the cover is an Arabic version of the LORD'S PRAYER as found in Matthew 6:9-13:

Our Father in heaven,
may your name be kept holy.

May your Kingdom come soon.

May your will be done on earth,
as it is in heaven.

Give us today the food we need,
and forgive us our sins,
as we have forgiven those who sin against us.

And don't let us yield to temptation,
but rescue us from the evil one.

For the kingdom and the power and
the glory are yours forever. Amen.

(Matthew 6, 9-13.New Living Translation)

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My Prayer for You

The very first words God has spoken as recorded in the Book were

"Let there be light".

And the first question (to Adam) found just two pages later addressed "Where are you?" show us God´s burning desire to have fellowship with his creation and bringing light into a dark world.

Nothing has changed ever since. Most people are still caught in sin, and in hiding away from God´s presence. But what a wonderful discovery: GOD SPEAKS, even TODAY!

My prayer for you as you find your way through this small book is that You will hear God speaking from His word, and that He will shed light on your path to eternity.

Perhaps you want to make these words your own Prayer:

"Your word is a lamp to guide my feet and a light for my path."
"The teaching of your word gives light, so even the simple can understand."
(Psalm 119: verses 105 and 130)

We would love to hear from you.

Walter Eric, for the *Life Challenge* People

1. THE BEGINNING OF IT ALL

In the Beginning – what?

This world of ours did not just happen, and neither did we. Presently two prevailing world views struggle to get our attention. Both want to explain to us, why we are living on this planet. The conservative points to God as the initiator of all there is. The liberal rather points to the "Big Bang" theory. Consequently, all development of life happened purely by chance with the result that humankind became the most advanced species.

It is everybody's choice what to believe. If just by *truly* observing what *is*, we have no choice, but to conclude that there can be nothing without an initiator, someone to think, and then create it. How can something emerge from nothing? Not even a box of matches or such a mundane item as the handkerchief in your pocket, not to mention our nervous, digestive and reproductive systems, not forgetting our mind.

We 'believe', that means we trust, depend on, and rely on the fact that someone created this world, this universe, which we fail to fully comprehend. He created "Life", with all the unimaginably minute myriads of cells, of which we, and all plants and animals are made up of, including all the components of each of these cells. Just try to think this! **We call Him God!**

Already the Psalms (see also Surah 17:55), the "Prayer-and-Praise Book" of the Bible, expresses that:

"The heavens declare the glory of God"

"The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.

Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they reveal knowledge.

They have no speech, they use no words; no sound is heard from them. Yet their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world." (Psalm 19:1-4)

God can only be Perceived or Grasped by what He Created:

"When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is mankind that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them?" (Psalm 8:3-6)

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

God also Gave Us a Mind to Grasp Him:

"You make known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand." (Psalm 16:11)

"I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation." (Psalm 13:5)

"Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight; so you are right in your verdict and justified when you judge." (Psalm 51:4)

"Teach me your way, LORD, that I may rely on your faithfulness; give me an undivided heart, that I may fear your name." (Psalm 86:11)

God's Gifts Fill us with Joy and Gratitude

"I will praise you, Lord my God, with all my heart; I will glorify your name forever, for great is your love toward me; you have delivered me from the depths, from the realm of the dead." (Psalm 86:11-13)

"You turned my wailing into dancing; you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy, that my heart may sing your praises and not be silent. LORD my God, I will praise you forever." (Psalm 30:11-12)

"Let the morning bring me word of your unfailing love, for I have put my trust in you. Show me the way I should go, for to you I entrust my life." (Psalm 143:8)

I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into glory. Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you.

My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever." (Psalm 73:23-26)

"The LORD is my light and my salvation— whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life— of whom shall I be afraid?" (Psalm 27:1)

But who *is* God? There is a lot of religion in this world, each claiming to reveal who God is. But religions differ substantially. What or whom are we to entrust our life, and our eternal destiny? Our up-bringing and tradition tells us that '*our* faith' is the right one. To disagree could mean rejection by our family, friends, and society. Should we follow our tradition? Or our feeling? Or our mind, our reason?

The famous Muslim poet of the thirteenth century AD, Jalaluddin Rumi, told the story of an elephant that had been brought to Arabia. Everyone wanted to see it. But the room in which it was kept was dark. One could only touch and feel the elephant. It so happened that one of the inquisitive visitors got hold of the elephant's trunk, and concluded that an elephant is a massive hose pipe. Another felt an ear, and said it must be a fan, operated by hand, as it was in the old days. Another argued that it must be a tree trunk or a column, while yet another reasoned that it is a flapping piece of rope (the tail). Each one of them had a small part of the truth, but none knew what an elephant really looked like.

This Bible Introduction aims to help understand the "elephant", as we find it in its original form in ***Al-Kitab***, or rather, *Al-Kutub-ul-Muqaddas* (Holy Scriptures), that is, the Bible. The different Christian denominations may vary in form or tradition, but nearly all acknowledge the basic teaching of the Bible, at least to some degree.

You are likely to discover that the actual message of the Bible differs from your own idea of Christianity. This is understandable, for we presently witness, sadly, a rapidly increasing godlessness in the Western world, which may be perceived to be Christian, which it is certainly not. In the measure that people are divorced from God, they live as though they are not accountable, neither for their thought, nor their speech, and action. 'Loose living', shameless dishonesty and corruption are only some facets that display the general thinking today, and more so in the Western world. This is not Christianity, and certainly just about the opposite of what the Bible teaches.

You must make sure to ask a truly Bible-believing Christian, before following the advice given in Surah 10:94:

> "If you are in doubt about what We have sent down to you, ask those who have been reciting The Book before you." [*A.J. Droge Translation*]

Still better is to study yourself what God has revealed, first to the descendants of Abraham, and then to all who want to know and act on that. You are welcome to take a look at the essence of what the Bible teaches.

Wherever it appears in this study, we used the numbering and text of the English translation of 'The Meaning of the Qur'an' by Abdullah Yusuf Ali published by Sh. Muhammad Ashraf of Lahore, Pakistan,1981.

Review and Remember

1. Describe the two competing world views how planet earth began.
2. What is the psalm writer's insight on how God speaks to man and proclaims his glory?
3. What should be our natural response to God's wonderful gifts?
4. Why would the Qur'an instruct its readers to consult Christian believers to further explain to them God's revelation?

2. WHAT THE BIBLE IS ALL ABOUT

The Bible contains the *self-revelation of God*, or simply put, God wants to tell us *who He is*, and *what He wants us to know* and be. But there is a problem. Just try to explain to a grasshopper that you, a human, have cultivated a garden, and wish that it should not feed on, and consequently strip a particular plant in it.

Sadly, a grasshopper does not understand English, Chinese, or any other human language. Neither do *we* understand the 'heavenly' language. So, when God attempts to communicate to us who He is, and what He wants us to know about Him, ourselves, our enemy, and the world in which we live, He uses *our* words, *our* thoughts, and *our* capacity to comprehend, to be understood by us. That became our Bible.

While we do understand the words, and perhaps also many concepts in the Bible, we understand only those that relate to our 'earthly' context, simply because those that are 'heavenly', are incomprehensible and inaccessible for us. Just try to comprehend who God is, and what Heaven, or eternity, or hell are. Perhaps we even fail to understand what '*agape*', God's divine love, really and fully is, simply because we will always apply the meaning of that word in the way we experience it, perhaps like 'I love ice-cream'.

We live in the era of airplanes, television, and ice-cream

We live in the era of airplanes, television, and ice-cream. Yet the Word of God needs to address, or convey, the self-same message equally to the nomadic shepherds and peasants wherever and whenever, as to our high-tech world. Can we see the problem?

God solved it in His own way. First, **He spoke to us through His earthly servants, the prophets**, using prophecies, historic events and manifold parables, metaphors, analogies, allegories, and just plain stories. But then happened the phenomenal..., but first things first.

The Bible is a Library

The English word "Bible" originates from the Latin *biblia*, meaning 'the books'. It will be very helpful, though not necessary, to open your Bible at the 'Contents' page right at the beginning. You will find that the Bible is divided into two main parts: the 'Old Testament' and the 'New Testament'.

The translation of this Latin word *testamentum*, simply means 'a testament', or 'a (last) will'. The first Testament was revealed by God 'BC' (before Christ) to the Israelites, and the New Testament is recorded as 'AD' *Anno Domini*, which again is Latin, and means 'in the year of the Lord' (Christ). And that addresses all people in the world.

You will see that each 'Testament' consists of a number of individual books. The Old Testament is made up of 39 books, and the New Testament of 27. Consequently, the Bible is not a single book, but rather a library of 66 separate books, now all bound into one!

Each book in the Bible is divided into chapters, and each chapter is subdivided into verses. When you read of 1 Sam. 3:4-14, you should look for *The First Book of Samuel, Chapter 3, from Verse 4 to Verse 14*.

The 'Books' of the Old Testament

As we already know, the Old Testament is a collective name for all Biblical revelation which was given to the Jews before Jesus was born. Jews were named after the Kingdom of Judea and its original fore-father Judah. It is also called the 'Old Covenant', for it is named after the covenant which God made with *Abraham* and his descendants. This was confirmed to *Moses* and the Jews, also called *Israelites*, the people God had chosen to be an example and light to all people, and to lead them to God. Unfortunately, however, this did not happen.

So Jesus initiated the New Covenant, which calls all people to repent, and to serve the living God.

Here is a brief mentioning of the books of the Old Testament:

1. The 'Books of Moses' (Torah), also called the *Taurat* [= Law, or better 'direction' or 'teaching'] in Hebrew, or the Pentateuch [= five books]. They are:

Genesis [= Beginning] In this first 'book' of the Bible we learn what we need to know about the creation of the world. Following that we read about the lives of the 'Patriarchs' ['the fathers who rule'], the stories of Adam and Eve, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Ishmael, Jacob and his twelve sons, how they got into Egypt, where they and their descendants lived for 400 years, most of the time as slaves.

Exodus [= move out] records the life of Moses, and God's rescue operation to save the Israelites from the slavery in Egypt under the leadership of Moses, beginning with the miraculous journey through the Red Sea, the first part of the 40-year-journey through the wilderness, and the receiving of the Law of God (including the Ten Commandments) at Mount Sinai.

Leviticus reveals God's offer to find atonement [= God's offer for a sinner to be reconciled with Him, provided he or she would repent. See also page 33], and to attain holiness "without which no man shall see the Lord." (Hebrews 12:14) Added is God's order for the priesthood, the Levites, as well as the order of worship, and the offering of sacrifices [symbolical substitute that suffers the punishment that the actual perpetrator of God's holy Law deserves]. The spiritual, criminal, moral, and 'civil' laws are to govern the lifestyle of all Israelites.

Numbers gets its name from a census taken after the giving of God's Law. It then records the journey from Sinai towards the 'Promised Land', Israel, but also the disobedience and rebellion of the people of Israel towards God.

Deuteronomy [= Second Law] repeats aspects of the Law of God near the end of the wilderness journey, and gives divine instructions for the keeping of the Law, as well as prophetic promises of blessings (for obedience), and curses (for disobedience). It calls the believer to love and obey God in answer to God's love and faithfulness, and ends with the death of Moses. A prophetic show of the fate of the Israelites is added.

2. The History of Israel 'Books' from the death of Moses to about 400 BC (covering about 1000 years).

Joshua tells the story of the occupation of Israel after the death of Moses.

Judges were ruling Israel for 400 years in times of much trouble due to disobedience.

Ruth tells the story of a Gentile woman who had turned to God during the time of the judges.

1 and 2 Samuel record the history of King Saul (*Talut*) and King David (*Da'ud*).

1 and 2 Kings record the history of King Solomon (*Suleiman*) and his successors until the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians (597 BC).

1 and 2 Chronicles provide a report of the period of Samuel and Kings.

Ezra and Nehemiah report about the return of some Jews to Israel after the Babylonian exile, and the rebuilding of the temple and the wall of Jerusalem.

Esther pictures the trials of a Jewish girl who became queen in the Persian empire (Iran). It also tells how God provided salvation for His people.

3. The 'Poetic' Books were largely written in the poetic style of their time:

Job (Ayyub) deals with the problem of seemingly undeserved suffering, and recounts the experiences of the prophet after whom the book is named.

Psalms (Zabur) consist of prayers, worship, praise and songs of praise, chiefly composed by David.

Proverbs gives practical instruction in righteous living.

Ecclesiastes shows the foolishness of man's reasoning in the light of the thought of God.

Song of Songs is a collection of love songs.

Lamentations depicts the terrible suffering of the Jews in Jerusalem during the time of its destruction by the Babylonians.

4. The Prophets spoke to the Jewish people on behalf of God. They give direction, warning and judgement. They also reveal the immediate and distant future of Israel and its people, and also the coming of the Messiah (*al-Masih*)

The 4 'major' (longest) **Prophetic Books are:**

Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel.

In addition we find **12 'minor'** (shorter) **Prophetic Books**. -- They are not called 'minor' for their message being of minor importance, but because their revelations are shorter than those of the Major Prophets.

The 'Books' of the New Testament

The second main section of the Bible was recorded within 63 years (AD 40-96) after the death of Jesus. It deals mainly with the life of Jesus (*Nabi 'Isa*) and his teaching, as well as the growth of the early Christian community. It begins with the Gospel (*Injil*) as recorded by four different writers. The word Gospel (Injil) means translated 'Good News'.

1. The Historical Books tell us about the life and teaching of Jesus, and also about his death and resurrection. This is recorded in the four Gospel records. The book of Acts informs us about the ascension of Jesus to heaven, and the first Christian believers on the Day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit of God descended first into the lives of the believers, and the rapid spread of the 'Good News'. The Gospel was recorded by:

Matthew, who was an apostle of Jesus. In his record, the Gospel is viewed from the Jewish viewpoint, where Jesus can be seen as the King and Messiah.

Mark was actually the secretary of the apostle Peter. He depicts Jesus somewhat as seen through the eyes of a Roman.

Luke was a Greek, and the Gospel he wrote down would appeal especially to the world view of the Greeks, who were not acquainted with the Jewish thinking and background.

John again was an apostle of Jesus. This Gospel was written last and strongly emphasizes the personality and message of Jesus.

The Acts of the Apostles (written down by Luke, a physician) records the ascension of Jesus to heaven, the descent of the Holy Spirit, and the consequent spreading of the Gospel all of over the Mediterranean world. This 'book' ends just before the persecution of Christians in Rome by Nero (AD 64).

2. The Teaching Letters (epistles) were inspired and are in harmony with the words of Jesus, who had announced its coming already beforehand:

> "...the Counsellor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you." (John 14:26)
>
> "I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. But when he, the Spirit of Truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth." (John 16:12-13)

Christians believe that these letters of guidance, teaching and prophecy were also written under inspiration of the Holy Spirit of God. They elaborate on the Gospel and cover a wide range of subjects, which were given for the instruction, uplifting and encouragement of the followers of Jesus. The authors were John, Peter, James, Jude and Paul. Paul's letters got their names from the church or individual to who or whom they were first addressed. The Teaching Letters are called:

Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon, Hebrews, James, Jude, 1 and 2 Peter, 1, 2 and 3 John.

3. The Prophetic Books. In the book called Revelation the apostle John (writer of the Gospel named after him) records prophetical visions about the history of the world and the church* right up to the last Judgement, showing how God's eternal purpose will be fulfilled. *See chapter 7 on page 80

Review and Remember

1. What kind of people did God use to speak to us?
2. What are the four main groups that make up the 66 books of the Old Testament and the New Testament?

3. WHERE DID THE BIBLE COME FROM?

The Bible did not fall from heaven. Or from the sky. Neither was it composed by a clever, religious sage, who wanted to make the world a better place, or had a lust for power over other people. Neither did it come into being in an instant, in a week, a month, or a year or two. The Bible 'grew' over a period of some 1,500 years and not less than 72 men and women were selected by God to record it, as the Holy Spirit of God prompted them to write down, what He revealed to them by inspiration in diverse kinds and situations...,

God is not silent

> "...for the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit." (2 Peter 1:21)

The Bible is inspired by God

As we already discovered in some parts of the Palms in the beginning, something is abundantly clear: **God is not silent**. He has revealed Himself, and also His will. And all this is for *our* good. God's Word is recorded in the Bible. It is called '*logos*' in Greek, and is "transcribed as 'reason', 'word', 'speech', or 'principle'. It related to a universal, divine reason, or the mind of God." (Christianity.com, Editorial Staff)

How did God reveal His mind? We already observed that God inspired godly people to record what He wanted mankind to know. 'Inspiration' literally means that God 'breathed' His Word into His selected messengers.

If you happen to be a Muslim, this will not be new to you, for it is a fundamental part of the teaching of the Qur'an. (e.g. Surahs 2:136; 5:47-48; 10:95; 21:7; 29:46)

God Revealed His Will in Different Ways

The inspiration, or revelation of the Bible, happened in various ways. God did not use prophets as mindless typewriters who merely let appear on paper what was typed onto it. Because we cannot comprehend divine

thought, God inspired His prophets to write down God's mind and thought in their own human words, including poetry.

> "In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways..." (Hebrews 1:1)

(We give some Bible references so that you can check these statements yourself.)

1. God Spoke Directly to Man

to **Adam** (Genesis 2:16-17; 3:9ff; 16-19) to **Noah** (Genesis 6:13-21)

to **Abraham** (Genesis 12:1-3; 12:7; 22:1-2)

to **Moses** (Exodus 3:4; 4:16) to **Joshua** (Joshua 1:1-9)

to **Samuel** (1Samuel 3:1-14) to **Jeremiah**(Jeremiah 1:4-19)

to the **apostles** of Jesus (Matthew 17:5; etc.)

2. God Communicated Visions or Dreams to Men

to **Abraham** (Genesis 15:1)

to **Jacob** (Genesis 28:12-17; 46:2) to **Isaiah** (Isaiah 6:1-10)

to **Ezekiel** (Ezekiel 1:1-28; 10:1-22)

to **Daniel** (Daniel 2:19; 7:1-28) to **Joseph** (Matthew 2:13)

to **Peter** (Acts 10:9-20)

to **Paul** (Acts 16:9-10; 9:3-4 with 26:19)

to **John** (Revelation 1:1-2, 12-19; etc.)

3. God Inspired Prophets to also Record Historic Events

The Old Testament was written down by prophets. And through these God revealed Himself, and also His will. Beyond that He frequently foretold events that would take place in the near or distant future. Prophecies were given in particular concerning:

> the *future history* of Israel and Judah

> the *coming of the Messiah*

> the *events* leading to the time *of the end of the world*.

Such knowledge is clearly beyond human comprehension.

But the Bible explains that...

"... prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit." (2 Peter 1:21)

Remember? We just learned:

"In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways... but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe.

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

The Bible was revealed progressively and in stages, according to God's purpose, the need of His people, and their spiritual condition to grasp the message.

The Message of the Bible

The Old Testament (Old Covenant) is named after the covenant (contract) that God made with Abraham, and later with his descendants, also with Moses, and then the people of Israel.

"Moses came and told the people all the words of the LORD and all the rules. And all the people answered with one voice and said, 'All the words that the LORD has spoken we will do.'" (Exodus 24:3)

God had chosen the Israelites to become the nation to which He would reveal His Word and will. Already Abraham was in a covenant relationship with God. The prophets of God were to share God's revealed Word with the people, and they should teach their children, so that future generations would recognize and receive the promised Messiah (= Anointed One. - At that time kings and prophets were anointed with olive oil, as one later would crown the kings):

"Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.

You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.

> And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart.
>
> You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise." (Deuteronomy 6:4-7)
>
> Moses was called to be the leader of this nation, and under him the covenant of Abraham was renewed. The Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:1-17) were, so to speak, the constitution for the Jewish nation, and likewise a map for them by which to live. In addition to these commandments, God also gave instructions on how to be reconciled with Him and also with one another, if somebody had become guilty by harming a fellow Israelite (Leviticus 4 and 16).

Following that we read the history of faithful men of God, but also about the disobedience of the nation of Israel. God sent many prophets to urge them to return, but with little, and only temporary, response. At last,

> "when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons." (Galatians 4:4)

Through Jesus a New Testament (New Covenant) was established. In Him a number of the prophecies of the Old Testament were fulfilled (Luke 24:44-45). He was the only man ever to stay pure by the standard of the law of God. And because of that, He 'qualified' to become the faultless sacrifice of God. It was John the Baptist (*Yahya*) who pointed to Jesus and said:

> "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29)

We will hardly understand the true meaning behind such a statement, unless we know and understand the sanctity of the Law of God, and the severity of our sin against the eternal and holy God. Over against that, we find the unfathomable grace and love of God, when He entered our world in Christ. He stepped in to take our place as condemned law breakers. He took our sin upon Himself, and by that the divine Justice and punishment that we deserved. He did it to redeem us from an unimaginably cruel, eternal hell, although he had...

> "committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth." (1Peter 2:22 as prophesied by Isaiah 53:9)

The New Testament then goes on to describe the life, work and death of Jesus Christ, how faith and trust in Him has changed, and will change, the lives of His true followers. It also tells us that He will come again, this time not to save, but to judge the world in righteousness. In our further study we will look into this more deeply.

Review and Remember

1. What does 2 Peter 1:21 explain. "How did prophecy come to us?"
2. Give THREE examples each of how God spoke directly to people. through visions or dreams.

4. CAN THE BIBLE BE TRUSTED? (1)

You may remember from Surah 29:46 that a Muslim is to accept the authority of the Scriptures that God has revealed to the Jews and the Christians:

> "And dispute not with the People of the Book except with means better (than mere disputation), unless it be with those of them who inflict wrong (and injury): but say, 'We believe in the Revelation which has come down to us and in that which came down to you; our God and your God is One; and it is to Him we bow (in Islam)."

This command is further elaborated in Surah 2:136:

> "Say ye: We believe in Allah, and in the revelation given to us, and to Abraham, Ismail, Jacob, and the Tribes, and that given to Moses and Jesus, and that given to (all) Prophets from their Lord: We make no difference between one and another of them: and we bow to Allah (in Islam)."

But now you may very well ask: How can I be sure that today's Bible is the same as that referred to in the Qur'an? Is it not possible that the Bible was corrupted by the Jews or the Christians since that time? How can I know whether a revelation really came from God? (On this topic read *Dear Abdallah*)

The Acid Test of True Revelation

Over the centuries thousands of people have claimed to be prophets of God. Many had a following, some became founders of world religions and others were even worshipped. This brings us to a very relevant, but also dicey question:

How can we differentiate between a true prophet of the One living, almighty God, and someone that thinks he is God, but actually is a deceiver? The Bible helps us:

> "You may say to yourselves, 'How can we know when a message has not been spoken by the Lord?'
>
> If what a prophet proclaims in the Name of the Lord does not take place or come true, that is a message the Lord has not spoken.

> That prophet has spoken presumptuously. Do not be afraid of him." (Deuteronomy18:21-22)

It is quite clear that prophethood takes more than preaching and teaching, more than acceptance by people or dignified behaviour. If it really is God who sent a messenger, he can be expected to provide some proof that his message is indeed from God.

Most religions have never bothered to supply any real proof that their 'book' has come from God, although one would expect that to be an intrinsic part of true religion. Faith is often based on emotional grounds, and not on actual revelation of and from God. Powerful people tend to rule the minds of men, and few of their followers seem to be critical of them.

In the above quotation from Deuteronomy, God provides the distinguishing test against deception. Seven hundred years later, the prophet Isaiah confirmed this test when he challenged the worshipers of idols:

> "Declare to us the things to come, tell what the future holds." (Isaiah 41:23)
>
> "Declare what is to be, present it - let them take counsel together. Who foretold this long ago, who declared it from the distant past? Was it not I, the LORD? And there is no God apart from me, a righteous God and a Savior; there is none but me. Turn to me and be saved, all you ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is no other." (Isaiah 45:21-22)

This means nothing more, but also nothing less, than that a true prophet must prophesy what only God can know and tell him: the future.

Fulfilled prophecy about the future is the credential of God. Prophecy about the future must obviously be beyond human foresight, and detailed enough to be clearly recognized as such.

Generalities are not good enough. God, over the centuries, not only inspired His prophets with messages to the people, but also added prophecies to verify them as truly coming from Him.

Prophecy about the Future is a Better Test than Miracles. God also enabled certain men of God to perform miracles, for example healing (2 Kings 5); raising of the dead (1 Kings 17; Luke 7:11; 8:41; Acts 9:36); water

flowing out of a rock (Exodus 16); fire falling from heaven (1 Kings 18:30-39; 2 Chronicles 7); making an axe head float (2 Kings 6:5) and many others.

It has been rightly said, however, (by Al-Haj Maulana Fazlul Karim, in an explanatory note in the *Mishkat-ul-Masabih*, Chapter XLIV: 2468) that prophecy is superior to miracles, because

> "**Prophecy can be historically proved, but a miracle cannot**. Prophecy manifests God's foreknowledge, while a miracle God's power. As knowledge is greater than power, prophecy is greater than a miracle."

In the Bible we find mainly three topics of prophecy:

Those that forecast the history of Israel and the surrounding nations, the life of the Messiah; and the time of the end of the present world.

Some Examples of Fulfilled Prophecy

1. The re-establishment of Israel in our time

The kingdom of Judah lived in unbelievable disobedience to God, when God predicted a 70-year lasting captivity in Babylon. It began in 587 BC. 70 years later the Persians defeated the Babylonians, and king Cyrus allowed the Israelites to return. In 63 BC the Romans conquered Israel. After the Jews had rebelled, Jerusalem and its temple were totally destroyed and the Jews expelled from the land in AD 70. They lived dispersed all over the (Western) world until after World War II, when 1948 Israel became the Jewish state again. Long before this was even beginning to happen, God prophesied:

> "... the days are coming," declares the LORD, "when it will no longer be said, 'As surely as the LORD lives, who brought the Israelites up out of Egypt,' (where they had been exiled and also slaves for 400 years until Moses) but it will be said, 'As surely as the LORD lives, who brought the Israelites up out of the land of the north and out of all the countries where he had banished them.' For I will restore them to the land I gave their ancestors. (Jeremiah 16:14-15, given about 580 BC)

"It shall come to pass in that day that the Lord shall set His hand again, the second time (the first time the Israelites had been captives in Babylon), to recover the remnant of His people who are left... He will ... will assemble the outcasts of Israel, and gather together the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth." (Isaiah 11:11-12, about 690 BC)

"This is what the Sovereign Lord says: I will take the Israelites out of the nations where they have gone. I will gather them from all around and bring them back into their own land. I will make them one nation in the land, on the mountains of Israel." (Ezekiel 37:20, about 560 BC)

2. The Coming of Jesus was Foretold by God

Throughout the Old Testament the coming of the Messiah (al-Masih) was foretold. Let us now also look at some prophecies that predicted His coming, and they are as unpredictable as those about Israel.

"Seventy weeks (= weeks of years, i.e. one week equals 7 years) are determined upon thy people (Daniel's people = Jews) and upon thy holy City (Jerusalem), to finish the transgression, and to make an end of sins, and to make reconciliation for iniquity, and to bring in everlasting righteousness, and to seal up the vision and prophecy (no more prophetic revelation to be added to the Bible after that). Know therefore, and understand, that from the going forth of the commandment to restore and to build Jerusalem unto the Messiah, the Prince shall be seven weeks, and 62 weeks: the streets shall be build again, and the wall, even in troublous times".

A text like this is not easily understood by an untrained mind. Ancient historical records could not state '455 BC', or any other given date. The calendar we use today is in operation only since AD 1582. Before that, historical events were tied to the rule of the current king, as for example:

"In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it." (Daniel 1:1), or

"In the second year of King Darius, on the first day of the sixth month, the word of the LORD came through the prophet Haggai to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua son of Jozadak, the high priest." (Haggai 1:1)

Let us make our text more intelligible:

In seven weeks [of years] [49 years] Jerusalem with its walls and temple, was indeed restored, after the royal order had been given by the Persian king Artaxerxes (465-425 BC). That was given in the 20th year of his reign (Nehemia 2:1, = 455 BC). Jerusalem was completed in troublous times indeed, since many contenders were trying to prevent its rebuilding.

The remaining "62 weeks" = 434 years, bring us to the year AD 38. Jesus was probably born in AD 6, and began his public appearance when he was 30 years old. The 2 years difference in determining the right time can confidently be contributed to historical inaccuracies, which, no doubt, crept in by the recording methods in these ancient times.

It may be added that 'Messiah' is the Hebrew word for the Greek *'Christos'*, which is used more frequently.

> "After 62 weeks shall Messiah be cut off, but not for Himself; and the people of the prince that shall come, shall destroy the city and the sanctuary (temple); and the end thereof shall be with a flood (of Roman soldiers?), and unto the end of the war desolations are determined."

"The prince that shall come" is, no doubt, Titus, the son of the Roman Emperor Hadrian who, after the death of the Messiah, came to destroy Jerusalem and the temple a second time, in AD 70. [The first destruction was done by the Babylonians in 605 BC under Nebuchadnezzar]. After this destruction, "desolations were determined" and lasted till about the middle of the 20th century, when Israel, after close to 2.000 years, became a state again.

Something that never happened to any other nation in history

Something that never happened to any other nation in history!

Alone in the Gospel that was recorded by Matthew, we can find no less than 21 references that tell us that each of the respective events or incidents was foretold in the Old Testament!

At one occasion Jesus told some Jews who were trying to argue with him:

> "You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me." (John 5:39)

Let us now read some of these prophecies and their fulfilment (BC = Years Before Christ):

> "Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign; Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel..." (which means 'God [is] among us') (Isaiah 7:14, about *690 BC*)
>
> "For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given, and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called: Wonderful, Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace..." (Isaiah 9:6, about *690 BC*)
>
> "But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times." (Micah 5:2, about *729 BC*)
>
> "Who has believed our message and to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?
>
> He grew up before him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of dry ground. He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.
>
> He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain. Like one from whom people hide their faces he was despised, and we held him in low esteem.
>
> Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted.
>
> But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed.
>
> We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.
>
> He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.
>
> By oppression and judgment he was taken away. Yet who of his generation protested? For he was cut off from the land of the living; for the transgression of my people he was punished.

> He was assigned a grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death, though he had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth.
>
> Yet it was the LORD's will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and though the LORD makes his life an offering for sin, he will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the LORD will prosper in his hand.
>
> After he has suffered, he will see the light of life and be satisfied; by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities.
>
> Therefore I will give him a portion among the great, and he will divide the spoils with the strong, because he poured out his life unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors. For he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors." (Isaiah 53:1-12, about *690 BC*)

No critic in the world can explain away the evidence of the divine origin of these fulfilled prophecies. It is unique in all history. There is also no other 'holy Book' with any similar proof of a divine origin. It is God's seal that is interwoven with His message to mankind, so that any earnest and honest seeker can be totally reassured that the Bible is God's Word.

However, the question may be raised: Was the Old Testament perhaps, at least partly, written *after* the New Testament? In that case it would *appear* that the New Testament has fulfilled the prophecies of the Old Testament, but that would be a forgery. This is unthinkable, for more than one reason. For one, the Jews guarded their Scripture with the utmost care. Once a copy mistake was detected, that page had to be burned.

By the way, the Old Testament was already widely circulated, and even translated, long before the time of Jesus. The Greek translation of it, the 'Septuagint', had already been undertaken in the second century BC.

To change a text that was so widely distributed is bound to be discovered to be a forgery.

Now check those passages yourself. You find them in the list below:

When Prophesied	Prophecy Theme	By whom	Fulfillment
700 BC	The Messiah	Micah 5:2	Luke 2:4-7
700 BC	His virgin birth	Isaiah 7:14	Matthew 1:18-23
500 BC	The time of his	Daniel	Galatians 4:4
700 BC	He would come to save and to heal	Isaiah 53:3-6	Matthew 1:21
	"		Luke 19:10
	"		Luke 18:40-43; 8:41-55
	"		Matthew 4:23-24;
700 BC	Name of the Messiah	Isaiah 49:1-8	Matthew 1:21
Note: "Salvation" is in Hebrew:"Yeshuah" the actual name of Jesus, because the English "Jesus" is derived from the Greek form of the Hebrew "Yeshuah"			
480 BC	His humble entry into Jerusalem on a donkey	Zechariah 9:9	Matthew 21:1-9
480 BC	The betrayal of Jesus	Psalm 41:9;	Mark 14:10-21, 43-46;
	His suffering and death by crucifixion	Isaiah 53; Psalm 22:1-18	Matthew 27:33-50
	His burial	Isaiah 53:9	Matthew 27:60
	His resurrection	Psalm 16:8-11	Acts 2:25-32
	His ascension	Psalm 110:1	Acts 1:6-11;

Review and Remember

1. How could Surah 29:46 help in Christian-Muslim relations?
2. How can we note the difference between a true and a false prophet (see Deuteronomy 18:15-21 and Deuteronomy 13)?
3. Name three prophecies described in this lesson that are most memorable to you.

5. CAN THE BIBLE BE TRUSTED? (2)

Eyewitness Reports

A second reason why we can trust the Bible is that it contains eyewitness reports. These happenings did not occur in a hidden corner. They took place in public, and all Israel was aware of them. When the facts of the New Testament were recorded, the whole of Israel would have stood up in protest against them had they been forgeries. But, on the contrary, the apostles repeatedly challenged the people to question the many eyewitnesses.

In his defence before King Agrippa, the Apostle Paul said:

> ". . . what I am saying is true and reasonable. The king is familiar with these things, and I can speak freely to him. I am convinced that none of this has escaped his notice, because it was not done in a corner.'" (Acts 26:26)

Shortly after the crucifixion, Peter said to a great multitude of Jews:

> "Men of Israel, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through Him, as you yourselves know. This Man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put Him to death by nailing him to the cross. But God raised Him from the dead, freeing Him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on Him." (Acts 2:22-24)

The Jews never denied the execution of Jesus by crucifixion

The Jews never denied the execution of Jesus by crucifixion. They denied only that he is the Messiah, and his resurrection. This challenging talk was given seven weeks after the crucifixion, in front of thousands of Jews. Would 3 000 people have expressed their faith in Jesus on that day, if the crucifixion had not taken place? Further the Apostle Paul reported:

> "For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas [Peter], then to the twelve [Apostles].

Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep." (1 Corinthians 15:3-6)

A little later the Apostle Peter and the other Apostles were put into prison for their witness. While being interrogated by the Sanhedrin, the Council of the Jews, they confessed:

"The God of our ancestors raised Jesus from the dead— whom you killed by hanging him on a cross.

God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Saviour that he might bring Israel to repentance and forgive their sins.

We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him." (Acts 5:30-32)

This is supported by the Apostle Peter some time later, when he emphasized the eyewitness report. But he added that fulfilled prophecy is even "more certain". A witness, even many witnesses, may be wrong. But in fulfilled prophecy there can be no flaw!

"We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of His majesty. For He received honour and glory from God the Father when the voice came to Him from the Majestic Glory, saying, `This is My Son, whom I love; with Him I am well pleased. We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with Him on the sacred mountain. And we have the word of the prophets made more certain, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts. Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit." (2 Peter 1:16-21)

The Apostle John, who was perhaps closest to Jesus, witnesses:

"That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched, -- this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our

> fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. We write this to make our joy complete." (1 John 1:1-4)

Historians Confirm the Gospel

Let us take a look at another, a third reason, why we can rely on the fact that the Bible is true.

Old historical annals and records hardly ever deal with anything other than wars, heroes and contemporary leaders. Consequently, it can hardly be expected that occurrences in such remote places as Galilee and Judea would merit any mention in the literature of the Roman Empire. And if they did, we could expect that the events of war and the actions of kings and generals would be the main features. Yet even there we find references that support the Biblical record.

Cornelius Tacitus (AD 54-117) was the greatest historian of the Roman Empire. He wrote,

> "The name Christian comes from Christ, who was executed in the reign of Tiberius by the Procurator Pontius Pilate; and the pernicious superstition, suppressed for a while, broke out afresh and spread not only through Judea, the source of the malady, but even throughout Rome itself, where everything vile comes and is tested.''

Tacitus quite clearly had no sympathy for Christianity, and so his evidence is all the more valuable.

Josephus, a Jewish general who survived the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in AD 70 and became a Roman historian for Israel, wrote in AD 93:

> "Now there was about this time Jesus, a wise man, if it be lawful to call him a man, for he was a doer of wonderful works, a teacher of such men as receive the truth with pleasure. He drew over to him both many Jews, and many of the Gentiles. He was the Christ [= Messiah]. And when Pilate, at the suggestion of the principal men amongst us, had condemned him to the cross, those that loved him at the first did not forsake him; for he appeared to them alive again the third day; as the divine prophets had foretold these and ten thousand other wonderful things concerning him. And the tribe of Christians so named from him, are not extinct at this day." (*'Antiquities of*

the Jews', Book 18, Chapter 3:3, by Flavius Josephus, as translated by William Whiston, Milner and Sowerby, London, p. 392).

Because of all these evidences, no honest investigator can question the truth and authority of the Bible.

Has the Bible been Corrupted?

It is sometimes claimed that the Jews and Christians have corrupted their Scriptures. It is true that the Qur'an speaks of certain Jews in Arabia who tried to hide the truth from Muhammad (Surah 2:75-79, 146, 159-160). Some of them also made up their own 'scriptures' and sold it for gain (Surah 2:79). But the Qur'an does not once lay that charge to the Christians.

If these allegations were true, it would mean that the Jews and the Christians, who were irreconcilable enemies (Surah 2:113), had conspired together to corrupt the Holy Scriptures. And even if this impossibility should have happened in Arabia, what about all the other thousands of copies of the Holy Scriptures that had already been circulated and translated all over the then known world? How could they all be corrupted? And surely, the Jews who became Muslims would have only be too glad to reveal the original versions, had there been one.

Today's translations of the Bible are based on manuscripts of the Old Testament (completed by 400 BC) and the New Testament (completed by AD 98). So the New Testament is about six hundred years older than the Qur'an. No one who believes the Qur'an can seriously accept that the Bible has been corrupted, simply because the Qur'an would not tell Muslims to believe in a Book that had been corrupted. The Qur'an testifies to the incorruptibility of the Bible.

"Dispute ye not with the People of the Book [the Jews and Christians] except in the best way, but say, 'we believe in the revelation which has come down to us [Qur'an] and in that which came down to you [the Bible]. Our God and your God is One'". (Surah 29:46)

"If you were in doubt as to what We have revealed, unto thee, then ask those who have been reading the Book [the Bible] before thee". (Surah 10:94)

"None can change His words for He is the one who heareth and knoweth all''. (Surah 6:115).

Review and Remember

1. Give two or more reasons why the Bible can be fully trusted.
2. Why can believers safely conclude that the Bible has not been corrupted?

6. GOD AND MAN

When we look around us, and see so much lying, so much hatred, corruption, deceit, and suffering all over, we may well despair. Why are we driven by selfishness? Or, more personally, why am I the way I am? Only when we begin to 'read the instructions of the Maker', we become aware that something has gone terribly wrong with our world, and begin to understand that God's original purpose and plan for mankind has been sabotaged, and that we, like all others around us, have miserably failed.

God's Purpose for Man

> "God said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.'
>
> So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.
>
> And God blessed them. And God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth." (Genesis 1:26-28)

Like the Bible, the Qur'an also refers to the creation of man, e.g.

> "We created man from sounding clay, from mud molded into shape." (Surah15:26), "out of nothing" (Surah19:67), or "from dust" (Surah 30:20), "from water" (Surah25:54), or "out of a (mere) clot of congealed blood." (Surah 96:1-2)

Man was given the freedom of choice

When the Bible tells us that man was created 'in the image of God', it does not mean that God looks like a human being. God is Spirit (John 4:24). But unlike all other creatures, which live by their instinct, man was enabled to perceive the existence of God, and was given the freedom of choice.

Both the man and the woman were created by God in a special way.

> "The LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature." (Genesis 2:7)
>
> The man gave names to all livestock and to the birds of the heavens and to every beast of the field. But for Adam there was not found a helper fit for him.
>
> So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh.
>
> And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man.
>
> Then the man said, "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man."
>
> Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.
>
> And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed." (Genesis 2:20-25)

Adam and Eve were formed in the image of God "in true knowledge" (Colossians 3:9-10), "…holiness, and righteousness." (Ephesians 4:22-25)

God Expected Man to Acknowledge Him for what He is. Mankind was told to fill the earth, to subdue it, and to rule over it (Genesis 1:28; Psalm 8:5-8). However, God gave one restriction:

> "The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.
>
> And the LORD God commanded the man, "You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die." (Genesis 2:15-17)

By this last statement, **man was given the freedom of choice**. There was no compulsion for man to follow God, or to listen to, and obey Satan. Adam and Eve, and by that token mankind, were given the choice to act against the will and purpose of God. *We still have it!* But God also explained the consequences of their actions.

> "The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.

> And the LORD God commanded the man, "You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die." (Genesis 2:15-17)

And this did not only affect our physical, but also, much more detrimental, our spiritual death. So, as long as man responded to God's guidance by reflecting to His love and trust, man would be able to enjoy fulfilment and happiness of life.

But Man Chose His Independence from God

> "Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God actually say, 'You shall not eat of any tree in the garden'?"
>
> And the woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.'"
>
> But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not surely die.
>
> For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."
>
> So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate."
>
> Then the eyes of both were opened." (Genesis 3:1-6)

Freedom turned into independence – and man's independence from God turned into dependence on Satan!

That was the time when sin came into the world by the fatal choice of the first man and his wife. The whole of creation was affected. Sin was always followed by separation: separation between man and God (verse 8) and separation between man and his fellow man (verses 7, 12).

From that day onwards every human being had lost his freedom and became a slave to sin, as Jesus clarified:

> "Very truly I tell you, everyone who sins is a slave to sin." (John 8:34)

This is underlined elsewhere in the New Testament:

> "We know that the law is spiritual; but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin." (Romans 7:14)

The first-born son of Adam and Eve became the first murderer (Genesis 4:1-16). He and all his descendants inherited, not their sin, but the 'sinful nature' of their parents. You know all too well that we all have 'by nature' the urge to sin. It needs an effort to do right. Christians call this inherent principle 'original sin' (compare Surah 12:53).

God created us for Himself. But like a rebellious teenager, man chose 'to do his own thing'. He consciously or unconsciously, and actively questioned God's love and stepped out of the God-intended relationship of mutual love.

Many entertain the strange idea that on the great Judgment Day, our sins are measured on a large scale against our 'good deeds'. They overlook that the latter are our duty to do. There is no merit in being good, "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." (Romans 3:23)

When people become aware of their sin, they are inclined to bribe God with their religious activity, and their 'good deeds', in an effort to 'earn' a place in God's kingdom, "...so that no one may boast before Him." (1 Corinthians 1:29) It all depends how we see things. God sent His answer, and said through the prophet:

> "All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags." (Isaiah 64:6)

Consider also what God further says about man:

> "The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.
>
> And the LORD regretted that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart." (Gen 6:5-6)
>
> "The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God.' They are corrupt, their deeds are vile; there is no one who does good.
>
> The LORD looks down from heaven on the children of man, to see if there are any who understand, any who seek God.

All have turned away, all have become corrupt; there is no one who does good, not even one." (Psalm14:1-3)

"They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, arrogant, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless.

Although they know God's righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve death, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them." (Romans 1:29-32)

"Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God." (Galatians 5:19-21)

The Love and Mercy of God

It is unbelievably wonderful to discover that God does not turn away from us in utter disgust. God's love is completely different from ours. God actually *is* love:

"Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him.

This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins."

God offers us His forgiveness and by that eternal life:

"I will not look on you in anger, for I am merciful, declares the LORD; I will not be angry forever.

Only acknowledge your guilt, that you rebelled against the LORD your God ... and that you have not obeyed my voice, declares the LORD."

I thought you would call me, My Father, and would not turn from following me." (Jeremiah 3:12- 13,19-20)

And Jesus told us:

"Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." (Mat 11:28-30)

God calls man into a special relationship with Himself:

> "...God said, "I will make my dwelling among them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people." (2 Corinthians 6:16)

God will remain faithful to His promises of blessings, provided we repent, that means we turn away from living our life the way we determine it, and return to God, willing to live His way.

Your and my disobedience to Him, did not change God's love for us. He is always willing to forgive, as we have already noted. But it needs two to make peace! God is holy and just. You and I are not! Because God is righteous and holy, sin cannot go unpunished. But it deserves **to eternally live in separation of God** – and **that is hell**! That is one of the reasons why God provided us with our free will. It is also our great chance to return to God, which is called repentance. That is why God prepared a new way to rescue us.

> "... no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin.
>
> But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify.
>
> This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.
>
> God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith. He did this to demonstrate his righteousness". (Romans 3:21-25)

Review and Remember

1. What made the creation of man and woman so uniquely special?
2. What destroys the image of God in human beings?
3. How did God express his desire to live among his people (2 Cor 6:16)?

7. RELIGION AND FAITH

"Sacrifice, redemption/redeem, atonement/atone!"

What comes to mind, when we hear these words? We may well speak of sacrificing time or money for the benefit of the one or other person or cause. But redemption, and atonement? To understand God and His Way better, we briefly look at these terms.

In the biblical use, a *sacrifice* is an animal, mostly a sheep or lamb, or also a bull, or doves for that matter, that are offered to God on behalf of man.

When God gave the Law to Moses, this proved disastrous,

> "... the law brings wrath. And where there is no law there is no transgression." (Romans 4:15)

God, the Judge, presented the divine Law. But after it was given, all mankind was proven guilty of trespassing God's will and purpose, which are expressed in His Law.

> "Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them." (Romans 1:32)

to eternally live in separation of God – that is hell

No one could claim to be without sin. But sin separates man from God– eternally. The bond between God, the *Father*, and the perpetrator, His *child*, is broken. The guilty person will suffer the consequences of his or her actions, which is a broken bond, unless the sinner is *redeemed*, and by that token *atoned* for. Now, what is that?

In the 'old days' it frequently happened that prisoners (of war) were 'redeemed' by a member of his family. Depending on the 'value' of a prisoner, a 'redemption price' was set up. Once the '*redemption*' sum was paid, the prisoner was 'redeemed', and set free. The prisoner was now 'atoned for'.

Likewise, during the final years of the Arab slave trade in East Africa when slaves were auctioned for a price at the slave market in Zanzibar some would be bought and set free after they were 'redeemed' by their well-wishers.

To the Hebrews under the Old Covenant, God revealed a similar remedy. To the Lawbreaker an opportunity was granted to be redeemed. He was given a chance to offer an animal sacrifice to suffer death in his stead, to atone for his sin. *Atonement* is the act of reconciliation between sinful man and God.

> "For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 6:23)

... the wages of sin is death

The last three of the five 'Books of Moses' in the Old Testament deal in great detail with this matter. Some extracts may help us understand:

> "The life of a creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar; it is the blood that makes atonement for one's life." (Leviticus 17:11)
>
> "The priest is to make atonement before the LORD for the one who erred by sinning unintentionally, and when atonement has been made, that person will be forgiven." (Numbers 15:28)

From the very beginning of the Bible we are introduced to Someone who would come from God into this world to save us from the just penalty and retribution for our sin, which we deserve, and that awaits us all. And that spells doom! This Someone would be the *real* Sacrifice, of which the animal sacrifices had only been foreshadows or symbols. He would be punished and killed for our sins. He was the only one who could stand in as the **atonement** that would **reconcile** us to God. It is the Messiah Jesus.

> "God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood — to be received by faith. He did this to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished." (Romans 3:25)

Review and Remember

1. How could you explain 'redemption' using the East African context of slavery?

8. THE LAW OF GOD

When we look at the damage that sin has done to the whole of creation (Genesis 3:17-19), we realize the importance of recognizing sin for what it is. God gave us His Law, so that we could, in our utterly corrupt world, recognize and know what is right and what is wrong.

A law is a fixed standard for the way we need to behave. Laws govern the universe: the movement of the stars and planets, as also science and mathematics, biology and all other aspects of creation. These laws are part of God's creation.

Every law has a purpose. In our human society we are subject to a criminal law, and a 'civil law'. They are to regulate our lives within our society. They are to protect the good and the weak. At the same time they function to control the bad and the strong.

Every law has a purpose

God gave His laws to man, not to restrict, but to protect him, just as a farmer puts up fences to protect his flock from predators. Like animals, we also may perceive God's laws as restrictions, but they are to protect us from harm. Perhaps you, like I, have suffered harm or loss by ruthless people, so you know.

God's law covers and regulates all affairs between God and man, and between man and man.

There is first of all what we may call the *Moral Law*, which establishes God's eternal will and standard for mankind. It explains what is right or wrong. That also includes what can be likened to our *Civil Law* (as from Exodus 21), which deals with the wrongs done between people. In addition, we also find the *Ceremonial Law*, which orders the divine services, including the offering of sacrifices (for example Leviticus 1-7).

God Revealed His Will in His Laws

1. It is revealed in the conscience of man.

> "Your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, "This is the way, walk in it," when you turn to the right or when you turn to the left." (Isaiah 30:21)
>
> "...the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts sometimes accusing them and at other times even defending them." (Romans 2:15; see also Titus 1:15)

Our conscience warns us of ways that are contrary to God's will. Yet there is a more definitive indicator that warns us of sin.

2. It is revealed in the Word of God.

In the Bible the Law of God is also called the 'Law of the Lord' and also the 'Law of Moses', because it was revealed to Moses on mount Sinai (Exodus, chapters 19 and 20).

A Concise Form is Condensed in the Ten Commandments

1. "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.

You shall have no other gods before Me."

2. "You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them."

3. "You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses His name."

4. "Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labour and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates."

5. "Honour your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you."

6. "You shall not murder."

7. "You shall not commit adultery."

8. "You shall not steal."

9. "You shall not give false testimony against your neighbour."

10. "You shall not covet your neighbour's house. You shall not covet your neighbour's wife, or his manservant or maidservant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbour." (Exodus 20:2-17)

Jesus condensed these commandments once more into two essentials that are all inclusive:

> "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment."
>
> "And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments". (Matthew 22:37-40)

Someone likened the Ten Commandments to a chain with ten links, which is firmly held by God above, and we tangle from its lowest link. How many links must we break before falling down? One!

How many times must it be broken before we fall? Just once! This illustration is confirmed in the Bible:

> "For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it." (James 2:10)

A law is given to establish a standard by which righteous judgement is to be passed. It is nothing less, but also nothing more. A law cannot pardon. It judges not. That is done by the Judge in accordance with that law. Also, **nobody can hope to be reconciled to God by the law**.

> "Therefore no one will be declared righteous in His sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin.'" (Romans 3:20)
>
> "Indeed I would not have known what sin was except through the law." (Romans 7:7)
>
> "We…know that a person is not justified by the works of the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law, because by the works of the law no one will be justified." (Gal 2:15-16)
>
> "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith — and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God — not by works, so that no one can boast." (Ephesians 2:8-9)

If we take God seriously, our first impulse will be to try to keep the Law. But to our detriment we are inclined to forget all the unforgiven sins of the past. But is it really possible to keep the Law according to God's perfect standard?

The Bible says:

> "We know that the law is spiritual; but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin. I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do... I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil that I do not want to do-this I keep doing." (Romans 7:14-19)

But we also find an explanation for this dilemma:

> "I find this law at work: Although I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God's law; 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.
>
> What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death? Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (Romans 7:21-25)

This 'law of sin' within every man is initiated and controlled by Satan. It is the force in me that makes me sin, even against the 'law of my mind' that wishes to obey God. It is that sinful nature within us which every human is born with.

> "For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want." (Galatians 5:17)

Are we a Hopeless Case?

There is nothing as discouraging as trying to keep God's Law according to His holy standards – and then fail. Jesus explains that God does not only look at what we *do*. He also judges what we *think!*

> "You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery'. But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.'" (Matthew 5:27-28)

As much as we may try to keep God's Law in the future, we have already broken it! And, because of our sinful nature, we will keep on breaking it! This totally disqualifies us from ever reaching God's approval of our life. We, like everybody else, are already under condemnation. Like Paul, a man of the highest ethical standard, we need to cry out:

> "What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?" (Romans 7:24)

Fortunately, God reveals the remedy for our deadly situation to us in the Bible.

Review and Remember

1. Describe two major tools God has used to reveal his will to us.
2. What are the three kinds of laws that regulate affairs between God and man, and between man and man?

9. BREAKING GOD'S LAW – AND THEN?

The end of the last lesson was not comforting. How did it come to that? The Bible explains:

> "...sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned..." (Romans 5:12)

Each one of us has problems with sin. Let us discover what sin is.

The Nature of Sin

Anything less than divine is not good enough

We already discovered that God's law is based on His divine nature. Since man was created in the 'image' of God, that requires of him or her to be a moral being, **Anything less than divine is not good enough**. The Bible explains:

> "Everyone who sins breaks the law; in fact, sin is lawlessness.'' (1 John 3:4)
>
> "All wrongdoing is sin." (1 John 5:17)
>
> "Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins." (James 4:17)

Sin begins with 'evil thoughts' from an 'evil heart'. Jesus said,

> "What comes out of a man is what makes him 'unclean''. For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly.'' (Mark 7:20-22)
>
> Sin is the 'fruit' growing in a person that is alienated from God. (Galatians 5:19-21)

Lack of love for, and absence of the fear of God is expressed in the lack of respect for Him and His will. **Every man is born with a sinful heart**. (Psalm 51:3-5) That is why we are all compulsive sinners:

> "All of us also lived among them [people that followed the ways of this world] at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath." (Ephesians 2:3)

Both voluntary and involuntary sin is the product of a sinful heart. Therefore both bear the same consequences.

The Root of All Sin

Sin is the supreme choice of self: self-love, self-will and self-interest. By that token, one can actually be sinning while 'doing good'.

Many 'good deeds' originate in self-love, and are intended to display one's goodness. Jesus explained that such good deeds are worthless:

> "Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.
>
> So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honoured by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full.
>
> But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.
>
> And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full.
>
> But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.
>
> And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words.
>
> Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him." (Matthew 6:1-8)

And the prophet Isaiah explains that

> "all our righteous acts are like filthy rags before God". (Isaiah 64:6)

Only when you begin to love God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind (Matthew 22:37; Deuteronomy 6:5), will self- love, self-will, self-interest and self-sufficiency begin to crumble, and the compulsion to sin be stemmed.

> "Therefore love is the fulfilment of the law." (Romans13:8-10; see also Galatians 5:14; John 7:18; 2Corinthians 5:15; Galatians 2:20-21)

Sin is Universal

Sin is universal, and every human being is "under sin." (Galatians 3:22) Some may sin more crudely and openly than others, but sin, as a governing principle, contaminates all mankind, no one excluded:

"... there is no one who does not sin..." (1 Kings 8:46)

". . . no one living is righteous before You [God]" (Psalm 143:2) "Who can say... I am clean and without sin?" (Proverbs 20:9)

"...for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom 3:23-24)

"If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.'' (1John 1:8)

Sin began with Adam (Genesis 3:16-19; Surah 2:36; 7:22-23). The Bible and the Qur'an agree that even the prophets all sinned:

**Abraham* sinned (Genesis 12:9-20; Surah 26:82)

**Moses* sinned (Exodus 2:12; Deuteronomy 32:51; Surah 28:15-16)

**Jonah* sinned (Jonah 1:1-12; Surah 37:142)

**David* sinned (2Samuel11:1-27; Surah 38:24-25)

*According to the Qur'an also *Mohammad* was ordered by Allah to ask for forgiveness (Surah 47:19; 48:1-2)

There is only one exception, and that is Jesus:

*He knew no sin (2 Corinthians 5:21)

*He did not sin (1 Peter 2:22)

*He was without sin (Hebrews 4:15). (See also Qur'an, Surah 19:19)

Sin destroys our life

The Source of Sin

When man first sinned, he was seduced and deceived by the serpent (Satan, the devil, *Shaitan* or *Iblis*). Man was willing to give Satan a hearing and to weigh his words against the word of God. Jesus in John 8:44 says the following about Satan:

"He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies."

Before making this statement, Jesus said to some of the Jews:

> "You belong to our father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desire."

Every sinner is a slave under a satanic influence. (Romans 6:16) But remember that the devil has an ally in our own corrupted mind:

> "When tempted, no one should say, 'God is tempting me.' For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He tempt anyone; But each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, He is dragged away and enticed. Then after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death." (James 1:13-15)

The Consequence of Sin

*Sin separates us from God (Isaiah 59:2)

*Sin makes prayers ineffective (Micah 3:4; Isaiah 1:15; 59:2-3)

*Sin kills, both physically and spiritually (Romans 6:23; Ephesians 2:1,4; Luke 15:24,32)

*Sin excludes from heaven (Galatians 5:19:21; Ephesians 5:5; Revelation 21:27; 1 Corinthians 6:9-10)

Besides this, sin degrades a man and makes him a slave to greed, sinful desires, and selfishness. It robs him of a clean conscience, and thus also of happiness and contentment. In short: **Sin destroys our life**.

But Why on Earth did God Permit Sin to Enter Our Lives?

There can only be one reason: Love. There just cannot be a love relationship without a free choice, or by consent. All else would be rape, if one may express this in physical terms. God chose you, and me, and all others. And He is waiting for our response.

Review and Remember

1. Sin is a universal problem. Explain its

   a) origin, b) scope, c) consequence and d) solution.

10. HOW DOES JESUS FIT IN?

His Childhood

According to the Old and New Testaments and the Qur'an, Jesus was born of a virgin, Mary (*Maryam*) by name (Matthew 1:18-25; Surah 19:16-35). King Herod, a pawn of the Roman Emperor, was ruling in Jerusalem at that time. When he heard about the birth of the "newborn King of the Jews" (Matthew 2:1-12), he feared competition, and planned to kill the infant Jesus. Mary had been pledged to marry Joseph.

But God revealed Herod's plan to Joseph in a dream, saying,

> "Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him." (Matthew 2:3-23)

After Herod had died, Joseph with Mary and Jesus returned to Nazareth, their hometown. (Luke 2:38-40, 2:51-52) We only read again of Jesus when He was about twelve years old, when the family went to Jerusalem for the Passover festival. Already then, Jesus surprised the learned rabbis with His knowledge of the Word of God. (Luke 2:41-50)

What Jesus Came to Be

When Jesus was about 30 years old, He met John the Baptist (*Yahya*) who was preaching at the river Jordan, warning: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near". When he saw Jesus, he pointed to Him and said,

> "Look, the lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29)

Already then, he was referring to Jesus as the sacrifice, the *Qorban*, that God provided, like the ram in the case of Abraham (Genesis 22:13) or the sacrifice of lambs as sin offerings by the Jews until Jesus came. (Exodus 12:1-13)

After Jesus was baptized by John in the Jordan River, the Holy Spirit of God led Him into the desert, where he was tempted by the devil for 40 days, during which he fasted. He tempted Jesus on the three most common points: the needs and desires of this body, pride, and lust for power and possessions (Matt 4:1-11; Gen 3:6; 1 John 2:16). But Jesus did not budge!

What Jesus Came to Do

During the three years of His public preaching and teaching until He was killed, Jesus devoted Himself to three spheres of service:

1. He was Teaching the People about God and His Kingdom

He taught His followers the principles of a practical, living faith in a life devoted to God. The religion of that time was largely mechanical and outward. Jesus taught that God did not look at outward religious form, but a living faith. (Read, for example, Matthew 5:1-7. 7:27)

Jesus spent much time going from place to place in Israel, teaching individuals (John 3:121; 4:7-30) and large crowds. (Luke 4:42-5:3). And the ordinary, simple people

> "were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law." (Matthew 7:28-29)

His lessons could be easily understood, for used events of the daily life to open their minds for the Kingdom of God.

> "A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up.
>
> Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root.
>
> Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. Whoever has ears, let them hear."
>
> "Listen then to what the parable of the sower means: When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in their heart. This is the seed sown along the path.
>
> The seed falling on rocky ground refers to someone who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away.
>
> The seed falling among the thorns refers to someone who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word,

making it unfruitful. But the seed falling on good soil refers to someone who hears the word and understands it."

(Matthew 13:4-9,19-23)

We are all aware that there is a difference between *hearing* and *understanding*. Some *heard* a lesson on agriculture; someone else *hears* the word and *understands* it. Why? Whoever *hears* with an open and willing heart, that is with a perceptive heart (good soil), understands the Word of God, because the Holy Spirit of God fills in what is missing, and what the 'normal' mind cannot comprehend. Let us apply that to another parable of Jesus:

"There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them.

Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

Whoever *hears* with an open and willing heart...

When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.'

So he got up and went to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found." (Luke 15:11- 24)

Jesus further tells us:

> "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again." "Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again." (John 3:3, 6-7)

We are made aware that just as a person is physically born to live an earthly life, so he or she must be born again, this time spiritually, to see, understand, and enter God's eternal Kingdom. We investigate that later.

2. He Performed Many Miracles

In His compassion for the people He taught, Jesus performed many miracles, even raising some from the dead. (Mark 5:35-42; Luke 7:11-17; John 11:38-44)

More than once He fed thousands of people miraculously (Mark 6:30-46; 8:1-10). He stilled a storm and calmed the waves (Matthew 8:24-27) and even walked on water (Matthew 14:22-33), not to mention the many people He healed.

3. Jesus Prepared His Disciples for the Great Task to Make Him Known Everywhere After His Death

Soon many people followed Jesus. They were known as His disciples (students). From these He selected twelve to whom He devoted much of His time. (Mark 3:13-19; Matthew 10:1-4) They would become the Apostles (= *sent out ones*) who would carry His message all over the world. (John 20:19-21; Matthew 28:18- 20; Mark 16:15-16; Acts 1:8).

Jesus had Friends and Foes

Jesus was dearly beloved by the ordinary people, He was a friend of sinners and religious outcasts, but the Jewish leaders envied Him, and turned to be His enemies.

> "The Pharisees and the teachers of the law who belonged to their sect complained to his disciples, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?"

> Jesus answered them, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance." (Luke 5:30-32 and also Matthew 9:9-13)

Tax collectors were despised by the religious Jews because they worked for and with the Romans, the invaders. But many of these tax collectors and sinners were aware of their spiritual need for salvation (rescue) from their sins, and followed Him. (Luke 18:9-14)

On the other hand, the Pharisees and other religious leaders performed their religious rites and duties meticulously, but their hearts were often ruled by pride in their position, and their diligence in keeping the law. Yet the hearts of many were far from God, because God resists the proud (James 4:6). They performed their duties to earn praise from men. At the same time, they observed their own religious traditions. (Matthew 6:1-6; Mark 7:6-9)

4. Jesus led a Perfect, Sinless Life

As you know already, Jesus was the only exception to the rule that all men are sinners. He lived a life of complete purity. He could challenge His enemies and say,

> "Can any one of you prove me guilty of sin?" (John 8:46)

Not one of them could. We further read the following about Jesus:

> "... we do not have a high priest [this refers to Jesus] who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are, yet was without sin." (Hebrews 4:15)

This is an important fact, because no one who trespassed God's Law, can pay the debt for the sin of another sinner. Jesus had no sin Himself, and therefore He was able to do what He came to do, as we shall see.

5. What Jesus Says About Himself

Jesus proved His authority and trustworthiness by the many signs he provided, and by the prophecies He fulfilled. Let us get to know Him a little better:

> "All those the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away." (John 6:37)
>
> "My Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day." (John 6:40)
>
> "Jesus declared, 'I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty'". (John 6:35)
>
> "When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, 'I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.'" (John 8:12)
>
> "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.
>
> I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me — just as the Father knows me and I know the Father — and I lay down my life for the sheep.
>
> I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd.
>
> The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord.
>
> I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father." (John 10:11, 14-18)
>
> "My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand. I and the Father are one." (John 10:27-30)
>
> "Jesus said to her [Mary], 'I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die.'" (John 11:25-26)

Jesus also claimed:

> "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." (John 14:6)

This has eternal consequences for every person, and that includes you and me!

According to the last book in the Bible, Revelation, Jesus is not just another prophet, although He was that too. But He is revealed figuratively

as the King of kings and Lord of lords when at the end of time when He will come again to judge the world:

> 'I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called *Faithful and True*. With justice he judges and wages war. His eyes are like blazing fire, and on his head are many crowns. He has a name written on him that no one knows but he himself. He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is the *Word of God*.
>
> The armies of heaven were following him, riding on white horses and dressed in fine linen, white and clean.
>
> Coming out of his mouth is a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations. 'He will rule them with an iron scepter.' He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty.
>
> On his robe and on his thigh he has this name written: KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS." (Revelation 9:11-16)

Elsewhere in the New Testament we further read:

> "Christ Jesus, Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.
>
> And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death— even death on a cross!
>
> Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." (Philippians 2:5-11)

Review and Remember

1. Why did Jesus come to earth?
2. What did Jesus come to do (3 points)?

11. THE DEATH AND RESURRECTION OF JESUS

Jesus did not only come to teach, to heal, and to train disciples. The main purpose of His coming was to offer Himself as the sacrifice for our sin. Why should that be? Even His disciples found that difficult to understand.

On at least three occasions Jesus prepared his disciples for what would happen.

> "Now Jesus was going up to Jerusalem. On the way, he took the Twelve aside and said to them, "We are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified. On the third day he will be raised to life!" (Matthew 20:17-19 and Mark 10:33)
>
> "Jesus took the Twelve aside and told them, "We are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written by the prophets about the Son of Man will be fulfilled." (Luke 18:31; also Matthew 16:21; 17:11-12, 22-23; 26:1-2)

It is no coincidence, therefore, that one third of the narrative of the gospel is devoted to one week in the life of Jesus, the week in which He was killed. This is one of the best evidenced events of history, an event that influenced the world and its thinking more than any other. In addition, this event has totally changed the lives of millions of believers throughout history up to the present time.

The Death of Jesus was Prophesied by the Prophets

The birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus were predicted by biblical prophets. The prophet Isaiah predicted around 740 years before Christ was born:

> "The Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel", which is translated 'God with (or among) us.' (Isaiah 7:14)
>
> "He will be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace". (Isaiah 9:6)

Also, His death and crucifixion were prophesied by Isaiah, as also by David (appr. 1.000 years before Christ):

> "He was despised and rejected by men… he was pierced for our transgressions. He was crushed for our iniquities. The punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way, and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all…
>
> For the transgression of my people was he stricken…After the suffering of his soul he will see the light of life and be satisfied; by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities.
>
> I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint. My heart has turned to wax; it has melted within me. My mouth is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth; you lay me in the dust of death. Dogs surround me, a pack of evil men has encircled me; they pierced my hands and my feet. I can count all my bones; people stare and gloat over me. They divide my clothes among them and cast lots for my clothing." (Psalm 22:14-18)

Perhaps it needs to be mentioned here that the first known use of crucifixion was only executed 900 years after the Psalm of David was written.

Seven hundred, or even a thousand years later, these prophecies were fulfilled. Everybody can find out how the many prophecies were fulfilment in the Gospel narrative.

(Matthew 27:27-56, Mark 15:16-39; Luke 23:18- 49; John 19:1-37)

After his resurrection from the dead, Jesus explained to some of his disciples, who were confused, because their false expectations had not been fulfilled:

> "How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken. Did not the Christ [Messiah] have to suffer these things and then enter his glory? And beginning with Moses and all the prophets he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself."
>
> (Luke 24:25-27)

The Plot Against Jesus

Despite the fact that the life and death of Jesus had been foretold in detail in the Old Testament, many of the religious leaders did neither recognize,

nor accept Him as their Messiah. To them He was an impostor, even a blasphemer. They saw His miracles, but ascribed them, at least partly, to Satan. (Matthew 12:15-24)

They expected a political Messiah who would deliver them from the yoke of the Roman oppression. They were also jealous of Him, because large crowds of the ordinary people followed him. They also saw in Him a threat to the 'theocracy' (rule of God) because Israel was largely under the influence of the priests and religious leaders. They felt that the future of their nation was at stake. After Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead (John 11:38-44), they finally plotted to kill Him.

The Passover Feast

The Passover is one of the major religious feasts in Israel. It reminds the Jews of their liberation from Egypt under Moses. For 400 years they had lived there, eventually and largely as slaves. God had sent different plagues on Egypt to persuade the Pharaoh [King] to permit the Israelites to leave that country to go 'home' to Israel, the land that God had promised them. (Exodus 7-11) The ultimate warning was when God had sent the Angel of Death to kill every firstborn, man and beast in Egypt.

> Moses spoke out and said, "This is what the LORD says: 'About midnight I will go throughout Egypt. Every firstborn son in Egypt will die, from the firstborn son of Pharaoh, who sits on the throne, to the firstborn son of the female slave, who is at her hand mill, and all the firstborn of the cattle as well." (Exodus 11:4-5)

Exempted only were those who had sacrificed a faultless lamb to God, and had painted the door posts and lintels of their homes with its blood. By that token they were saved, for:

> "On that same night I will pass through Egypt and strike down every firstborn of both people and animals, and I will bring judgment on all the gods of Egypt. I am the LORD.
>
> The blood will be a sign for you on the houses where you are, and when I see the blood, I will pass over you. No destructive plague will touch you when I strike Egypt." (Exodus 12:12-13)

This festival, including those details that do not seem to make much sense at first sight, had a deeper meaning. God often spoke in forms of allegories, metaphors or parables to make Himself better understood by His people. It was not a coincidence that Jesus Christ was killed during the Passover ceremonies, "for Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed", as we learn from the New Testament. (1 Corinthians 5:7) The blood of the lamb(s) on the door posts of the Israelites in Egypt let the judgement of God to 'pass over' the Jews, and not the others. Figuratively speaking, the blood of Jesus, of which the blood of the Passover lamb is just a symbol, characterizes that the judgement of God will 'pass over' everyone who puts his trusts in Jesus. His sacrificial death was in our stead. We deserve the punishment that He suffered. (Exodus 12:25-27; Leviticus 23:5-8)

We deserve the punishment that He suffered

The Last Supper

Just before His capture Jesus celebrated the Passover feast with His disciples. One of them, Judas Iscariot, had already negotiated with the Jewish religious leaders to betray his Master so that He could be arrested without attracting any public attention, but Jesus knew about it and told him so in his face. (Matthew 26:25)

During the celebration, the prescribed text for the Passover ceremony (*Seder*) was repeated year by year. But at this feast Jesus departed from the usual pattern:

> "He took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, 'This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me.'
>
> In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you.'" (Luke 22:19-20)

This New Covenant or New Testament means that every one that accepts and lives in it, is freed from the fear of the judgement to come. Whoever entrusts himself to Jesus, can know that His body was broken for him or her, and His blood was shed for them. Christians remember this in regular

services where this symbolic action is replicated and the believers rejoice in the full forgiveness, which the New Covenant offers. (Hebrews 9:16-28; 8:6- 13) This New Covenant replaces the old in which the sacrifices were only pointers to God's great and final sacrifice, Jesus.

Jesus' Trial and Execution

That same night Jesus was arrested in a garden called Gethsemane, close to the eastern city wall of Jerusalem, and on the slopes of the Mount of Olives. During the night, contrary to the Jewish law, He was brought before the high priest and the Jewish council (Sanhedrin).

> "The chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin were looking for false evidence against Jesus so that they could put him to death. But they did not find any, though many false witnesses came forward. Finally two came forward and declared, "This fellow said, 'I am able to destroy the temple of God and rebuild it in three days.'" [Jesus had actually referred to His own body (John 2:18- 22)]
>
> "Then the high priest stood up and said to Jesus, 'Are you not going to answer? What is this testimony that these men are bringing against you?' But Jesus remained silent. The high priest said to him, 'I charge you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Messiah, the Son of God.' 'You have said so,' Jesus replied. 'But I say to all of you: From now on you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.'
>
> Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, "He has spoken blasphemy! Why do we need any more witnesses? Look, now you have heard the blasphemy. What do you think?" "He is worthy of death," they answered. Then they spit in his face and struck him with their fists. Others slapped him." (Matthew 26:59-66)

The Jewish authorities were under Roman rule, and not allowed to pass or execute a death sentence. At the first light on that 'Good Friday' morning, Jesus was taken to Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor. After questioning Him...

> "...Pilate came out and said to the Jews gathered there, 'Look, I am bringing him out to you to let you know that I find no basis for a charge against him.' When Jesus came out wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe, Pilate said to them, 'Here is the man!'

As soon as the chief priests and their officials saw him, they shouted, 'Crucify! Crucify!' But Pilate answered, 'You take him and crucify him. As for me, I find no basis for a charge against him.' The Jewish leaders insisted, 'We have a law, and according to that law he must die, because he claimed to be the Son of God.'

When Pilate heard this, he was even more afraid, and he went back inside the palace. 'Where do you come from?' he asked Jesus, but Jesus gave him no answer. 'Do you refuse to speak to me?' Pilate said. 'Don't you realize I have power either to free you or to crucify you?'

Jesus answered, 'You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above. Therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin.'

From then on, Pilate tried to set Jesus free, but the Jewish leaders kept shouting, 'If you let this man go, you are no friend of Caesar. Anyone who claims to be a king opposes Caesar." (John 19:4-12)

"When Pilate heard this, he brought Jesus out and sat down on the judge's seat at a place known as the Stone Pavement (which in Aramaic is *Gabbatha*). It was the day of Preparation of the Passover; it was about noon. 'Here is your king,' Pilate said to the Jews. But they shouted, 'Take him away! Take him away! Crucify him!' 'Shall I crucify your king?' Pilate asked. 'We have no king but Caesar,' the chief priests answered.

Finally Pilate handed him over to them to be crucified. So the soldiers took charge of Jesus.

Carrying his own cross, he went out to the place of the Skull (which in Aramaic is called *Golgotha*). There they crucified him, and with him two others, one on each side and Jesus in the middle.

Pilate had a notice prepared and fastened to the cross. It read: JESUS OF NAZARETH, KING OF THE JEWS.

Many of the Jews read this sign, for the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city, and the sign was written in Aramaic, Latin and Greek.

The chief priests of the Jews protested to Pilate, 'Do not write 'The King of the Jews,' but that this man claimed to be king of the Jews.' Pilate answered, 'What I have written, I have written.'

When the soldiers crucified Jesus, they took his clothes, dividing them into four shares, one for each of them, with the undergarment remaining. This garment was seamless, woven in one piece from top to bottom. 'Let's not tear it,' they said to one another. 'Let's decide by lot who will get it.' This happened that the scripture might be fulfilled that said, 'They divided my

clothes among them and cast lots for my garment.' So this is what the soldiers did." (John 19:16-24)

"It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, for the sun stopped shining. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two. Jesus called out with a loud voice, 'Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.' When he had said this, he breathed his last. The centurion, seeing what had happened, praised God and said, 'Surely this was a righteous man.'" (Luke 23:44-47)

Because the Jewish leaders did not want the bodies left on the crosses during the Sabbath, they asked Pilate to have the legs broken and the bodies taken down.

To ease the excruciating pain of a crucifixion, caused by the body weight of executed persons tearing on the nails driven through their wrists and the spans of their feet, they tried to equalize the weight of the body by lifting it up from their pierced feet from time to time. That actually prolonged their circulation, and with that their life. To prevent that, the executioners used clubs to smash, and by that break, their shin bones.

"The soldiers therefore came and broke the legs of the first man who had been crucified with Jesus, and then those of the other.

But when they came to Jesus and found that he was already dead, they did not break his legs.

Instead, one of the soldiers pierced Jesus' side with a spear, bringing a sudden flow of blood and water." (John 19:32-34)

On top of this hill
Jesus was crucified.

The Burial of Jesus

"As evening approached, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who had himself become a disciple of Jesus.

Going to Pilate, he asked for Jesus' body, and Pilate ordered that it be given to him.

Joseph took the body, wrapped it in a clean linen cloth, and placed it in his own new tomb that he had cut out of the rock. He rolled a big stone in front of the entrance to the tomb and went away."

(Matthew 27:57-60)

But Jesus Came to Life Again!

In spite of all the precautions of the Jewish council to keep Him in the grave, Jesus rose again from death on the third day after His execution.

> "On the first day of the week [Sunday], very early in the morning, the women took the spices they had prepared and went to the tomb. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they entered, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus.
>
> While they were wondering about this, suddenly two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning stood beside them. In their fright the women bowed down with their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead?
>
> He is not here; he has risen!" (Luke 24:1-6)

He is not here; he has risen!

If you consider this evidence, as well as those recorded in the other accounts of the gospel, it is obvious that it was quite impossible for Jesus to stay alive on the cross, if only for...

> "...one of the soldiers pierced Jesus' side with a spear, bringing a sudden flow of blood and water." (John 19:32-34)

It was equally impossible for His disciples to steal the body. If the chief priests and Pharisees had stolen the body, they would have produced it triumphantly as soon as the disciples began to say that Jesus rose from the dead. The facts show that only one explanation is possible: Jesus was dead, and rose from the dead again.

A little later a story was circulated among the Jews, claiming that Jesus' body had been stolen by the disciples. If one is aware that any Roman soldier, found sleeping while on guard duty, was executed, even that tale was hardly acceptable.

It is interesting to note that the disciples themselves were completely surprised by the news that Jesus was alive again.

> "On the first day of the week [Sunday], very early in the morning, the women took the spices they had prepared and went to the tomb.

They found the stone rolled away from the tomb

This is the entrance to a tomb like the one Jesus had been laid. Notice the round, millstone-like, rock that would be rolled before the opening to the grave.

But when they entered, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus.

While they were wondering about this, suddenly two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning stood beside them.

In their fright the women bowed down with their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead?

He is not here; he has risen! Remember how he told you, while he was still with you in Galilee:

'The Son of Man must be delivered over to the hands of sinners, be crucified and on the third day be raised again.'"

Then they remembered his words.

When they came back from the tomb, they told all these things to the Eleven and to all the others. It was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the others with them who told this to the apostles. But they did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense.

Peter, however, got up and ran to the tomb. Bending over, he saw the strips of linen lying by themselves, and he went away, wondering to himself what had happened." (Luke 24:1-12)

All that ignorance, in spite of the fact that Jesus had predicted His resurrection again and again. That same evening Jesus appeared to them and convinced them that He was truly alive.

"While they were still talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, 'Peace be with you.'

They were startled and frightened, thinking they saw a ghost.

He said to them, 'Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds? Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have.'

When he had said this, he showed them his hands and feet.

And while they still did not believe it because of joy and amazement, he asked them, 'Do you have anything here to eat?'

They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate it in their Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.'" (Luke 24:36-44).

Even the proverbial "doubting Thomas", one of the apostles, was convinced in the end.

"A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you!'

Then he said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.'

Thomas said to him, 'My Lord and my God!' Then Jesus told him, 'Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.'" (John 20:26-29).

Jesus Returns to Heaven

After instructing His disciples for forty days after the resurrection, Jesus went back to His heavenly glory. He will ones more return to earth at the end of time.

"Then they gathered around him and asked him, 'Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?'

He said to them: 'It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.'

After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight. They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. 'Men of Galilee,' they said, 'why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.'" (Acts 1:6-11)

Review and Remember

1. Why was the death and resurrection of Jesus so significant?
2. What great hope and promise did Jesus give his followers when he returned to heaven?

12. THE 'KINGDOM OF GOD'

One of the fundamental teachings of Jesus was about the Kingdom of Heaven, also called the Kingdom of God. Right from the beginning of His teaching, Jesus began to warn the people, saying:

> "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near." (Matthew 4:17)

What and Where is the Kingdom of Heaven?

Jesus often used parables (stories of everyday life that illustrated what He was teaching) to explain eternal truths. Jesus wanted to be understood by even the simplest people. In Matthew 13:1-52 we read one of His sermons about the kingdom of heaven that consists of seven parables.

> "That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat by the lake. Such large crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat in it, while all the people stood on the shore.
>
> Then he told them many things in parables, saying: "A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. Whoever has ears, let them hear."
>
> "Listen then to what the parable of the sower means: When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in their heart. This is the seed sown along the path.
>
> The seed falling on rocky ground refers to someone who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away.
>
> The seed falling among the thorns refers to someone who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, making it unfruitful.

But the seed falling on good soil refers to someone who hears the word and understands it. This is the one who produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown."

Jesus told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away.

When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared. "The owner's servants came to him and said, 'Sir, didn't you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the weeds come from?' 'An enemy did this,' he replied. "The servants asked him, 'Do you want us to go and pull them up?' 'No,' he answered, 'because while you are pulling the weeds, you may uproot the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn.'"

"...Then he left the crowd and went into the house. His disciples came to him and said, "Explain to us the parable of the weeds in the field."

He answered, "The one who sowed the good seed is the Son of Man [Jesus]. The field is the world, and the good seed stands for the people of the kingdom. The weeds are the people of the evil one, and the enemy who sows them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the harvesters are angels. As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. They will throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Whoever has ears, let them hear.

The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field."

"Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant [Jesus] looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he [Jesus] went away and sold everything he had and bought it."

"Once again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was let down into the lake and caught all kinds of fish.

When it was full, the fishermen pulled it up on the shore. Then they sat down and collected the good fish in baskets, but threw the bad away.

This is how it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous and throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

The disciples came to him and asked, "Why do you speak to the people in parables?"

He replied, "Because the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them...

This is why I speak to them in parables: "Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand.

In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah: "'You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving.

For this people's heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them.'

But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear." (Matthew 13:1-50)

From these stories we may well conclude that the Kingdom of God is where God rules, be it in a person, or a group.

Review and Remember

1. How would you explain to others what "the Kingdom of God" is?

13. BECOMING A CITIZEN OF GOD's KINGDOM

Jesus warns us that many religious people will discover in the Day of Judgement that they never were part of God's Kingdom:

> "Many will say to me on that day, `Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evil doers!" (Matthew 7:22)

They were evildoers because their guilt before God was not forgiven. We should, therefore, make ever so sure that we are in fact citizens of the kingdom of God.

Citizens by Birth

Jesus explained the way to enter the kingdom of God when He spoke to a Jewish rabbi named Nicodemus:

> "Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council. He came to Jesus at night and said, 'Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him.' Jesus replied, 'Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.' 'How can someone be born when they are old?' Nicodemus asked. 'Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb to be born!'
>
> **... but people loved darkness instead of light**
>
> Jesus answered, 'Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.' 'Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness [Numbers 21:8-9], so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.'
>
> For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.

This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. (John 3:1-7 and 14-19)

Review and Remember

1. What is the only way of becoming a citizen of the Kingdom of God?
2. Are you quite sure You are a citizen of God's Kingdom?

14. THE LIFE OF THE CITIZEN

When you love a person deeply, you will avoid everything that might hurt her or him. Should that be different in our relationship with our almighty and holy God? No, but yet with a difference.

Christians that deserve this name, think of God with awe. That may well be somewhat intimidating, and it should! We should at all times be aware of His wrath on everything impure. That is called the fear of God, and also reverence.

> "And now, Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you, but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments and statutes of the LORD, which I am commanding you today for your good? (Deuteronomy 10:12-13)
>
> Jesus added to that: "And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. (Matthew 10:28)

Believers are all too aware that forgiveness costs God the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, His Son. But they are equally aware of eternally being loved by God. 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.
>
> 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." (Rom 12:1-2)
>
> "...walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.
>
> Among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people." (Eph 5:2-3)
>
> "Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful." (Col 3:15)

"As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: 'Be holy, because I am holy.'

Since you call on a Father who judges each person's work impartially, live... in reverent fear.

For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your ancestors, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect." (1 Peter 1:14-19).

"...count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus.

Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires.

Do not offer any part of yourself to sin as an instrument of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer every part of yourself to him as an instrument of righteousness. For sin shall no longer be your master, because you are not under the law, but under grace." (Rom 6:11-14)

Now you will wonder...

...why so many 'Christians' are not living in the way that was outlined just now. Why are so many people in the 'Western World' given to immorality, drunkenness, dishonesty, greed, hatred and pride? Are they truly Christians? You be the judge:

"Since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature— have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse.

For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools...

Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another.

They exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator who is forever praised. Amen.

Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural sexual relations for unnatural ones.

> In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed shameful acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their error.
>
> Furthermore, just as they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, so God gave them over to a depraved mind, so that they do what ought not to be done.
>
> They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; they have no understanding, no fidelity, no love, no mercy." (Rom 1:21-31)

These are hard words. Some of these statements may well contradict laws in a justice system that legalises and promotes what God resents and forbids. However, before condemning others, we better look at the full text, and see our own shortcomings the way Jesus did:

> "The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group and said to Jesus,
>
> 'Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. The Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?'
>
> They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him. But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger.
>
> When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, 'Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.'
>
> At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there."

What would we have done? Would we have thrown the first stone? The only one to do that could have been Jesus. And what did He do?

> "Jesus straightened up and asked her, 'Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?' 'No one, sir,' she said. 'Then neither do I condemn you,' Jesus declared. 'Go now and leave your life of sin.'" (John 8:3-11)

Did this justify her sin? In no way! But it is grace in action.

The Christian Life

How, then, should Christians live and behave? Someone rightly said, "Christians are not perfect, **but they are forgiven**." Yet, Christians aim sincerely to no longer live for themselves, but for the love of God:

What greater joy is here than to be loved

"...he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again." (2 Corinthians 5:15)

"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... and we will come to them and make our home with them." (John 14:21 and 23)

Love grows through personal contact. You cannot love a person you do not know. When you get to know Jesus the Messiah, you can only love him for who and what he is - or reject Him for the same reason.

What greater joy is here than to be loved? How much more does this apply when being loved by God:

"I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete." (John 15:11)

The Festive Occasions for Citizens

In their calendar Christians also have festive occasions. That these have been perverted in today's world is a sad fact, beginning with Christmas. What you see happening in this season in the 'Christian world' has nothing or at best very little to do with the celebration of Christ's birthday, even though this is only the supposed birthday of Jesus. We do not have a historic date. On Christmas eve, Christians remember and celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ.

The most impressive festive days are, no doubt, **'Good Friday'** and **'Easter'**. Good Friday is quietly celebrated in remembrance of the day on which Jesus was crucified and died. On Easter Sunday He defeated death by rising again from the dead. Other occasions are remembered even more quietly.

On **'Ascension Day'** Christians remember the ascension of Jesus to His Heavenly Home. (Acts 1:9-11)

The day of **'Pentecost'** is seven weeks after Easter. It is the day when the Holy Spirit of God came to 'live in' the disciples. (Acts 2:1-13) Since then He is that 'part' of the 'trinity' of God that equips and leads believers to live in a God honouring way, and to tell others about the God that saves every sinner who truly wants to be forgiven by the pure mercy and grace of the one God.

On Sundays **'the Lord's Supper'**, also called 'Holy Communion' or the more descriptive and biblical 'Breaking of the Bread' is celebrated. This feast was instituted by Jesus Himself to remind His followers of His sacrificial death for them, to save those who trusted Him from eternal doom, as expressed in Luke 22:15-20:

> "And he [Jesus] said to them, 'I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer'... And he took a cup [with the Passover wine], and when he had given thanks he said, 'Take this, and divide it among yourselves. For I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes.'
>
> And he took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, 'This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' And likewise the cup after they had eaten, saying, 'This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.'"

The Baptism of Believers

> "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 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, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." (Matthew 28:18-20)

These were (almost) the last words of Jesus on this earth. As the 'communion' on Sundays, baptism has a spiritual meaning. Therefore, we ought to understand: only believers are to be baptized. It is not meant for everybody. The act of baptism (translated 'submerge') carries symbolic meaning. Every true new believer will receive the guidance of the Spirit of God, and that affects a new outlook on life. To love God, and by that Jesus, also develops a new view of sin.

"What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?"

Seemingly, someone had suggested that since Christ causes sins to be forgiven, it must me meritorious to sin more, so that Christ can forgive more. What do we think? The Bible says:

"By no means! How can we who died to sin still live [any longer] in it? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. For one who has died has been set free from sin.

Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him... So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions.

Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness." (Romans 6:1-5)

Dead people are buried (figuratively by submerging them in water, symbolising a grave). As water cleanses [only] the outside of someone, the 'heart' or inside, is purified by the blood of Jesus. But the new believers do not remain in the 'grave', but are, like Jesus, resurrected to live a new life in a personal relationship with the living Jesus:

"... don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his. For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body ruled by sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin...

Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. For we know that since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him. The death he died, he died to sin

once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus.

Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires." (Romans 6:3-12)

Review and Remember

1. How is the life of a Kingdom Citizen different from those outside the Kingdom of God?
2. Explain these feasts: a) Christmas, b) Easter, c) Pentecost.
3. What is so special about baptism? Explain its spiritual significance.

15. THE CHURCH

To begin with we better define what 'the church' is. Is it a building into which people 'go to church' on Sundays? Yes, that would be the common use of the word.

In real terms, churches are institutions; you may call them organisations that carry that name: There is a Catholic Church, a Reformed Church, and in addition Anglican, Methodist, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Baptist, and many other churches. These should properly be called 'denominations'. They can differ noticeably, in form, and a little in content. And each one has its own history and tradition.

Lately, denominations are being classified in a new and more realistic way. In keeping with their attitude towards the Bible, they may roughly be called '*traditional*' churches, '*liberal*' churches, and '*evangelical*' churches, of which the 'Pentecostals' are a part.

But what does the word 'church' actually mean?

The word "Church" is derived from the Greek *'kyriakon'* meaning 'The House of the Lord'. But the Greek word *'kyriakon'* is not used in the Bible. The Greek word *'ekklesia'* is. *'Ekklesia'* is composed of two words, *'ek'*, translated 'out of ', and *'kaleo'*, 'to call', meaning to be 'called out of ', and consequently 'into something'.

Applied, it means to be called out of the 'worldly' state, and into fellowship with Jesus. And that is actually the biblical Church.

called out ... into fellowship with Jesus

Now all that tells us a lot about human traditions, but very little, if anything, about the intended substance of the Church. But the Bible does.

The biblical Church is universal. Every true believer in Jesus Christ is a member of the body of Christ. The undisputed head is Jesus. His Church exists in myriads of forms and sizes wherever Bible-centered believers meet.

Every local church has basically three functions, which are carried out by its members:

- To glorify and **worship** God.
- To **make the Gospel known** to the people in the 'world' around us, and by living an attractive, sanctified life.
- To bind believers together in **close fellowship**, and by promoting the knowledge of God and His Word.

Some verses from the 'teaching letters' for the Church will give us a little insight:

> "To the church of God..., to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ..." (1 Corinthians 1:2)
>
> "But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace." (Eph 2:13-14)
>
> "...speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ.
>
> From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work. Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function." (Ephesians 4:15-16)
>
> "Christ is the head of the Church, his body, of which he is the Saviour." (Ephesians 5:23)
>
> "He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy.
>
> For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him [Jesus], and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.
>
> Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behaviour.
>
> But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through [His] death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation — if you continue in your faith, established and firm, and do not move from the hope held out in the gospel." (Colossians 1:18-23)

"Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of dong, but encouraging one another..." (Heb 10:24-25)

"There are different kinds of gifts. But they are all given by the same Spirit. There are different ways to serve. But they all come from the same Lord. There are different ways to work. But the same God makes it possible for all of us to have all those different things.

The Holy Spirit is given to each of us in a special way. That is for the good of all." (1 Cor 12:4-7)

Review and Remember

1. What is the meaning of the term 'church'?
2. What are the three functions carried out by the members of a church?
3. Read Ephesians 4:15-16 once again, and recall the two connections – vertical and horizontal – that will cause believers to grow.

16. THE LAST JUDGMENT, HEAVEN AND HELL

Although the kingdom of heaven operates here and now, it is an everlasting one, and will be fully established, when Jesus returns to this earth once more (Daniel 7:13-14). But before the coming of Jesus, the Antichrist, already at work, will reveal himself and throw the world into great turmoil, claiming the world for himself.

> "...then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will overthrow with the breath of his mouth and destroy by the splendor of his coming." (2 Thessalonians 2:8; Daniel 7: 25-28; Revelation 20:10)

Let us read the most relevant extracts:

> "Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be famines and earthquakes in various places. All these are the beginning of birth pains. Then you [Christians] will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of me...
>
> Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold, but the one who stands firm to the end will be saved. And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come..." "Immediately after the distress of those days 'the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.'
>
> Then will appear the sign of the Son of Man in heaven. And then all the peoples of the earth will mourn when they see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven, with power and great glory. And he will send his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other... But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark; and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away. That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man.
>
> Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come." (Matthew 24:7-42)

"Don't let anyone deceive you in any way, for that day will not come until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the man doomed to destruction. He will oppose and will exalt himself over everything that is called God or is worshiped, so that he sets himself up in God's temple, proclaiming himself to be God...; ...you know what is holding him back, so that he may be revealed at the proper time.

For the secret power of lawlessness is already at work; but the one who now holds it back will continue to do so till he [the Holy Spirit of God?] is taken out of the way.

And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will overthrow with the breath of his mouth and destroy by the splendour of his coming. The coming of the lawless one will be in accordance with how Satan works. He will use all sorts of displays of power through signs and wonders that serve the lie, and all the ways that wickedness deceives those who are perishing. They perish because they refused to love the truth and so be saved." (2 Thessalonians 2:3-10)

"The Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and those who died in Christ will rise first.

After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever." (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17)

That will usher in the 'Millennium', a thousand-year rule of Christ on earth: [*As to the term 'thousand years', it is a mystic number among the Jews as in the Midrash Tillin, Adam Clarke Commentary*].

"He [an Angel] seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil, or Satan, and bound him for a thousand years...".

"...I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony about Jesus and because of the word of God. They had not worshiped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years.

The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended. This is the first resurrection." [*In contradistinction from the beheaded martyrs, and from those who had kept themselves pure in the times of great temptation, the phrase 'rest of the dead' here would most naturally refer to the 'same general class' which was before mentioned - the pious dead. Adam Clarke commentary*]

"Blessed and holy are those who share in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with him for a thousand years." (Rev 20:2-6)

"When the thousand years are over, Satan will be released from his prison and will go out to deceive the nations in the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, and to gather them for battle. In number they are like the sand on the seashore.

They marched across the breadth of the earth and surrounded the camp of God's people, the city he loves. But fire came down from heaven and devoured them.

And the devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of burning sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. They will be tormented day and night for ever and ever." (Rev 20:7-10)

The 'Last Judgment' will follow:

"Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. The earth and the heavens fled from his presence, and there was no place for them.

And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books.

Nobody wants to go to hell

The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and each person was judged according to what they had done.

Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death.

Anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire." (Revelation 20:11-15)

One may read this with a skeptical smile – or with genuine concern.

Surprise, surprise! Nobody wants to go to hell, and everybody wants to go to heaven. -- But most prefer to rather wait a bit.

Surprise, surprise! The great majority of the world population behaves and lives as though they are not accountable for the way they think, speak, or act, or faces the brutal consequence, which will emanate from this.

But you will agree that God would not be God, if He would not execute justice. Okay, but isn't God "Love"? Yes, He is. That is why He, through Jesus, has done all that is needed, to have our sin forgiven, removed from us "...so that no one may boast before him." (1 Corinthians 1:29)

He already atoned for our failure to live by God's Law. We 'just' need to 'repent', return to Him with all the consequence that this involves. And that has been outlined clearly above.

Let God be God, and get right with Him, in His way.

Review and Remember

1. What needs to happen FIRST before the end will come (see Matthew 24:14)?
2. What will happen to the dead when Jesus returns to this earth again (2 Thessalonians 2)?
3. What will happen at the "Last Judgment"? What will decide over who will be accepted and who will be rejected?

17. THIS IS THE END... AND THE BEGINNING

This is the end of this study, ... although there is so much more to know. This is the end of this study – but you already know enough about the Word of God to be aware of your position before God - and which way to go.

This is the end of this study, ... but, perhaps the beginning of a meaningful life that is orientated on the Word of God. There is a key to that:

> "What no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, and what no human mind has conceived – [are] the things God has prepared for those who love him." (1 Cor 2:9)
>
> "Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls." (1 Pet 1:8-9)
>
> And now "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..." (Eph 1:18)

You will have concluded that knowledge demands a response, a reaction.

The offer of God is still valid. It only ends with your earthly life.

> But, lest we forget, you also need to be aware that there might well be a 'price' to be 'paid' for your privilege of being a 'daughter or son of God':
>
> "... everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven, but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven." (Mat 10:32-33)
>
> But even if "everyone will hate you because of me, ... the one who stands firm to the end will be saved." (Mark 13:13)

There remains the ultimate choice. When saying 'no' to the one, we have to say 'yes' to the other. May you have the wisdom, honesty, and courage to choose right! To do that can only be between you and God alone.

God bless you!

You may well need extra information or assistance on your way. If you do not know anyone to ask, try the internet.

When looking for someone like you, contact us, the Life Challenge people: **info@lifechallenge.de**

Review and Remember

1. Memorize 1 Corinthians 2:9: "What no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, and what no human mind has conceived – [are] the things God has prepared for those who love him."

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