

BIBLE STUDY AND PRAYER

Introduction

As good food and healthy exercise are essential for physical life on earth, so feeding on God's Word, the Bible, and engaging in prayer are essential for every Christian believer's spiritual life. This study booklet is an introduction to these two areas of Christian discipleship. It is based on two series of the 'Sound Words' Bible teaching programme, and I am grateful to Dr John Hall for his invaluable help in explaining the teaching of the Bible on these two areas of the Christian life. You will gain the most help from these pages if you read them with your Bible at your side, so that you can look at the passages referred to. It is my prayer that this booklet will encourage you not simply to know about Bible study and prayer, but to engage in them both. May God bless you as you do so.

Derek French,
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PART 1: PERSONAL BIBLE STUDY

From the very first days of the Christian Church the followers of Jesus have been men and women who studied the Bible. Acts 2:42 is a description of the things these early Christians did. "*They devoted themselves to **the apostles' teaching** and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.*" The apostles' teaching is contained

in the Bible. Indeed it has rightly been claimed that the Bible is a book that has changed the world. This is because its message changes lives, because it tells us about God and his Son Jesus Christ. So already we begin to see that Bible Study is important for Christian believers. We must now turn to see why personal Bible Study is necessary for the Christian.

1) THE REASONS WHY CHRISTIANS NEED TO STUDY THE BIBLE

a) In the Bible God has made himself known in Christ

In 1 Thessalonians 1:9 God is described as "*the living and true God*". One of the things the true and living God has done is to speak to men and women. And God has spoken to us in the Bible. The Bible is sometimes called the Word of God for this very reason. It is here that God has spoken to us.

In the Bible God has shown us what he is like. He has shown us that he made us. He has shown us what he expects of us his creatures. And it is in the Bible that God has told us about the Lord Jesus Christ, and why he came to this world, and what he has done for sinners. In Hebrews 1:1&2 we read about Jesus these words: "*In the past, God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son.*" And so as we read the Bible God is speaking to us and showing us his Son the Lord Jesus Christ. Indeed all we need to know about God and Jesus and his requirements of us are found in the Bible.

(See also the ‘*Sound Words*’ study booklet, ‘Spiritual Experience’, chapter 1 - write for a copy if you do not have one.)

b) The Bible has been given for our spiritual profit

Here is a selection of Bible passages that describe some of the spiritual benefits that are brought to us through the Bible, the Word of God.

[i] 2 Timothy 3:15-17:

When Paul wrote to his Christian friend Timothy, we read this in 2 Timothy 3:15-17: “... *you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.*” Now that phrase “the holy Scriptures” is another way of describing the Bible. And in these words Paul is teaching us about the usefulness of the Bible to Christian believers. He tells us where the words in the Bible came from – God has breathed them out. He has guided men to write them down for us. (See also 2 Peter 1:20 and 2 Peter 3:16.)

“SALVATION”

Now notice the first benefit that comes from Bible study. The Holy Scriptures are able to make us wise for salvation. Salvation is to have our sins forgiven through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ (Ephesians 1:7). Salvation is to have eternal life – to know God and Jesus Christ whom he has

sent (John 17:3). And this is the first and most important blessing that comes to us when we read the Bible and believe its message. Before we go any further let me ask you if this is true of you. Have you come to trust in Jesus to forgive you your sins, and bring you to God? Until that has happened you will not be able to experience the other blessings that come from Bible study.

“TEACHING”

Having made us wise for salvation by bringing us to follow Jesus, Paul tells us the Bible goes on to help us even more. He mentions a number of specific things in 2 Timothy 3:16&17. The first of these is “*teaching*” or doctrine. It tells us all we need to know about God, and all we need to know about how to live our lives in this world. It tells us all that God has in store for the followers of Jesus in the future. It gives us a wonderful hope. So the Bible teaches us to trust in what God has said, rather than our own feelings or the opinions of other people. It instructs us how to think about ourselves and our world. And that is why Christians need to study the Bible in order to learn these things.

“REBUKING”

The next thing Paul mentions is “*rebuking*”. This is something that most of us do not like. But our passage tells us the Bible is “*useful*” for this. So this rebuking is not simply a negative thing. It is actually for our good. The Bible, you see, warns us about things that are harmful to us. It rebukes our sinful ways, because sin will harm us.

We have an example of this in the Bible itself in the book of Galatians. Some of the Galatian Christians were in danger of departing from the gospel of salvation by God's grace. Now to do such a thing would have eternal consequences. So Paul wrote them this rebuke (Galatians 1:6): *"I am astonished that you are quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel."* That was not an easy thing for Paul to do, nor an easy thing for the Galatians to receive, but it was absolutely essential to their eternal well being. Apart from the gospel of the grace of God in Jesus Christ there is no salvation. And if there is no salvation then people will perish forever in hell. So in the Bible God was showing his great kindness by rebuking these Galatian Christians to make them stop doing something that would cause them great harm.

"CORRECTING"

The next thing that the Bible is useful for, says Paul, is *"correcting."* While rebuking was the negative side, correcting is the positive. The Bible not only tells us what is wrong, it also teaches us what is right. It is a very useful book indeed. An example of this is found in James 4 where James writes about the sin of pride, which he tells us, in verse 6, is something God resists. But he does not simply write a rebuke and stop at that. He also shows his readers how to deal with pride, how to correct it. He tells them (James 4:7-10) to submit to God; resist the devil (*who so often stirs us up to be proud*); come near to God; seek

God's forgiveness; and humble yourselves before him. So the Bible is useful for correcting.

"TRAINING IN RIGHTEOUSNESS"

Then finally in 2 Timothy 3:16 we are told the Bible will train us *"in righteousness"*. It trains us to be good followers of Jesus. It trains us to do what is right, to do what God approves of. Here are some examples. The Bible trains us to speak the truth (Ephesians 4:15 and Exodus 20:16), to love (1 Corinthians 13), to be pure in our relationships (Exodus 20:14), to be honest hardworking people (Colossians 3:23), and many other things that are good and right.

The combined effect of these four things is that the Bible will equip us thoroughly for every good work. It will make our lives both pleasing to God and useful to others. The Bible is a book that speaks to us AND changes us.

[ii] Psalm 19:7-11:

Psalm 19:7-11 is another passages that lists the Bible's usefulness. In these verses there are a number of different terms used to describe the Bible, or God's word. There is law, statutes, precepts, commands, and ordinances. All of these point to how God directs and orders our lives through the teaching in the Bible. Also God's Word is described as perfect, trustworthy, right, radiant, pure, sure, altogether righteous, precious and sweet. All of which tell us the Bible is reliable, attractive and valuable.

Then David, who wrote this Psalm, tells us some of the things the Bible achieves. The list is very descriptive. He

begins with “*reviving the soul*”. It brings a sense of life and refreshment when we feel dry and perhaps distant from God (see also Isaiah 40:28-31). Then he adds, “*giving joy to the heart*”. This is because it directs our minds to the Lord Jesus Christ and all that he is and all that he has done for us. When we read that Jesus loved us so much that he died on the cross for us, it fills us with wonder and great joy that he should have done so much for unworthy sinners. David goes on to write, “*making wise the simple ... giving light to the eyes ... by them is your servant warned ... in keeping them there is great reward*”. The Bible gives us spiritual understanding and direction to our lives. And then sums this all up by telling us how valuable the Bible is. It is “*more precious than much pure gold*”. A real bag of gold can be spent or even stolen, but the word of God and the blessings it brings, last forever. If we hide God’s Word in our hearts by committing it to memory, no one shall ever be able to take it away from us, and it will always do us good.

And so again we see why the followers of Jesus need to engage in personal Bible study. As we give ourselves and the Lord time in reading it, we shall benefit from it immensely.

[iii] Romans 15:4:

The apostle Paul, when writing about the Old Testament, described its benefit like this (Romans 15:4): “*For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope*”. The Bible gives hope

to the followers of Jesus. And one of the ways it does this is through the promises of God, especially those that tell us a place is reserved for all Christian believers in heaven (1 Peter 1:3-5, John 14:1-3).

A question that often arises is this, ‘How can we be sure the promises of God are true?’ One of the ways the Old Testament answers this is through the promises of God that have already been fulfilled, particularly those promises about the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ and what he would do upon the cross. Some of these promises were made a thousand years before Jesus was born, yet were fulfilled exactly as God said they would be.

An example of this is in Psalm 22. Some of the very words Jesus used on the cross were foretold in this Psalm. Compare Psalm 22:1 with Matthew 27:46 and the words, “*My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?*” Then look at Psalm 22:18 which says, “*They divide my garments among them and cast lots for my clothing*”. We read in the New Testament that the Roman soldiers who crucified Jesus did exactly this in Matthew 27:35. Now that is amazing accuracy, and shows us that God’s Word is true and all his promises will be kept in detail. We can rely on the message of the Bible with complete confidence and assurance. So when the Bible promises to bring all the followers of Jesus to heaven we can be absolutely sure that will take place. The Bible gives us great hope in a hopeless world, because God has the power, ability and reliability to keep his promises. Therefore, not to study the Bible will deprive us of this encouragement, but to study it will bring us great consolation and strengthen our faith.

[iv] 1 Corinthians 10:1-13:

You may have wondered why the Bible records the historical details of the lives of God's people. The Old Testament is full of these, and it even records the sins and failings of God's people. Now why does it do this? Why does it explain the sins, for example of the people of Israel? In 1 Corinthians 10 we are given an answer to these questions. In this chapter Paul describes a list of the wrong things the Israelites did when they were in the wilderness. That was the 40 years between leaving Egypt and coming to the Promised Land. It tells us in verse 5 that God was not pleased with them, and the passage goes on to tell us why. In verse 7 it refers to the time that the Israelites made a golden calf and worshipped it, when God had forbidden idolatry. You can read the details in Exodus 32. In verse 8 it refers to their immorality as some of them joined themselves to the idol, Baal of Peor. The details are found in Numbers 25. In verse 9 we have reference to how they tested God and suffered from snakebites as a result. This is described for us in Numbers 21:4-9. And in verse 10 reference is made to the time they grumbled against the leaders God had given them, Moses and Aaron. This incident is found in Numbers 16:41ff.

Paul then tells us in 1 Corinthians 10:11&12 why these things were written down. *"These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfilment of the ages has come. So if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!"* In other words these are recorded to help us to resist sin and temptation, and to have our hearts set on God. They are

written to warn us against pride and self-reliance, and to encourage us humbly to depend on God and live as he directs.

So we have seen from this selection of Bible passages that personal Bible study will enrich us by increasing our understanding of the Lord and all that he has done for us. It will strengthen our faith, encourage our hope, direct our conduct, and warn us against the dangers of sinful behaviour. When we consider all these things together we can understand why David writes this about the Bible (Psalm 119:72&103): *"The law from your mouth is more precious to me than thousands of pieces of silver and gold... How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth."* Studying the Bible will help us greatly.

c) God commands us to study the Bible

On numerous occasions the Bible uses such terms as 'meditate', 'read', 'study', 'search', 'examine', and 'hide in your heart', to describe the response of believers to the word of God. God expects us to study the Bible. All the godly people recorded in the Scriptures, and down through the centuries of the Christian Church, have been men and women who gave careful study to the Bible. But in the Bible itself there are many places where God commands the followers of Jesus to read and obey it. Here are a few of those passages.

Paul, when he wrote to the followers of Jesus in Thessalonica gave, this instruction (1 Thessalonians 5:27): *"I charge you before the Lord to have this letter read to all*

the brothers.” And in a similar way he wrote to the Colossian Christians (Colossians 4:16) about the letter he wrote to them, and another he had written to the followers of Jesus in Laodicea. *“After this letter has been read to you, see that it is also read in the church of the Laodiceans and that you in turn read the letter from Laodicea.”* So, very clearly, the early Christian believers were exhorted to give their careful attention to these Biblical writings.

But this has always been the case for God’s people, whether in New Testament times or during the days of the Old Testament. One of the outstanding believers in the Old Testament was Moses. God gave Moses some very specific instructions about all that God had said to them. This is found in Deuteronomy. In Deuteronomy 5 we find the Ten Commandments, and then at the end of that chapter, in verse 32, we read, *“So be careful to do what the Lord your God has commanded you; do not turn aside to the right or the left. Walk in all the way that the Lord your God has commanded you...”* Well, how were they to ensure that they did this? The answer is they were continually to read, study, talk about and obey all that was written in the Bible. Deuteronomy 6:6-9 describes what God required of them: *“These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the door-frames of your houses and on your gates.”* So their whole

lives were to be surrounded and dominated by the word of God, the Bible. God had commanded this.

Consider the example of the godly man who is described in Psalm 1:2: *“... his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night.”* The godly man fills his mind with the Word of God. He thinks about it constantly, for he meditates on the things God has said. Meditation in the Bible is not emptying your mind and thinking of nothing. Rather it is concentrating your mind on what God has said in the Bible, and dwelling on it. David expresses this in Psalm 119:78, *“... I will meditate on your precepts.”*

The instruction of Paul to Timothy (2 Timothy 2:15) is another example of a clear command from God to give ourselves to the study of God’s word. Timothy was a young preacher, and Paul, who was at the end of his life, wrote this to his younger friend and fellow servant of the Lord Jesus: *“Do your best to present yourself to God as workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.”* Timothy was to be a faithful student of the Bible.

That God’s people are to study the Bible is underlined by the commendation of the Bereans in Acts 17:11. After the apostle Paul had preached the gospel in Thessalonica, he then travelled to Berea to tell the people there about the Lord Jesus Christ. This is how they reacted to his message: *“Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.”* This is a helpful verse in two

ways. Firstly, it reminds us that we are only to believe those who teach exactly what the Bible itself teaches. We should never believe anyone who alters the teaching of the Bible. The Bible is God's word and therefore we should only believe that teaching which is in agreement with what God has revealed in the Bible. Then, secondly, it shows us that God is pleased with those who study the Bible, believe it and act upon it. The Bereans were commended for their diligence in searching the Scriptures.

Knowing these things surely makes every Christian believer want to know more and more about all that God has told us in the Bible. Those who are truly God's children and followers of Jesus will give time to study God's word. It is a mark of our obedience to God.

d) It is the way we discern the difference between truth and error and right and wrong

We have already touched on this area of the Bible's usefulness, but we come back to it because it is such an important reason for really getting to know our Bibles. Many verses in the Bible testify to this. Indeed Jesus himself did. In John 17 we have recorded what has become known as Jesus' high-priestly prayer, just before he went to the cross. In that prayer he made a very important statement about the Bible. He was praying to his Father in heaven about his disciples and said, "*Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth.*" This really is a statement of great significance. It tells us that the word of God, the Bible, is utterly reliable and trustworthy and, therefore, to be the standard of all that we believe and do as

Christian believers. We are to test everything by the teaching of the Bible.

This same description of God's word is found in James 1:18. James is reminding his readers how they had become followers of Jesus. God had given them new life, and he had done this through the Bible. Here are his words: "*He chose to give us birth through **the word of truth**, that we might be a kind of first fruits of all he created.*" There is the same teaching that was found on Jesus' lips. The Bible is the "*word of truth*".

This same emphasis is also found in the Old Testament. The prophet Isaiah made a similar statement to those of Jesus and James. Isaiah's words are found in Isaiah 8:20: "*To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, they have no light of dawn.*" Isaiah had been warning the people not to consult mediums and spiritists; rather they were to consult the Lord and see what he had said. This was because God's law and testimony, in other words, the Bible, is the truth. God's truth was like the light of the dawn when the sun shines dispelling the darkness of sin and ignorance. But those who teach things contrary to the Bible have no light in them at all. They are in darkness, and so are those who follow them. So it is essential that we **only** believe and follow that teaching which is found in the word of God. And we must reject that teaching which does not agree with the Bible. Sadly, it is not enough for someone merely to say he is a Christian teacher. Many have said that, but they were not telling the truth and simply wanted people to follow them. We must test what teachers say by examining

it to see if it agrees with what God has declared in the Bible. It is the Bible which enables us to discern between truth and error.

Consider this description of the person who bases his life on God's word (Psalm 37:30-31): *"The mouth of the righteous man utters wisdom, and his tongue speaks what is just. The law of his God is in his heart; his feet do not slip."* What a lovely picture of stability, and of being on the right path! This is the case with all who have God's word in their hearts and base their lives upon it. For the Bible shows us the right way to live, the right things to do. In Psalm 119:105 it is described as *"a lamp for our feet and a light for our path"*. It teaches us what is right and exposes what is wrong. To neglect the Bible is to endanger our souls, but to give heed to the Bible is to keep our hearts and minds in the love of Christ.

e) It is our spiritual food

When a child is born it is a time of great joy. One of the things that is essential for its growth and development is a regular supply of good nourishing food. Indeed, without food it would soon become sick and be in danger of dying. In a similar way our spiritual lives as Christian believers need to have regular supplies of spiritual food. And the Bible is the food we need. When Jesus was tempted by Satan to change stones into bread, he replied (Matthew 4:4): *"It is written: 'Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"* Just as we depend on bread to feed our bodies, we must also depend and feed on God's word to nourish our souls. In

fact, this spiritual food is more important than physical food.

In 1 Peter 2:2 we read, *"Like newborn babes, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, now that you have tasted that the Lord is good."* Some translations put it like this: *"desire the pure milk of the word."* In other words, we must feed on the teaching of the Bible if we are to grow and develop as Christians, and be strong and useful in the service of Christ.

So we have considered five main reasons why the followers of Jesus need to engage in personal Bible study. Now we must turn to how we go about the task entrusted to us.

2) HOW TO STUDY THE BIBLE PROFITABLY

We need to remember that the Bible is different to all other books. It is God's book, his word to us, and therefore we must approach our study of it in a different way from that in which we may study, say, a book on geography or mathematics.

a) We must study the Bible prayerfully

We need to pray over our study of the Bible for a number of reasons. Firstly, we need the help of God the Holy Spirit so that we can understand spiritual truth. We read in 1 Corinthians 2:14, *"The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him and he cannot understand them for they are spiritually discerned."* We have already seen that the Bible comes from the Spirit of God. He directed those

who wrote the Bible so they would give us God's word. Because of this the Holy Spirit is the author of the Bible. So we need to have his help to understand the Bible and apply it to our lives. We must pray seeking God's help to teach us as we read it.

Linked with this is need for us to have teachable hearts; hearts that are ready, eager and willing both to learn and submit to all that God would teach us as we study the Bible. David, the great king of Israel, and the man used by God to give us many of the Psalms, was aware of his need to have a teachable heart. This is how he expresses it in Psalm 119:18: "*Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law.*" And in Psalm 139:23&24 he writes like this: "*Search me, O God, and know my heart. Test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.*" David was both aware of his own weaknesses and failings, and his need of God's help over this. He expected God's word to search him and test him and change his life. He wanted this, so he prayed for God's help. We must do the same. We need to pray that God would make us sensitive to the things particularly relevant to our own lives. We need to pray for strength to apply what we learn from the Bible and act upon it. We need to pray that God would keep us from applying the Bible to other people, while we fail to apply it to ourselves.

b) We must study the Bible thoughtfully

In order to do this adequately, we shall need to give sufficient time to our Bible reading. We will get the best

out of our studies when we do not rush through our reading, as if we wanted to do something else instead. That can happen, even to people who have followed Jesus for many years. We can go through periods when, foolishly, we hurry through our Bible reading, and then fail really to take in all that God is saying to us. Remember David again. In Psalm 119:15 he writes, "*I meditate on your precepts and consider your ways.*" In other words, he gave God plenty of time. He meditated and carefully considered what God had said. And that is something we cannot do in a rush.

One of the most helpful things we can do in this respect is to commit to memory verses that have spoken to us. Again this was something David did. In Psalm 119:11 he tells God this: "*I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you.*" He gave time to learn God's word, so that he might avoid sinning against God. Now, to do this we must study the Bible thoughtfully.

c) We need to study the Bible systematically

By this, we mean simply that we read through a book of the Bible over a period of time. We need to remember that the Bible was given to us in books, so we need to read through whole books if we are going to gain the most out of our Bible study. It is not sufficient to jump all around the Bible and just pick a verse here and another one there.

Another approach is to study a theme, or someone's life, such as Elijah, or Abraham, or Peter. Some followers of Jesus plan to read a chapter a day, or the whole Bible in a year.

The reason for this is that then we profit from all of the Bible, and read parts which we most need to read, rather than just looking at our favourite parts. This will give us a well-balanced spiritual diet.

For someone who is just beginning to read the Bible then it is probably best to begin with parts that are easier to understand. A good book to begin with is Mark's Gospel, or John's Gospel. But don't stop with those. Go on from there to read the rest of the Bible, both Old and New Testaments.

d) We must also approach Bible study expectantly

We should eagerly anticipate that God will speak to us through the Bible. It is God's word, after all. How strange it would be if someone sent us a letter and when we opened it, inside were blank pieces of paper. No, we would expect to have lots of writing on the pages, and would read them, eager to discover what they say. How much more then should this be the case as we read what God has sent to us. We should do so with great expectancy that God would speak to us and deal with us through the Bible.

e) We must study the Bible diligently

By this we mean not only that we give adequate time to our Bible reading, but also that we do so regularly. Indeed we need to read the Bible every day. And we must guard against giving up on Bible study. It is nearly always the case that when a Christian backslides one of the first things they neglect is personal Bible study. To help them with

this some Christians have found it useful to have a set time each day for their Bible study. Say first thing in the morning, or at mid-day, or at the end of the day. They do not let anything else take up this time.

Many years ago I read this illustration in a Christian booklet. When an orchestra gives a concert, when would the musicians tune their instruments? The answer is easy – before they started to play. It was suggested the Christian, likewise, needs to start each day in tune with God.

Some followers of Jesus may find it difficult to do that in the morning, especially if they have young children to attend to. Other Christian believers, because of temperament, are more alert in the morning or in the evening. Really, the particular time of the day is not important. What is important is that we study the Bible every day, diligently.

f) We must approach our Bible study humbly

We said earlier that the Bible is a unique book. It is God's book, God's word to us. Therefore, when we come to read the Bible we need to study with reverence. We need to remember the chief purpose of the Bible is to glorify God, and that is to be our chief purpose too. So as we study we will want to submit to all that God will show us from his word.

The proof that we are studying the Bible with humility is seen when we obey what we read. A humble heart will not rebel against God. The humble heart will repent when God, through the Bible, rebukes sinful behaviour. James puts it like this (James 1:22): "*Do not merely listen to the*

word, and so deceive yourselves. **Do what it says.**” He goes on in verse 22 and writes, “*But the man who looks intently into the perfect law (that is the Bible) that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it - will be blessed in what he does.*”

To help us with this a Pastor of a Church in England, Brian Keen, suggested we could ask ourselves certain questions when studying the Bible. Here is his list:

- What is this telling me about God, his attributes, purposes and ways?
- What is this telling me about myself and my relationship to God?
- What change should this teaching be making in my life?
- How should this be influencing how I think, speak, act, and react?
- How does this affect my worship and service, my work and my study?
- In what way is this challenging my use of time, or money, or possessions?
- What is it saying about my relationships at home, or in the Church, or at work?

This is an excellent list, and although the questions are quite searching, how useful they are to help us get the most out of our Bible study. Perhaps you could write them out on a piece of card and keep it in your Bible so that you can use them daily.

g) We should study the Bible thankfully

This is a very important attitude to have when we do Bible study. To have such a gift from God as the Bible, and then to be able to study it, is a great privilege. Therefore, we should always be thankful to God for this. This will make our Bible study a joy and not a burden. It will also help us to receive all that God teaches us in the Bible, for we shall receive this gladly and praise Him for it, even when it rebukes us.

GENERAL HELPS

- It will be useful if we can find somewhere quiet to help our concentration.
- Planning our time will help us not to rush our Bible study.
- It is often useful to make notes on the passage we are studying.

This helps us:

- to understand the passage more clearly.
- to remember what we have read.
- to apply the passage to our own lives.
- There are a number of daily reading booklets available that give a passage to read from the Bible for each day, and give a short explanation. If these are available where you live they will be very useful
- Then there are more detailed books called commentaries. These will help us learn the background of each book, the context of each passage,

and the meaning of each verse. They also deal with parts of the Bible that are difficult to understand. This all helps us learn exactly what a passage is teaching. A word of warning here, though. Make sure you use commentaries written by people who actually believe the Bible is the word of God. Sadly, there are some authors who do not.

NB. These may not always be available or within a suitable price range. When this is the case write down the parts you do not understand so you can seek the help of your pastor or a trusted Christian friend.

- Membership of and commitment to a local Church is an invaluable help to understanding and applying the Bible. Bible study with others is very beneficial as we can then learn from one another. The early Church members gave themselves to this, along with other things (Acts 2:42).
- **The most important thing is to actually read the Bible.** If you do not read it you cannot gain the benefits it brings.

PART 2: PRAYER

The twin of personal Bible study is prayer. Really, these two are inseparable. And to stress the importance of prayer, one Christian hymn writer has written this about it: “*Prayer is the Christian’s vital breath*”. In other words, prayer is as important and necessary for the Christian’s spiritual life and health, as breathing is for our physical

life. You will remember that Bible study was described as our spiritual food, and now, the companion to that, prayer, is our spiritual breathing.

This graphic description is a helpful illustration of how the Bible teaches us that prayer is absolutely vital for the followers of Jesus. Indeed sometimes the Christian is simply described as ‘one who prays’. An example of this is found in Acts 9:11. It refers to Saul of Tarsus, who was also called Paul. He had once been a persecutor of Christians. When he was travelling to Damascus, the risen Lord Jesus Christ met him, and Saul became his follower. A few days later the Lord sent a man named Ananias to visit Saul. To encourage Ananias not to be afraid to go, the Lord said in Acts 9:11, “... *for he is praying*”. That was Jesus’ description of Saul now he had become a Christian believer. So a genuine Christian will be a person who prays to God regularly.

1) PRAYER DEFINED

Whereas the Bible is the word of God to man, prayer is the word of man to God. Prayer simply means to talk with God and express our fellowship with him. It is the provision of the Lord whereby we may develop and deepen our relationship with him. This means prayer is much more than coming to God with a shopping list of needs and no more.

a) Prayer is humbly and reverently submitting to God

Many years ago, there was a follower of Jesus named John Bunyan. He wrote a very famous book about the Christian

life called 'Pilgrim's Progress'. He also wrote about prayer. His description is quite long, but this is what he wrote: *"Prayer is a sincere, intelligible, affectionate pouring out of the heart to God through Christ, in the strength and assistance of the Holy Spirit, for such things as God has promised or according to his word, for the good of the Church, with submission in faith to the will of God."* Now, it is interesting that this is exactly how Jesus himself prayed. We read in Hebrews 5:7: *"During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission."* This verse tells us Jesus had a deep respect for his Father and only wanted to do his will. Now if Jesus approached God in prayer with *"reverent submission"*, how much more ought we to do so? We see also how wrong it would be to pray to God in an arrogant and proud way, demanding God to do this or that for us.

b) Prayer is expressing our dependence on God

Prayer is to call on the name of the Lord. Here are some examples (Genesis 4:26): *"... At that time men began to call on the name of the Lord"*. Abraham is also described in a similar way, when he pitched his tent near to Bethel (Genesis 12:8): *"There he built an altar to the Lord and called on the name of the Lord."* (See also Genesis 21:33.) To call on the name of the Lord means to pour out our hearts to God for his help. Those who call on the Lord are expressing their dependence on God. So when Christian believers do this they are entering into communion with

God who has loved them and saved them, and are expressing their trust and confidence in him. The Christian worships God when he adores, confesses, praises, and pleads with him in prayer.

c) Prayer comes from the heart

We need also to realise that prayer is something that is much more than mere words, it involves the heart. The Christian delights in God, and therefore adores and praises his excellencies in prayer. As we enter God's presence we see something of his holiness, and this causes us to confess our sins to him. We also see something of his greatness and power, and plead with him to uphold us so that we might please him day by day. And as we pray we are filled with thanksgiving for all God's benefits. It is this kind of praying that comes from the heart. Isaiah 29:13 is a sad verse because it is about people who did not pray to God in this way, and is a rebuke from the Lord. *"These people come near to me with their mouth and honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is made up only of rules taught by man."* So we can see that true prayer is more than going through the motions, or reciting some words we may have learned. The prayer that God requires of his children is to come from our hearts.

d) Prayer is seeking God's will

1 John 5:14-16 says this: *"This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know he hears us –*

whatever we ask – we know that we have what we asked of him.” This raises some questions. Where do we discover what God’s will is? How do we know what to pray? The only place where we can clearly find the will of God is in his word, the Bible. The Bible is a guide to direct our thoughts. Sometimes our feelings can be very strong, and we may well feel that what we are praying for is God’s will. Now that is not wrong, but we need to be careful because sometimes our feelings can mislead us. So we must test our feelings by the teaching of the Bible. One thing God never does is to contradict his word. He will never tell us one thing in the Bible but then direct our feelings to ask for something that is the opposite. When God is guiding us it is always in accordance with the Bible. In addition we should never expect God to give us anything that was not in accordance with his word.

One of the great ways the Bible helps us in prayer is the promises of God that it contains. They really are wonderful to use as a basis of prayer. For example, the promise in Hebrews 13:6, “... *God has said, ‘never will I leave you: never will I forsake you’*”. I can remember some years ago when I was in hospital for an operation, asking the Lord to be with me, just as he had promised. And it was truly wonderful how the Lord drew near, and gave me his peace and calm as I was wheeled to the operating theatre.

What do we do, though, when we are not sure what God’s will is, or when there is no specific promise of God that deals directly with our needs? There is a lovely promise in Philippians 4:19: “*And my God will meet all your needs*

according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus.” How often Christian believers have been perplexed as to what to pray for, yet, with this promise in their hearts, have been able to come to God, present the situation to him, and with complete confidence and assurance leave the whole matter in his hands, knowing he would do what is best.

Another helpful way to test whether we should be asking God for something or not, is to ask, ‘Would Jesus have asked for this?’ Because Jesus tells us that we are to ask in his name (John 14:13 and 16:24), and that means through him, with him representing us. So if Jesus would not ask for this, neither should we.

One of the outstanding examples of praying in accord with God’s will is the Lord Jesus’ prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, just before his crucifixion. Jesus knew all that lay before him. He came into the world to die on the cross for sinful men and women. As that hour drew near the pressure he was under was intense – of greater intensity than anything we will ever have to face. He was to bear the punishment for sin, and to have his Father forsake him. As Jesus committed all of this to his Father in prayer, he prayed (Matthew 26:39): “*My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. **Yet not as I will, but as you will.***” Above all his personal needs and comforts, he wanted God’s will to be done, and prayed for it to be done.

His example is really challenging, and the followers of Jesus must be continually asking themselves, ‘Are we praying like this?’ True Christians would never want God to give them anything that was not his will for them to have. How good to know we can place ourselves, our

loved ones, and our needy world, into the hands of our loving heavenly Father to do what is best for us. In Romans 8:28 it says that God works all things for the good of his children, and, therefore, we can trust him implicitly.

2) CHRISTIANS ARE COMMANDED TO PRAY

It is not simply that Christian believers are expected to pray, or ought to pray. Prayer is commanded by God. It is an obligation God places on all the followers of Jesus. It is a matter of obedience to God that we pray. So if we do not pray we are guilty of disobeying God, and that is sinful.

This is a selection of such commands (1 Thessalonians 5:17): *“Pray continually.”* (Colossians 4:2): *“Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful.”* (Romans 12:12): *“Be ... faithful in prayer.”* (Ephesians 6:18): *“And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints.”* Jesus assumed his disciples would pray. In Matthew 6:5 he said to his disciples, *“And when you pray...”*

These commands tell us how God loves his children to talk to him, and that is marvellous, and a great privilege. The Christian life begins with prayer, when we first ask God to forgive our sins for Jesus' sake. And the Christian life continues and is maintained by prayer. So again we see that a genuine Christian will pray. It is difficult to see how a person can be a Christian, and know the only true God and Jesus Christ whom he has sent, and not pray. It is an essential part of our daily spiritual life.

3) HOW WE ARE TO PRAY

When the Lord Jesus Christ was on earth he taught his disciples how to pray. And he taught them what is often called ‘The Lord’s Prayer’. We find this in Matthew 6:9-13. It is a prayer that many followers of Jesus have committed to memory, and find great comfort in thoughtfully and earnestly repeating the actual words of the prayer when they talk to God. It is a wonderful prayer, and it really covers every area of need that we shall ever face. But it is more than a prayer to learn and repeat. It is also to be a pattern for our own prayers. It is a model prayer, if you like.

This is important to remember because there is always the danger when we know a prayer off by heart, that we can simply repeat the words without really meaning what we are praying and asking for. Indeed, Jesus warned his disciples not to be like the hypocrites who prayed just like that (Matthew 6:7): *“And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.”* A very good example of this is found in 1 Kings 18. Elijah, the prophet of God, gave a challenge to the prophets of the false god, Baal. He told them to pray to their god, Baal, and he would pray to the Lord. They were both to build altars, place sacrifices on them, and pray that fire would fall from heaven to light the sacrifices. The true God, said Elijah, would be the God who sent the fire. The prophets of Baal prayed all day, repeating themselves and saying many words in frenzy – even cutting themselves to make

Baal answer them. But they received no answer. Then Elijah prayed. If you look at his prayer it is obvious that Elijah knew God. In it he desired the will of God and the glory of God. Elijah prayed in true faith and reliance on God, and his prayer was far more effective than all the repetitious cries of the prophets of Baal. His prayer was very short, but came from his heart, and the fire fell from heaven. We should pray like Elijah prayed.

Jesus, having warned his disciples about the wrong kind of praying, then introduced the 'Lord's Prayer' (Matthew 6:9) with these words: "*This, then, is how you should pray.*" In other words, this prayer is to be our guide in all our praying.

Our Father in heaven.

The 'Lord's Prayer' begins with these words, "*Our Father in heaven.*" This is a remarkable statement. It tells us that God, who created the universe, who flung stars into space and made the beautiful flowers, the almighty, sovereign, holy God becomes our Father when we follow Jesus! And that in itself opens up for us the whole area of praise and adoration of God in our prayers. What he has done for us in Jesus is truly amazing. (See Galatians 4:4-7.)

As our Father, God is full of concern for us, his children. He is someone who cares for us. And how comforting and reassuring this is. We read about this in Psalm 103:13&14: "*As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him; for he knows how we are formed, he remembers we are dust.*" As our Father,

his heart is filled with warmth and tenderness towards us, and he wants us to talk to him.

The fact that he is "*in heaven*" is also very instructive. It tells us God is over all. There is no one higher or greater than he. He reigns there as the almighty ruler of the universe. He is King of Kings and Lord of Lords. (See 1 Timothy 6:15&16.) While again this causes us to praise him, it also gives us great confidence in prayer, because God has the power to help us. How useless it would be to pray to someone who was unable to help us. But we pray to "*Our Father in heaven*" who is able to do more than we can ask or imagine (Ephesians 3:20-21).

"Hallowed be your name."

'*Hallowed*' is an unusual word that we do not use very often. It really means that we want God to be seen as glorious and holy. It is a prayer that God would be seen by all the world as separate and pure and exalted. It's a prayer that desires God to be glorified. It means that you desire that God should be honoured. It also reminds us that God is awesome, and helps us to approach him with reverence and love.

These two opening phrases of the 'Lord's Prayer' help us in several ways in coming to God. They compliment each other in this way. That God is our Father teaches us of his closeness to the followers of Jesus, while desiring God to be hallowed teaches us he is great and awesome. Closeness without awe leads to an over familiarity, and could easily lead us to despise God or take him for granted. On the other hand, awe without closeness leads to terror

and anxiety and fear. Then, we would be afraid to approach God at all. But Jesus teaches us that both things are true about God. He is close to Christian believers, while at the same time being awesome. When we follow Jesus' teaching on prayer this helps us approach God with reverent submission and with confident dependence.

"Your kingdom come."

The kingdom of God is the place where God's rule and authority are recognised and seen. Jesus began his ministry preaching about this kingdom (Mark 1:15): "*The time has come,*" he said, *'The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news.'*" John the Baptist taught the same (Matthew 3:2). Jesus' disciples also taught about the kingdom (Luke 10:9). Sometimes this kingdom is called "*The kingdom of God*", and on other occasions it is called "*The kingdom of heaven*". They are both referring to the same thing. It is simply that different Gospel writers used either description.

When Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when this kingdom would come, he answered, "*The kingdom of God does not come with your careful observation, nor will people say, 'Here it is,' or 'There it is,' because the kingdom of God is within you.*" (Luke 17:20&21). Jesus then went on to speak about his second coming. So what the Bible is teaching us is that the kingdom started when Jesus came. It began to be displayed as it began to conquer men's hearts and lives. And it is continuing to do this as the good news about Jesus is shared around the world and people are brought to acknowledge God as their King. This will

continue until Jesus comes again, when the kingdom will have reached its fulfilment.

So when we pray "*Your kingdom come*", we are praying for three things. **Firstly**, that we want God's rule to be established in our own lives. That Jesus would reign as King in our hearts and that our lives will be changed to show this as we submit to his commands. **Secondly**, that we want his rule to be established and acknowledged world-wide as many men and women and girls and boys are brought to trust in Jesus and are saved. So it is a prayer for evangelism and world wide mission. **Thirdly**, that we want the Lord's kingdom to be fully established when he returns. This, then, directs our minds to the new heavens and new earth (2 Peter 3:13, Revelation 21:1). Then we shall be with Jesus, in that place he has gone to prepare for us (John 14:3). Revelation 21:3&4 describes it like this: "*Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.*" It was the thought of this future aspect of God's kingdom that caused John to pray (Revelation 22:20), "*Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.*" Like the previous part of the prayer, this also stimulates our hearts to praise and worship as we think of all that awaits Christian believers.

"Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

We have already touched on this previously, but because it is so important we need to consider it again. God's will is

immediately, fully and willingly obeyed in heaven. Christian believers long for this to be the same on earth, including in our own lives. This aspect of prayer is not telling God what to do, but seeking in prayer those things he has promised, so that his will is done. And even in our asking for things, only desiring God to answer our requests according to his will, not simply ours. Very often the Christian's will coincides with God's will, and that is marvellous. But on other occasions Christians can want things that are not God's will, or that they are not sure are God's will. So this petition in the Lord's Prayer means we will only ever want and expect God to answer us in accord with his will.

We have an example of this in the life of Daniel. Daniel was taken captive to Babylon, and while he was there he read the prophecy of Jeremiah. He discovered that God had promised this captivity would last for 70 years (Jeremiah 29:10). So Daniel then turned to God and prayed about this. You can read his prayer in Daniel 9. Daniel had read what God's will was in Jeremiah 29 and then prayed for God's will to be done. In fact, he found the promise of God a real encouragement to prayer. So he prayed with boldness, confidence, and specifically, and God answered his prayer, and the people of Israel were allowed back into their own land.

This example from Daniel also shows the relationship between prayer and the Bible. Many Christians find that as they read their Bibles each day, they are stimulated in prayer by what God has revealed in the Scriptures. So as we read the Bible we can ask ourselves questions such,

'What is God teaching me to pray about today? What area of my life do I need help to apply what I have been taught in my reading?'

To pray for God's will to be done in our own lives is very challenging, yet also encouraging. It is challenging because it means we should be living in a way that is obedient to God. This applies to all that we do and the way we do it. It applies to what we say, and when and how we say it. It even applies to what we think and allow our minds to dwell upon. But alongside this, it is also a great encouragement to pray. As we think, for example, what we shall be doing today and those areas of our lives where we want God's will to be done for us, we can bring these to God in prayer. This really means we can pray about everything we are involved in, and seek the blessing of God's will being done in our lives, and in the lives of those we love and are concerned about. It really means that we want God at the centre of our lives and desire to serve God and do what he says.

Up to now the 'Lord's Prayer' has taught us to concentrate our thoughts on God, his honour and his will. What Jesus has done is to teach us to put God first. Serving him is to be the Christian's great aim. The followers of Jesus are to be God-centred and Christ-centred, not self-centred.

"Give us today our daily bread."

While we are to be God-centred, that does not mean we cannot pray about our own needs. Jesus encourages us to do this here. This request really indicates that we are dependent on God for everything. Christian believers are

very needy, and this phrase of the 'Lord's Prayer' teaches us to cry out to God, whom we know loves us, to provide for us each day. The fact that we are to pray for today's needs means the followers of Jesus will be praying every day, and will be living every day in conscious dependence on the Lord.

This again shows how interested and concerned God is for us, even down to our daily food. Learning to trust God in this way will help us not to be over anxious, but to have calm and peace because we rest in his care (see Matthew 6:25-34).

"Forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors."

This is a prayer that refers to our relationships with God and with other people. The word 'debts' is often translated by the word 'trespasses'. It affects our relationship with God, because it is God that we disobey and sin or trespass against ultimately. Even the godliest Christian on earth needs to pray this prayer, because we all fall short of the standard God has set for us (see 1 John 1:8-10). Sin still troubles Christians in this life, and sin is a barrier between us and God and needs to be removed (see Isaiah 59:1&2). We are to confess our sins to God, for we need his forgiveness. God has wonderfully provided for this through the Lord Jesus Christ and his death on the cross. Therefore we can seek his mercy in prayer when we have failed him.

But as we pray for ourselves, we must also be mindful of those who have sinned against us. And Jesus says that we must be as willing to forgive them, as we want our

heavenly Father to forgive us. That really is a challenge. It rebukes any bitterness we may have against someone. It condemns any grudges we might bear or desires for revenge on someone who has hurt us. It exposes any feelings of malice or plans to do evil against others. It teaches to be loving and forgiving. In short, it teaches us to be like God. He has forgiven us when we did not deserve it. He forgave us even though it cost him the death of his dear Son. He has forgiven us freely. So how unlike God is anyone who fails to forgive others. In Ephesians 4:32 we are taught to "... be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God has forgiven you." This is a very demanding thing for us to do, but proof that God's grace is in our hearts, and that we are forgiven by God, is that we are forgiving people. (See also Matthew 6:14&15.)

"Lead us not into temptation."

Every day Christians face many different kinds of temptation. We can be tempted to be greedy, lustful, dishonest, untruthful, unjustly angry, and in many more ways. Now, to overcome temptation requires God's help. Jesus is teaching us here that we cannot do this in our own strength. We need the special help of heaven itself, God's help. We need him to make us strong so that we will not fall into sin.

Now this has very practical as well as spiritual implications. If we pray this prayer and then go and read an immoral book, or visit places where we know we shall be tempted, or watch lustful films on television, then really

we are being hypocritical. If, for example, a drunkard genuinely prayed this prayer, then he would avoid places where alcohol is available. Not to do this would be deliberately to enter into temptation. Or if a gambler prayed this prayer, but then visited a betting shop, or where there was a gaming wheel, then he would be hypocritical.

Perhaps this story will help you understand what Jesus is teaching. There was once a rich man who wanted someone to be the driver of his car. A number of men applied for the job. When they were interviewed the rich man asked the first applicant, "How close to the edge of a cliff could you drive my car and keep me safe?" "One metre," he replied. The next was asked the same question and he said, "A half a metre." The final applicant received the same question and he replied, "If you were in the car while I was driving, then I would keep as far away from the edge of the cliff as I possibly could!" It was the last man who got the job. Now, that is how Christians are to respond to sin and temptation. We are to keep as far away from it as possible, because it is very dangerous.

You will record how Joseph was tempted by Potiphar's wife, in Genesis 39. We read in verse 9 that he refused to give in to this temptation, and he ran away from this wicked woman.

But even when we have prayed this prayer, and have been careful to avoid temptation, we still have to face it. This is because we live in a sinful world, and we have a spiritual enemy, the devil, who is called the tempter (see Matthew 4:3 and 1 Thessalonians 3:5). So when we pray that God would not lead us into temptation, we are also asking that

God would help us not to be so burdened by temptation that we give in to it.

"But deliver us from evil, or, the evil one."

The difference between a temptation and being delivered from evil, is that the temptation, for example, is tempting to despair, and the evil is falling into the despair. And as these things come from the devil, we need God's strength and grace to deliver us from the evil one.

In 1 John 5:18 we read, "... *the one who is born of God ... the evil one cannot harm him.*" In other words, God has promised to deliver us, so that the evil one will not ultimately harm us.

The 'Lord's Prayer' covers every area of our lives as Christian believers, and there is no part of our lives that we cannot pray about. We can even tell God about things we would find it difficult to tell anyone else. What a privilege prayer is!

4) AREAS TO CULTIVATE IN PRAYER

We have seen from our brief examination of some of the 'Lord's Prayer' that prayer is intended to include many things. What we are doing in this section is to group those things together under four headings. To help you remember, each of the four areas for prayer begins with the successive letters of the word ACTS. A for adoration, C for confession, T for thanksgiving, S for supplication.

a) Prayer is to include adoration

By ‘adoration’ we mean that we worship and praise God for himself. As we approach God in prayer we remind ourselves of the greatness and glory of his character and worship him. One of the most helpful ways of doing this is to use the Psalms. For example Psalm 145:1-3: *“I will exalt you, my God the King; I will praise your name for ever and ever. Every day I will praise you and extol your name forever and ever. Great is the Lord and most worthy of praise; his greatness no-one can fathom.”* If you read through the rest of the Psalm you will see how David expresses why God is great. He speaks of his majesty, glory, holiness, power, wisdom, compassion, care, and mighty acts.

If we just use the last description as an example, and think about God’s mighty acts, we could think of creation (Genesis 1&2), of the parting of the Red Sea (Exodus 14), of the coming of Christ and his triumph over sin and death. And all these things fill us with awe and wonder at God’s mighty power. There is so much to adore God for, and as we read about him in the Bible so our hearts will want to worship and praise him.

b) Confession

When we come before God we shall discover that we are made aware of our sins. This is because God is holy. He is light, whereas we, even at our best, are unprofitable servants who still sin. Now, to have fellowship with God, who is light, our sin must be pardoned and our hearts cleansed. In 1 John 1:9 we read, *“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify*

us from all unrighteousness.” What a remarkable provision that is. Confession means that when we are aware of our sin, we come to God and admit we have done wrong and turn away from it in repentance. God will then forgive and cleanse us.

The blood of Jesus cleanses from all sins, even serious ones. An example of this is King David who committed adultery with Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah the Hittite, and then arranged for Uriah’s murder. God exposed his sin through Nathan the prophet. You will find the details in 2 Samuel 11&12. David then realised his sin and repented of it. Psalm 51 is his prayer of confession to God where he humbly asks God to create in him a clean heart.

c) Thanksgiving

Thanksgiving is the expression of our gratitude to God for the blessings and help he has given us. In many ways there is an overlap here with praising God for himself, because one of the ways God reveals his glory and majesty is through the things he does for us. It is so easy, however, to forget to do this. If you are a parent you will know how disappointing it is when your children do not say thank you, while it is so different when they do. How much more then is this the case with God.

Consider these Bible passages (Ephesians 5:20): *“Always giving thanks to God the Father for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.”* (Colossians 2:6&7): *“So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, **and overflowing with thankfulness.**”*

(Colossians 4:2): “Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful **and thankful**.” Many Christians, at the end of each day, pause and think over the day’s activities to recall how God has helped them. Then, armed with these things, they pour out their hearts in praise to God. There is a Christian hymn which has these words, “Count your blessings, name them one by one, and it will surprise you what the Lord has done.”

d) Supplication

Supplication simply means requests. We come to God to lay before him those needs we, or our loved ones, or our brethren and sisters in Christ, or our world have. What a delight and relief to know that we can cast our care on God because he cares for us (1 Peter 5:7). Those who do not follow Jesus cannot enjoy this blessed privilege; for it is only through him that we can approach God (John 14:6, 1 Timothy 2:5). But if we do follow Christ we are encouraged and commanded to bring our requests to God. Consider these passages (Philippians 4:6): “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, **present your requests to God.**” (1 Timothy 2:1&2): “I urge, then, first of all, that **requests, prayers, intercession** and thanksgiving be made for everyone – for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness.”

You will notice of the four areas the Bible encourages us to cultivate in our prayers, we have placed supplication last. This is not because it is unimportant, but simply to remind us to put God first. It is so easy to rush into God’s

presence with a shopping list of requests without even pausing to consider who we are approaching. When we pray we must remember we are coming to the throne of heaven. But let us also remember that God’s throne is a throne of grace (Hebrews 4:16): “Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy, and find grace to help us in our time of need.”

CONCLUSION

In this booklet we have looked at two of the most important and fundamental parts of true Christian discipleship. True followers of Jesus will want to learn more and more about him, and will do so by careful study of the Bible, the word of God. By this means we shall be built up in our most holy faith, and our hearts will be nourished as we feed spiritually on God’s Word. For this to be most effective, the Christian believer will also engage in and enjoy regular communion with God in prayer. A close walk with God cannot be maintained without these two essential ingredients. But God has promised to bless us when we are obedient to him, part of which means we shall study the Bible and come to him often in prayer.

APPENDIX

TESTIMONY OF DR JOHN HALL

John Hall was brought up in Yorkshire, in the north of England, and, from his childhood, attended a local church with his parents.

I’d been a serious teenager, and two things occurred: firstly, I sensed that God was great, and secondly, I started

to pray over what God wanted me to do with my life. I felt that God had led me into doing science at school and then medicine, which I intensely disliked. Eventually I went away to university, and again I disliked leaving my village, and going to this vast urban desert of Manchester where there was hardly a blade of uncultivated grass, and no trees. I was very unhappy at university, and I began to think that all that religion did was to make a person miserable. I came home after the first term at university determined to think about how I could drop my belief in God, because I felt that as long as I could believe that God wasn't there, I could then live as I liked. But when I came home, a friend took me along to a Bible study. I went only to please this friend, rather than because I wanted to go.

This Bible study wasn't in the church I'd attended with my parents, but in somebody's home. This person had gone away to university and had been converted to Christianity and was leading these Bible studies. The friend who took me along was also a Christian. We were studying Romans 3 where it says, "*No-one does good, no not one*". During the study, there was a debate amongst the young people there, that Paul had gone too far and couldn't possibly be right. Surely, people were basically good? But by this time, I'd come to the conclusion that people weren't good, certainly I wasn't, and that what was said in that chapter of the Bible was true of my heart.

I thought that, because I'd tried to be good. I was taught that you went to heaven if you were good, and I'd had six or seven years of Bible reading and prayer and trying to be good, and I'd failed. The more I knew about God, the

more I realised that my life was offensive to him. However hard I tried to be good, I knew that my inner self, and my dealings with other people were often wrong. So I knew a lot of what I would now refer to as conviction of sin, although I didn't realise it was that then. I also realised that at nineteen, this should have been the happiest time of my life, and that for most of my relatives, their lives went downhill after that. They married, they were unhappy, they had suffering, job problems, lack of fulfilment of desires and ambitions; in other words, life was a miserable business, and if I was miserable at nineteen, then really there wasn't much hope for me.

I realised that life was empty, and that my religion had only given me a fear of God, and a consciousness that I was not right with God. I asked a very significant question at that Bible study. I agreed with what Paul said, and I said to the leader, 'To be a Christian do you just have to grit your teeth and get on with it? Or do you have to love God?' I was serious that, for me, religion was a matter of gritting your teeth and getting on with it, and I found it very painful and uncomfortable. I was quite miserable, and I went home from this meeting extremely agitated, for the first time in my life realising that I wasn't a Christian. David, the friend who was leading the Bible study, lent me a book called 'Alarm to the Unconverted' by Joseph Alleine. So I read this book and it contained the marks of the unconverted which fitted me, so it confirmed my view that I was not a Christian; that being a Christian wasn't going to church, wasn't going to communion, wasn't being confirmed, wasn't trying to be good. But being a Christian

was, indeed, loving God. And it had the marks of conversion there. It was a remarkable book in that it was written in old-fashioned English and I wasn't a reader, although I read my Bible. So it was a struggle to read it, and yet such was the inward drive to read it, that I read it late on into the night.

One evening while reading it, I realised I wasn't a Christian, but that God was there and that there was never going to be any escape from him. Whether I lived or died, I'd have to come to terms with this awesome God. So I got out of bed, knelt down and said to God, 'If you're there then I need to be saved; I've had enough, I've come to the end of myself, I can't go on any longer.' Now it's very interesting: I had no idea what it was to be converted or justified, in spite of going to church for sixteen years, and reading the Bible for five or six years. I must have read most of the Bible in that time, but I had no idea what the religious language meant. So I didn't realise what had happened to me. I didn't know what it was to be converted. A few days later the friend who had taken me to the Bible study, asked me how I was. The people there had obviously seen I was very, very agitated. I told them that I was much calmer; I'd put everything into God's hands.

I noticed first of all that I was calmer, and almost overnight my attitude to the Bible changed, in that I began to see that it was God's Word and that I had to sort out the problems I had with it. So I began to be sympathetic towards the Bible. The other thing that was interesting, although I didn't really know why, was that I desired to be holy, and

liked it and saw it as being useful and wholesome. I couldn't understand why I felt that way either. But I started to read the Bible in earnest, and it was like reading a new book in that I began to understand it for the first time.

After about 3 months I had an argument with a non-Christian round a Bunsen burner in the physiology lab; he said, 'You're no different from me; you're a sinner.' I said, 'Yes, I am a sinner, but God has saved me and hasn't saved you yet.' That's when I realised what had happened to me and that's how I became a Christian.

I was doing medicine at university and, after I became a Christian, I continued to do that. I began to enjoy it, because although I found it extremely difficult and not what I was naturally good at, I started to see that I was doing it for the God who had loved me. I loved God then because I'd experienced his love, and so wanted to please him. Although I found it a tremendous struggle, my testimony was that throughout my time at university, God was exceedingly gracious to me, and although I didn't think I had the talent for the work, I managed to do very well in my exams.

I eventually became a General Practitioner. I wondered about staying in hospital, but I'm a shy sort of person, and it takes me a long time to form relationships. I realised that if I stayed in hospital I could never be of any use in a local congregation because hospital doctors have to move so frequently that I'd never get to know people. I realised, then, that it would be much better to settle in one place and try to serve God there. So I became a GP.

Once I understood that God controlled all the events of my life, I found that fact tremendously comforting, after I'd got over the aggravation of it. Firstly, I sensed that my life was now not adrift on the open sea, not knowing what might happen, but in the hands of the God who had loved me. Therefore, I experienced a sense of calmness and security that I'd never known before. For instance, when I was doing my A Level exams, I panicked, and when a person really panics his vision dances, his handshakes, his heart pounds, his mouth goes dry and it's very difficult to remember anything. Now I found that by praying before exams I had the sense that God was with me and that blind panic went. So I had a new confidence in life, knowing that I wasn't alone any more, and that God cared for me. I also had a desire to please and serve God, so I wanted to work hard, and did work hard, because I could see that there was the need to bring glory to God through my work. Because of my childhood, I'd grown up with the idea that to have close links with other human beings was painful, because they might leave you, or they may die. Therefore, I'd made every attempt to avoid becoming dependent on people, an attitude which actually impoverishes human life. Instead, the love of God enabled me to have confidence to reach out and start to care for other people and to be vulnerable enough to be hurt, because God was always there to help, comfort and strengthen me when I was hurt. Now I'm no longer a GP. I came down to Yate (in the south of England) to be near sound gospel preaching, where the gospel of God's sovereign grace was preached. As I began to work in this new town, with people from all

over the place coming to settle down, and saw the stress that caused, along with the absence of home and family ties, I realised that people weren't going to go 12 miles (to the nearest church) to listen to the preaching. One day someone asked me to help with a new work on the estate that was being built – a huge, vast private housing estate in Yate. I agreed to do so. That eventually led on to a church being formed in 1973. The work began to grow a little and, by 1988, I was preaching, and the congregation was about 50. I realised that I couldn't carry on doing full-time general practice and preaching and it was then that the congregation called me to be one of their full-time elders. I gave up my general practice and became a full-time elder with preaching, teaching and pastoral responsibilities.

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