

REALLY CRUCIAL ISSUES

Introduction

Some questions really have to be faced up to honestly because they are so important. For example, ‘Why are we here?’, or ‘Where did the Universe come from?’ And then things such as, ‘Is there a God, and if so what is he like?’, or ‘Who was Jesus?’ In this booklet we are going to tackle some of these ‘*Crucial Issues*’.

These pages are based on a number of talks Mike Parsons had with Graham Jones in the RightAngles programme, and there is also some additional information. Graham is a Christian pastor from Guildford in England.

We shall approach these issues by simply considering some of the questions Mike raised with Graham. We have also included quite a number of passages from the Bible. The words are quoted in full so you will not need to have a copy of the Bible yourself, but if you do we have added the chapter and verse references so that you can look them up for yourself. We trust you will find this additional information a help as you think about the ‘*Crucial Issues*’ we discuss. If while reading this booklet you have any questions, we would be happy to hear from you, the address is to be found at the end of this booklet.

Derek French
October 1997

Crucial Issue 1 The Bible - What is it? Where did it come from? Is it true?

The Bible is the world’s best-selling book, and it is described by many as the Word of God.

What is it?

The word ‘Bible’ means library. And the Bible is exactly that. It is made up of 66 individual books, and they are divided into two parts. The first part is called the Old Testament, and it contains 39 books. The second part is the New Testament, and has 27 books. It was written over a period of about 1600 years, from 1500 BC to about 100AD. Although there were about 40 different writers used to write it down for us, the author of the Bible is God himself.

What is its overall theme?

The Bible exists to teach us about God. It tells us who he is and what he is like. It also teaches us about ourselves, who we are and how we should live. It also tells us that God sent Jesus Christ to teach us how to live and to show us what God is like. An early Christian teacher named Paul described the Bible as Scripture, and this is what he wrote about it to his younger friend Timothy. His words are found

in the Bible, in the New Testament book of 2 Timothy chapter 3, verses 14 to 17. *“But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy 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.”*

Why do we have the Bible?

The Bible has been given to us because God wants to show himself to us. When you have a relationship with somebody you want to tell them what kind of a person you are and what you desire for them. In a similar way God has chosen to show us in the Bible who he is, what we are to be like, and how we might really know him. In the Old Testament section we have the history of the nation of Israel, and in the New Testament we have the details of Jesus, the one that God sent so that we might come to know God.

How can we know if it is true?

First there are the records themselves, the manuscripts that we have of the Bible. There are literally thousands of these that have been preserved for us. That number is very high compared with other

literature of that historical period. Another important and interesting fact about these documents is that with such a number you would expect there to be a wide divergence of opinion, but in fact this is not the case. Their amazing similarity helps us to see that we have an accurate account of what actually took place in the Jewish nation and at the time when Jesus was alive. And with regard to the manuscripts that tell us about Jesus, the first of these was written in much less than a 100 years from when Jesus was alive, which in historical terms means we have a very accurate record indeed.

But we must remember that the Bible is not just history, it is more than that. It is history with a meaning, a purpose and a direction, and a history that relates to our lives and is meant to affect the way we live today.

Crucial Issue 2 God - Who is he? Does he really exist? What is he like?

Many people say that having the Bible does not prove that God exists, and that is true. But it is interesting to note that the Bible never tries to prove the existence of God. Instead, it assumes he is there. It begins with these words in Genesis chapter 1 verse 1, *“In the beginning God...”*

How do we know that there really is a God?

We begin by looking at the evidence. Take, for example, another person. You would not need to prove the existence of a person you have a relationship with. You know that they are there! And it is like this for Christian believers, because they have a relationship with God and they know he is there. But in addition we can look at the various things a person does in order to know what they are like. Now, when we start thinking about God, we start thinking about the one who made the world, the Creator of the universe. When we look around us, the question arises, where did it all come from? Who made the world? It is clear that it must have been made by someone, and someone who is very powerful indeed. And that person is God himself. We read in the Bible in Romans chapter 1 verse 20, *“For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities - his eternal power and divine nature - have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made...”* The very first book of the Bible, the book of Genesis, teaches us that God is so powerful that he made the world in only six days.

This same evidence all around us teaches us something else about God. Our world is very complex. It is characterised by an amazing variety. Just think of the different flowers or animals and people. How dull the world would be if everything was the same colour. The very evidence before our eyes tells us there is a very wise designer behind it all.

And this is exactly what we find in the Bible. In Psalm 104 verse 24 the Psalmist wrote about God, *“How many are your works, O Lord! In wisdom you made them all; the earth is full of your creatures.”*

Even looking at ourselves has something to teach us about God. Just as often a child resembles its parents’ features or characteristics, so we reflect the God who made us. For example, we are rational people, we can talk, and communicate, and God can do all that too. We have an imagination; we have creativity, and God is like that as well. We are patterned on him, and not he patterned on us. Indeed, God has told us in the Bible that he made man in his own image (Genesis chapter 1 verse 26).

Is there only one true God, or are there many gods?

There is only one true God who lives in heaven, and who has shown us what he is like. If there were many gods, then we would not know who to worship and who to serve. But the real God has shown what he is really like in what he has made, and also in whom he has sent. He sent the Lord Jesus Christ to show us what he is like, so that through following him we might become friends with God. This is how the Bible describes some of the first people who became Christian believers in the ancient city of Thessalonica, in what is now modern day Turkey. These words are

found in 1 Thessalonians chapter 1 verse 9, “...you turned to God from idols to serve **the living and true God**, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead - Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.” And God instructed Moses to teach the nation of Israel these important words, “I am the Lord your God....You shall have no other gods before me.” (Exodus chapter 20 verses 2-3) And through his prophet Isaiah, God has said, “...there is no God apart from me, a righteous God and a Saviour; there is none but me...I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me.” (Isaiah chapter 45 verse 21 & chapter 46 verse 9)

Is it not enough to have our own ideas about what God is like?

Having our own ideas about God is all very well, providing they are true ideas. I might have many ideas about life, but if they are not based on fact, based on reality, then those ideas are worthless. For example, I might like to think I could walk on the ceiling, but the facts of the law of gravity mean that is not possible. So just having my own ideas about something is not enough. This is even more true when we begin to think about God. But the wonderful thing about God is that he not only exists, but has told us about himself in the Bible, so that we can be absolutely sure what he is really like. He has told us that he is an infinite being, and yet personal

and can be known by us. He is great and he is beyond us, yet he is not far from any of us when we speak to him in prayer. He is a sovereign God, he is in control of the world, and he controls it with holiness, goodness and love. And so this God who is there, is a God that we may know and have a relationship with.

Crucial Issue 3 Creation - How did the world and the universe begin? Is man different from the animals?

How do we know that God created the world?

It is often argued that because many scientists, schools, colleges and universities teach that there is no God and therefore no Creator, the world and universe just happened, that God did not create the world as the Bible claims. But the problem with taking that line of approach is that there are also many scientists who say God did create it all. So we are playing one scientist off against another. On the other hand, if we look at the world around us, the picture becomes much clearer. One thing that stands out about the world and the heavens is that they are well ordered, and the evidence points towards the universe being planned. While some scientists say that it came about by chance, with different molecules joining together by accident, you only have to look at your own life to realise there is a mind behind it, a purpose, someone who is teaching us something through it. And what we intuitively know is declared

plainly in the Bible. We read in Psalm 19 verse 1, *“The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.”*

Take, for example, this book that you are reading. You could ask the question, ‘Where does it come from?’ It is obvious someone is communicating with you through it. It indicates there is a mind behind it. It did not come into existence by accident. It was purposely planned. And it is the same when we look at the created universe. It shows us something about God who is communicating with us. It shows us he is a God of order who planned it all. It shows us he is a powerful God, for as the Bible tells us in its opening pages, God created the universe out of nothing, and in just six days (Genesis chapter 1).

Why did God create the Universe?

We can think of it in this way: why do we do the things we do? And one answer is because we show love and care and interest in others. And it is like that with the world. God made it to show us something of what he is like, that he is not only powerful, but also that he is loving and kind, and is a God who is reaching out to us in his love that we might know him. God made us in order that we might enjoy him and have a relationship with him.

Is man different from the animals?

Many have held that man merely evolved and therefore this is the reason for our advanced level of development. However, this fails to face the fact that man really is quite different from the animal world. This still leaves the question, ‘Why is man different from the animal world?’ to be answered. And the reason why man is qualitatively different from the rest of creation is because he is a personal being. The reason for this is explained in the Bible in Genesis chapter 1 verse 27, *“God created man in his own image...”* Man has been made like God, as opposed to being like the rest of creation. While, physically, man is a created being, yet he is more than an animal. He is also more than a machine and more than a robot. Man is a personal being because he is patterned on the God who is there, made in his image.

What does it mean to be made in God’s image?

First, this means in regard to the world around us that we are put into the position of dominion; we act as God’s agent in this world. We are his representatives; we rule this world on his behalf. Again we read in the first chapter of the Bible, Genesis chapter 1 verse 26, *“Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.’”*

It also means that we have a special relationship with God. We have dignity. Each person is valuable, and is worth something more than the mere physical elements of our lives. Man is very special and the object of God's special care. One day, a man named David, who became Israel's king, was thinking about God's greatness and majesty, and in comparison how small and seemingly insignificant we are. His response is recorded for us in the Bible in Psalm 8 verses 3-5, and in it he tells us about this dignity God has given to man. He was talking with God and said, *"When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him? You made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honour."* In other words, it amazed him that God should have such a special interest in man and should have given him such dignity. Man is indeed different from the animals.

Why are we responsible to God?

Being made in God's image also means we are responsible. We are people who can choose, and we have the freedom to choose. And this means we are accountable to God who made us. When we mentioned earlier that God made us to rule over the world, this does not mean we can do just what we like with it. Rather we have to care for the world because

we are accountable to God for the way we live. We do not own the world or ourselves. God does, and because he made the world and us, we have to answer to him. Indeed we are accountable to God for everything we do or fail to do, even down to the words we speak. Jesus put it like this in Matthew chapter 12, verse 36, *"...I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken."*

Why does being made in God's image make us special?

Supremely, being made in God's image means we are made for relationship, first and foremost to have a right relationship with God himself, and then to have a right relationship with others and the world around us. This is illustrated for us again in the very first chapter of the Bible, because once God had created man and woman we find God talking with them. Genesis chapter 1 verse 28 reads, *"God blessed them and said to them, Be fruitful and ..."* And again and again we find God doing just that and man responding by talking to God in prayer. So we can rightly say that man is very special indeed.

Crucial Issue 4 Sin - What has gone wrong with the world? If God created the world, why is it now imperfect?

Was the world perfect when it was first created?

The answer to this is yes. At the end of the first chapter of the Bible we read, *“God saw all that he had made, and it was very good.”* (Genesis Chapter 1 verse 31) It was perfect. There was nothing wrong with it at all. The world was a most beautiful place, and man and woman were perfect also.

Why is the world imperfect now?

One thing that is clear to everyone who considers the present state of the world is that it is in a mess. It is far from perfect. In addition to disasters such as floods and famines and earthquakes, there is the sheer wickedness of man that seems to be like a flood itself. We learn of murders, and thefts and all sorts of corruption. Truthfulness is a rare commodity. There is the vast break up of marriages and families all over the world. And the list of terrible things is almost endless. So what has happened?

We have already said that originally the world that God made was perfect. It functioned exactly as he intended, but that is no longer the case. There is war and poverty and injustice. And the reason for this is that mankind has rebelled against God. We are not going the way that God intended us to go. This rebellion against God not only affects people, but also the world around us. Earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, floods and many more things show the world itself is not how God intended it to be, a world of peace, a world of harmony, a world at peace with

itself. And all that has been affected by man's rebellion.

Where did this all start?

The Bible tells us this began with Adam and Eve, who were the first two people that God made. They chose to disobey God, to listen to the enemy of God and man, the devil, rather than follow God's ways. We read in the Bible in Genesis chapter 3 that they chose to disobey God by eating fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. God had specifically forbidden this in Genesis chapter 2 verses 15-17. *“The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. And the Lord God commanded the man, ‘You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die.’”* Tragically, they chose to disobey God and to turn away from him. And that opened the avenue (opened the floodgates, if you like) for mankind to be out of touch with God and for the world to be disjointed.

Why does something that happened at the beginning of time affect us today?

When Adam and Eve were originally made by God, they also represented mankind. As our representatives, God had placed them in a perfect environment. They had a relationship with God that

was open and free and frank, and when they turned their back on God, sin came into the world. This was nothing less than rebellion against God. And that rebellion is now in our hearts as much as it was in the heart of Adam and Eve when they turned against God. So from that time onwards everyone has inherited this same rebellion against God. It is something which is in all of us, and shows by how we live our lives, that we are actually against God ourselves. Ask any parent and they will tell you that they have never had to teach their children to do wrong, they do it automatically. The psalmist, David, put it like this in Psalm 51 verse 5, *“Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.”*

Why doesn't God destroy the world now?

If God did not let the world carry on, he would judge it and destroy it. But then all of us would be separated from him forever. All of us would be under his judgment, under his punishment. And yet God, in the Bible, has shown that he has a bigger purpose, a greater purpose, a purpose to show his love even to those who have rebelled against him. And this is the message of the Bible.

Crucial Issue 5 God's Response - What did God do when man rebelled?

How did God respond to man's rebellion?

In our last chapter where we considered what has gone wrong with the world, we discovered that the fault lies entirely with man, with us. Man has rebelled against God, has disobeyed God, has spurned God's love and care and all his kindness. The result of this is that mankind is no longer able to relate to God in an open relationship of love and friendship.

When the first man and woman, Adam and Eve, disobeyed God, we read in the first book of the Bible, the book of Genesis, chapter 3 that they were afraid of God and went and hid themselves. Their relationship with God had been spoilt and ruined by their disobedience to him. It became a broken relationship. The Bible goes even further and tells us that mankind is now under God's wrath, his settled hostility against wrong and injustice because of our guilt.

How is God's judgment shown?

When Adam and Eve rebelled, God acted in judgment.

- He judged the tempter who tempted them to disobey God and told him that he would one day be destroyed. God said to the evil one in Genesis 3:15, *“I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head and you will strike his heel.”*

- He also judged the relationships between mankind, with the result there is now suffering, discord and disharmony. Genesis chapter 3 verse 16: *“To the woman he said, ‘I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing; with pain you will give birth to children. Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you.’”*
- He even judged the ground because of man’s rebellion. God said to Adam in Genesis 3:17-19, *“Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return.”*
- He brought death to man, physical death, with all the suffering that leads up to that, and spiritual death whereby man was separated from God and banished from his presence. We read in the New Testament book of Romans, chapter 6 verse 23, *“For the wages of sin is death...”*

Does that mean there is no hope?

Definitely not! Amazingly, in the midst of this judgment, God also promised that he would send somebody to rescue men and women from this dreadful condition that they are now in. He spoke of

one who would come and *“...crush the head of the evil one...”* The evil one would lash out at him, but the rescuer would destroy the evil one. You see, God is both a God of judgment and a God of love. And through the one he would send he would deal with man’s rebellion and sin, and bring man back into a right and loving relationship with him.

In the Old and New Testament parts of the Bible God shows us he has done something positive to rectify the situation. He has sent the Lord Jesus Christ to be the rescuer of lost men and women and to change their lives. He is the one who has crushed the evil one. The way that he did this was to live a perfect life, showing us what God is like, and then he provided the way for men and women to come back to God through his own death. He did this so that all our rebellion, wrongdoing and sin could be put right, so that we might live for God today and enjoy him. We will look at God’s wonderful rescue plan in more detail in the following chapters of this book.

Crucial Issue 6 Our Responsibility - How has man responded to God’s goodness?

What is God like?

We have already looked at God’s character in chapter 2, but it is important to remind ourselves about God so that we can then consider what our relationship to him ought to be. The Bible tells us that God is holy,

true and right. Everything about God is good. God is also just, loving and caring towards all that he has made. In addition, and this is very important, God is also personal. He is a God of relationships, and therefore a God we can know. In the Bible he has shown us his character so that we might relate to him in the right way. David wrote these words about God in the Old Testament part of the Bible, in 1 Chronicles 16:34, *“Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his love endures for ever.”*

Why did God created the world and us?

The Bible tells us that God created the world to show us something of his greatness, so that we might marvel at and worship him. One of the early followers of Jesus was a man named Paul, and he described this in the Bible in the book of Romans chapter 1 and verse 20, *“...since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities - his eternal power and divine nature - have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made...”* In addition to this, God created human beings so that they may know him and relate to him, one to one, and to enjoy his love. Love finds its fulfilment in being given to others. And right back from the beginning of time God has loved mankind, and given us this wonderful world that we live in, and given us himself that we might relate to him. God loved to talk with Adam, the first man, and theirs was a relationship of pure joy. Sadly, however, this blessing has been lost.

How did man respond to God’s goodness?

Sadly, tragically, instead of worshipping God, man decided to be selfish and look after his own concerns and be interested only in what he wanted to do. Man ignored God, spurned his love and kindness, turned his back on God, rebelled against him and sought to live without him. This is what the Bible calls sin. How often we hear people say, *“Well, it’s my life; I can do what I like with it. I’m only responsible to myself.”*

What is our responsibility?

The problem with this attitude is that it fails to recognise the responsibility each of us has towards God. He has made us, and therefore we are not a law unto ourselves, but accountable to him. The air we breathe is his air, the health we enjoy is his gift to us, the food that we eat comes from his goodness. All of this means that we are not only responsible to ourselves, but also and chiefly to God who has made us. And we can go further and add that we are also responsible to everyone else. Our lives affect others. We live in communities, in families, in villages, towns and cities, so all that we do will affect others and not just ourselves. If we simply live for self we will miss out on our relationship with God and also on truly loving others as God has intended. Jesus summed these responsibilities up in this way when he was asked by someone one day what is the first and

greatest of all God's commandments. His answer is found in Matthew chapter 22 verses 37-38, "*Jesus replied: 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbour as yourself.'*"

How can our relationship with God be restored?

The truth of the matter is, sadly, that this relationship with God has broken down. It is as if there is a barrier between us and God, which, as we have seen, is because of our wrongdoing. God is angry with us for our rebellion, and on our side stands our sin which cuts us off from God. The Old Testament prophet Isaiah described it like this in Isaiah chapter 59 verse 1, "...*your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you...*" Some people have imagined they could get over this barrier themselves by stacking up all the good things they do. This is a delusion because the stack will never be tall enough or good enough. The debt we owe to God is too great for us to pay. Also this way of thinking can never deal with God's side of the barrier, his righteous anger against our sin. No sacrifice we might offer, no action or kindness we might do can ever deal with that. The only one who can deal with God's anger is God himself. He needs to enter into our world in order to change this situation and change us. And you will remember in

chapter 5 we saw how God promised to send a rescuer to do this very thing, and that rescuer is the Lord Jesus Christ.

Crucial Issue 7 Jesus - Who was he? Is he God?

What was Jesus' impact on the world?

We do not have to look far to realise that Jesus has had an enormous impact on our world and its history. The very date today is based upon his life. When historians write about a date we often read that it was either BC or AD, and those letters simply refer to before Christ or after Christ. The book which contains the details of his life and teaching, the Bible, is still the world's best selling book, outselling any other book sold today. And millions of people in past generations and millions today follow Jesus as his disciples and speak of how he has changed and influenced their lives. So his impact is very, very considerable.

Was Jesus a real person?

The answer to this is a simple yet important, 'Yes'. In the Bible we have the details of his genealogy in Matthew chapter 1 and Luke chapter 3, showing that his family tree went right back through the Jewish nation to the very beginning when God created the world. Then when he lived on earth people spoke with him. They saw him walk and sit and eat and

sleep and bleed. They saw him live a real life and knew that he was fully man. When writing about the Lord Jesus Christ one of his followers named John wrote in 1 John chapter 1 verse 1, *“That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched - this we proclaim concerning the Word of life.”* Then there is the simple but lovely testimony about Jesus’ life on earth that we find in the New Testament part of the Bible in Acts chapter 10 verse 38 *“...he went around doing good...”* So there is no doubt at all that he was a real person, a real man. And yet the Bible also claims that he was more than that.

What was God doing through Jesus?

We have already seen that God promised to send Jesus as the great rescuer or Saviour of men and women. The Bible has shown us that we are not right with God because of our sin, and therefore need someone to deliver us from it. And God sent Jesus to do that saving work. As we think about this we can say a number of important things.

- God sent Jesus to be his King, and he is therefore the rightful ruler of this world. We read in the New Testament book of Revelation chapter 17 verse 14, *“...he is Lord of lords and King of kings...”*

- God sent Jesus as the great Prophet, greater than all other prophets, the one who would speak to us exactly what God wanted us to hear. Jesus said one day, *“...I do nothing on my own but speak just what the Father has taught me.”* He was speaking about God the Father, and those words are found in the Bible in John chapter 8 verse 28.
- God sent Jesus as the Priest, the one who could bring us back to God. Writing about this, Peter described Jesus’ death in this way in 1 Peter chapter 3 verse 18, *“For Christ died for our sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God.”*

And Jesus could do all these things because he was more than a man, he was also God. Describing Jesus as the Word, John wrote in his Gospel, in John chapter 1 verse 1, *“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”* One of Jesus disciples named Thomas spoke to Jesus after his resurrection and said in John chapter 20 verse 28, *“My Lord and my God!”* So we can see that Jesus was God’s King, God’s Prophet, and God’s Priest.

Was he like other good teachers, or was he different?

This is an important question because some have claimed that Jesus was really no different from any

other moral teacher. They admit he was a very good one, but that is all. And basically they claim that Jesus was no different from others. Well, is that right? Is this a correct assessment about Jesus? When we examine the evidence the only conclusion we are left with is that Jesus was unique. He was different to all other religious and spiritual teachers that have ever lived. He was a good teacher indeed, the very best. Those who listened to him testified that no one taught as he did. One day some of his enemies sent the temple guards to bring Jesus to them. They went to him, but in fact did not arrest him. When they were questioned by the authorities for not doing this they replied in John chapter 7 verse 46, *“No one spoke the way this man does.”* Again and again people recognised that there was a depth and an authority to his words that they could find nowhere else. We can safely say that Jesus was the greatest teacher that has ever lived. One of his most famous and penetrating teaching discourses is called the ‘Sermon on the Mount’ and you can read it for yourself in Matthew’s Gospel chapters 5 to 7.

What made Jesus so special?

But we have to say that Jesus was much more than the greatest teacher that has ever lived. He also claimed to do everything that God could do - to forgive sin, to give life to people, and to be the judge of the world at the end of time. One day a paralysed man was

brought to Jesus by his friends. The events are recorded in the Bible in Matthew chapter 9. The first thing that Jesus said to the man was this in verse 2, *“Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven.”* Some other religious teachers of the day who heard this accused Jesus of blaspheming, because they knew that only God can forgive sins. To demonstrate that he really was able to forgive the man, Jesus said to his critics in verse 5, *“Which is easier: to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Get up and walk?’”* Then Jesus proved that he did, indeed, have the authority to forgive sins. He said to the paralysed man in verse 6, *“‘Get up, take your mat and go home.’ And the man got up and went home. When the crowd saw this, they were filled with awe; and they praised God, who had given such authority to men.”* And again and again Jesus demonstrated his divine power in his many miracles. He had power over disease, demons, nature, and even death itself, raising people from the dead. And what is significant about all these things is that even his enemies agreed that he had done these things. Indeed it was their jealousy towards him for doing these good and great acts that made them hate him. The accounts in the Bible of all that Jesus did are not written in sensational language, but as they occurred in the everyday events of his life.

All this evidence combines to tell us that Jesus was the one that God promised to send and that he was indeed different. But there is even more than that

about him. The Bible and Christians say that Jesus also died in their place on the cross, but that he is not dead now. He is risen from the dead, and he is the true King, the true Lord, and it is these things together which make Jesus unique. And for more on this, read on!

Crucial Issue 8 The Cross - How did Jesus die?

Why did Jesus die?

How did Jesus die?

Jesus died by crucifixion when he was about 33 years old. We read Luke's account of this terrible event in his Gospel in the Bible in this simple statement (Luke chapter 23 verse 33): "*When they came to the place called the Skull, there they crucified him...*" At this time, the Romans had a most barbaric way of executing people by tying or nailing them to a wooden cross and hanging them up under the sun, so that, after an excruciatingly painful ordeal, the victim eventually died of suffocation or heart failure. This was the way that Jesus died.

Why did Jesus die?

If you asked the Romans why Jesus died they might have pointed out some political reasons for it. If you asked the Jewish leaders of the time, they would say it was because of religious reasons, because Jesus claimed to be God. But when we examine the Bible we discover the amazing fact that it was God's

purpose that he should die. This was foretold in the Old Testament part of the Bible, and this is why Paul wrote in the New Testament in 1 Corinthians chapter 15 verse 3, "*...Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures...*" So we must take note that he died in the place of others. He had done no wrong himself, but he died because of the wrong that others had done. He himself deserved no punishment. Peter wrote in 1 Peter chapter 2, verse 22, "*He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.*" He was, after all, God's Son and was perfect, yet he bore the punishment of others, in their place, when he died on the cross. And all of this was God's plan. The early Christian disciple, Peter, commenting on the fact that evil men murdered Jesus and that it was God's purpose for him to die, said in Acts chapter 2 verse 23, "*This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross.*"

Why did God plan for Jesus to die?

But this raises the question, 'Why did God plan to save others by the death of Jesus, his own Son?' And to answer that we need to remember a number of things about God and about us. God is a holy God, absolutely pure and spotless and cannot tolerate any wrongdoing. Habakkuk, an Old Testament prophet, described God like this in Habakkuk chapter 1 verse 13, "*Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you*

cannot tolerate wrong.” God is also righteous, and therefore must act justly. He has to punish wrongdoing. And that is where our problem arises, for we are the ones who have done the wrong. We are the guilty ones. We are the ones who deserve to be punished by God. And the amazing thing is that God, in the greatest act of love that has ever been committed, said that he would bear man’s sin, man’s wrongdoing. And God did this by punishing his own Son, Jesus. Jesus took that punishment instead of others! He suffered God’s wrath for man’s sin. He took the punishment which was due to his people, those who will turn and trust him. This is how Paul wrote about it to the Christian believers who lived in the ancient city of Corinth (in 2 Corinthians chapter 5 verse 19 in the Bible): “...*God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men’s sins against them.*” And writing about Jesus a few sentences later he declared in verse 21, “*God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*” When someone trusts in Jesus, and becomes his follower, God forgives them for all of their sins because at the cross Jesus has borne sin’s penalty in full.

The cross then is at the very heart of Christianity. Without the cross Christianity would be like any other religion in the world and simply be a set of good moral teachings and standards. But it is the cross of Jesus that transforms Christianity into its unique

position, because it is through the cross that God deals with sin and offers to men and women like you and me his forgiveness, enabling us to be changed and to live for God.

Crucial Issue 9 The Resurrection - What is resurrection? How do we know it is true? What does it mean?

What does this mean?

This is a very important question to consider because over the years a number of different answers have been given which are untrue. So what is the truth? What does the Bible mean when it speaks of the resurrection of Jesus? What is it precisely that Christian believers understand when they speak of this?

By resurrection, we mean that Jesus was dead, having been crucified, and that he physically, bodily, rose from the dead and is alive today with God in heaven. The same body of Jesus that was taken down from the cross, bearing the marks of the nail prints in his hands and feet, and the hole where a Roman soldier’s spear had penetrated his side, and which was laid in a tomb, rose to life again. We mention these details because, not only are they true, but they had a profound influence on one man who refused to believe that Jesus was alive. His name was Thomas, and he was one of the twelve disciples of Jesus. When the other

disciples told him they had seen Jesus and spoken with him he refused to believe that he had risen. The details are recorded for us in the Bible in John's Gospel chapter 20 verses 25-28. When the other disciples told him, "*We have seen the Lord!*", this is how he replied, "*Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it.*" Exactly a week later Jesus appeared to the disciples again, and this time Thomas was there. Jesus said to Thomas, "*Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.*" Thomas was so convinced that he humbly said to Jesus, "*My Lord and my God!*", and he doubted no longer.

Could something else have happened to the body of Jesus?

Because the resurrection of Jesus is so unusual and remarkable, many alternatives have been proposed to try to undermine its truth. For example, some have said that the disciples simply saw a ghost and that it was not Jesus at all. This, however, has an enormous difficulty to overcome because the disciples actually saw the risen Jesus eat food, and they touched him. Luke described the disciples' initial reaction when he appeared to them after his resurrection like this in Luke chapter 24 verses 36-43:

"While they were still talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." They were startled and frightened, thinking they saw a ghost. He said to them, "Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds? Look at my hands and feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have." When he had said this, he showed them his hands and feet. And while they still did not believe it because of joy and amazement, he asked them, "Do you have anything here to eat?" They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate in their presence."

Others have objected to the resurrection saying the disciples who saw him must have hallucinated. But the Bible records not just one appearance, but many, and to different people in many different places. Could all these have hallucinated to order? And in addition, over 500 people saw him on one occasion and it is utterly unbelievable to suggest they all hallucinated at the same time. You can read these details in the Bible in 1 Corinthians 15 verses 3 to 7.

Still others have claimed Jesus did not rise from the dead because he had not actually died! They make the claim that he merely fainted, and in the cool of the tomb revived. Such a claim is naïve to say the least and fails to take account of the facts. Before Jesus

was crucified, Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, ordered that he first be flogged. This flogging was so severe many men died from it as the flesh was torn from their backs. Then there were the long hours on the cross itself, in this the most agonising form of execution men have ever devised. And if that is not enough there was the Roman soldier's spear which pierced his side from which flowed water and blood, a well acknowledged scientific indication that death had already occurred as the water and blood cells had already started to separate. To say after all this that Jesus only fainted is as laughable as it is a tragic denial of the facts. Jesus really died, and he physically came back from the dead.

Even with all these facts, there are still some who refuse to believe that Jesus rose physically from the dead. They say it was not a physical bodily resurrection, but a spiritual one, and the Spirit of Jesus lives on in the lives of individual Christian believers and the church. Now, there is much truth in these sentiments, because by his Spirit Jesus does indeed live in the lives of believers today, and they do know God's power in their lives. Indeed, the very fact that anyone has become a true disciple of Jesus is because God has been at work in their lives by the same power that raised Jesus from the dead. You can read about that in Ephesians 1 verse 18 onwards. But this spiritual awareness is rooted in the historical facts of Jesus' death and resurrection. It is these historical

facts which prove the spiritual realities related to it. Without the historical resurrection there would be no spiritual repercussions and benefits. It is because Jesus really did rise from the dead, and that his disciples did see and touch him, and because his life is now transformed, there is a secure future for the people who know Jesus. They can know him today and have his Spirit live in them, and they can be sure of life beyond death and their own resurrection from the dead.

How do we know it is true?

In a sense we have already furnished much of this in the previous paragraphs. We have seen quite clearly that Jesus had died, and only a genuine resurrection from the dead can account for the way he appeared to many afterwards. But in addition there was his empty tomb - something which even his enemies among the religious authorities of the day admitted was a fact. They had set soldiers to guard the tomb to prevent anyone attempting to steal the body of Jesus. Indeed, we read in Matthew's Gospel that these authorities did their utmost to deceive the people when the news reached them that Jesus had risen. We read in Matthew chapter 28 from verse 12:

“When the chief priests had met with the elders and devised a plan, they gave the soldiers a large sum of money, telling them, ‘You are to say, ‘His

disciples came during the night and stole him away while we were asleep.’ If this report gets to the governor, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble.” So the soldiers took the money and did as they were instructed. And this story has been widely circulated among the Jews to this very day.”

Further, there is the evidence not only of him appearing to his disciples, people who already believed in him, but also to people who did not believe in him. One of these was James, his own brother, who had not been a follower of Jesus, but who eventually became a disciple as a result.

Then we must not forget the remarkable changes that took place in the lives of his disciples because of his resurrection. Previously they had been a frightened band of men. When Jesus was arrested just before his crucifixion we are told in Matthew’s Gospel chapter 26, verse 56, *“Then all the disciples deserted him and fled.”* Peter, almost the spokesman of the disciples, denied he ever knew Jesus at all when he was challenged about it by a little maid. Then immediately after Jesus’ death, on the very day he had risen from the dead, we are told, in John’s Gospel chapter 20 and verse 19, that his followers met in fear: *“On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jews...”* But what do we

discover after they realised Jesus had risen and was alive? These same timid, frightened men become bold and courageous and begin to declare publicly the good news about Jesus. They were even prepared to suffer persecution, including imprisonment, beatings and death for the sake of Jesus, because they knew he had indeed overcome death. It is these tremendous events, the death and resurrection of Jesus, that started Christianity, which is now transforming the lives of millions of people all around the world. The resurrection of Jesus was indeed a historical fact. He is no longer dead, but alive.

What does the resurrection of Jesus mean?

What is so important from all this is that we can have a relationship with Jesus today because he is alive. We can know him and experience his resurrection power in our lives today. We can pray to him and know that he hears us, which he could not do if he was dead. So when Christians tell others about him they are talking about a living person. Unlike all other religious leaders who have lived and died, only Jesus has come back from the dead.

Crucial Issue 10 Jesus’ Death and Resurrection - How is it relevant to me?

What does it tell us about Jesus?

The death and resurrection of Jesus tells us he is completely different from anyone else, including any

other religious or world leader that has ever lived. It means that everything he claimed about himself, and his power to forgive and love people, was really true. Before any of these events took place in his life, Jesus said they would happen to him. We read in the Bible in Matthew chapter 16 verse 21, *“From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.”* The truthfulness of Jesus about these things also shows us that what he accomplished by his death and resurrection, his death in the place of others to put them right with God, is also right and true. It also shows us that we need to meet Jesus in our lives today, and that we will all meet him as our Judge in the future.

What does it tell us about our sin?

The death of the Lord Jesus Christ shows us that what Christians believe about sin is true. Our sin is something very serious indeed in the eyes of God, because it took the death of Jesus Christ to put men and women right with God. It shows that our sins are hostile to God, and God is hostile towards our sins. The early Christian leader, Paul, described it like this in Romans chapter 8 verses 7-8, part of his letter to the Christians living at Rome, *“...the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God’s law, nor*

can it do so. Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God.” And the death of Jesus helps us to see how solemn a thing sin is, and how dangerous a thing it is to live a life that is not pleasing to God.

What does it teach about God’s love?

But alongside that, the death of Jesus also shows us something of the tremendous love that God has for sinful people today. The fact that he was willing to send his Son to die in that way shows that each individual is precious in God’s sight. It shows us that men and women are valued by God, and that we can know his love in our lives today. Through the death of Jesus sin’s penalty has been paid, and we as sinners can be forgiven for all the wrong we have ever done, and we can experience that now. John has described this in a lovely statement in his Gospel in the Bible. The words come from John chapter 3 verse 16: *“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son (that is Jesus), that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”*

What was accomplished by Jesus’ death?

The death and the resurrection of Jesus are linked together for a very important reason. It is the resurrection of Jesus that shows us that his death was effective in dealing with sin. It shows that he carried God’s judgment in full, so that those who follow him will not have to bear the punishment their sins

deserve because Jesus has done that for them. This means that our relationship with God can be restored. Writing about this Paul put it in these words which are found in the New Testament book of 2 Corinthians chapter 5 verse 19: *“...God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men’s sins against them.”* And in his letter to the Christians at Rome in Romans 4 verse 25 he wrote that Jesus *“...was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.”* It is his resurrection that shows us God was fully satisfied with all that Jesus accomplished in his death and now all who trust him will be forgiven.

Is there life after death?

In addition to this, the resurrection of Jesus also shows us that death is not the end. There is life beyond death. Some people think that once you are dead that is the end of you, but the Bible shows us that is not the case. We are told in the book of Hebrews in the Bible in chapter 9 verse 27 that *“...man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment...”* So there is something after death. And for Christian believers that judgment will declare them to belong to God’s children and they will be welcomed into heaven. Indeed, we can go further and say that as Jesus was raised so will all his followers, and they will live with him forever. Jesus said to his disciples in John chapter 14 verse 19, *“Because I live,*

you also will live.” The moment we believe in him he gives us eternal life and we shall never perish.

Is Christianity unique?

Christianity is different from all other religions because it is concerned with God coming down to us and revealing himself to us, not with our reaching up to him. Christianity is concerned with God sending his Son into the world to die for sinners, and therefore it shows us more than anything else the enormity of God’s love for men and women. Christianity is about a God who has acted for us, and not things that we have to do in order to get to God. And because Jesus is now alive, he is the one true God that we should follow.

What does God do for those who trust in Jesus?

If we do begin to follow Jesus and come to know him as our Lord and Saviour we shall receive some tremendous blessings.

- We have already mentioned that all our sins - that is the wrong we have done and good we have failed to do - will be forgiven by God. Paul, writing about Christian believers in Ephesians chapter 1 verse 7 tells us, *“In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins...”*
- We will be granted his Holy Spirit to live inside us. The Bible describes the Christian believer’s

body as “...*the temple of the Holy Spirit.*” (1 Corinthians chapter 6 verse 19)

- We will be given his peace, and joy, and his new life enabling us to live for God in a new way. Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians chapter 5 verse 17 that, “...*if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!*”
- We will have Jesus with us all of the time. Jesus told his disciples at the very end of Matthew’s Gospel in chapter 28 verse 20 “*And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.*”
- We will be brought back to God, as Peter tells us in 1 Peter chapter 3 verse 18, “*For Christ died for our sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God.*”
- We will be united to all other Christian believers in the world, as they have his Holy Spirit living in them also. Paul described this unity between believers in this way in Galatians chapter 3 verse 28: “*There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*”

I think you will agree that these are very precious benefits that Jesus gives to whoever follows him today.

Crucial Issue 11 Our Response - How do we become Christians? What is faith?

Why should we respond to Jesus?

Throughout this book we have considered the historical background to Christianity, the person of Jesus, his death and resurrection, and the fact that there is a barrier between us and God because of our sin. This last part is something all of us are only too aware of because, if we are honest with ourselves, we know there are many wrong things that we have done, and there are many good things that we have failed to do. Many who think seriously about these things realise they are in a terrible position because they cannot do anything by themselves to rectify their broken relationship with God. Indeed, there is an incident in the Bible that describes people in this very condition. It is recorded for us in Acts chapter 2. Peter had been speaking to the people about God, about Jesus, about his death and resurrection, and about their many sins. As they listened they felt things deeply and were very disturbed, leading them to cry out with a very important question in Acts chapter 2 verse 37: “*When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, ‘Brothers, what shall we do?’*” They knew they had failed God and were guilty, yet they longed to put that right, but did not know how, hence their very important question, “*What shall we do?*”

How should we respond to Jesus?

The answer that Jesus would give us to that question is that we need to get right with God, and to do that we need to remember a number of things. Jesus is the Lord and we should begin following him as our Lord. This means we will not only listen to his message but also do what he tells us.

⇒ **Repentance**

Right at the beginning of his public ministry Jesus told the people they needed to repent. We read about it in Matthew chapter 4 verse 17, *“From that time on Jesus began to preach, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.’”* Indeed this was part of Peter’s answer also to those who asked him, *“What shall we do?”* He replied in Acts 2 verse 38, *“Repent and be baptised, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins.”* Repentance literally means to have a change of mind, to turn around. As we recognise that we are sinners we are to turn away from that sinful way of living and turn back to God. In other words, we are to begin to think about God’s way; about what God wants, and not just, selfishly, what we want. We are to have a change of desire and begin to love what God loves, and this results in a change of action. Repentance includes being sorry to God for our sins, but it is more than that. It actually means forsaking our sinful way of living

and wanting to live as God directs us in the Bible. It leads to a different lifestyle; a Christian lifestyle.

⇒ **Faith**

Something that is closely linked with repentance in the Bible is faith. They really are two things that go together, and true repentance cannot exist without true faith. Faith is believing in God. But it is much more than simply acknowledging that God exists. True faith means trusting God and depending on God. We read in the New Testament book of Hebrews, chapter 11 verse 6, *“Without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.”* And faith also means trusting in who Jesus is. In particular it is trusting in what Jesus accomplished on the cross when he died for the sins of others. It is saying that we are depending on what he has done to deal with our sin and to put us right with God, and not trusting in our own feeble efforts, whatever they may be. Once when Paul and Silas were in prison in the city of Philippi for telling the people about Jesus, the jailer of the prison also asked what he should do in order to be forgiven by God. He actually said, *“What must I do to be saved?”* The answer given to him is found in Acts chapter 16 verse 31, *“Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved...”*

These two things, repenting and believing, are so necessary. When we think of all that God has done for us, in making us and this world for us to live in, and when we think of all he has accomplished through the Lord Jesus Christ, the only fitting response is that we should love him. Until we do begin to do that the Bible tells us we are under God's judgment. Paul, writing to his Christian friends at Ephesus described their condition before they became followers of Jesus in this way in Ephesians chapter 2 verse 3, "*Like the rest, we were by nature objects of (God's) wrath.*" This is why we need to turn to God in repentance and place our faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, so that we can be delivered from that judgment and receive the new life and peace and joy and freedom from sin that God offers.

What this involves

If we are to truly repent and believe, then this will involve a number of things:

- We will admit that we are wrong before God.
- We will believe what Jesus Christ has done on the cross to deal with sin.
- We will consider the cost, realising that this is a lifetime change, and that we are going to follow God for the rest of our days on earth.
- We will pray to God and ask him to forgive our sins and to accept Christ's death on our behalf.

What is prayer?

Thinking of this last and very important point of praying to God, we need to realise a number of things. Prayer is talking to God. Christianity is about a living relationship with God, the God who is everywhere. So we do not need to go to a particular place in order to pray, such as a temple or church building. We do not need to go to a particular person such as a priest so that through them we might come to God. All we need to do is to tell God what is on our hearts and minds. He already knows everything about us, and this enables us to be absolutely honest with him without fear that he will reject us. He knows we are guilty sinners and he knows that we need his mercy, and he delights to have people ask him for it. Indeed the only person who can bring us to God is Jesus. He has told us in John's Gospel chapter 14 and verse 6, "*I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.*" So wherever you are at this present moment you can pray to God. Just simply talk to him, because he hears us. Christianity is a wonderful relationship between the believer and God, not between the believer and some building or some other person. It is a personal relationship where the God of heaven becomes the believer's Lord and Saviour. Jesus described the prayer of one such man who came to God, conscious of his many sins and need of

forgiveness. His prayer was not long, but it was real and came from his heart. This is what we read about him. It is found in Luke chapter 18 verse 13, *“He would not even look up to heaven but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’”* And Jesus said God gave him the very thing he asked for.

Crucial Issue 12 Following Jesus - How can I be sure I am a Christian? How can I grow as a Christian?

How can I know if I have become a Christian?

In our last chapter we spoke about the need to repent and believe, and saw how it is important that we talk with God in prayer asking him to forgive us for the wrong in our lives. And a question that can arise at that point is this, ‘How can I be sure that this has really made a difference in my life?’ This is a very important question, because God wants us to know that we really have now become his children, and for us to enjoy that fact in our lives. We can have this assurance for a number of reasons. First, Christianity is something that is based upon what Jesus has done, not on what we have done. So if we have turned to God and have followed and trusted in Jesus Christ, relying on what he has done on the cross, then we have trusted in the greatest person who has ever lived. That is intended to give us the greatest assurance of all that we now belong to God. John put it this way in chapter 20 verses 30-31 of his Gospel after having

written an account of Jesus’ life and ministry: *“Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.”* And in chapter 5 and verse 13 of his first letter John tells the purpose that lay behind his writing, *“I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life.”*

What is the work of the Holy Spirit?

But God does something else for the Christian believer. He sends his Holy Spirit to live in us, and he assures us that these things are true, and we are indeed God’s children. We read in Romans 8 verses 15 and 16, *“For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, ‘Abba, Father.’ The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children.”* That unusual word ‘Abba’ was the Aramaic word that a child would use for their own father. If someone else was speaking about the child’s father, they would use an entirely different word. The word ‘Abba’ was a term of intimacy and affection. And that is now the relationship that exists between the Christian believer and Almighty God. He becomes our Father.

The Holy Spirit also begins to enable believers to live for God, and to change and develop into the people that God wants them to be. And again in Romans 8 Paul tells us in verse 14 that, “...those led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.” And you will notice the certainty with which he writes. It is this certainty which helps us to live the Christian life.

What should I do to grow as a Christian?

When people become followers of Jesus a great change takes place. No longer do they live for themselves or simply as they think best. Instead, they want to live for their Lord and do what he commands. Someone has said that starting the Christian life is a bit like standing on the first step of a ladder. It is the first step of a life-long climb until we reach heaven at the top. That illustration simply means that the new Christian needs to learn about God more and know him better, and this is a life-long exercise. Here are some things the Christian will do:

- New believers need to follow him in every area of their lives and to serve him. Desiring these things, the young Christian will want to find a Bible and to read it in order to discover more about God and his will for daily living. Writing about the importance of Bible study to his young friend Timothy, Paul wrote in 2 Timothy chapter 3 verses 16-17, “*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.”

- Because Christianity is a relationship with God, the disciples of Jesus will begin to talk with God regularly in prayer. Each day Christians will bring the whole of their lives to the Lord. They will tell God when they know they have done wrong and let him down, and seek his forgiveness afresh. They will submit all their plans to God and ask him to lead them and direct them. 1 Thessalonians 5 verse 17 tells us simply, “...pray continually...”
- And Christians will want to meet with other Christians. If we have indeed become part of God’s family we will want to meet with the other members too, as they have now become our brothers and sisters. So we shall join with them to worship God, to express our love to him, and to learn together about him. The very first believers did this and it is summarised for us in Acts chapter 2 verse 42, “*They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching (that is Bible study) and to the fellowship (that is to one another), to the breaking of bread and to prayer.*”
- Having come to know God’s love personally, the believer will want to share God’s love with others. This means they will begin to tell them how good God is and what Jesus has done for them. Indeed, Jesus instructed one man with these very words in

Mark chapter 5 verse 19: *“Go home to your family and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you.”*

Is it costly to become a Christian?

Being a Christian believer does not mean that you will no longer have problems. Indeed, for many, the very fact that they have become followers of Jesus brings difficulties to them. It can mean that their families or their friends no longer want anything to do with them, or they begin being unkind and hurtful. This is by no means easy. Not everyone likes the Christian message, and not everybody wants to turn and follow God. This is part of counting the cost we mentioned earlier. When this happens it is important for us to remember that following the Lord Jesus Christ is the most crucial issue in our lives, and therefore we should not let other people, even family members, put us off from remaining faithful to Jesus. Remember, it is through following Jesus that God becomes our Father. And Jesus has promised us he will bring other brothers and sisters to us, so that we can have a new family, his church. We, in fact, belong to a world-wide family of believers who are followers of the Lord Jesus Christ. This does not mean everything will be easy, nor that we will never make any mistakes or never do wrong again, but it does mean that God will be with us in all our struggles and will never leave or forsake us. His

grace is sufficient for our every need (2 Corinthians chapter 12 verse 9).

How will I keep it up?

Many who start the Christian life, along with those who are seriously considering becoming a follower of Jesus, often face this obstacle. They know that to be a Christian believer means a life-long commitment, and they wonder if they could ever keep it up and remain faithful to Jesus to the very end. Following Jesus Christ is indeed a life-long relationship. It is something that develops and grows. But it is because it is a relationship with God and with Jesus that enables the Christian to keep going. We have already seen how God gives the believer the Holy Spirit. He helps them to live for God and to develop their relationship with him. God has also given us the Bible, his Word, to us, which also strengthens our faith. Then we have the support and encouragement of other Christians, and by meeting with them regularly we are helped to keep going in the Christian life. And we have the privilege of prayer, of talking with God and seeking his help in specific areas of our lives. God has given us all these things to help us, and he expects us to use them. When we do, he will help us. Paul challenged the Philippian Christians about this when he wrote in Philippians chapter 2 verses 12 and 13, *“...as you have always obeyed...continue to work out your salvation with fear*

and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.” Yes, Christian believers must work at it in their Christian lives, but as they do that, so God works in them to help.

What happens when we die?

One of the greatest encouragements given to Christian believers is that their relationship with God is not just for life, but it is for longer than this. It is eternal. It will continue after death and forever. At the end of this life believers have the assurance that they will be with Christ, and with other Christians who have already died. And then at the end of time, when their bodies have been resurrected, they will worship God and serve Christ in a new heaven and a new earth that God will make, and they will dwell with the Lord forever. If you have access to a Bible you can read about this in the New Testament in 1 Thessalonians chapter 4 verses 13 to 18, 1 Peter chapter 1 verses 3 to 5, 2 Peter chapter 3 verse 13, and Revelation chapter 21 verses 1 to 4.

This is the great goal for the Christian. Yes, there is a place to avoid, which the Bible calls hell. It is a place where God's judgment and wrath abide. But for all who come to trust in God through the Lord Jesus Christ, there is a heaven to gain, where they will live with him forever.

This book is supplied by Grace Baptist Mission and other titles are available in e-mail format at the address below:

**Grace Baptist Mission
12 Abbey Close
Abingdon
OXON
OX14 3JD
UK**

e-mail: radio@gbm.org.uk