

A Walk in the Park



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Introduction

"Of making many books there is no end,..."

Ecclesiastes 12v12

This book was originally written for some Polish churches as an addition to the teaching I had been giving them. It was not written as a great theological challenge, or a search for deep spiritual meanings in obscure parts of the Word of God, but as an encouragement for people to walk closer with the Lord, so that their relationship with the Lord would deepen and their whole Christian life would be strengthened.

To those of you who do not know what it is like to know God as your Father, my hope is that you will see the joy and privilege of knowing Him, and that you will get your eternal introduction through Jesus Christ.

To those of you who already know the Father, I hope that you will be challenged to look again at your life and check what the priorities are in your walk with the Lord, for so often our relationship with the Father slips out of first place to be replaced by the church, our ministry for the Lord or one of the many other things that make up our lives.

As Christians, we often talk about the forgiveness of our sin and eternal life through Jesus Christ. We talk about working for the Lord and living a better life for Him, and yet I believe we often forget the very reason for our salvation which is to know God and fellowship with Him.

As I read through the Bible, there is a verse that strikes me so hard, a verse that is often overlooked, but a verse that sums up salvation and maybe even the creation of man himself. If we go back to the book of Genesis we read how God created the heavens and the earth, and everything in it. We read how God made everything ready for the grand finale of creation; man. We see the father heart of God preparing a home, a place of safety and interest. Like a couple expecting a child, He had made great preparations, and when all was ready He created man. Then He placed him in the cot of creation, the Garden of Eden. Here in the centre of God's creation was a special place, a place for man and God, but a place to do what?

In Genesis 3v8 it says

"Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the Lord God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day,..."

I do not believe this was a one off walk just to catch Adam and Eve in their sin. I believe this was just part of their daily life, walking with the Lord. And the question then comes, well what did they do? What did they talk about? Well, they probably just walked and talked. There were no prayer requests, Adam and Eve had all they wanted, they just walked and talked together, sharing their lives, their thoughts, their hearts with each other. The picture must have been a bit like a couple in love walking along together, not asking for anything, just sharing their lives, their thoughts, their dreams, but most importantly just being together in love. It is from this perspective that I want to look at the Christian life, for so often we forget this central point of our Christian life, the reason for man's creation, for Jesus dying on the cross for our sin, for eternal life and even for prayer.

It is so that man can walk with God, that we can share our lives with Him. Although you may have a great ministry for the Lord, and you may lead a near perfect life, if you are not spending time just sharing yourself with the Lord, just being in His presence, then you are missing the whole reason for your salvation.

For God has created you and saved you to love, and be loved by Him. We may be obedient, but if we do not share ourselves with the Lord, having time just to be with Him, then we become like a marriage without romance; cold and functional, not fulfilling to either party, a relationship that is on-going but in which both parties could receive so much more.

My hope in writing this book is that you will not only get more from your relationship with the Lord, but that He may also get more from His relationship with you.

1 - Love and sin

"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 of it you will surely die.""

Genesis 2v16-17

When God created man it was out of an act of love. God is a God of love and created man, a person who could receive that love. In Genesis 1v26-27, we see that man was created in the image of God, he was given certain attributes that are the same as God. He was free, free to choose, he had the ability to think, to love, and to receive love. He also, because of his freedom, had the ability to reject love and withhold his own love, to choose his own way and reject the way that the Father hoped he would take. This may sound like a mistake on the part of the Father, an error in His creation. Surely it would have been better to have made man so that he could not reject God's ways and would always love his creator. Well, it sounds a good idea, but it would have changed man from an independent being into a pre-programmed biological robot running a predetermined programme. Any love would not have come from the heart but would of just been automatically given. It would not have been love at all. True love cannot be forced from someone, it cannot be bought, but it is given freely at the will of the giver, and it is this type of love that the Father wants. A love that is given because we want to love Him who loved us.

So we see that God took a risk. Like a couple expecting a baby, they hope the child will love them. They will pour out their love and energies into the upbringing of the child, but only the child can choose whether or not to return that love. Love is a risky business with no guaranteed returns. It costs so much to give, and the risk of rejection is so high it seems almost illogical to take the chance, but the rewards when love is received back is worth so much. God the Father was willing to take that risk with man.

God gave man so much; He gave him the rights of a son. We see in Genesis 1v26-30 that God made him a ruler, the rights of an heir were given to him in that he was allowed to rule the estate; earth. Only the Father Himself was above him, and to this end a sign of obedience was set up. We read how in Genesis 2v16-17 God set up a rule that man

was not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. I do not believe that this tree had any special powers, but it represented an acknowledgment by man that God was over him and that He was sovereign. It was a simple rule, but it was a reminder to man that although they may have the rights of an heir, the Father was still over them and had to be obeyed. God had given so much, He had put man in such a high position and all for love.

Those first days must have been so good as Adam and Eve and the Father spent time together, sharing themselves, it was meant to last for eternity. This is what man had been created for, that man and God could continue in fellowship together, to walk in the park, and yet man was so quick to throw it all away.

The fall of Adam and Eve, and therefore the whole of mankind came about so quickly, and yet is typical of all men to this day. We see that they wanted more. They wanted to be more than an heir, they wanted to be at the top of the pile. The serpent said they would be like God, Genesis 3v5, he offered them something that was pleasing to the flesh, but would cost them so much in the spirit, and like so many of mankind, they took it. It was an act of disobedience that cost them everything. What was it that was so wrong about taking this fruit?

In taking the fruit they removed the symbol of God's lordship over their lives. They pronounced themselves as equal to God. They announced themselves as Lords over the Earth. They replaced their love of God with a love of material things, replacing spiritual wealth with physical wealth. In one small act, they threw away all the Father had planned for them and announced they were going their own way. They also, by this act, changed family and made Satan their new father instead of God. By that simple act they committed the ultimate crime, anarchy against the King of Kings, against the Lord and creator of the universe, against God Himself.

The results of this act of sin was more than Adam could have ever imagined. Like so many of us today, he looked at the sin alone, rather than the consequences that follow.

Man gained only two things from his sin, a piece of worthless fruit that would soon be gone, and knowledge of good and evil. He knew what evil was now because he had become it, what a sad way to find out.

He lost his position, his home in the garden, but more than that, he lost his fellowship with God. He had declared his intention to go his own way and he got it, for sin blocked his relationship with the Father who had created him. He was now an exile, alone, and

worse, he had no way back, no way to fix the damage he had done, for the penalty was too high for him to pay. The penalty was death.

However, man was not alone in losing out, for the Father also suffered great loss, His creation had rejected His sovereignty and He also had lost his fellowship with man. Why God should want to restore fellowship with man after what he had done is a mystery and a sign of the great depth of God's love. He could have just started again, but in His love He wanted fellowship restored with man whom He loved. God's love was greater than the rejection He had received and was willing to pay any cost to bring man back into fellowship with Himself, even if He had to pay the death penalty Himself, and this He did in Jesus Christ.

2 - A way back to fellowship

".....But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him,..."

Luke 15v20

Before reading this chapter it would be good to read Luke 15v11-32, for this simple parable shows so much of what man did to God and how God still showed His love for His lost son.

It seems incredible after all man had done, and indeed is still doing that God would care for us at all. Yet the love He has for us is so great, He was willing to pay any cost to allow us back to Him.

Man had committed the ultimate crime, a sin against the highest authority and no matter how much God loved man, the penalty for that sin had to be paid. The Bible says,

"For the wages of sin is death,..."

Romans 6v23

That was the penalty to be paid, but it was more than just a physical death, it included a spiritual death, Hell itself, eternal death and eternal separation from God. That was the penalty for man's sin. God could not overlook this, He is not like many of us who would just like to ignore the problem in the hope that it would go away. God, as a God of justice and righteousness, had to have the payment for man's sin made in full before they could be back together in fellowship again, but who could pay that penalty? No one in the human race could pay the penalty for anyone else's sin because they had their own penalty to pay. Only a perfect uncondemned man could take sinful man's place, and God could not find such a man on the earth, and so He sent His one and only son, Jesus. Jesus Christ came and paid the penalty that man deserved. For the death that we see Jesus dying on the cross was the death that we all deserved. He died the very worst kind of death, a torture saved for the worst of mankind; that death should have been ours. Jesus died on the cross as a free gift to mankind to allow us back into

fellowship with the Father.

"For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Romans 6v23

God, in His desire to have fellowship with you and I, thought so much of us that He would pay the cost of our sin through Jesus Christ. It is a gift, it is totally undeserved, it is a miracle that while we were still sinners, Jesus Christ would pay the penalty for us. There is no other way we can come to God, we may not like the idea, it may hurt our pride, but the only way to God is through Jesus Christ. If there was any other way to God then Jesus would not have had to die on the cross. Indeed if there was any other way to God, then the Father would have been guilty of one of the cruellest tortures the world has ever seen. Yet because there was no other way, Jesus died.

The other fact about Jesus' death on the cross is that it was a finished work. He did not half do the job, requiring us to finish the work. No, He did a complete job of salvation on the cross, there is nothing left for us to do except come humbly before the Father and say, "Father I have sinned against heaven and against you, I am not worthy to be your child, forgive me through Jesus Christ."

Like the father in Luke 15v11-32, they are words that the Father longs to hear from us. He has been looking out for us, waiting for us to return to our senses and come before Him. We are dead in our sin, yet He wants to make us alive again in Jesus Christ, for just as Jesus rose from the dead, so we too can rise from the penalty of our sin through Him. The penalty has been paid, our pardon, our entry to the family is waiting for collection. The Father is waiting for us. All we have to do is enter through the door, and that door is Jesus.

"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 15v22-24

This son had appeared on the doorstep of the father he had rejected, the father owed him nothing, he was dirty, he was nothing. However, the father reinstated him as his son. His love forgave what had gone before, and a great celebration took place in that home. So it is when we arrive at the door, Jesus Christ, and accept God's forgiveness through Him, confessing that we are sinners. Then the Father picks us up, washes away our sin in the blood of Jesus, He gives us a ring of sonship, He gives us a robe of righteousness through Jesus Christ, and celebrates that another sinner who was lost has found his way home.

*"I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent."
Luke 15v7*

How the son and his father must have talked, the joy of being together again, how they celebrated, but so much more does God celebrate as we come back to Him through Jesus. He longs to spend time with us, to look after us, to be with us. That is the love that God has for us.

If you do not know God today, if you have never taken Jesus Christ as your Lord and Saviour; then heaven awaits your decision. There is no other way to God and there is nothing else you need, or can do, to get to God. Yes, you are a sinner, you are dirty in the eyes of God, but He loves you, and once you have entered in through Jesus Christ, He will do the washing; He will make you a new member of His family.

For those of us who are already saved, who have been in the family a few years, let us remember to spend time with our Father, let us never become proud or conceited, self-righteous in our own ability. Let us also remember, that everything that is good in us has been done through the work of Jesus Christ, because the Father loves us so much.

3 - The results of a relationship

*"I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them."
John 17v26*

Over the years I have met many people who have reduced Christianity to a set of rules, the do's and don'ts of holy living. Others struggle with themselves, as they look and see how sinful they are. They are weighed down with a never ending sense of hopelessness.

Now I am not against holy living, indeed I am very much in favour of it, the same is true for trying to overcome sin. However, when these become the centre of our Christian life, then we have missed the point.

The desire of God in saving us is that we might know Him, and that we would spend time with Him. That is the most important thing. The fight against sin and trying to live a holy life should then come out of that relationship.

Consider a young man fixing his car, he is very dirty, and suddenly a lovely girl walks by. He doesn't run into the house to get dressed up, for by the time he returns she will have gone, he speaks to her as he is. Of course when he goes to meet her in the evening, he gets dressed up. His desire to change his looks comes from the love he has for the girl.

Many times as Christians we find it harder to change than it need be, because without the deepening relationship with God, there seems no point to our struggle. It becomes a struggle for the sake of struggle.

Jesus gives us a good example of this when He called His first disciples. There they were, smelly fishermen, when Jesus said come and follow. Now they were a rough scruffy bunch, not really the type of people you would expect the son of God to deal with, but He took them as they were. Just like when we accept Jesus Christ into our lives He takes us as we are. It was as the disciples spent time with Jesus that they changed. They did not become perfect overnight, but they changed as they spent time listening to His teaching and observing His life. The effect was so great that this scruffy bunch of fishermen, assorted social outcasts and oddballs finished up being the founders of the church. They changed. This change came out of their relationship with God, they

changed because they wanted to do something for the one they loved. This change was not always easy and was a bit of a slow process, an ongoing process, it was not a change for change's sake or out of some religious duty, but it was done because of their relationship with Jesus. It was not forced, they wanted to do it because of love, because of what God had done for them.

"Therefore, I urge you, brothers in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God-which is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is-his good, pleasing and perfect will."

Romans 12v1-2

These two verses have meant so much to me over the years, they sum up to me the whole reason for living a better life for the Lord. It is not because I have to, it is not to improve my salvation or to get some kind of reward. It is in response to what God has done for me in Jesus Christ. As I spend time with the Lord and find out more of what He has done for me, as I discover the greater depths of His love for me, then I want to do more for Him. It does not make the changes any easier, the battle is just as hard, but there is a reason. It is not a senseless fight for self-improvement, but a desire to look better when I meet the one I love. A desire to make myself more attractive to the one who loves me more than any other. It does not make Him love me more; it is just in thankfulness for the love He has already poured out on me.

What does this mean in our daily lives?

In our daily life we seem to be in a constant battle against sin, often this battle seems never ending. To help us overcome, we often need to stop thinking about what sin we are trying to overcome, but why we are trying to overcome it.

If you are finding it hard to change, you may just need a change of tactics. Sometimes we struggle and concentrate on the problem of sin so much we forget the one we are

doing it for. It is a bit like the young girl spending so long dressing up and putting on her makeup, that by the time she has finished, there is no time left to spend with her boyfriend. In her struggle to look right she becomes more obsessed with her appearance than the relationship itself. We as Christians can fall foul to the same trap, for Satan himself would put us on such a guilt trip over our sin that we fail to come to the Lord any more. However, God knows us, He saved us, and no matter what state we are in He wants us to come to Him. Maybe we will have to ask for forgiveness, for help and strength, but the most important thing is to come to Him. For as we spend more time with God, as our knowledge and love of Him grows, then the desire to make our lives better for Him will get stronger.

In Romans 7v19-25 we see that even Paul struggled with sin. Out of his love for God he wanted to do what was right, he wanted to please God, but he found himself doing what was wrong. You are certainly not alone in your struggle. I find it a great encouragement to know it's not just me that finds it hard. Like Paul in Romans 8v1-4, we can give thanks that through Jesus the sin in us has been condemned by the work of Jesus on the cross. Yes, there are still struggles, but praise God, through Jesus Christ our relationship with the Father goes on.

Suppose we do not struggle to change our lives for the Lord? Supposing we do not care how we carry on in our life? I find it incredible how many Christians will lie, cheat, break the law of the land, and yet carry on with no condemnation at all. I wonder how they face the Lord. They are like a marriage where the honeymoon is over, and the romance has gone. There is no longer a growing love, just a gradual cooling down of the relationship with their love slowly getting colder and colder. The couple make no effort to be attractive to each other or to please each other. Finally the marriage is not a marriage at all. It is just two people living in the same house. It will finally come to an end.

The constant desire to please the Lord can be an uphill struggle, a constant swimming against the tide, but it shows life in the relationship, a love that is growing. Remember those of you who are drifting along, only dead fish float with the tide.

"I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm- neither hot nor cold - I am about to spit you out of my mouth."

Revelation 3v15-16

4 - Relationship in action – Speaking

"He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognise him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God - children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God." John 1v10-13

It seems incredible that God would allow us, the ones who have caused Him so much pain to return to Him through Jesus Christ. He allowed us back into a position of sons so that once again we could have access to Him. It seems strange that many Christians have trouble with this relationship, they do not seem to know how to make it work, how to get in touch with God and how to allow Him to get in touch with them. For although you may want to do the will of God in your life, unless you hear what God is saying you will not know what that will is. A servant can only serve his master if he knows what the master wishes him to do. Many of us have made the mistake of assuming we know what God wants, we've always done it this way, so why should it change now? The problem is that it doesn't matter how good our work is, if it is not what the master wants, then we are wasting our time.

Take an evangelist for example. He may seek the Lord for a message and many get saved, so for his next meeting he decides to preach the same message again. After all it was a good message, and it was from the Lord. The message may be well preached but if it is not what God wants to say on that day then the preacher is not doing the Lord's will. This of course can be true in so many ministries, it's called tradition; the repeating of something because it worked before instead of asking God what He wants us to do today. We just assume it's the same as yesterday.

First let us look at the centre of a relationship, whether it be a father and son, a husband and wife, brother and sister, or just friends together. A relationship needs something to make it work - communication. Not a cold talk, but a communication based on love and trust, (another word for faith). If any of these elements are missing from either side of the relationship then the communication gets distorted, it becomes misunderstood and distrusted. It can be used to hurt the other person if love is missing,

or if trust or faith is missing, then we are not sure whether to believe what is said.

As we look at the Father we do not have to worry about whether God loves us or whether God can be trusted. As we look at what Jesus did on the cross we can see very clearly that God loves us with a depth of love that we cannot imagine or hope to return. At the same time we can trust Him because as we read through the Bible we see that God never failed to carry out one of His promises. With a track record like that we have nothing to fear in our communication with Him. So let us get down to the basics of communicating with God- How does it work?

There are two sides to communication, speaking and listening. That may seem obvious, but it would seem that many people have trouble with one or both of these in their Christian life and so have great problems communicating with God, therefore it would be best to look at them one at a time.

Talking to God

"Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshippers the Father seeks." John 4v23

At this point it would be worth reading from John 4v1-26, for this part of Jesus' life shows us something about talking to God and the mistakes that are regularly made. The argument in this passage was between two groups who both had their own ideas about how people should speak to God. Their arguments were based on the right place to pray, the right way to stand and the correct form that prayer should take. Jesus cut right through the argument, He did not go into a long discussion over who was right or wrong, but went straight to the heart of prayer and of what God wants from us. He wants us to speak to Him in spirit and in truth, to tell Him honestly of what is on our heart. To share our troubles, joys, doubts and questions. God is not interested in the form that your prayers take. I have worked in many countries and seen Christians pray in many different ways. Some pray silently, some pray aloud, some pray aloud in large groups while others form small groups and pray one at a time. Some pray in the morning while others pray late at night, some kneel, some stand, many use a combination of ways, but God is more

interested in what you say rather than how you say it. An open truthful communication said in the way you would say it is true prayer. God just longs to hear from you. So if you find it difficult to pray, the first thing to do is relax, be yourself, for you are the one who God has saved. Talk to Him in your own way, your own style, do not feel intimidated or pressurised into imitating others, just be yourself. He did not save you for you to act like someone else, He saved you to be you for you are the person He wants hear.

There are guidelines in the Bible, but the way you pray is very much left to you. I personally like to pray in the morning, but I also find it easy to pray when I am driving alone, or in the bath where there should be no chance of being disturbed. I like to pray while out for a walk or on my bicycle, anywhere where I can be alone. My way of praying is my own way. Sometimes it is a list of requests, sometimes questions on my mind. It may be just talking, a bit like Adam and Eve in the garden. I just pray from the heart. I do not try to dress it up in any special spiritual language; I say it as I always speak. When I sing to God it is on my own. I like to sing as I drive along- it's very loud, very poor quality, but it is from the heart. Some may not get on with my way of praying, that's OK, each person is an individual and must express their heart to God in their own way. You should feel free to come before God, don't allow yourself to feel forced into a mould but speak to your Father as His son in your own way.

Before I finish this chapter on speaking to God, there is one thing that we should note; God is our Father, but He is also God- the creator, King, ruler and Almighty. As such, He deserves respect. Just as if my children were rude or disrespectful to me, there would be displeasure and discipline, so also when you come to God there must always be respect. Speak the truth with respect for the one you are talking to. Do not lie, for what is the point of lying, God knows anyway, and do not pray to impress others. Remember the worshippers God seeks are those who will worship in spirit and truth. Remember the lesson of John 4v23-24.

5 - Relationship in action - listening

"I tell you the truth, no-one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again..."
John 3v3

"I tell you the truth, no-one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit."
John 3v5

When we accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour we are spiritually born again. We enter into the kingdom of God, and, whether we like it or not, we become children whose father is God himself.

Like children we have to grow up and we have to learn many things. One of the hardest is to listen to what the Father says and do what we are told. In many ways these are parallels with a normal baby's growth, and if we look at spiritual growth in the same way it may help us to see where we are going.

As my own children have been born I have noticed that they are not too sure of the noises around them. As they first hear their father's voice they are not sure what the noise is, let alone if it has any meaning. A call of a newborn baby's name gets little or no response; certainly the baby does not sit up and answer. Instead everything is done for the child. He is fed and cleaned and looked after by the other members of the family.

After a time however, the baby starts to recognise the voice of its father. It still may not understand what is said, but it understands from whom the voice is coming. Later the child learns to recognise its name, he learns to respond to simple words, "yes", and hopefully "no", and as he grows, he slowly learns to respond to more complex instructions. It is a simple everyday picture, but one we should look at in the light of listening to God.

When we first become a Christian, we know something has happened, it can be difficult to explain in words, but something has changed. Like a baby we enter into a new world, a world we do not know a lot about. We know God is our Father, we know what Jesus did on the cross and yet to hear God speak can seem very complicated.

At first it may not matter, like the new baby in the home where everything is done for

it, we too are looked after by our brothers and sisters in the church. They guide us in our new life, and that is good and proper, but things cannot stay that way. As time goes on the child grows, if it does not, the parents suspect ill health and they start to look for a problem. In Christ the healthy child should grow up and develop, not relying on others to give him his spiritual food. He has to learn to feed himself, to read the Bible, to study, to pray, and also to get his own instruction from God. The young Christian must learn to hear from Him.

"He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says..."
Revelation 2v29

In John 16v12-15 Jesus talked about the Holy Spirit speaking to us and guiding us. Jesus calls Him the Counsellor, someone who will lead and guide us, who will pass on instruction and teach us in the way we should live our lives.

So how does God speak to us?

First, we must remember that we are all unique and God can speak in different ways, but the Spirit wants to speak to your spirit, to your heart. It is not a rude interruption but a gentle knocking, and then the choice is up to you as to whether you listen. First it may be a simple instruction, "no, don't do that", maybe God guiding you not to sin, to not say or do something. You start to feel a gentle "yes, do that," maybe God is asking you to do something, to give something, to help someone. It is simple at first, so simple that many Christians don't realise who it is that is speaking to them. As we listen, our spiritual ears develop and we hear God more clearly. The instructions may be more complicated and more obscure, guidance for the future or help in a situation that we are in. As we grow the Holy Spirit wants to speak to us, not just when we pray but at all times. We have to learn to become sensitive in our heart to God speaking and ready to listen at any time. We must become God conscious.

How do we know God has spoken and we are not just interpreting our own desires or understanding of a situation? It is important to be sure and there is a simple test. God

will always agree with what the Bible says. His word, the Bible, does not change, neither is it adapted for new situations and it does not develop sudden compromises because you do not like a particular part or, it is not convenient to your lifestyle. The Bible is a written safeguard. If what you think God is saying disagrees with the Bible, then you are not hearing God.

Not only is the Bible a great safeguard, it is also a great aid in hearing God speak. One of the hardest lessons I had to learn was to memorise parts of the Bible, not just the nice promises and encouragements, but the warnings and rebukes. Before I learnt these scriptures I could not see the benefit, but later it was almost like having little cassettes that the Holy Spirit could play in my heart. As I would go to do something, a little verse would suddenly be playing in my heart. A rebuke, a warning, an encouragement. It was so much easier for the Lord to speak to me. If you are having trouble hearing from God, try memorising a few verses. As I found out, it can have a great effect on your spiritual life, not just on your memory. Hearing what God has to say is a great privilege for God's children, and is what makes a relationship with God complete, but like any relationship, our relationship with God is delicate and can be upset.

When sin is in our lives it disrupts our relationship with God. It is hard for us to speak to Him, and we block what He has to say to us because we do not want to hear it. This is why we should be quick to confess our sin to God and keep our line of communication open. The Christian life is often hard, but because of the relationship with God it is worth it. Without that relationship, Christianity becomes no more than a set of dead rules, a dry religion, a hard pointless struggle.

If you are not hearing from God, ask yourself why. Are you listening? Is there sin? Whatever the problem, it can be overcome, for the Father wants to speak, He wants to speak to you and He will help you to hear Him if only we ask and seek Him.

"You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart." Jeremiah 29v13

6 - The Word of God

"Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful."

Joshua 1v8

Many years ago I was fixing a motorbike, it had a broken part which I replaced at great cost. I carefully put the bike back together and tried to start it. It wouldn't go so I got a friend to push me. It made a slight knocking noise but still it would not start. In frustration I took it to a mechanic who charged me a lot of money to fix the bike. The problem was one small part that I had set at the wrong angle. I assumed it would be set the same as another bike, I was wrong and it cost me dearly.

Well, I learnt something from that experience. Check what the manual says before assuming anything. It works for bikes and cars and it also works for Christians. Christians often have a bad habit of assuming they know the answer to a problem without checking in the book. That book of course is the Bible, the ultimate guide for running your life.

It is a guide that does not change, and is not affected by emotion. It is a permanent, unchanging workshop manual on how to live. It guides us not only in our spiritual life, but also in our day to day living, covering everything from birth to death, and in fact every subject of any importance that we may come across.

It does not always tell us to do things the way we might think best, but then, as God says,

""For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the Lord. "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.""

Isaiah 55v8-9

God's ways are so much deeper than ours; they are based on love, true righteousness and justice. He does not ignore wrongdoing but addresses it directly for the sin that it is.

Some say the Bible is very complicated. It is true that some parts can at first be hard to understand, and may even seem disagreeable. However as we spend time with the author, the Father himself, through the Holy Spirit we can understand more of what the Bible says, also, as we change our lives to live as God says, we understand more and more why He said it.

"Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is - his good, pleasing and perfect will."

Romans 12v2

How do we approach the Bible?

The Bible is a long book and is certainly not a book that can be read in five minutes. I think the best way to look at it is as a love letter from a Father to his children. If you are not part of the family of God the Bible can seem dry and irrelevant, you are not part of it. Many people find the Bible to be boring until they become a Christian. Once they are born again it is no longer something very long and disconnected, it becomes a letter to them personally. It talks about their new family and how other members of the family lived. It shows them their strengths and their weaknesses, and from them, gives them examples of how they should live. It shows how the Father loves and cares for them and the behaviour He expects from them. It is a guide as to decisions they must make, at work, at home, with family and friends. It is a letter that has been given to them by a Father who cares.

It is a letter of great depth, so deep that no matter how many times we read it, we find more under the surface. It is something to go back to time and time again for fresh knowledge, inspiration, encouragement, and love. It is a most valuable part of the Christians life, a love letter from heaven.

It is strange how a man (who normally never writes a letter), on falling in love with a woman, can write so many letters that the postal system struggles to deliver the extra weight as he writes every thought that comes into his mind during the day. When she

receives the letter she does not read it once and throw it away, it is read over and over and carefully stored away so that even in the future she can go back to it again, looking ever deeper into the heart of the writer.

The Bible should be like that for us. Not some chore that must be read, but something we want to read. Do we love God? Do we want to hear what He has to say to us? How would you feel if you had written a great letter to someone you loved, only for them to glance at it and throw it aside. Yet many of us do this to God.

Like prayer, reading the Bible is different for each person. Some people like to use study notes, some read a little of the Old Testament and a little of the New. Others read a Psalm a day. There are no hard and fast rules of how much you should read and when. I personally find it best to read in the morning in bed. Once I get up I find I am too distracted by family and work. Others seem to prefer the evening when all the work is done. With one job I had, I started work very early, and would read in my lunch break. The time does not matter. What is important is that you read the Bible.

As you read, think about what the passage is saying, are there any lessons for your own life, is there something new that you did not know about God before? Is there a promise that God has made or a command He has given? Just ask God to guide and teach you as you read. If it is a part that you do not understand, then do not worry. Remember, as you grow and mature as a Christian, your understanding develops and next time you read the same passage you will understand more. If it seems important, make a note of it and ask an older Christian, it is nothing to be embarrassed about. Only God knows it all!

We should look on the Bible as spiritual food, and as such should make sure we have a balanced diet. When you become a Christian it is good to read the easy parts first, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. It's good to read the New Testament and Psalms. However, later it is good to read through the whole Bible and to have a knowledge of what the whole book says. You are unlikely to remember it all, but it is good to read all of what God has to say. There is also a great sense of achievement when you finally finish.

Don't allow your reading to get stale, vary the way you study and maybe spend a few days studying one particular chapter or even a particular verse, but be careful! A verse is part of a larger chapter which is part of a larger book. Make sure you read a verse in the context of the chapter it is written in. Even as you read this book or any book, it is good to check that the verses quoted are taken in context and not twisted to suit the writer's need. Also remember that the Bible is the final authority. Whether you like what it says

or not, whether a writer agrees or not, the Bible is the truth, the final authority, and if anyone is teaching anything else they are wrong!

"But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned."

Galatians 1v8

7- Faith in God

*"Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for."
Hebrews 11v1-2*

Something that is central to the Christian life is faith, yet it seems to be one of the things we struggle with. So often people try to generate faith within themselves without looking at what faith is or where it comes from.

*"Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ."
Romans 10v17*

As a human relationship grows we learn to trust the other person. If you look at your closest friends they are probably close because they are the ones you trust the most. Faith in the Christian life is trust in God. It is something that grows as we spend more time with Him and as we see how He has worked in our life.

Let us go back to becoming a Christian, the beginning of faith. When we first came to Christ, the first step was to believe that God existed, and that Jesus, the Son of God, had died on the cross for our sin. Just to believe was not enough, we had to trust in that belief and act on it, we made it part of our lives, only then did it become the type of faith that God desires. This type of faith means doing something; acting on what God has said or done. And so we took a step of faith when we took Jesus Christ to be our Lord and Saviour. We trusted God as we took Jesus to be the only solution to the problem of sin. It was a step of faith as we said "I put all my hope and trust for eternal life in Jesus Christ alone." We believed in what He had done and trusted in it. We acted on it. That is the faith that God requires.

Now, as a Christian, faith does not end at that point, but in fact it is the beginning. Faith grows as we grow spiritually. As we read the Bible we see more promises that God has made, and more things that He asks us to do. As we get to know God better, our

trust in Him grows, our faith is getting stronger. It is something that develops along with our relationship with Him, just as the trust we have in a friend grows over time. As we read the Bible we can see there are hundreds of promises that God has made and things that God asks us to do. Some may be too much for us to do at the moment, but as our relationship grows and trust develops, so our faith should grow. Our trust in what God can do grows as we hear what God has done in other's lives, it grows as we see what He has done in our lives, it grows as we read our Bible, but more than anything it grows as we spend time with Him. For as we spend time with God, as we get to know Him better, then our trust and knowledge of Him becomes deeper. We learn that He will not let us down, that He will not ask us to do more than we can bear. We learn that He is always with us and that we will never be alone. We learn that whatever He asks us to do will eventually be for our benefit.

As we spend time with God our faith grows because we see that, unlike people, He will not lie; He is not a politician, willing to make promises that He does not keep, just to be popular. He always tells us the truth about Himself and about us, even if sometimes we do not like it, and it is because we know He is telling the truth that our trust and therefore our faith grows. As we read through the Bible we can see that from the very beginning God has always been truthful and reliable and so we learn that we too can trust in Him.

We must make sure our faith continues to grow and that we continue to accept the new challenges the Lord gives us. Over the years I have seen how the Lord has challenged me to bigger and bigger steps of faith. It is true that sometimes we fall. We stop looking at the Lord, and instead look at the problem. We suddenly stop trusting in God and start looking around for something else. It happens to us all. However, we should not give up. We should try again as the Lord leads.

I love the story of Jesus walking on the water in Matthew 14v22-33. It always seems that Peter is criticised for his lack of faith, but I admire Peter, at least he had a go, he trusted Jesus. It's true that he got wet, he did make a fool of himself, but he did something. None of the other disciples got wet, they sat very quietly in the back of the boat doing nothing. If we step out for God in faith maybe we will get wet, but at least we will have done something. The only people who never make a mistake are those who do nothing. It would be better to stand before God as a wet "Peter" having attempted something and failed, than to be dry having trusted the Lord for nothing.

So often we pray but do not believe, so often we refuse to act on a promise because we do not trust the one who made it. We ask God to help us and take control, but then continue to panic. Faith, true trust in God means that we can pray and be calm, safe in the knowledge that God is sorting out the problem no matter how bad the storm may look. As we look at Hebrews chapter 11, we see people who often never saw the answer to their prayers; the answers often came years after they died. They died trusting in God, having faith that He was able to carry out the promises He had made to them. As we grow as Christians, as our relationship with God gets deeper, let us take more steps of faith, for the Father loves us and wants us to trust Him. He wants us to put our whole life in His hands for He is more able to care for us, than we are ourselves, if only we would give Him the chance.

*"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me."
John 14v1*

8 - Letting others know

"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."

John 3v16

One of the things that characterises falling in love is the desire to tell others about your partner. It is something that just seems to happen, the desire to tell others about this person in your life is natural, the desire to tell about the things that they say and do. It is not something that has to be forced into mind and into the conversation; it is something that just seems to be there.

I remember reading a book that said how you could tell what was important in a person's life just by listening to what they talked about. How true this is. We find out about people's hobbies and interests, their loves and hates, and therefore, as a Christian, others should find something out about us. Our very conversation should show that we are a Christian. Talking about the Lord and what He is doing in our lives should come naturally. It should not be a forced thing, but something that flows from our relationship with the Lord. Indeed it is important that it does flow from our relationship with the Lord, because when it does it is natural and people see us for who we really are. When we force things and pretend to be more spiritual than we really are, despite what we may think, people know!

I remember at work, often someone would exaggerate what they had done at the weekend. They may have thought they were getting away with it and that we all believed them, but of course as soon as they turned their back, everyone laughed. It was so forced and they were so intent on trying to make us believe that we knew it was a lie. In our Christian life it is important to tell others about Christ, but there is no need to exaggerate. We must be what we say.

Over the years I have travelled on many ships and ferries. Not all the journeys have been smooth and many people have been sick. The sickness seems to be caused by a confusion in the brain. The eye says everything is stable while the sense of balance says it is moving. The difference between the two causes confusion and sickness.

The same is true in the Christians life. If our words and actions do not match, then

people will not be drawn to Christ. We, by our actions, will make them sick and push them away. Jesus said "let your "Yes" be "Yes," and your "No," "No."" Matthew 5v37. It would be good to make sure that this holds true in our speech, for if we do not tell the truth all the time, how will people be able to trust anything that we say. Our ability to share what God has done for us is removed.

Why share about God with others?

In Mark 12v28-31 we see that Jesus said that the most important thing is to love the Lord with our whole life, to become a living sacrifice. The second is to love your neighbour as yourself; to want the same good things to happen in his life as you want and desire to happen in your life. Like someone who has just fallen in love, our desire should be for others to experience our joy. However, unlike a human relationship, in Christ they too can know God and experience Him for themselves and it is God's desire that they do so. For Jesus died that all men could come to Him, and in sharing what Jesus has done in our lives with others, we are trying to bring the lost sheep home to the Shepherd, for just as God loves us, so He also loves them. The only difference is that we have found our way to God, but they are still lost.

What do we share with others?

Many people feel unable to share the gospel, they find it difficult to discuss a point from the Bible or maybe as a young Christian they know very little of the Bible, yet still they can spread the good news of Jesus Christ.

One of the most powerful things you can share is your testimony, your life, and what God has done for you. You do not need to know huge areas of the Bible, but just share how God has changed your life. It is simple but also one of the most powerful ways of sharing the gospel. People will argue with the Bible, they will try and twist what it says, however, it is very difficult to argue when someone openly and honestly shares what God has done in their lives, just tell it as it is. Remember to tell of the centre of your

Christian life, your relationship with God Himself. This is the most important part of your life. Not how you lived a terrible past, but how you now know God. That is what we need to share so that through Christ they may know God as well.

When should we share the gospel?

Always be ready to share the gospel, whenever you meet someone, be ready for an opening in the conversation. It is not necessary to share the whole gospel, sometimes just a little word in the conversation. It is like sowing seeds, we may not know what the result will be, if the plant will grow or not, but our job is to sow seeds that the Holy Spirit can water.

Always be truthful, and if you are asked a question that you do not know the answer to, offer to find out. There is no need to panic, show them you are human, that you do not know it all. Far from putting the person off, it can often be an encouragement because that person sees weaknesses in you that they may see in themselves, they can associate better that it is not by some great spiritual knowledge that you were saved but by an act of grace. A work done by God not earned or bought by man.

Don't be afraid or discouraged when people laugh or mock. It does not take anything away from the truth and in time as they see you stand firm in what you believe, in spite of the way not being easy, then your life, even more than your words will speak to them. Just continue to live the truth before them. Pray for them, and remember that God loves them, and if it were not for what God has done in your life, you would be just like them.

*"...I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message,"
John 17v20*

Always remember that you are these people's hope of hearing the truth about Jesus Christ. We are God's mouthpiece in the world today, and if we do not tell them the truth, then there are plenty of others who are willing to sell them a lie. They may not all receive Him, but for those who do it will be worth the effort. Remember in your relationship with the Lord, that our aim is to bring joy to his heart, and what could make a father

happier than for a lost son to return home, just as we once did.

"He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God - children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God."

John 1v11-13

Finally, remember that God is a God of love; a God who desires to have a relationship with all mankind, it is not his will that any should perish and as such his heart rejoices as each soul comes to Him. That alone should be a good enough reason for us to reach out to others, to bring joy to the heart of the Father we love.

9 - The Lordship of Christ

"Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Saviour. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything."

Ephesians 5v22-24

Adam's mistake all those years ago in the garden of Eden was to forget who was Lord. He was in a privileged position, he was over all creation, but he was under God. It was his rebellion to the Lord that was his downfall, and we as Christians also must be careful not to make the same mistake. So often as Christians we go to God with an "I want, help me, fix this," attitude. It almost seems as if we are the Lord, and God is there just to serve our needs. Let us remember that He saved us. He is God, He is Almighty, and although He has given us the rights of a son, for us, His children, there is work to be done.

"That if you confess with your mouth , "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved"

Romans 10v9

We like to think of Jesus as our Saviour, to think of what He has done for us, and indeed we do have a lot to be thankful for, but we should also remember that this same Jesus is our Lord. The same Father who wants to walk with us, to share Himself with us, who wants us to know Him, is also the Lord and creator of all and we should always bear this in mind. As I have said earlier, although He wants us to know Him, we must still speak to God with the respect He deserves.

I had a similar situation with a job. I was working for a friend, we knew each other well, but he was still my boss, and so no matter how close we were as friends, when there was work to be done, I had to do as I was told. We may have discussed together how a job was to be done, but when he made the decision, that was final and my job was to obey and get on with the work. So in Christ we must be ready to do as we are told, to listen to what God says and get on with it. It does not mean that we are earning our

salvation or trying to earn a reward, but that we are showing obedience to the one who saved us. By our very actions we are showing that He is Lord.

"Therefore, I urge you brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God - which is your act of spiritual worship."

Romans 12v1

So often we think of worship as prayer, as something that is said to God, but worship is recognising God for who He is, and although words are great, without actions our worship is hollow. True worship produces change in our lives, it should have some physical fruit, changes made in the way we live that show we serve God. Changes made, not always because we like the change, but because we want to show God that He is the most important thing in our lives and we will do anything to bring glory to Him.

As I have travelled to many countries for the Lord, people often ask if I enjoy the travel, if I like the places I visit. Well yes, I do enjoy some parts, but I also miss my family, and many times would be much happier at home. This is the job that the Lord has given me, and there are sacrifices to be made. A sacrifice is something that gives itself up completely for the benefit of someone else. We are asked to be living sacrifices', constantly giving our whole life over to God to do His will. We do not have to fear, for like a wife submitting to her husband, it should be done in the knowledge that the husband loves and cares for her and would always want the best for her. So as we, God's children, submit to God, we do it in the knowledge that whatever He asks of us, He does it with a full understanding of who we are. He asks us to serve Him as sons; sons that He loves and that love Him.

How God asks us to serve Him varies from person to person. Just as in a business there are many people with different jobs, so in the kingdom of God there are a whole variety of things to be done. For some He may ask that they sell all they have and move to some remote place to be missionaries; for others He may say to be still, to work in a secular job and participate in their local church. For missions do not start in the next country, but with the next person that you meet. God also asks for other acts of service. He asks us to live our lives in particular ways according to the Bible. The way we live our life is both an act of worship to God as well as a testimony to those around that God is

first in our lives. Often there are things we cannot join in with because it would not bring glory to God in our lives, things that the people of this world think nothing of doing. We may think we miss out, we may think we are making a sacrifice. However, compared to what God has for us these things are nothing.

"Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven"
Matthew 6v10

So often we have said the Lord's Prayer; that we may serve Him in doing His will on this earth. Let us make it more than mere words, let us offer our lives as a living sacrifice to the one we know and love.

10 - Church

*".....I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it."
Matthew 16v18*

If God is our Father, then we as Christians belong to a very big family, the family of believers, the church. The church worldwide, consists of all those who have accepted Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour. However, for this chapter we will look at the local church.

If we go back to the Garden of Eden, God said

*".....It is not good for the man to be alone....."
Genesis 2v18*

And so God created Eve as a partner and helper for Adam. As a Christian, it is also not good to be alone, not that we all need to rush out and get married. However, we do need helpers and encouragers to aid us in our Christian life. The church should be a bit like a local family home, a place to feel at home in, with your new family.

It is important that we meet together as believers, not just for help and encouragement, but also for teaching and discipline. For, although sometimes we may fall and go the wrong way, at least there are others around to pick us up and guide us back to the right path. There is a sense of security in the church.

The first thing to do is find the right church.

So what should we look for?

The most important thing is that the teaching is sound and Bible based. We may be affected by politics and social issues, but in the church what the Bible says must be first, and all teaching must be based on the Bible. If the Bible is not the sole source of teaching

then leave and find somewhere else. Other things to look for are the lives of other believers; Are they trying to go forward with God? Not that they are perfect, but they are at least trying to please God. Does the church try to bring new people into the kingdom of God? Does it look outside itself and into the world around and beyond? These are all important things to look for.

Now you will find that no church is perfect. I have visited many churches over the years and I have not found a perfect one yet. The problem seems to be that everyone else in the church is just like me, fallible. So do not expect everything to be perfect. Do however get involved. Look for things you can do in the church, not straight at the platform ministries, but look to the smaller things first. Remember that we are called to be servants and if we cannot serve God in the little things then we certainly cannot be trusted with more public duties. Remember that in all things, we are doing it for the glory of God out of worship of Him, not to bring glory to ourselves.

The next thing is to be loyal to your local church. As I have said, it will not be perfect, that includes the pastor who is only human as well. Do not use a few minor things as an instant excuse to leave and join another group. If there are problems, then be open and honest with the leaders, but also pray. Maybe there is something that you can do to help the situation. You may find that the hymns, choruses, way of praying are not quite to your taste. However, we must remember that if it was totally to our liking, others would not be happy, so enjoy the bits you like and, in love bear with the bits you do not like. If you find it very difficult, speak to a leader and explain the problem. Maybe the fault is with you, or maybe you will point out something that has been overlooked. Don't just sit there complaining and doing nothing, that helps no one.

Remember also, that like in any household, there are bills to be paid and this is also true in Gods family. Give not only of your time but also of your money. Money is given to the church so that the work of God can be continued, whatever you give, you can be sure that God will bless you, for it is impossible to out give God.

What if there is no fellowship near you?

It may be that you live in an area where there are no groups of Christians and so you

are alone. Even then, there are ways that you can still receive help and encouragement.

One way is to receive teaching over the radio. Large areas of the world can now listen to Christian broadcasting; it is a great source of encouragement and teaching, especially if you are on your own. Remember to write to the radio station with any comments or thanks, they also need help and encouragement.

A second way is to use correspondence courses. Many of these courses are free or at a subsidised price. They often have the advantage of a personal contact that you can write to or telephone.

A third source is national conferences where you travel for a weekend or even a week of ministry. These can be a good source of teaching, but also a chance to be with other believers.

Wherever you get your source of ministry from, remember to give. It may be that you cannot give to a local church because there is none, but you can still support the correspondence course or radio station or whatever other source you get your ministry from.

Finally of course, you can pray that you would find some other believers in your area, or maybe even lead someone to the Lord yourself. You can then meet together just to pray and share with each other what God is doing in your life.

Whatever happens, seek to be with other believers, it is good to meet together, to share both the good things as well as the bad. It is good to be able to be in a family, and not to be alone.

11 - Good times and bad times

"Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything."

James 1v2-4

Many times Christians feel they are doing something wrong, because life does not seem to be the bed of roses they expected. They feel that because they are not blessed in the way they thought they would be, and are not feeling good every day, that somehow they have got it wrong. The first thing to remember is that as a Christian we are not immune to the problems of this world. Bills come through our letterbox just like anyone else's. There are trials and disasters just as in anyone else's life, for we still live in this world. The advantage that we have is that as a Christian we can go to God to ask for help, strength, and encouragement as we need it. This should be our testimony before the unbelievers around us; that no matter what happens we do not need to panic, we just trust the Lord.

There are other types of trials and problems that are unique to the Christian life, problems that unbelievers do not have. The first of these is "sin".

Before I knew God I had no problem with sin, I just did it. It was my choice, everyone else was doing it, so what did it matter. Then I became a Christian, I met with God, and I found that He hated sin, so I have done my best to give it up for Him. Of course it is not always easy. Some sin we enjoy and do not want to give up. Other sin is so deeply embedded into our life we feel we do not have the strength to give it up. Some sin we feel will make us lose out if we give it up. If we don't declare all our earnings for tax we will be better off. If we declare to our employer that our expenses or overtime was more than it really was, then we will have more money, but this is sin, it should not be part of our lives.

However it looks as if we will be worse off if we give these things up, and anyway, everyone is doing it. Why should we be different? Well, the fact is that we are different. Our Father and family is different to theirs, and the standards of our family are much higher.

"Jesus said to them, "If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and now am here. I have not come on my own; but he sent me. Why is my language not clear to you? Because you are unable to hear what I say. You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desire. 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.""

John 8v42-44

Those who have not come to the Father through Jesus Christ have a different Father, the devil, and eternally will suffer the same punishment in Hell as he will. We however belong to God, that is what Jesus has done for us, and because of this a different standard in our life is required.

This does not make it any easier at times, but God will give us the strength to overcome if we want to overcome. It is a question of love. Do we love the Lord or sin? Who do we want to live our life for, the Father or the devil? It is a choice that we constantly have to make. Surely it is worth it, the benefits of the love affair with God far outweigh the things that we lose. Just as when we meet a husband or wife our life changes, we are not free to do whatever we want, instead we must consider the other person, we must give up things because this new love of our life needs time. We do not begrudge it, we are happy to do it because we want to be with this new love. It is almost as if everything else does not matter anymore. If you are struggling, get closer to God. That way, the love you have for Him will help to push these other problems out of the way. For God does not want to make our lives empty. He says that He wants to give us a full abundant life, and, if we will do the things He asks, we will receive more blessings and a better life than we could ever imagine. For God knows us better than we know ourselves, He knows what will really satisfy us for He created us. If we will only trust Him and follow Him we will be blessed. It does not mean it will be easy, but the reward will be worth the effort.

Another problem that we face is persecution. It seems that no matter how bad a person you were, you are worse if you become a Christian. Maybe it is because our righteousness in Christ makes them feel guilty, maybe they are jealous of our new

Father, or maybe the fact that our lives have changed and they are stuck with the life they have. Whatever the reason, we seem to constantly come under persecution. It comes in many forms, physical, emotional, psychological, e.g. name calling, or just being left out. There are many ways, and I am not sure which is the worst, but even in this we can be thankful, for it means that the changes in our life show, and that the things that God has done on the inside are starting to show on the outside, that we are becoming more Christ like and learning to understand the suffering and persecutions that He went through. Jesus warned us that the way would not be easy, He told us that as they persecuted Him, so they will persecute us. John 15v20. It may not be easy, but it is encouraging that we are following in the steps of Jesus.

In all these trials, we have the Lord. We have a Father who is there to help us. A Father who will not allow things to happen to us that with His help, we cannot survive. Many of the trials help us to grow stronger in our trust of the Lord; He uses them to develop character in us. No matter what happens, He does not leave us alone in our trials. We have the knowledge that He is always with us and always will be. Over the years in my Christian life there have been many trials and hard times, but as I look back I see that those are the times when I grew as a Christian. It may not have been pleasant at the time, some of the things I would not like to go through again. However, looking back, I see what God has done and I praise Him, for through these trials I grew and came to know Him better.

Finally, we will look at the good times, for in the Christian life there are many blessings, many good times that the Lord provides. There is not a lot that needs to be said about good times except to remember to praise the one from whom they came. Do not feel guilty when the Lord blesses you, yes, it is true you do not deserve it, you cannot earn God's blessing, it is a gift from a Father who loves you.

Always remember to put God first, never let the blessings that God gives become more important than God. Our love should be for the giver not the gift.

12 - Going on

"I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith, so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ."

Philemon 1v6

In England, when a couple get married they make a promise. A promise to be together whether things get better or worse, whether they become poor or millionaires, whatever the future holds they promise to stay together. The couple are so much in love as they make this promise that they believe nothing on earth could tear them apart or destroy the love they have for each other. How sad it is that so often love grows cold and the promise is never kept.

As Christians, we must make sure that our love for God does not grow cold, that our love affair with God does not just deteriorate into a dead religious duty that neither satisfies us or our God. It is important that we regularly look at our lives to see how the relationship is developing.

"A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without recognising the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgement on himself."

1 Corinthians 11v28-29

For a moment I want you to think about baptism and communion. They are things that people do, and maybe you have taken part in these things, but I want to look at them from a slightly different perspective.

When a couple fall in love, they get married; it is a public witness to say that they have made their choice of partner for life. Usually the woman takes on the family name of the man, they are declaring that they are now one and that they share everything, that they have left their old families to become one. So we can also look at baptism as a next step for the Christian. It can be looked on as the Christians public declaration that he has left his old worldly family, of which Satan was the head, and now publicly declares

that he is a child of God. In Baptism we declare to the whole world that we are now His and our desire is to serve Him forever. We declare that no matter what life has in store for us we will serve and love God, and that He is now the centre of our life. It is a great witness of the changes that He has made in our life, and of our desire to serve Him in the future.

Then of course life goes on, the love can grow cold. However, God has given us communion, 1 Corinthians 11v23-26. It is a cup of remembrance, like a wedding anniversary it's a time when we can think back to our first love. A time to see how far our relationship with the Lord has come; a time to examine our lives and make sure that we are still close to Him and make any changes that are necessary.

Communion is a time for you and the Lord. It is a constant declaration that we continue to love Him and hold Him in first place. An ongoing proclamation that we want to continue to serve Him with our whole life. It is a special time; a time to quietly reflect on what He has done for you and what you have done for Him. These two things, baptism and communion, are very special times. Like marriage, they are not to be taken lightly, but should be given the respect that a lifelong commitment deserves.

In your personal life I hope you will continue to share what God has done for you. I started this chapter with a verse from the book of Philemon. It is a verse that I have found to be so true over the years; that as I have shared with others what God has done for me, I have been blessed by the greater realisation of what He has done for me in Christ. As I share my testimony I realise more and more, just how sinful I was and yet how much God loved me in sending His one and only Son to die in my place. As I look at my life today I see what God has done, how He has changed and blessed me and given me more than I ever deserve. As I look back I see that the more I have tried to give my life to Him, the more He has given to me for it is impossible to out give God.

Seek to serve Him with all that you are, become the living sacrifice and give your life out of thanks for what Jesus did for you. I can assure you that no matter what God calls you to do; whether it is travelling to the other side of the world, or just serving Him where you are, whatever He calls you to do, if you obey, you will be blessed. For God does not want a dull life for us, but He wants to give us life to the full.

".....I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full."

John 10v10

God knows you better than you know yourself, He knows the things that will satisfy you better than you do yourself, and if you will give your life to Him He will give you a life that is more satisfying than you could ever imagine. It may be hard, it may seem impossible at times, but God will see you through, and you will know life to the full.

"But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well."

Matthew 6v33

If you do not know God, if you have never accepted Jesus Christ as your Lord and Saviour, then God is calling you. He is waiting for you, He has made all the preparations necessary for you to come to Him, it is just up to you to call out to Him. I am not going to give you a specific prayer to say, it is up to you to speak to Him. Tell Him of your desire to know Him as your Father. Tell Him that you want to turn from your life of sin to a life of service. Tell Him how your only hope is in Jesus Christ, that He is the one that you now want to make Lord of your life. Call out to Him and He will answer.

"You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart."

Jeremiah 29v13

My hope is that you will know Him, serve Him, and walk with Him, and bring glory to Him through your life.