

God's Facebook — Group Study Material and Individual Readings for Titahi Bay Community Church, May-August, 2009

1. God's Facebook: Online

Christian faith is all about God relating to people who want to relate back. It is not about "making a decision" so we can stay out of hell. It is about making a lot of decisions, day by day and week by week through the years, so we can get onto the wavelength of someone who says, "Listen, I'm your Father," and as we do so, letting him and us get to know each other.

What sort of decisions? All sorts of decisions. How to regard God, how to relate to other people, how to regard oneself. Decisions about money, and sex, and family and work and how to keep a perspective on things. You name it: we have decisions to make about it.

Everyone has such decisions, not just Christians. Some people get so steamed up about them they lose all balance and peace of mind. That's why it's good to get all the help we can find.

The Bible is a ready-made source of help. It's not a rulebook. It's a record of God's dealings with his people through the years. It's more like a casebook — stories of all sorts of people and situations, with examples sidling off every page. Along with the examples there is a wealth of advice, and there are some commands as well. And it's not only a casebook. It's also a sort of facebook: a place where God reveals himself and says, "This is what I'm on about. Come and learn how we can do it together. And when you know my patterns, a lot of those decisions will become less stressful, and some of them will be unnecessary, because they'll already be made."

It's a good deal we're offered, really. But it is only a good deal if we actually *read* the book. Parking it on the shelf, even by our bed, and admiring it from afar, is not a substitute for actual reading. Osmosis is a great device of God's for other circumstances, but it won't work here. Come on in to the book itself, and see what we can find.

Read 2 Timothy 2:14-19 and 2 Timothy 3:14-17

Specific Questions

1. What is one thing we are warned against?
2. Why?
3. What sort of person is approved?
4. What sort of example is given here of "godless chatter"?
5. What are we to continue in?
6. Why?
7. What are the Scriptures able to make us?
8. How is Scripture described?

9. What is Scripture useful for?
10. What is the ultimate aim of it all?

Discussion Questions

1. “A workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.” What does this mean, and how does it apply to you?
2. What sorts of godless chatter do you think you (personally) or we (people in the church, generally) are most susceptible to? How can we avoid it?
3. If all Scripture is God-breathed, what does that mean (a) about it and (b) about how we should regard it?
4. Point to note: when Paul wrote this letter around 67AD, (the last letter he wrote), three of the gospels were just being written, the fourth was yet to come and none of his own letters had yet been declared to be “Scripture”. What does this suggest to us about the Old Testament? What might it then imply about the New Testament?

Individual Readings for the Week

1. 2 Timothy 2:14-26

Have you ever received a letter of encouragement? This letter is one that Timothy got from Paul. The areas in which Paul encouraged Timothy are important areas for disciples of Jesus Christ today also, learning to be faithful even when it may be a special challenge. Two pictures are used in today’s Bible passage to remind us that our behaviour is important as Christians. Paul encouraged Timothy to behave like someone proud of his work (verse 15); and to think of himself as being like a special dish used for important occasions (verses 20-21). Notice also the sorts of behaviour which disciples must work hard to avoid (verses 16, 22-24), and which they must strive to achieve (verses 22-24). The secret to successful discipleship is that as you work hard at the positive behaviour, you will find yourself avoiding the inappropriate behaviour!

Prayer: Holy Spirit, please coach me as I strive to behave as a disciple approved by God.

Question: Is there a good example or a command for me to follow or obey?

2. 2 Timothy 3:1-17

What a long list of behaviours — which we recognise so often in other people! No wonder Paul urges Timothy to “keep away from such people” (verse 5). Even people within God’s church may show some of these characteristics (verse 5). But before

you criticise others, ask yourself what they may see in you. Invite God to work with you in dealing decisively with your habits.

A challenge for Timothy was to “keep on keeping on” as a growing disciple. It’s a challenge for us, too. Three things can encourage us: (1) observe how mature Christians cope with the pressures of discipleship (verses 10-11); (2) continue to build on what we already know (verses 14-15); and (3) recognise the Bible (‘the Scripture’) as our God-inspired key resource book (verses 16-17). Put these three things together, and you have a powerful weapon to counter any wanting to give up!

Prayer idea: Think of examples of each of these things in your life. Thank God for them.

Question: Is there any example of sin or a warning for me in this reading?

3. Matthew 28:16-20

The leaders had used bribery and lies to deny the fact of Jesus’ resurrection, but his disciples met him and responded with worship (verse 17) – even though they were not all equally sure. Note (verses 18-20) what Jesus offered his disciples, including those who had their doubts: 1. His authority; 2. A challenge (“Go...and make disciples”); 3. A promise (“I will be with you always...”). He offers disciples today the same three things for partnership with God. Some people will have some experiences with Jesus, and others will have different experiences. Some will wonder if they are in the game at all. But we can all read his promises and be assured of his character. He has given us his word so that we will not be limited by the things that we are happening to feel right now.

Prayer: Give thanks that the goodness of God depends on him and not on us, and for his word that ensures we have an objective understanding.

Question: Is there any promise here for me to believe or to give me hope?

4. Hebrews 11:22-40

Faith means commitment. Faith is our commitment to God, our decision to allow him to be present with us, to guide us, to support us, to challenge us and to rule over us in every aspect of our lives. The people we are reading of today were all people of faith and commitment: Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets were all people who triumphed. Those who were tortured and flogged (verse 35ff) were people who did not. But they were all people of faith. And ... look at verse 40. “Only together with us” will they be complete. Does that inspire you and humble you at the same time, and encourage your faith? Faith is obedience. We are called to be doers, not just hearers of the word of God. But if we don’t hear it, we can’t do it either. Faith and good works

are two halves of a whole: if we are to live for God, we have to know what he wants us to do, and put ourselves where we can hear his word.

Thought: God's commitment to us demands a commitment from us in return.

Question: Can I find my own experience reflected anywhere in these verses?

5. John 17:20-26

When Christians fight among themselves, others dismiss us as phoney. Sometimes disunity is in the home: husbands and wives quarrelling, children neglected, brothers fighting or sisters and aunties not speaking. Sometimes the disunity is in the local church: some members against others, some wanting power, others gossiping, until one group walks out. Sometimes the disunity is between churches or denominations. It is all Satan's doing, because he knows the world will believe in Jesus if they see his people in the same unity he has with his Father. But we cannot blame Satan for things we are responsible for ourselves. Jesus prays for us, because he knows it won't be easy. Am I prepared to play my part in allowing his prayers to be answered?

Thought: Jesus prayed for me then, and he still prays for me now (Hebrews 7:25).

Question: Are there any Christians that you are at odds with? What can you do today to bring unity?

2. God's Facebook: Faith of Our Fathers

It is good for anyone to remember their roots. For Christians, our roots are firmly established in Jewish history, faith and culture, and paramount in Jewish religious understanding is the understanding that God is one, and he is involved with his people.

We can certainly relate to that. And when Jews talk about the actual people with whom God is involved, they name names. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph: the patriarchs, the tribal fathers, the forerunners of all those who would come after them. The stories are told and retold, and they have sustained the people through hundreds of years of exile, persecution and dispossession.

Abraham is the first — sometimes called the first Jew, although he obviously did not spring out of a vacuum. But he was called by God, sent by God and provided for by God, who promised him a legacy and gave him a task. All of that is familiar to Christians, and we walk in the tradition of Abraham. We have inherited a lot of his promise, and we are part of the fulfilment of it. So what can he teach us?

His story is long, and it covers a lot of time and a broad range of circumstances. Today, he would be the subject of a feature film or two, and indeed he probably has been. When we meet him first he is in transit, and when he dies he is the father of at least eight recorded children. A number of tribes are attributed to them, his legacy is assured, and God's promise to him is fulfilled, although his personal ways are far from perfect. It is true that that which applies to him is not necessarily applicable in detail to us, but it is also true that he shows us an example which is to the benefit of people throughout the years, including us. The lessons of Abraham shine through the centuries, even though nearly 40 such centuries have now passed. Patriarch to the Jews: signpost to the Christians.

Read Genesis 11:31-12:7, 15:6, Hebrews 11:9-12

Specific Questions

1. Where was Abraham when God called him?
2. What was he to do?
3. What was the promise?
4. Did he know where they were going?
5. Why did God call Abraham "righteous"?
6. What was it that prompted Abraham to go to the place he was called to?
7. Who was his guarantee of final establishment?
8. What was the measure of faith applied to Abraham's belief about a miraculous child?
9. How were Abraham's descendants to be numbered?

Discussion Questions

1. What is the most likely reason that God called Abraham, in 12:1? What is the most likely reason that Abraham followed him, in 12:4? What are the implications for any of us who might expect to follow any call of God?
2. What does it mean to be “righteous” (15:6)? How can we help ourselves toward being righteous? How can we help each other?
3. Notice Abraham, in Hebrews 11:8, is credited as having faith because he *did* something. So far from there being a tension between “faith” and “works”, Scripture constantly talks of them as being inseparably linked. What is there in your life that marks you as a person of faith? What do you see in the lives of others around you?
4. “He was looking forward...” (verse 10). Are you looking forward? To what? So what?

Individual Readings for the Week

1. Genesis 12:1-9

Abraham, the father of the Jewish nation, began his life in the city of Ur. He moved to Haran and then, called by God, moved out to Israel. He did not know where he was going but he trusted God to lead him. Sometimes we have to trust God as he leads us and we need to be prepared to do what he asks. Many people have come to know God because others were prepared to move out and share the Gospel with them. Read and study God's word, be available to share it when asked, and learn how to follow.

Question: Is there a good example or a command for me to follow or obey?

2. Genesis 24:1-21

Here is a wonderful love story, with enough fascinating aspects to intrigue anybody. Abraham's faithfulness to God's call was clear. Isaac needed a wife, but he must not marry a Canaanite woman and he must not go back to Haran. So Abraham's servant receives a daunting responsibility, by anyone's measure. He went on his way depending on God in prayer (verses 12-14), and God wonderfully answered his prayer, leading him to a lovely bride for Isaac. (Nor did he forget to thank God, see verse 27).

Question: Is there any example here for me to follow?

3. Genesis 25:1-25

These passages cover three generations. When Isaac buried Abraham he probably wondered if he could have a faith like his father, but God blessed him (verse 11). When he and Rebecca had no children and when Rebecca had a difficult pregnancy, they prayed. God told them that their twins, Esau and Jacob, would become the ancestors of two nations — Edom and Israel. They would often quarrel and Jacob would be stronger and the one blessed by God. They saw the start of this in their family life.

Question: Can I find my own experience reflected in these verses?

4. Genesis 39

Joseph is an honourable man, so honourable that he may be left with his boss's wife, so honourable that he refused to even think of acting improperly with her. We need, too, to put a distance between ourselves and the temptation that will certainly come to us.

Yet, even though Joseph was honourable, when it comes to believing him or his wife, Potiphar has to believe his wife. We may do everything right in this life, and it will not mean that all will go well with us. What it will mean is that God will not forget us.

Question: How good am I at avoiding temptation?

5. Genesis 45:1-8 and 50:20

With the tests complete, and the goodwill of his brothers demonstrated, Joseph introduces himself and extends forgiveness. More than that, he sees the provision of God in all that had happened, not only for him but for his father and family, and all the people of Israel. Because his gifts of interpreting dreams were made available to Egypt, all the Israelites were to benefit.

It's like that with the gifts God has given us. We may be spared all the drama of slavery, but God has given us gifts to use for those around us, not for our own entertainment.

Question: What is there that you are able to do for somebody else?

3. God's Facebook: From Slavery to the Kingdoms

Following all the vicissitudes of the Patriarchs as outlined in the Book of Genesis, and a lengthy period of comparative silence after the Hebrews' relocation to Egypt at the invitation of Prince Joseph, we meet them in Exodus in trouble. Enslaved and facing genocide under a king who "knew not Joseph", the people are in need of a deliverer. True to his promise, God prepares them one in the shape of Moses, whose early years are supremely tailored to fit him for the task ahead. Born a Hebrew and raised in the Egyptian palace, he confronts the Pharaoh (not willingly), is central to the Passover, leads the people out, receives the Ten Commandments and gets to within sight of the Promised Land before he dies. The people subsequently enter the land, allocate it to their tribal divisions, elect a series of judges to conduct their legal affairs and, according to the covenant, rely on God for their kingly authority and for protection in Foreign Affairs.

That is, they do for a time. Then, inevitably, they commence to look around them at the governmental structures of other people, and decide that what they really want is a king. Through the prophet, God warns them — "Kings are a way to conscription and taxes," he has them told. However, they are adamant, while God is not. "Give them a king if they insist," he tells the prophet, and Saul becomes the first King of Israel. In Bible terms, we're up to the end of the second book of Chronicles: in historical terms, roughly a thousand years after Abraham, half way between Abraham and Jesus, three thousand years ago.

Read Exodus 3:1-4:17

Specific Questions

1. What was Moses doing when he was called?
2. Where?
3. When did God call him?
4. Why is God acting at this time?
5. List the reasons Moses gives as to why he should not go.
6. What evidence is there that the snake that his staff turns into is real?
7. What is significant about verse 13 of chapter 4?
8. Why is God angry with Moses?
9. Moses is trained and Aaron is eloquent, but the real ace is neither of these. What is it?

Discussion Questions

1. Moses' background was one of special privilege, and it led him to special responsibility. What privileges have you received? What responsibilities might they lead you to? How might those responsibilities be expressed?
2. Why does God list the history in 3:6? If it were you standing there in Moses' place, what history might he list for you?
3. "I am who I am" (3:14). What does that mean?

4. Moses lists a number of objections, and the Lord answers them all. What is the real problem, and how does God meet that? Do you recognise the essence of it in your own conscience?

Individual Readings for the Week

1. Exodus 20:1-17

The Ten Commandments. Or, as Jesus made them later, the Two Commandments — love God, love your neighbour. Look at them closely: numbers 1 to 4 are all about God (who comes first), and numbers 5 to 10 are all about various takes on the neighbour. Not God *or* the neighbour, but both. Of these Ten Commandments, eight are in terms of what we shall not do, and two are about what we should do. Jesus' summary puts two points, both couched in terms of what we should do. Which approach looks more compelling?

Question: What can you do today to show love to (a) God and (b) some neighbour? Commit random acts of love and senseless beauty.

2. Joshua 1:1-9

Whenever we are at the beginning of a new task, it is good to get the basics in place. Here, as Joshua takes over from Moses, he listens to God, who says to him three times, "Be strong and courageous." With the courage, he has to have obedience, and the people demand that he shall stay listening to God. If these things are true, there is an excellent chance of success. But let us beware of thinking we are going to do marvellous things if we have stopped hearing what God is telling us.

Question: Am I careful to listen to what God may be telling me?

3. Judges 6:1-16

Here is the commander of the army, successful and honoured, making a public fool of himself. How do you think the people of Jericho felt when they saw the enemy army marching round their town blowing horns? How did the soldiers in Joshua's army feel? So why did Joshua do it?

He did it because God told him to, and he knew that God's ways were the only right ways. He knew when to be humble (verse 14 of chapter 5), and he knew that God's ways were better than his ways.

Questions: Do we know these things? How does our behaviour show it?

4. 1 Samuel 8:1-21

Samuel, old and likely tired, appoints his sons to roles for which they are not well suited. They fail, and the people demand a king. This is counter to the instructions the people have had from God, and counter therefore to what Samuel is supposed to be representing to them. So what does he do? He goes to God. And what he hears is not what he expects — in fact, it's what he knows to be wrong. And it's from God. So what does he do? He does what he is told. It's an excellent model.

Question: Am I in the habit of asking God what to do, and then of doing what I am told?

5. 1 Samuel 16:1-13

God rejects Saul as king, and he commands Samuel to get on with the anointing of David. He tells him what to do and where to go, and then he shows him whom to choose — and it's not the man that Samuel might have looked for, nor certainly the man that all the onlookers would have looked for. “The Lord looks at the heart,” he tells Samuel before first confirming David as his choice and then “coming upon him in power” (verse 13). And all of this involvement in a programme that God had originally asked them not to get into in the first place.

Thought: God wants to be involved in what his people do, even when it is not ideal.

Question: What do these verses teach about God?

4. God's Facebook: Years of Captivity

Well, the kings came. And after a long time, they went. The story of their various reigns is a generally sorry one, of overall descent into an increasing slide. They were to honour God and God was to see them right in their various affairs of state, but collectively they fail, and he leaves them to reap the whirlwind. Result: dispersal into all the countries of the world, slavery, ruin and class B living, or lower. And through it all, God's prophets are the call to conscience and the reminder of identity.

Why in the world should the Jews, dispossessed of a nation state, have survived as an entity? Because God had promised them one and, even when they had thoroughly dishonoured their end of the covenant, God kept his promise. Much of their collective identity came from the observance of their religious festivals and special occasions, all based on historic events in which God had been good to them, yet even so the identity was not the same as triumph. For generation after generation, the struggle was just to stay afloat, not to break any records. Enslaved here, dispossessed there, persecuted somewhere else, in all the nations of the Middle East and Europe, yet when Israel became available in 1948, there were still people ready to move up and occupy it. And through it all, the words of the prophets told them the mind of God — worship one God; consider the poor; remember your roots; do not sink to the practices of those who have oppressed you. God's promises are faithful. Do not cast him off. One day...

Read Psalm 137:1-9

Specific Questions

1. Where were the rivers?
2. Why did the people weep?
3. Why did the captors demand songs?
5. Who and what are they determined to remember at all costs?
6. Why?
7. How do the Edomites enter the picture?
8. What response do they elicit from the people?
9. How do they feel about Babylon?

Discussion Questions

1. These people are determined to look to the past. In what ways is a good view of the past helpful to the Christian's attitude to life?
2. We are not called to remember Jerusalem, but we are called to remember — what? Why? How do you find greatest help in remembering the things that are inspirational to Christians?
3. There is a certain view of enemies presented here, and it is a view entirely consistent with Jewish outlook. It is, however, at variance with Christian outlook. How? Why? In what ways is a wish for vengeance entirely alien to the Christian understanding of the world and of human nature?

4. How free are you of a wish to see your “enemies” pay for their shortcomings? Who are your enemies, anyway?

Individual Readings for the Week

1. Isaiah 6:1-13.

Israel still has a king when Isaiah receives his call to the task of prophecy, but his experience is illustrative of the prophet’s importance throughout Jewish history. First he has a vision of the Lord, and he receives a powerful understanding of his own sinfulness. After that, he sees also his people’s uncleanness. He receives personal cleansing, then he receives a mission, and after that the specific message he is to deliver. He seeks clarification of what he does not understand, and he is given a scale of operation.

Question: Is any of this applicable to the Christian messenger in our time; is any part of it specially applicable perhaps to me?

2. Daniel 1:1-14

When Daniel hits the news his people have been dispersed and he, with some of his friends and countrymen, has become a captive in a foreign country. This is a situation his people will recognise readily over the generations ahead. He is placed in a totally reorganised situation, with a new name, a foreign education, radically new responsibilities and a disorientation from the familiar that ought to have given him a nervous breakdown. But it doesn’t. He accepts that which is inevitable (or maybe of secondary importance), and he challenges, courteously, that which he simply cannot accept, calling on God to validate his position. Do not overlook the significance of the opening of verse 8.

Question: Is there a good example or a command for me to follow or to obey?

3. Micah 6:8

Micah’s prophecy takes place against the backdrop of the people’s dispossession because of their unfaithfulness. The Lord opens this chapter by levelling his charge against them: essentially, that they have forgotten their reasonable memory of what God has done for them, and neglected their reasonable response to it. So what, the question asks, would be reasonable — multiple sacrifices on a major scale? No, comes the classic reply, not a dramatic circus. Rather, just practise justice, mercy and the presence of God, humbly. It’s a good Christian message really, maybe 700 years early.

Question: Is there a warning for me to heed or an example or a command for me to follow in this reading?

4. Nahum 3:1-7

From Micah to Nahum, different prophet, 40 or 50 years later, but the same message. God hates exploitation and the abuse of the poor and he lifts his hands against it. Nahum, like Micah, is here to warn the people of their unrighteous ways and of the consequences of abusing the poor and the helpless. The message should fall on receptive ears in our time too, if not in the world at large, certainly in the church. A community's moral fibre can be gauged by its treatment of its most needy members — the others will look after themselves.

Question: Is there a warning in here for me to acknowledge?

5. Esther 4:1-17

Esther is an unusual, even unique, heroine in Jewish history. Unequivocally Jewish, yet the queen of a foreign and exploitative empire. Queen, moreover, at a time when her people are about to be — again — ruthlessly persecuted. And it seems to be her job to intercede for them.

She doesn't want to. Why not? Because it might cost her her life. She may, by law, be executed for approaching the king unsummonsed. So she appeals for advice and help to her uncle, and he is famously unsympathetic (verse 13). There is no "I'm all right, Jack" stance allowed here. In fact, you might have even been put there "for such a time as this." Swallow hard, commit yourself to God, and do your duty.

Question: Is there an example or a command in here for me to follow or obey?

5. God's Facebook: The Journey in the Gospels

The Gospels are the various stories of Jesus, told by those who were there. Matthew's was written around the middle of the first century, Mark's was some time similar, Luke's maybe 58 and John's came last, likely around AD 90. Although they cover, obviously, the same general ground, they also display many individualities, since each was written for a slightly different purpose. Although all four cover the crucifixion and the resurrection, and leave us in no doubt as to the centre of the story of Jesus, of the Bible and of faith, the number of specific events covered by all four is quite small and two of them omit Christmas entirely. The Gospels exist to tell us of Jesus, to show us what the Bible has been aiming at so far and to provide a basis for what will come next. If this is all about journeys, the gospels are the destination of the first half and the origin of the second — the journey's terminus, or Grand Central Station. They are the fulcrum of God's view of history.

And if the Gospels are the fulcrum, there is at least a case to be made for the temptation in the desert to be thought of as the pivot. This is Jesus taking on the heavyweight champion of the universe and winning in a first round knockout. All that follows flows on from here. Although one of the other gospel accounts says, ominously, that the devil left him "until an opportune time" (Luke 4:13) and that time was probably Calvary, we should realise that if Jesus had succumbed here, there would have been no Calvary. Here, Jesus avoids the temptation to "win" the prize without the price: it would have been a loss. We, too, may know that any gain we make in this Christian life is likely to be when we overcome the temptation towards some kind of indulgence.

Read: Matthew 4:1-11

Specific Questions

1. Where did all this occur?
2. Who led Jesus there?
3. Who did all the tempting?
4. How long was he there before the tempter came?
5. What was the first temptation?
6. And how was it answered?
7. What was the second temptation?
8. What might Jesus have got out of yielding to it?
9. What was the last temptation?
10. And what might Jesus have got out of that?

Discussion Questions

1. Why would the spirit lead Jesus to be tempted? See James 1:13 — is there a difficulty here?
2. Is temptation something for us to be ashamed of? (Are you ashamed of yours?)

3. How should we handle temptation? Is that what you normally do?
4. Jesus is tempted with bread when he is hungry, spectacular success when he might be wanting to make an impression, and a kingdom when he is probably beginning to establish one. But it will cost him — what? What sorts of things tempt you? What sorts of costs will be involved if you yield to them?

Individual Readings for the Week

1. Matthew 15:10-20

Here is a lesson from Jesus that we need to learn. What is inside our heart is what is important, not the specifics of behaviour that we might enact. There are many people we think are good Christians because they seem to do all the right things. But the real question is, why do they do them? When you see them unexpectedly, it's sometimes different from what they show you when they're on display: what is really inside their heart is coming out. This is not the way Jesus wants us to live. He looks on our motivation more than on our ability to keep to a list of approved behaviours. We must fill our lives with good things from God's word and then these things will come out as well.

Question: Can I find my own experience reflected in these verses?

2. John 14

Question: What do these verse teach us about God?

Two things here should capture our attention. One gives us the most wonderful hope the world has ever known. The other reminds us of who gives us that hope. Jesus tells them — and us — of heaven. "There is enough room there for you all," he tells us, "and I am going to get it ready for you." Hang onto this.

These are very important verses for our faith. Jesus and the Father, God, are the same. If this is not true, Jesus would just be a boasting cheat, and following him would just get us further away from God, not closer.

He knows this. He expects us to believe it, but he understands that we might need some proof. Look at verse 11. "You can believe my words," he says, "but if that's too hard, look at my actions." Very soon after this, he was to rise from the dead.

Thought: If Jesus is the Son of God, no wonder he is able to take his friends home when he wants to.

3. Matthew 7:1-6

Have you ever criticised someone for doing something, and then found yourself doing the same thing a short time later? We are all very good at noticing the wrong that others do, and commenting on it, when what we should be doing is taking note of ourselves, and getting ourselves right. God promises to judge us in the same way that we judge others. That is a good reminder to all of us to be less critical of others, and more concerned about judging our own actions and lining them up with God's standards.

Question: Is there a good example or a command for me to follow or obey?

4. Mark 9:30–37

It can be very interesting sometimes actually listening to politicians, especially when there is an election coming up and they are telling people why everyone should vote for them. They will also tell people that the other parties are wrong, and that their own is the best. Each claim they are the greatest. We are all tempted to act like this, and when we do it we are rude to other people, or we only think about ourselves. Jesus wants us to think about other people. He wants us to care for them and help them, and forget about being proud. If we do this, we will be great people.

Prayer: Lord, please help me to live as you want me to, and to regard other people as you regard them.

Question: Is there any example of sin or any other warning in here for me?

5. Luke 12:13-21

Beware of greed. There are many rich fools around today, and we can very easily be tempted to follow their example. There are many poor fools around too, many of them only prevented by circumstance or their own incompetence from being rich ones. Jesus tells us that true riches have nothing to do with money, and everything to do with attitude and outlook. Was it wrong for this man to have had success in his cropping? Of course not. What was wrong was his selfish smugness. Nothing caused him to consider God or others until Death came knocking at his door. We should be able to do better than this.

Question: Is there a warning in here for me to heed? How should I do it?

6. God's Facebook: The Journey in the rest of the New Testament

Here is a picture of Jesus, the image of God and central to creation. No talk of a “great teacher” or a “holy prophet”: Jesus is the central agent in the world’s formation. Not just a good example for us to follow: the very object of our worship and the enabler to make it possible. Get your mind onto a huge picture of Jesus. “He is before all things”, starting before creation and personally central to it.

Yet only starting there. Following the creation, it is by Jesus that “all things hold together.” Not only that, but he is the agent of redemption — he made the world, he sustains it, he reconciled it to God when it was in a lost condition.

Nor does that finish the picture. He is the head of the church, and in case that seems institutional and distant, he is also responsible for reconciling you, and presenting you holy in God’s sight. For any one of us, the very idea is a miracle, and Jesus has performed it. We shall be presented as perfect to God — if we continue in our faith. He has done the miracle, but we get to do the maintenance, as our part of the teamwork. Yet even in that task, his Holy Spirit enables. “This is the gospel,” and it is proclaimed to all the world.

So, respond. Respond with praise, and thanks, and then with confession, and then with goodwill. Add resolve: to get to know him better, to follow him more closely, to develop a mind that is shaped by who he is. Determine to live in the world as one who follows its maker and its redeemer, day by day, continuing in the faith.

Read Colossians 1:15-23

Specific Questions

1. How is God described in verse 15?
2. How does Jesus relate to the various other authorities in the world?
3. How does he relate to the church?
4. What gets reconciled?
5. What made you enemies of God?
6. What changed that status?
7. What is the result of Christ’s physical death?
8. What does this result depend upon?
9. To whom has this gospel been proclaimed?
10. Of what has Paul become a servant?

Discussion Questions

1. “The image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation” (verse 1). Jesus, body and spirit; God and man. Why is it vital for us to perceive him as both?

2. Who is “the church” (verse 18)? How should we regard the church, even with all its failings? How do you contribute to the church’s failings, and how does this make you feel about Jesus’ efforts on your behalf?
3. “...reconcile to himself all things...” — really? What is your understanding of the reconciling so far achieved, and of that which still lies ahead? What does that mean for you, personally? What about for your local church?
4. Are you ever tempted to be “moved from the hope” held out in the gospel? What by? What are some good ways to resist that temptation?

Individual Readings

1. Acts 11:19-26

Notice the reason for the dispersal of the church — it is persecution. Like shaking a handful of oxalis roots, and watching them grow all over the place. And the growth is not even. It begins among the Jews, and then sort of leaks out to the Greeks, almost as if it shouldn’t have, but couldn’t help it. Notice too why it grew — “the Lord’s hand was with them.” After the Lord organises growth the existing church took steps to catch up by sending someone full of the Holy Spirit to check it out, and he was glad and organised some help. And when the world observed it, they called them “Christians”. It looks like a good pattern.

Question: Is there a good example or command for me to follow or obey?

2. Ephesians 6:10-20

A little manual for Christian living. Don’t get lost in the breastplate or the shield or the helmet — they’re all illustrations, and we could replace them if we wanted to with images from our own day (the spam protection programme of faith, maybe?) But such an exercise would be more poetic than useful. Rather, look at what the images represent — truth, righteousness, the gospel of peace, faith, salvation, the word of God and prayer. We should pursue them all, consistently, because we are in a battle against the evil one and life is not expected to be a ride in a fairground. Nor are we in it on our own, so pray also for others who share the challenge with us.

Question: Is there a good example or command for me to follow or obey?

3. Hebrews 1 Something on Jesus

It’s the same theme in Hebrews as it is all through the New Testament — Jesus. The Gospels tell his story, Paul writes of him in his letters, and the unidentified writer of Hebrews addresses the same topic. Jesus really is the theme of the New Testament, and here is presented as the complete revelation of God. Above all previous messengers, “their

of all things”; God made the universe through him. If the angels of heaven seem to us to occupy an exalted place, that of Jesus is higher — “Let all God’s angels worship him.” Present before the creation of the world, active in every place within it today, and embarked on a course that will have no end (see verse 8). As well as eternal, the Son is of profoundly noble character, and this is part of the reason for his station (“...loved righteousness and hated wickedness...”) — unless the cause and effect are the other way around. But Jesus is Truth, ultimate and overarching, and we do well to worship him, and to be called aside for no other.

Question: What do these verse teach about God?

4. James 2:14-26

Over the years, there has been much debate about the relationship in Christian living between “faith” and “works”. James faces the matter head on and declares, “Both.” Clearly, faith is necessary to please God — the Scriptures say it (Hebrews 11:6 is only one example of it) and logic and common sense dictate it as well. How can anyone come to God without the faith to direct him?

But it is a mistake to think that, because we are not saved by doing good works, the good works are somehow unnecessary or dubious. If there are no works to observe, James says, how can we know there is any real faith? We may not be saved by works, but we are certainly saved for them (see Ephesians 2:8-10).

Question: Is there a good example or command for me to follow or obey?

5. Revelation 22:1-6, 16-17

The theme of these verses is life. Rivers in the city, trees having fruit all year round, healing for the nations, and God in the centre of it. No wonder the people worship him as they see his face. No lamps or sun, because God is the light of the place — didn't Jesus say, "I am the light of the world"? Total goodness, with no evil presence at all. We cannot imagine such a thing, partly because of the evil in our own hearts. But read these verses again, slowly — there aren't many of them — and just imagine.

And so, it finishes. And notice verse 6.

Prayer: Give God thanks for the picture he has drawn for us here.

Question: What do these verses teach us about God?