

Comfort & Counsel

FOUNDATIONAL TRUTHS

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CHAPTER 1 – GOD THROUGH THE AGES

God is too big for our small created brains to figure out for ourselves, and what we know about God is only what He has revealed to us. The Bible gives us a record of how God has revealed Himself to us throughout time. It reveals to us what He has been doing from the beginning, what He is doing now, and what He will do in the time to come. In order for us to get a good understanding of our relationship with Him and His plans for us, it will be good for us to get an overview of the entire scenario.

a. The nature and character of God

God is a spirit, and has no physical body or form (John 4:24). The Bible sometimes mentions His arms, eyes, etc., in a figure of speech to convey some spiritual truths. But God does not want us to represent Him in any visible form. From the ancient times people have made idols to represent God as they understood. But God opposes all such attempts since it misrepresents His real nature (Exodus 20:4,5).

God is omniscient (all knowing), omnipresent (present everywhere at the same time) and omnipotent (almighty). Since He created everything, He knows every detail of every substance in the universe and every created being by name. He knows our thoughts (Psalm 139:2), He sees what we are doing at any time (Psalm 139:3,4), every hair on each one of our heads is numbered (Matthew 10:30), He knows what all is happening to each creature (Matthew 10:29), etc.

God is present everywhere (Psalm 139:8; Jeremiah 23:23,24). This is how He sees everything that is happening, hears every prayer and is close to every one of His children (Psalm 46:1). A sinner cannot hide himself from God, and even the darkness is like light to Him (Psalm 139:12).

God has power to do whatever He wants (Psalm 135:6). But He cannot contradict His own character, and He has chosen to grant people the freedom to choose. As a result there are many things that He will not do. Since He has absolute power and authority, He is in control over all things. But since He has allowed certain freedom to His created beings, including demons and evil people, He is not directly responsible for everything that happens.

God has revealed Himself as one God (monotheism) existing and working together as three Persons, the Father, the Son (who took the name of Jesus when He came to earth), and the Holy Spirit. This is altogether difficult for us to imagine or understand, but we believe it because that is how God has shown Himself from the time of creation. We see at the time of creation God the Father as the One who was responsible for the creation and who made the announcement about each step, the Holy Spirit moving about over the creation, and the Son (who implemented the acts of creation as the Father spoke – Genesis 1:3 John 1:1-3). The Son came down to earth as Jesus (John 3:16), prayed to the Father (Luke 22:42), and was filled with the Holy Spirit (Matthew 3:16). Now those who have become children of God are born of the Spirit (John 3:8) and have the Son in them (Colossians 1:27). They can be filled with the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:4) and have the Father also make His abode in them (John 14:23). Believers are baptised in water in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:19). The three Persons cannot be separated. One cannot have the Father without the Son (1 John 2:23), and if one does not have the Spirit, he does not have the Son either (Romans 8:9).

The character of God is seen in His holiness (as being separate from sin - 1 John 1:5; Isaiah 6:3), righteousness (Deuteronomy 32:4), truthfulness (Psalm 19:9; John 17:7), love (John 3:16; Romans

5:8; 8:35-39), mercy (Romans 11:30), goodness (Matthew 5:45), compassion (Isaiah 30:18; Daniel 9:9).

b. Pre-Genesis

God has no beginning or end, and He knows the past, the present and the future as we see time. The Book of Genesis starts with the description of how God created the universe as we know it now, and all the creatures on earth including man. But we know from the Bible that it was not the beginning of creation itself. God had created a set of spiritual beings including angels (messengers, ministering spirits), seraphim and cherubim. They have no physical form or shape, just like God, but they seem to have physical forms when they appear to man so that they can be visible. Angels have appeared at different times in Bible in the form of men and as shining ones. Seraphim and cherubim have been seen in visions as having many wings, face, feet, hands, etc. (Isaiah 6:2; Ezekiel 10:8).

At one time Lucifer was the anointed cherub at the top of the hierarchy of angelic beings. But he became proud of his abilities and position and wanted to be like God. God judged this rebellious spirit and cast him down from heaven (Isaiah 14:12-15; Ezekiel 28:2-19). Lucifer managed to influence a third of the angelic beings to join him in this rebellion against God, and now they are called Satan and the demons (Revelation 12:4). This is the background from which the Genesis story of the creation of man begins.

c. Adam to Noah

The creation of man was the second phase of God's activities, after the first phase ended in rebellion. He created Adam and Eve as innocent people, but with an ability to choose what they wanted. After providing everything that they needed for an abundant life, He tested them by giving them a simple instruction to obey—not to eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. At the same time they could eat from every other tree including the tree of life. Satan entered the scene, speaking through a serpent, and deceived Eve into questioning God's word and sincerity (Genesis 3:1-5). Adam also fell after listening to Eve.

When sin entered into the world it brought corruption into everything. The whole creation became defiled, and man's life on earth became very tough (Roman 8:20-22; Genesis 3:14-16). All people who came later are 'born in sin' having a sinful nature or a tendency towards sin (Psalm 51:5; Romans 7:17).

From then onwards, sin began to control people more and more, starting with Adam's son Cain killing his brother Abel, till a point came that God felt that it was better to destroy the whole world (Genesis 6:5-7). But Noah found favour in the eyes of the Lord.

d. Noah to Abraham

Noah was righteous and blameless in God's sight (Genesis 6:9). God tried to start a 'new world' with Noah after the rest of the old world was destroyed through the flood. But degeneration began almost immediately after the flood through Noah's son Ham, and Ham's son Canaan became the father of the Canaanites who spread throughout the area (Genesis 10:15-19). Some of these descendents tried to make a tower at Babel tall enough to reach into heaven to make a name for themselves (Genesis 11:4). God did not want them to continue in that direction and become so powerful that they would not remember their need for Him. So He confused them by mixing up languages (Genesis 11:7-9). As generations came down, they forgot God and started worshipping

idols. God started again by calling Abraham to come out of their midst to go to the promised land (Genesis 12:1).

e. Abraham to Moses

Abraham is called the father of faith because he believed what God told him, without doubting (Romans 4:11,18,19). When God told him to leave his father's household and go to the place which He would show him, Abraham obeyed even though he had no idea where he was going to (Hebrews 11:8). By faith he became the father of Isaac when he was 100 years old, 25 years after he had heard the promise from God (Genesis 12:1-4; 21:5). By faith he gave the choice to Lot, his nephew, to take the land which God had promised him, believing that God would still keep His promise (Genesis 13:8,9). He decided to obey God who asked him to sacrifice Isaac believing that God was able to raise him up (Genesis 22:10-12; Hebrews 11:17,19).

One mistake Abraham made was to listen to his wife Sarah when they could not see the fulfilment of God's promise for a son, and take her servant Hagar as his wife. Ishmael was born as a result from whom the Arab race started. Paul later used Isaac and Ishmael to represent what we receive as a result of God's promise and as a result of our own efforts (Galatians 4:22,23).

Isaac had twin sons, Esau and Jacob. God said that He loved Jacob and hated Esau even before they were born (Romans 9:10-13; Malachi 1:2,3). This was based on His foreknowledge that Esau would hate his birthright and Jacob would repent of his wickedness. Esau (also called Edom) is a picture of our carnal nature and Jacob (later called Israel) is a picture of the new nature.

Jacob had twelve sons who became the heads of the children of Israel. From this point onwards Israel has assumed great significance in the plan of God for man. God chose them to start a new work. Jacob and his children moved to Egypt when there was a famine in Canaan, where in the course of time their descendants became slaves to Pharaoh. God raised up Moses to lead the children of Israel from Egypt to the Promised Land. The slaying of the Passover lamb, the Lord passing over the houses where they had sprinkled blood on the doorpost, leaving Egypt, crossing the Red Sea and the River Jordan, conquering Canaan – all are pictures of what happens in a person's life when he comes to Christ.

f. Moses to Christ

Moses is a picture of Christ who would lead people from the slavery of sin to the abundant life. Moses also represents life under the Law. It was through Moses that God established the Old Testament (covenant). It was he who brought down the Ten Commandments and also the ceremonial and ritualistic regulations of the old covenant.

The period from Moses to Christ is a demonstration of people's inability to keep God's standards. Through these commandments God told the people of Israel how He expected them to live and behave. The people of Israel were not able to keep those commandments, and they failed again and again. God raised up judges to lead the people. But they wanted kings like their neighbours. God gave in to their demand and made Saul king of Israel. He lost his kingdom when he disobeyed God. The next king was David who was a man after God's own heart (Acts 13:22). His son Solomon began well, but as he prospered and became famous his foreign wives turned his heart away from God to idols (1 Kings 11:4). At the time of Solomon's son Rehoboam, the kingdom got divided into Judah and Israel, and the people started following the practices of the people around them and beginning to worship idols. God on His part kept sending prophets to warn them to turn back to Him. Eventually God warned them that they would be sent off to captivity, but they did not take heed.

Later on Israel was conquered by Assyria and Judah was taken into captivity in Babylon. They came back to their land once the predetermined period of their stay in captivity was completed.

Many of the prophets prophesied about the coming of the Messiah (the Anointed One = Christ) as a Servant who would suffer and be killed, who would be raised after three days and who would save people from their sins. But the people did not understand this because they were looking for a king who would deliver them from earthly oppression.

g. Christ to the present

Jesus came to bring out the new covenant, the ultimate relationship between God and man under which sinful men could be forgiven and adopted by God as His children (Luke 22:19,20). He lived a sinless life, and died as a substitute for us taking the punishment for our sins (2Cor. 5:21). He also brought forth the real meaning of a holy life (an inner holiness in contrast to external behaviour in the old covenant), worship (in spirit and truth in contrast to form and ritual) and a relationship with God (John 4:23). The religious leaders of His day felt exposed of their hypocrisy and saw Him as a threat to their authority. They manipulated the people and got Jesus crucified. But God raised Him from the dead and He ascended to sit with the Father in heaven on the right side.

Now all power and authority have been given to Jesus in heaven and on earth (Matthew 28:18-20). He first sent out His apostles to go to every part of the earth and to preach the good news of salvation, to baptise them and to teach them to obey everything that Jesus had taught them. Jesus also told them to wait in Jerusalem till they were baptised in the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:4,5). On the Day of Pentecost (50 days from the Passover), the Holy Spirit came in the form of tongues of fire on about 120 people (including the apostles) who were waiting in prayer in the Upper Room. Peter preached that day explaining how this was a fulfilment of the prophecy of Joel the Prophet, and how the people should turn away from their sin and believe in Jesus. About 3000 people were converted and baptised that day. They began to gather together from then onwards to listen to the preaching of the word of God and fellowship (Acts 2:42). This was how the church (an assembly of called out ones) started. The apostles took the gospel to different places and set up churches.

The books of the New Testament were written around this time. False teachings and spurious writings also began to emerge, and the leaders of the church had to meet together and determine the collection of books that would form part of Scripture, based on general acceptance among the churches and harmony with accepted truth. During and after the time of Emperor Constantine, a lot of pagan customs were Christianised, and the hierarchy of priests and bishops was set up, leading to the formation of the Roman Catholic Church. Martin Luther, a Catholic priest in the 17th century, questioned and protested against many of the malpractices of the Catholic Church and this led to the Reformation. However that reformation was only the beginning, and even now many people are trying to reform the church in many ways and bring it back to the design that God had for it.

h. Eternity

Jesus said that He was going to heaven and prepare a place for us (John 14:2,3). When that is ready He would come and take us to spend eternity with Him. There is going to be no judgment for those who belong to God, but the others are going to be judged according to what they have done in their lives. We know that for us it is going to be a time of unending joy and fellowship with God and His people. God will destroy this present Earth and create a new earth. There will be no pain, sorrow or tears there (Rev. 21:4). We shall receive glorified bodies (Php. 3:21). But we know very little details of all the wonderful things we would be enjoying and doing there, which God has kept as a surprise for us (1 Cor. 2:9).

CHAPTER 2 - THE WORD OF GOD

God is so infinite in His being and ways that we finite created people cannot know or understand Him unless He reveals Himself to us. God has revealed Himself to us in many ways. The vastness, the design, the beauty and the harmony of His creation show us His greatness, intelligence, knowledge and power. His dealings with people reveal His character. He reveals Himself through visions, dreams, angels, prophets, etc. He has revealed Himself the maximum through His Son Jesus Christ coming as a Man on this Earth (Hebrews 1:1,2; John 17:6). God has also revealed Himself through the written form of the Bible, which now serves as the reliable source of truth with which to check all other forms of revelation.

What is special about the Bible?

Its unity. The 66 books of the Bible were written by more than 40 different authors with different backgrounds in different places and in different circumstances over a period of 1600 years (1500 BC to 100 AD) in three different languages (Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek) covering different subjects. Yet there is a coherence among these books with respect to the theology, values, principles, history, etc.

Its single thread. A common thread relating to man's sin and God's plan of redemption runs through all the books.

Its depiction of God. Different books of the Bible give descriptions of God's being and character that add up to a unique and grand picture.

Its survival. The Bible has been attacked by a greater number of people than any other book trying to disprove its credentials and also to destroy it from existing. But it has survived.

The worldwide bestseller. This book has been read by more number of people than any other book.

Its power to change lives. Written more than 2000-3000 years ago, the Bible speaks to people's hearts and changes their lives even now. Hardened criminals have been converted overnight after reading portions of Scripture.

Its claim to be inspired by God. Many religious books teach many doctrines and give instructions. But the Bible claims to have been inspired directly by God.

Fulfillment of its prophecies. Many prophecies in the Old Testament regarding the birth, life and death of Jesus have been fulfilled accurately hundreds of years later, as also many others in the old and new testaments related to events.

Its focus on sin and holiness. Many religious books give a mixture of stories and ideas. But the Bible brings out God's holiness and man's need to be saved from sin.

Its validation through archaeological findings. Investigation by secular archaeologists have confirmed the facts given in the Bible regarding location and names of places, important historical events, etc.

a. Inspiration of the Bible

The Bible claims that it has been inspired by God. Paul wrote, *"All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness"* (2Tim. 3:16). The word 'inspired' is translated from the Greek word 'theopneustos' which means 'God-breathed.'

Peter wrote, *“But know this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God”* (2 Pet. 1:20,21). The Greek word used for ‘moved by’ is ‘pheromenoi’ which means ‘borne along.’ Therefore inspiration by God means that the authors of the books of the Bible wrote them as God breathed into them and carried them along.

Theologians refer to this inspiration as ‘plenary’ (meaning that each and every part of the Bible was inspired by God) and ‘verbal’ (meaning that every word in the Bible has been chosen by God). At the same time we can see that God did not dictate words to the authors but allowed each one to write in his own style.

When Jesus referred to the Scriptures, He was referring to the Old Testament because the New Testament had not been written yet. The way He quoted extensively and verbally from the Old Testament as God’s word shows how He viewed the inspiration of the Scripture. He quoted Scripture to overcome His temptations in the wilderness. In one place He used the tense of the phrase “I am” in the sentence “I AM THE GOD OF ABRAHAM, AND THE GOD OF ISAAC, AND THE GOD OF JACOB” to prove that God is a God of the living and not of the dead (Matthew 22:32).

When the New Testament was being written by the apostles, it was recognised that their writings also formed part of the Scripture. Peter referred to the writings of Paul in this way (2 Pet. 3:15,16). Now we also know from the experience of believers throughout the centuries that the words of the Old Testament and the New Testament are *“living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart”* (Heb. 4:12).

We must remember that this process of inspiration essentially took place when the authors wrote the original books. Subsequently, before printing was invented, the text was transmitted down the generations through a process of copying which has caused some discrepancies. However these are few and very minor in nature and not of significance in terms of important truths. We do not assume inspiration for translations from the original language, and we have to be careful in choosing the right version if we want accuracy of text. But since we also have access to several very old manuscripts, possibilities of error have been very greatly minimised.

When we say that the entire Bible is inspired by God it does not mean that everything that is written there is from God. The difference between inspiration and revelation is that revelation refers to the truths God has chosen to reveal to people, and inspiration only refers to the process of telling the authors what to write down. It means that all that is written down through inspiration is not revelation. The Bible reports many things that wicked people have said and done. It also contains many fears and questions expressed by godly men. But inspiration in this context means that God inspired the authors to write down those things as a matter of historic importance. The fact that the Bible gives an honest report of the weaknesses and failures of its heroes goes to further prove its authenticity.

Failure to accept the inspiration of the Bible denies us the certainty regarding the truths given there. This robs us of all the wisdom, comfort, guidance and instruction that we would need for our life. If we think that the Bible is not fully inspired it places us on the slippery path of trying to figure out which part is inspired.

The final proof of the pudding is in the eating. The fact is that those who believe in the inspiration of the Bible and follow it experience great and miraculous things in their lives which the unbelieving do not find.

b. Reliability of the Bible

The factors given in the earlier section on the special features of the Bible establish the uniqueness of the Book as well as its reliability. But the greatest proof of the reliability of the words of the Bible is seen in the experience of millions of believers who have experienced those words as life-giving and life-changing. All these people testify to the fact that the words of the Bible are 'living' and place them in touch with the Living God Himself.

The Old Testament. The oldest complete text of the Hebrew Old Testament is called the Massoretic Text dated around 900 AD. These were prepared by a group of Jews called the Massorettes who were very meticulous in copying Scripture. For example, after copying a book, they would count the number of letters in the book and check if the letter in the exact middle of the book was the same as in the original. Otherwise they would copy it again. Comparison of this text with the earlier Latin and Greek version have shown very little variation in meaning. In 1947 some scrolls from 100 BC were found in clay jars in caves near the Dead Sea. A complete copy of Isaiah was found among them which was seen to be an almost exact copy of the Massoteric Text with deviations mostly involving spelling mistakes and missing letters. A comparison of the Septuagint (also called LXX) which is a Greek translation of the Old Testament also confirms the accuracy of the copying of the Massoteric Text. We can therefore reasonably assume that the text of the Old Testament we have now is practically the same as the original one.

The New Testament. There are more than 4,000 different ancient Greek manuscripts containing all or portions of the New Testament that have survived to our time. The oldest of them contained portions of John's gospel from 130 AD. Apart from these there are more than 8000 copies of the Latin Vulgate (a translation) and a 1000 copies in other languages dating to 300-400 AD. There are thousands of quotations from the New Testament in the writings of the early church fathers dated 100-450 AD. With these sources we can assume that the text of the New Testament which we have now is almost exactly the same as the original one.

c. Interpretation

The word of God is essentially a spiritual channel of communication between God and man. They are words that were inspired by the Holy Spirit in order to convey spiritual truths. In order to understand them accurately, we need to go beyond intellectual understanding of the meaning of the written words. While we certainly need to use our head while reading and meditating on the word of God, we must remember that in order to connect with the heart of God our own spirit must be alive and alert to the voice of the Spirit.

There are a few common mistakes we need to avoid when we try to interpret the Bible.

1. Taking the text as a legal document. Even though the Law of the Old Testament was related mainly to external behaviour and was, in that sense, simple, it still proved to be inadequate even with the clarifications provided by Moses and the others. The reason was that instead of understanding the spirit of the law, people looked only at the literal meaning. Jesus pointed this out to those who questioned Him on the basis of literal interpretations of the text (Mk.12:24). The spirit knows no boundaries, and once we understand the principles behind the law we can interpret it correctly in different situations. But the literal text has finite limitations, especially concerning its scope of meaning.

When we come to the New Testament, we find that it is the principles that are stressed and not so much the details. The Bible itself does not make any claim to containing every detail that people need to know concerning life. It says that God has given to us everything that we need for life and godliness (2 Pet.1:3). This everything includes the Holy Spirit, the Bible, the fellowship of other Christians, and many other things.

It is foolish for us to look only at the written text of the Bible, as though it were a legal document, without seeking to understand what God is saying to us through it. It is much better to ask the Holy Spirit to reveal His truths as we read the Bible, and then apply them to our lives. In other words, if we simply go to the Bible and examine it as we would refer to a book of law, it would be possible to misunderstand or miss to understand God's heart. An extreme case of wrong application of the text in a legal sense is when people conveniently make use of the silence of the Scriptures (that is, the fact that the Scriptures do not mention certain subjects specifically) to say that therefore such and such things are allowed or they are prohibited!

2. Taking the text as a scientific document. When a book on chemistry says that a water molecule is made up of two atoms of hydrogen and one atom of oxygen, we can interpret that if a molecule has two atoms of oxygen or one atom of hydrogen in it, it cannot be water. In mathematics, if $A + B = C$, we can also say that $A = C - B$. Science is precise! But the words of Scripture cannot be interpreted this way. The reasons are several.

Spiritual words do not have precise meanings. For example, we cannot define the meaning of humility precisely, so that we can know definitely when we are humble and when we are not. Secondly, connections between different aspects of the spiritual life, such as grace and humility, have many dimensions to them which are not all mentioned together in every place. For example, if we understand grace (generally speaking) to mean God's favour upon our lives and also understand that God gives grace to the humble, can we conclude that the calamities that came upon Job were because he was proud?

3. Taking the Word as a magic password. The present time is one where people are looking for instant solutions to their problems, instant spiritual growth, etc. Therefore people are taught to take hold of different promises of God as if they were mantras which they can utter by which they can receive their heart's desires from God. This is certainly a distortion of God's Word. The problem comes when we ignore the contexts in which the promises are given, the type of people for whom they are meant, the conditions we have to fulfil in order to receive those promises, etc.

4. Confusing history and teaching. A large part of the Bible contains historical narrations of things that happened and things that people did. It is very honest about the mistakes of its heroes, and reports some of the foolish things godly people said or did. It would be obviously naive to think that just because something is given in the Bible we should do just as it is written.

The early church started with breaking bread every day, going from house to house (Ac.2:46). The Bible says later on that Paul and some others gathered together to break bread on the first day of the week (Ac.20:7). This is a historical report and not a teaching about when and how often we should meet to break bread. The teaching on the subject only says that whenever we break bread together we should do it in remembrance of Jesus (1Cor.11:25).

On the other hand, some people take teaching to apply only to 'those' people or 'those' times. Some people think that the Sermon on the Mount applies only to Israel, and others think that many of Paul's teachings were only for those days or people. Of course we know that all words in the Bible are not for us to obey, but they have something to teach us.

5. Not distinguishing between the old and the new testaments. It was because the old testament (covenant) was faulty that God gave that up and established a new one and made the old one obsolete (Heb.8:7,8,13). It is a big mistake if we do not realise this, and treat them on equal footing or fail to discard what God has made obsolete.

6. Relinquishing the use of commonsense. This is to fanatically hold on to the words of the Bible to the extent of being ridiculous. Jesus overcame the temptation to test God by jumping down from the pinnacle of the temple. But we have people totally avoiding medicine, blaming every calamity that befalls others on sin, etc.

Many think that reason is the enemy of faith, and refuse to think things through. Of course there is some truth in that statement. But the 'reason', which is referred to there, is the kind which does not trust in God's Word but which is based on our natural senses. But the God-given ability to reason, when it is made subject to the revealed Word of God and the direction of the Holy Spirit, can protect us from taking many wrong steps.

7. Majoring on proof texts. This is a very common error among believers, especially those who are used to receiving all their understanding of Scripture from pastors or teachers second-hand. The problem in such cases is that we hear the "It is written" without having heard the "It is also written". The balance of truth is in holding together all that is written about a subject in the Bible, even if some of the verses seem to be opposing each other, and not just some pet verse.

Some criteria for right interpretation:

1. A willingness to do. God does not reveal His truths to those who are merely curious about them but to those who are eager to subject themselves to those truths (John 7:17).

2. Tremble before God's word. God looks for those who will stand in respect and awe before His word (Isaiah 66:2).

3. Exercising the intellect. Instead of being moved by emotions or pressure from the preacher, we need to examine the word to understand exactly what it says (Acts 17:11; 1 Cor. 14:29; 1 Thess. 5:19-21).

4. Allow emotions to stir to action. Mere intellectual understanding is not sufficient. We need to be stirred in our heart so that we will follow up with action for ourselves and for (Luke 24:32).

5. Understand the context. We must see what the context is in terms of the situation, the people involved, the cultural background, etc., what the words mean in the context, who said or wrote the words, and whether and how the words relate to us now.

6. Compare Scripture with Scripture. It is not enough to know what is written, but also what else is written. When Satan tempted Jesus with quoting Scripture, Jesus overcame it by quoting other parts of Scripture (Matthew 4:6,7).

7. Check for meaning within the big picture. In order to avoid getting sidetracked by minor issues, we need to always keep the big picture as revealed in the whole of Scripture. Therefore it is very important that we take efforts to study the whole Bible and not just some favourite or easy parts that we like.

d. Personal use.

One of the greatest blessings of the word of God is that He speaks to us individually through it. He speaks directly, specifically and according to the need of the moment. This may happen as we are reading it or listening to it, or the Holy Spirit may bring to our mind something that we have heard before. There are a few guidelines we have to remember in order to hear God rightly.

1. Expect to hear from God. We may miss hearing God if we read the Bible as just another book. We need to want to hear God, and be expectant by faith.

2. Keep our heart quiet. We cannot hear the still, small voice of God if our mind is tossed around with many thoughts. It may help to give Him thanks, praise and worship before we begin reading the word of God.

3. Ask God to speak. Like Samuel told the Lord, “Speak, Lord. Your servant is listening,” we could also start by asking God to speak to us according to our need.

4. Learn to recognise the voice of God. Other voices trying to get our attention are our flesh, Satan and the people around us. We need to become familiar with God’s voice through practice.

5. Check with the word of God. If we think God is telling us something new, make sure that it is really God’s voice by checking with the other parts of the Bible. God will never go against the written word in the Bible.

6. Check with mature people of God. If we think we have heard something extraordinary from God check with more mature people of God to protect ourselves from error.

7. Avoid looking for confirmation for what we want. Sometimes people make up their mind on what they want to do, and look for verses to confirm it. We may fool ourselves.

Finally, let us keep in mind the principle that we are likely to hear God speaking to us if we are seeking His glory and His will, and are willing to obey whatever He tells us.

CHAPTER 3 - THE OLD AND THE NEW COVENANTS

The Old Testament was given through Moses to Israel on Mount Sinai after they had left Egypt on the way to the Promised Land. This covenant was meant to prepare the people for the coming of the Messiah (Hebrew - the Anointed One. Greek - Christ). As such it was like a guardian bringing up a young boy till he came of age and could take over the responsibility of the home (Galatians 3:23) or a tutor preparing a student for higher studies (v. 24). It was a weak covenant for a weak people till Christ could come with the New Testament. The commandments dealt mostly with external actions, and the reward and punishment were also earthly. Israel could not keep the commandments, and went again and again to idol worship following the people around them.

The great lack under the Old Covenant was that the people could not have the Holy Spirit in them to teach them and to enable them to keep the commandments. In other words, the experience of the people of Israel demonstrated the fact that man by his own strength is incapable of coming up to the standards of God. Most people failed in keeping even the external commandments of God, and exceptional men like Saul of Tarsus who kept themselves blameless according to the law (Philippians 3:6) found themselves exposed when it came to inward matters such as coveting (Romans 7:7-11). Under the New Covenant, people can now be born again—receive a new heart, and have God write His laws on it—and be filled with the Holy Spirit. This brings about an inner transformation of life that becomes more and more like the life of Jesus.

After the New Covenant came, the Old Covenant has become obsolete (Hebrews 8:13). Now we have a higher law, the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus, that has taken us beyond the laws of the Old Covenant (Romans 8:2).

A lot of confusion exists among Christians because many people have not understood the difference between the old and the new covenants. Many people only think of the Old Testament and the New Testament as divisions of the Bible or history. We need to remember three things about the Old Testament (covenant). 1) God had meant it to be temporary, to be replaced by the New Testament at the right time. 2) The Old Testament was a weak covenant for weak people, and dealt only with external behaviour and meant to demonstrate that man is not capable of coming up to God's standards. 3) The Old Testament was a 'shadow' of the New Testament, and had many limited models till the Messiah came with the perfect structure.

It is not possible to understand the New Covenant properly without knowing the Old Covenant and God's work for the people through it. However we must not forget that now the Old Covenant has been taken away and replaced by the New Covenant. As Christians we must live under the New Covenant. (This is not to say that the Old Testament part of the Bible is not important any more. The whole Bible is necessary for our spiritual growth. What we must differentiate is between the old and the new covenants which are discussed all over the Bible.)

a. The Ten Commandments

The Ten Commandments were the backbone of the Old Covenant (Exodus 20:1-17). The first four related to man's dealings with God and the other six with dealings among men. Jesus summarised them into two commandments to love God with all our heart and to love our neighbour as ourselves. The Ten Commandments gave the outline of God's standards for men on moral issues, and these were further expanded through more descriptive and specific instructions on dos and don'ts. The laws were read out to the people by Moses and the people agreed to do whatever the Lord commanded them (Exodus 24:3). Then Moses sprinkled the blood of bulls on the people saying that it was the blood of the covenant (v.8). Later on God warned the people that if they obeyed the

commandments they would receive blessings and if not they would receive curses (Deuteronomy 28).

An important point to remember is that the commandments were given so as to ensure happy and blessed lives, and not to restrict their freedom nor to take away their enjoyment. God knew that the temporary pleasure or gain that sin offered would turn back on them and bite them like a serpent to cause them pain, sorrow and regret in future. Satan often tries to deceive people into looking at God as a hard-hearted, no-fun, policeman-around-the-corner type of person who takes sadistic delight in catching people when they slip up. No. The commandments are a mark of His love for us.

Another important point for us to recognise is that the Ten Commandments are not the expression of God's best standards. These were the commandments given to 'spiritual freshers,' laying down a set of minimum standards. Jesus explained later that what God really wants from us is a much higher standard. For example, He said it was not sufficient to keep from murder but we should also stop getting angry with people (Matthew 5:21,22). It was not enough to stop committing adultery, but we should also stop looking with lust (Matthew 5:27,28). The Ten Commandments were the best under the Old Testament, but Jesus came with something better, the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:2).

b. The ceremonial rules

Along with the Ten Commandments, God also gave Israel many other commandments and instructions regarding ceremonial aspects. These included rules regarding religious ceremonies, those related to religiously 'clean and unclean' things, and others related to hygiene. The Levitical priests were responsible for carrying out the ceremonies and also for deciding on other issues related to implementation of these rules. The purpose of these laws was to create a sense within the people's minds with regard to what was acceptable to God and not. These laws also gave way under the New Testament.

c. The role of Israel

God's purpose in raising up Israel as a nation was to use them as a model for the rest of the world, and then to ultimately save the rest of the world also through the Messiah who would come from them. He gave them the laws, and raised up prophets, teachers and kings to take care of them. But the people of Israel kept going astray and getting mixed up with the idol worship of the nations around them. They also imagined that they were special people compared to the others—Gentiles—and acted arrogantly and carelessly. The Messiah (Christ) was born as a Jew. But since the people were looking for a political deliverer and not a spiritual saviour, they did not recognise Him. They rejected and crucified their Messiah. But at this point God opened up salvation even to the Gentiles.

The people of Israel are still special to God because of His promise to Abraham. There are many prophecies concerning their future still to be fulfilled. In the meantime the Jews are still waiting for their Messiah.

d. The new covenant prophecies

God had the new covenant in His mind even before the foundation of the world (Ephesians 1:1-12). Even when Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden of Eden, God promised that the Seed of man would break the serpent's head, which referred to Jesus overcoming Satan on the cross and delivering people from his hands. When Israel started showing signs of breaking the Old Testament, God started giving prophecies about the New Testament and what it would do for the people.

In Isaiah 1 God spoke about how He had disciplined Israel again and again when they went after other gods, and about what He was planning to do for them. He introduced the new covenant by saying that even if their sins were red like crimson, He would wash them and make them white as snow (v. 18). This was an introduction to grace under which He would show them favour they did not merit by themselves. Now we are saved, not based on what we do, but by grace as a gift through faith (Ephesians 2:7-9).

God would take away the heart of stone and give a heart of flesh. He will put a new spirit within us (Ezekiel 36:26). This is the description of being born again (John 3:3,5).

God would write His laws on our hearts, and will help us to walk in His ways (Jeremiah 31:33; Ezekiel 36:27). This is the new nature that we receive when we are born again. We hate to sin and we want to do what is pleasing to God (Hebrews 1:9; 10:7).

God will enable each one of us to hear His voice and have a personal relationship with Him (Jeremiah 31:34). He abolished the system of priests, prophets and kings and gave each one of us direct access to Him.

God said He would forgive us and not remember our sins anymore (Jeremiah 31:34). It does not mean that He forgets them (God cannot forget anything), but that He will not bring up our sins to His memory. In other words He will not hold our sins against us anymore.

e. Israel at the time of Jesus

Israel as a nation had been conquered by the Romans and Caesar was ruling over it. Herod the Great (during the time Jesus was born) and later his son Herod Antipas were ruling Israel under Rome. There was also a Procurator who represented the Emperor of Rome at Jerusalem. Pontius Pilate was the Procurator at the time of Jesus' crucifixion. There were Jewish tax collectors who collected taxes from the Jews for Rome who were hated by the Jews not only for working for Rome but also for extorting more money from them in the name of taxes.

There were three major religious groups among the Jews at the time of Jesus – the Pharisees, the Sadducees and the Essenes. The name 'Pharisees' comes from a Hebrew word meaning 'separate.' This term was applied to this sect because of their extreme devotion to the Mosaic law and commitment to leading a separated life. They had a zeal for keeping the law, but in wanting to keep all the details of the law strictly they missed the spirit and ended up in legalism. In trying to interpret the law for daily life they ended up making a lot of strict rules and regulations which neither they nor anyone else could keep. Jesus came into conflict with them at every point of His ministry (Matthew 23). The Sadducees were a Jewish sect who were sceptical, rationalistic and worldly minded, denying the existence of anything supernatural such as miracles, angels or spirits (Acts 23:8). They did not believe in a life after death (Mt. 22:23-33). The Pharisees and Sadducees were both members of the Sanhedrin (Acts 23:6) and were rivals. The Essenes were a mystic or ascetic order among the Jews (similar to monasteries) who shared their goods, abstained from meat, wore white dresses, etc. Since they isolated themselves from the common man Jesus did not come into conflict with them.

Israel had been set free from idol worship after the disciplinary periods of captivity under the Assyrians and the Babylonians. Now they had a new temple at Jerusalem (built by Herod the Great). The religious Jews were waiting in expectation for the coming of the Messiah. But they did not understand the prophetic references to the servant Messiah who would suffer and die for the sins of the people and who would start a kingdom of righteousness, peace and joy. They expected Him to

come as a king and overthrow the Roman rule. The Pharisees who were the main teachers of the law at that time had interpreted the Law in external actions without understanding the spirit behind it. As a result of these things, Israel did not recognise the Messiah when He stood in their midst and preached on life in the spirit and a spiritual kingdom. Even though it was the Romans who killed Jesus, it was the Jews who handed Him over to death. Caiaphas, the High Priest, was the one who decided that Jesus should be killed, and God in His sovereignty saw to it that Jesus became the Passover Lamb who died for the sins of the whole world.

f. Freedom under the New Covenant

The New Covenant brought in the ultimate plan of God for man. What the Old Covenant portrayed were the elementary moral standards of God laid down in terms of external actions, as seen in the Ten Commandments. When Christ came, He came as the body that cast the shadow that had been seen in the Old Covenant (Colossians 2:16,17). All the commandments in the Old Covenant found their ultimate fulfilment in the New Covenant. Jesus said that He had come to fulfil the Law (Matthew 5:17). But He did this by fulfilling the spirit of the law rather than the letter.

Jesus said that while murder was prohibited under the Old Covenant, even getting angry with a brother was just as bad (Matthew 5:21,22). If adultery was banned earlier, Jesus said that looking at a woman with lust was actually committing it in one's heart (Matthew 5:27,28). What Jesus was basically saying was that it was not sufficient in God's eyes that we keep good standards externally but that we needed to keep them in our hearts. God looks at the heart, and we are going to be finally assessed on the basis of our thoughts and motives rather than our deeds (1 Samuel 16:7; 1 Corinthians 4:5; Hebrews 4:12).

Some people think that these higher standards of the New Covenant bring them under greater bondage as compared to the Old Covenant because they are not able to keep those standards. It is true that the new standards are far higher. But what we need to understand is that the New Covenant also gives us a better framework to live under.

When we repent and place our trust in Jesus, God causes us to be born again. He takes away our heart of stone (which was rebellious, selfish and independent of God) and gives us a new heart of flesh (Ezekiel 11:19). He writes His laws upon our hearts (Hebrews 8:10). Now we **hate** to do sin and we **love** to obey God (Hebrews 1:9). So we do not want to sin any more. The Holy Spirit helps us to remember the things we have heard from Jesus (John 14:26) and warn us when we tend to go astray (Isaiah 30:21). We can have personal fellowship with God (Hebrews 8:11). This begins as a transformation of our mind and slowly translates into action and finally character. In this way our righteousness becomes far greater than that of the Pharisees, because their righteousness was merely external (Matthew 23).

God washes the stain of our sins with the blood of Jesus Christ so that our hearts become white like snow (Isaiah 1:18). He will not hold our sins against us any more (Hebrews 8:12). We do not have to face condemnation any more (Romans 8:1). If we fall into sin, we can be forgiven again when we go to God and confess our sins (1 John 1:9). If we are walking sincerely before God according to the light and understanding that we have, the blood of Jesus Christ keeps washing us of the sins we do unknowingly (1 John 1:7). God will not punish us for the sins of our ancestors (Ezekiel 18:20).

Since our life becomes driven from the inside rather than controlled from the outside, all the ceremonial laws that the Jews had no longer apply to us. We are no longer to worry about clean and unclean foods, keeping days (Sabbaths) or places as holy, keeping festivals, etc. (Colossians 2:16). Since Jesus has conquered Satan and all his demons on the cross of Calvary (Colossians 2:15), and He

has given us all power and authority over them in His name (Luke 9:1; Matthew 28:18) we do not have to fear them anymore. We do not have to be anxious about the future and about money because as we seek God's kingdom and His righteousness all the things that we need will be given to us (Matthew 6:33). He has promised never to desert or leave us (Hebrews 13:5). Since Jesus has risen from the dead and gone ahead to prepare a place for us in heaven we are not afraid of death (John 14:3; 1 Corinthians 15:54,55). God has given us brothers and sisters on earth so that we can encourage and strengthen one another. Jesus has removed the barrier between the genders, races, languages, cultures, etc., because all can become children of God (Ephesians 2:14).

CHAPTER 4 - SALVATION

Jesus came into the world, first of all, to save us from our sins (Matthew 1:21). God also knows that we have need of many things for life on this earth and He will provide them to us (Matthew 6:25-32). But it will be foolish of us if we focus on all those things and neglect this salvation that Jesus came with, because that is the best part of the gospel.

a. The corruption of sin

Sin is described variously as disobeying the commandments (1 John 3:4 KJV, NASB – lawlessness), coming short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23), doing things without faith (Romans 14:23), not doing what we know we should do (James 4:17), etc. Sin can be in our thoughts, words, action or attitudes. God created Adam and Eve as innocent people with a freedom to choose. Their first test was when they were forbidden from eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. When they disobeyed that commandment, sin entered into the world for the first time. (The first recorded instance of sin was when Lucifer the leader of the angels became proud of himself and wanted to exalt himself above God. He became Satan, and God cast him out of heaven. It was he who came and tempted Eve to sin against God.)

God had warned Adam and Eve that if they disobeyed God they would die (Genesis 2:17). Death here basically meant spiritual separation from God. When sin entered the earth, the whole earth became corrupted as a result, and life on earth became very hard. Thorns and thistles began to grow, and man had to work with the sweat of his brow in order to make a living, and woman would have to go through much pain to give birth to babies (Genesis 3:16-19).

When Adam and Eve lost the immediate fellowship with God and suffered spiritual death, the whole race of man which came from them inherited the spiritually dead nature from them. Now all people are 'born in sin' (Psalm 51:5). We are born as children of the devil (John 8:44; 1 John 3:10). (This why we need to be born again in order to become children of God – John 3:3.) We are born with a corrupted nature referred to in the Bible as 'flesh' (Greek – sarx) which is different from our physical body. We have lusts (strong, driving desires) and passions in this flesh (Romans 13:14) through which we are tempted (James 1:13-15). We are tempted when these desires entice us. If we say "No" to the desire, we gain victory. But if we yield to it by enjoying it in our mind, we sin. Then when we act according to it, sin is 'born' and bears fruit that affects everyone around.

b. The need for a Saviour

Because we are born under sin we end up doing things we do not want to do, and not the things we want to do (Romans 7:19). As a result of this, all of us have sinned (Romans 3:23). Some of us have fallen into gross sins because we grew up under certain circumstances and faced certain temptations. But even others who have lived in comparatively good environments have sinned in many ways such as by being selfish, proud, callous, lacking compassion, etc. None of us can look down on another person because we would probably have done the same or worse things if we had been in their position. Since the punishment for sin is death, that is what we all deserve. Even if it were possible for us to somehow stop sinning from now onwards, we would still die because of the sins we have already committed. By offering sacrifices for sin under the Old Covenant people's sins could be *covered* (for the time being till Jesus came) but not wiped away (Psalm 32:1). The blood of bulls and goats could not take away sin (Hebrews 10:4). All this essentially implied that no one could make himself right with God by anything that he did. Man needs a saviour.

God loved us whom He had created so much that He did not want us to perish. But at the same time He could not just wish away our sins. He is a righteous God, and His righteousness demand justice. Sin must be punished. Since God knew that we could never get right with God and we were all doomed to death, He took our punishment on Himself. He sent His only Son to die in the place of all humanity (John 3:16). When Jesus died on the cross, the sins of the whole world were placed on Him (1 John 2:2). Now anyone who acknowledges himself as a sinner and claims the sacrifice of Jesus as sufficient for him can receive forgiveness from God and also become a child of God. At the same time, there is no other way any one can come to God except through Jesus (Acts 4:12).

c. Repentance and faith

God now offers salvation—a complete package that includes forgiveness of sins, adoption as His children, transformation into the character of Jesus, power and authority over Satan and his forces, fellowship with all the other children of God, eternal life with Jesus in heaven and enjoying all the wonderful things He has prepared for us in heaven—as a free gift. There is nothing that we can do to earn this salvation. It is an undeserved favour from God. The door to salvation hinges on two aspects from man's side, namely repentance and faith. These are essentially actions of the heart that produce fruits in our lives in the form of changed behaviour.

Repentance is like a 180^o turn—from our earlier direction where we were doing what pleased us and unknowingly heading for hell, to loving God, wanting to be pleasing to Him and doing what He wants. Earlier we were our own masters (or thought so, even though we were allowing Satan and other people to move us around) and doing what we wanted. Now we recognise that we were actually sinning against God and heading for hell. Repentance has two sides to it: we are truly sorry for the sins that we have already committed, and we decide we don't want to sin any more.

Repentance is *not* a promise that we make that we will never sin again. We may fall again, because of weakness, carelessness, ignorance, etc. But genuine repentance is a change of heart by which we decide that *we don't want to sin again*. God says in His word that He does not want us to sin again, but He also says that if we fall, we can get forgiveness for that sin (1 John 2:1).

Faith is the other factor in ensuring our salvation. A genuine faith has two main aspects to it. First of all we believe a set of facts about God, ourselves and sin: a) I am a sinner who deserves death and hell. b) I will never be able to be good enough to go to heaven. c) God loves me not because He sees anything good in me, but because He created me. d) God is so holy, just and righteous that He can never take me to heaven as I am because I am a sinner. e) Because of God's great love for me, He let His only Son Jesus die in my place so that my sins could be punished and I could be set free from their claim. f) God has forgiven me my sins because Jesus died in my place. Secondly we trust Jesus and place our lives entirely into His hands in love and gratitude.

When God sees a sincere repentance and faith in our hearts, He washes our hearts with the blood of Jesus Christ and makes us white like snow (Isaiah 1:18). He places His Holy Spirit in us and gives us a new heart. He begins to renew our conscience with sensitivity towards sin and the voice of the Holy Spirit. He accepts us as His children.

d. Forgiveness

Forgiveness for our sins is the first thing that we receive from God as a part of our salvation. When we repent and believe in Jesus God gives us forgiveness for all our sins. He forgives us not just because He is merciful, but because Jesus has already borne our sins on the cross. He forgives us

through grace—as an unmerited favour from His side—and He does not want us to do anything in order to receive it but repent and believe in Jesus (Ephesians 2:8,9).

- God’s forgiveness is not cheap; He had to pay with the blood of His Son (Eph. 1:7)
- God forgives us because He loves us, and does not want us to be lost (Jn. 3:16)
- God forgives us when we repent (Ac. 2:38)
- God forgives us when we confess our sins (1Jn. 1:9)
- God’s forgiveness is free for us; we don’t have to pay for it; Jesus has paid for it
- God’s forgiveness is not to be treated lightly (Heb. 10:29)
- When God forgives, He promises not to bring up our sins again (Heb. 8:12)
- God cannot forget our sins, but He will not remember them (bring up our sins again) again
- God will not forgive our sins if we will not forgive the sins of others (Mt. 6:15)
- God will take back our forgiveness if we proudly refuse to forgive the sins of others after He has forgiven us (Mt. 18:23-35) (This does not refer to us if we are struggling to forgive others)
- God wants us to forgive others without limit (Mt. 18:21,22)
- God wants us to forgive others when they repent, and also when they don’t repent (Lk.17:4;23:34)
- God is the Lawgiver and He waits for people to repent before He forgives them; we are those who have received forgiveness freely from God, we have no right to judge, and we have to forgive freely even if people do not repent or acknowledge their sins. Jesus gave an example of this when He forgave people from the cross. He forgave those who were crucifying Him, even though the Father would forgive them only if they repented.
- Forgiving others is a decision we make; we may not feel like forgiving those who have done us much harm. Forgive as a matter of choice, and feelings will change after some time.
- Forgiveness is not the same as pretending nothing has happened. We know harm has been done, and we may be still suffering the consequences. Forgiveness means to say that we give up our right to judge them. They still come under the authority of God and perhaps also under human legal procedures.
- Forgiveness does not mean that we automatically behave with those who have harmed us as if nothing happened. It may take time for us to regain confidence in them, that they would not repeat what they have done. Forgiveness means that we will not hold grudges or bitterness in our hearts against them. We have to be wise in dealing with them.

e. Acceptance

Many people are suffering from a sense of rejection from people and God, thinking of some flaws or lacks in themselves and imagining that no one could love them the way they are. Many have faced real rejection from people including parents, relatives, friends, teachers and others and live with a sense of inadequacy, not being able to fulfil God’s potential for their lives. But we must understand and experience God’s acceptance of us just as we are, and also learn to accept others in the same way.

- God has created all of us differently. There are no two people on earth who are exactly alike. It is foolish to compare ourselves with others.
- God has given all of us some abilities. We are not in competition with others. In the parable of the talents the master did not ask the two talent man why he did not produce as much results as the five talent man (Matthew 25:14-30).

- There are some things in our lives we can change, but there are also many things we cannot change. We must learn to change those things we can change, and accept the things about ourselves that we cannot change.
- The Son of God was born in a poor family, in a manger, showing that wealth, status and family names are not the things that God values.
- Jesus and the disciples were not highly educated, showing that education has no special value in the kingdom of God.
- God looks at the heart, and that is what God values above all (1Sam. 16:7).
- Once we come to God trusting in Jesus, God accepts us (Eph.1:6 KJV).
- God accepts us by grace—unmerited favour—and not based on how good we are (Eph.2:8).
- When God accepts us, we still have lots of faults, and we are not perfect at all. God knows all about our past sins, our present faults and even our future. He has accepted us as His children knowing fully about every aspect of our lives.
- God does not get shocked when He sees one of our sins. His love for us is so great that it covers all our sins (1Pe.4:8). He hates sin, but He loves us.
- He has not just accepted us, but He rejoices over us, shouting for joy, because we have responded to His love (Zeph.3:17).

Rejection and acceptance:

- Some people have gone through different types of rejection from people.
 - Perhaps your parents did not want you to be born
 - Perhaps your parents did not like something about you when you were born—your colour, features, gender, etc.
 - Perhaps your parents compared you wrongly with your brothers or sisters.
 - Perhaps your parents or teachers told you that you were hopeless or worthless.
 - Perhaps your classmates made fun of you or insulted you.
 - Perhaps you were abused physically, emotionally or sexually in your childhood.
 - Perhaps you lost a parent, close friend or pet in your childhood and felt abandoned by God.
- Are you angry with God or people because of what has happened in your past?
- Do you feel hopeless or insignificant because of what others have told you?
- Do you think that you are guilty thinking that you were responsible for some of the bad things that happened between your parents?
- Remember that God saw with tears what was happening to you as you grew up.
- Remember that God was planning even then for your welfare.
- God will cause all those things also to work together for your good now (Rom. 8:28).
- When you turn to God in your need, weakness and confusion He will draw near to you and heal you.
- God will make something new to come out from you; you will forget the sadness of the past (2Cor. 5:17).
- God wants to transform you to become like His Son Jesus in your character (Rom. 8:29).
- Forgive everyone who has harmed you; they did not know what they were doing (Lk.23:34).
- If Jesus could forgive the people who had crucified Him, you too can forgive every single one of those who has harmed you in your past.
- Remember that when you forgive, your Heavenly Father will rejoice over you. Then you can rejoice in His acceptance of you.

If God has accepted you knowing all about your faults, can you not also accept others who have their faults?

f. Victory

God does not want to merely forgive our sins and let us continue in the same way that we used to live before. He wants us to set us free from the guilt of sin, as well as from the power of sin. He takes away our condemnation (Romans 8:1) and He also gives us victory over temptation (Romans 6:14; 2 Corinthians 2:14). For receiving forgiveness we need to repent and confess our sins (1 John 1:9). We do not have to do anything to earn our forgiveness. For getting victory over sin, we need to receive God's help (grace) and take up a battle against temptation (Romans 6:13; 8:13).

What is temptation? It is a pull towards something (which is wrong according to God) that would give us some pleasure. We are tempted because we are born with certain strong desires (lusts) in our flesh. ['Flesh' (Greek – sarx) is a word the Bible uses many times (not always) to refer to the seat of these lusts and desires (Galatians 5:24; Romans 7:5). Some new Bible translations have unfortunately translated this as 'body' which loses this meaning.] Temptation comes usually in the form of a thought that stirs up one of these lusts (James 1:14). These thoughts may come from ourselves, the devil, or other people. If we agree in our mind with the temptation and yield to it we sin (James 1:15). We may sin by continuing to enjoy the thought in our mind or speaking or doing something according to the temptation. Sin gives us pleasure. But afterwards comes the result of sin which is spiritual death—distance from God and corruption of our mind (Romans 6:23; Galatians 6:7,8). But if we say 'no' to the thought of temptation, we get victory! This means we do not let the temptation produce fruit in our lives—or, as the Bible says, we do not allow the temptation to conceive (James 1:14-15).

If we have yielded to temptation in any area many times in the past, it will be difficult for us to get victory in that area the first time we try to overcome. But if we do not give up and keep resisting the temptation, we will notice that the power of temptation becomes less and less till it practically ceases to bother us. (But it can get revived if we start yielding again!) Also, since the temptation comes from our own lusts, we need more than our resistance to overcome—we need God's grace. So we also need to keep asking Him for help to get victory. We should also take practical precautions such as keeping away from people and situations that can tempt us.

A victorious life is a progressive life. This means that we get victory little by little over more and more areas in our life as we progress in our spiritual life. Victory is also not permanent or once for all because there is a possibility that we can backslide.

g. Justification, sanctification, glorification

When we are born again, we are spiritual babies, however old we may be physically. We have to grow spiritually and develop in all aspects of spiritual life. Our spiritual life goes through three different stages, namely justification, sanctification and glorification.

Justification is an instantaneous process that happens when we repent and come to Jesus trusting Him. We who were classified as sinners and who had no right to stand before God or enter heaven are made right with God on the basis of Jesus having borne our punishment. We become 'justified' in the sight of God.

Justification deals with our entire record of sin so that what was red because of sin is made white like snow (Isaiah 1:18). There is no sin that is so bad that the blood of Jesus cannot wash it clean (1 John 1:7; Revelation 1:5). Justification deals with the whole issue regarding sin in our life that it is

sufficient to deal not only with our past sins but also our future sins. If we sin in the future what we need to do is to claim this justification by confessing our sins (1 John 1:9).

As someone said, to be 'justified' is to be treated by God 'just as if I'd' never sinned. God wipes away our record of sin and promises not to bring it up against us ever again (Hebrews 8:12). Justification takes away all our condemnation and guilt and gives us acceptance with God. It gives us the right to enter God's presence boldly (Hebrews 10:19), and also boldness against Satan's accusations and power.

Sanctification is the process that starts after justification. Essentially it means to be 'set apart' for God and also to be transformed into the character of Jesus (Romans 8:29; 6:22). God has set us apart for Him (1 Corinthians 1:2), and now we have to set ourselves apart for Him. We do this by obeying God and placing ourselves into His hands as living sacrifices (Romans 6:19; 12:1). God wants us to be sanctified entirely in our body, soul and spirit (1 Thessalonians 5:23). This is a lifelong process, starting when with our justification and ending with our death.

Justification brings all people to the same level as children of God. But sanctification takes people to different levels depending on how each one cooperates with God and works out his or her own salvation in response to the work of God (Philippians 2:12,13). The more we love God, the more we will submit to God's sanctification in our lives.

Glorification is the process by which we will be changed into the nature of Jesus as He is now (1 John 3:2). This will take place in an instant through rapture (1 Corinthians 15:52) or when we are resurrected (Romans 6:5). We will have a glorified body just like Jesus after He was raised from the dead.

CHAPTER 5 - Baptism in water and the Holy Spirit

After we are born again by the grace of God through our faith in Jesus Christ, the next two steps are the baptism in water and the baptism in the Holy Spirit. Baptism in water is what we do in obedience to Jesus, and baptism in the Holy Spirit is what Jesus does for us to give us power to be His witnesses.

a. Significance of water baptism

John the Baptist came preaching that the kingdom of heaven was near and people should repent (Matthew 3:1,2). Those who responded were baptised in water (Matthew 3:6). This was referred to later by the apostles as John's baptism (Acts 19:3) as different from the baptism taught by Jesus. This was a baptism that testified to repentance from a sinful life and a desire to be in the kingdom of heaven. Since Jesus had not died at this time it was not possible for anyone to be born again, and so a baptism showing repentance was all that could be done. Jesus Himself was baptised by John as a role model for us even though He did not have anything to repent of (Matthew 3:15).

On the day of Pentecost after Peter preached a message to the people who had gathered there, 3000 people believed the gospel of Jesus and were born again. Paul later explained the meaning of the believer's baptism as a picture of the burial of the 'old man' (that is our old self which lived according to our own desires and which did not fear to sin against God) and the coming of the new life which we receive from Jesus (Romans 6:3-8). As we go under the water it signifies the burial of the old man and as we come out of the water it signifies the new life coming out of the resurrection of Jesus. In this sense, our baptism in water is a public testimony to what God has done in our life through Jesus' death on the cross.

'Baptism' is a transliteration (adopting a word from one language into another language) from the Greek word used in the New Testament which is 'baptisma.' This word means 'immersion.' The right mode of baptism is through full immersion in water, which signifies the meaning of what we portray through that act. Other forms such as making a sign of the cross on the forehead with water, sprinkling drops of water on the body, etc., came up as deviations when infant baptisms started centuries later in a corrupted church.

Baptism does not save us even though some churches teach a false doctrine called baptismal regeneration. They think that if they can get someone to be baptised, such persons will be saved. It is only through faith and being born again that we are saved. Baptism is only a public testimony to the fact that we have already been saved. Since justification is based only on faith, and no amount of 'works' can save us, baptism is not a requirement for going to heaven. Also baptism does not cause any magical transformation of our lives which can come only through the lifelong process of sanctification. We get baptised because it is one of the things Jesus has commanded us to do (Matthew 28:19) and because it is our joy to testify about what the Lord has done for us. When we get baptised we also receive a good conscience for having obeyed what Jesus said (1 Peter 3:21).

b. Who can be baptised

There was some confusion in the early church regarding baptism. Paul had to teach them to make a distinction between John's baptism which was intended only to show repentance and baptism according to Jesus which signified being born again (Acts 19:1-5). Even now it must be made clear that baptism according to Jesus is only for those who can testify to the new birth. This is because many people think that baptism will take them to heaven, qualify them to join a church, or cause

them to be born again. Justification is only through faith, and baptism is something that must follow afterwards as a testimony to what has already taken place.

When someone seeks to be baptised we must make sure, as far as possible, that he or she has been born again (even if they do not understand all the doctrinal significance of what baptism signifies). It is not the age that matters but the genuine experience of having repented from their sins and placed their trust entirely on Jesus.

c. Receiving the Spirit and being baptised in the Spirit

When we are born again, it is the Holy Spirit who does the supernatural act of placing God's life in us, giving us a new heart, writing God's laws into our hearts, etc. Therefore all who are born again have the Holy Spirit in them. Those who do not have the Holy Spirit in them do not belong to Jesus (Romans 8:9).

The Holy Spirit does many things for us after we come to Christ. His ministry is to glorify Christ in us (John 16:14). He is our Teacher who will guide us into all the truth (John 16:13). Since He is the one who inspired people to write the books of the Bible, He is the one who can reveal to us the real meaning of the word as we read it. He will bring to our memory what He has already taught us (John 14:26). He is our Helper and Counsellor (John 14:26; Isaiah 11:2). He will convict us when we stray off towards sin (Isaiah 30:20,21; John 16:8).

While all this is available to all those who are born again, there is something more of the Holy Spirit that Jesus wants to give His people. The disciples had the Holy Spirit in them because of their faith in Jesus and because Jesus had said, "Receive the Spirit" and breathed on them (John 20:22). But before Jesus was taken up to heaven He told them to wait till they 'received power' from the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:4-8). This is what happened to them on the day of Pentecost when they were praying together. The Holy Spirit came upon them with power and tongues of fire rested on each of them. They began to speak in other languages and praise God, which people from other countries could understand (Acts 2:1-11). More importantly, the disciples who till then had locked themselves up because of fear of the Jews came out and began to witness for Jesus without fear.

This experience is referred to as baptism in the Holy Spirit or being filled with the Spirit. In some cases this happens along with the experience of being born again (Acts 9:17). In some cases this happens when someone lays hands and prays for others after they are born again (Acts 19:1-6). In some cases, as on the day of Pentecost, people are filled with the Spirit as they pray even without anyone laying hands on them. The important thing is that God gives power to be witnesses (Acts 1:4-8). God exhorts us to be continually filled with the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 5:18), and there are also instances in the Acts of the Apostles about the apostles being filled again and again.

The evidence of the baptism in the Holy Spirit is power, and not speaking in tongues as some people think. The Bible very clearly says in the context of the gifts of the Spirit that not all speak in tongues (1 Corinthians 12:30). Though it is recorded that on many occasions people who were filled with the Holy Spirit spoke in tongues, it did not happen in every instant (Acts 4:31).

However it is true that it is possible for one to know if one has been baptised in the Holy Spirit. There is some inner evidence that a person will have. The outward evidence may vary including speaking in tongues. This is why the Apostle Paul was able to ask some people who had become believers whether they had received the Holy Spirit after they believed, expecting a clear answer from them (Acts 19:1-6).

d. Gifts of the Holy Spirit

The church is the body of Christ, acting on behalf of Christ who has ascended to heaven. The universal church consisting of all born again believers in Christ all over the world is manifest through many local churches as a body with different parts carrying out different tasks. God gives to each believer supernatural gifts through the Holy Spirit to fulfil some specific task in this body of Christ.

1 Corinthians Chapters 12-14 give the basic teaching concerning spiritual gifts.

- God gives different gifts to each person, with differing effects (12:4-6)
- Spiritual gifts are given to be used to bless the others and not for oneself (12:7)
- God distributes gifts according to His sovereign plan and not according to people's desires (12:11)
- One who has a 'small' gift should not think he is not a member of the body (12:15,16)
- One with a 'prominent' gift should not think others are not necessary (12:21)
- God wants us to seek for gifts earnestly so that we can be of blessing to others (12:31; 13:1-3;14:1)

There are varieties of gifts such as the word of wisdom, the word of knowledge, faith (for special situations), healing, miracles, prophecy, distinguishing of spirits, tongues, interpretation of tongues, etc. The suggestion here is that this is only an indicative list and that there are other gifts also. The gift of tongues helps us to edify ourselves in private prayer as when we do not know what to pray or we run out of words trying to praise God (14:4). In public, tongues is not to be used unless there is also someone who can interpret it (14:27,28).

There are some who teach that these gifts of the Holy Spirit ceased after the Bible was completed and the early church was established. But there is nothing in the Bible that supports this. The passage they normally quote is from 1 Corinthians 13 where it talks about the coming of the perfect state when gifts of prophecy, tongues, etc., would cease. They attribute the 'perfect' to the completion of the Bible. But what the passage refers to is the day when we finally are with the Lord when we can see Him face to face when all such gifts become redundant (v. 9-12). On the contrary, the Bible exhorts us to see earnestly for spiritual gifts (12:31; 14:1). It also tells us not to quench the Holy Spirit (1 Thessalonians 5:19,20; 1 Corinthians 14:39).

e. Ministries

The function each one of us has to carry out in the body of Christ is our 'ministry' or service to the other parts of the body. This ministry is to be done for the others, according to the will of God, with the power and gifts that God has given us and for the glory of God. We are to function as stewards of the grace that God has given us as those who have to give an account to God, as Jesus taught in the parable of the talents. It is a privilege God has given to us to have a small part in the working of His kingdom, and it is not something that we can use to make a name, money or position for ourselves.

As there are varieties of gifts that God gives to His children, there are also varieties of ministries that we have, according to the sovereign plan of God. No ministry is big or small because each one is needed for the body. The Bible gives different lists of ministries in different places, indicating that these are only indicative lists and not exhaustive. In Ephesians 4:11,12 God says that He has given apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ. These are ministries that are 'equipping' the people

of God. What this passage shows is that the main work of building the body of Christ is done by the saints and not by these ministries. In 1 Corinthians 12:28 the Bible says that God has appointed apostles, prophets, teachers, miracles, gifts of healings, helps, administrations and various kinds of tongues in the church, giving another list of ministries. We see another list in Romans 12:6-8 mentioning prophecy, service, teaching, exhortation, giving, leading, and showing mercy. We can also think of many other things different ones can do for the others as a part of the body of Christ.

We need to ask God to show us the particular task or tasks that God has planned for us and then seek for spiritual gifts and grace to carry them out.

f. The fruit of the Spirit

Spiritual gifts are for doing things for serving others for the glory of God. The fruit of the Spirit are the results of the Holy Spirit living in us and transforming us into the character of Christ. A typical list of these fruit is given in Galatians 5:22,23 : love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. The devil can imitate some of the spiritual gifts, but he cannot counterfeit these fruit because they are totally contrary to his nature. These fruit are the evidence of Jesus living in us (John 13:35). This is also the way by which we can see through false prophets and teachers, because even though they may try to fool us through exhibitions of gifts and supernatural powers, they cannot show the fruit of the Holy Spirit growing in their lives (Matthew 7:15,16).

In order to grow in these fruit we must allow the Holy Spirit to speak to us, and obey what He tells us. We will be able to listen to Him better and obey Him more quickly and effectively if we spend time reading God's word and talk to God in prayer. In this way we will be able to recognise His voice better and do what He tells us.

CHAPTER 6 – CONCLUSION

The whole purpose of building a foundation is so that we can construct a building on top of that. So while understanding the foundational truths will help us to be clear in our direction of life, we must remember that there is still much more to be learned and obeyed. That is the exciting and challenging part of our daily life. As we build up there has to be a lot of interaction with God and other people. We will find need for greater knowledge, understanding and wisdom as well as greater filling of the Holy Spirit as the tasks become more demanding. But God promises to be with us always, and He has also provided us all the help that we need, through His word and our fellow learners and workers in the kingdom of God. Let us seek God and learn to be faithful to Him so that we can fully accomplish the task that He has ordained for each one of us (2 Timothy 4:7,8).