

A person with a cracked, stone-like face and body, surrounded by dust and a bright light source. The person's face is cracked and covered in dust, with a bright light source behind their head. The body is also cracked and covered in dust. The background is dark and filled with dust particles.

The Road Back Home.

We all have a story and are also part of a much bigger story.

Jem Trehern

To all who read this....

***I pray that God blesses and encourages you as He uplifts and
strengthens you.***

You are noticed and you are loved.

The Road Back Home.

We all have a story – but we are all part of another story: His story.

We live in a world that was created to be beautiful, purposeful and a secure place that we could call home, but sadly, this world has been marred by man. People search for fulfilment in the wrong places and often end up disillusioned, insecure, and damaged. They are like flowers being cut off from their roots and from the enrichment of the soil which would help them to grow. Our true home is found in God who alone know what is best for our lives and heals our broken hearts and minds.

This course is life changing. Through the scriptures, the stories, and illustrations it gives a beautiful picture of who we were intended to be, our true roots and home for fallen humanity.

It has been fascinating to see how concepts such as 'image', 'sabbath', 'rest', 'tabernacle', 'temple', 'priest' and 'kingdom', have been meaningfully portrayed to unfold a beautiful canvas for us to see of God's amazing plan to draw His people to Himself and show them the significance of their lives. The picture of 'Eden' gives us a glimpse into God's heart of love for His people.

The themes in this course are so vital to our understanding of who we are and how life should be. It unfolds the true meaning of our existence and draws us back home to our Father. It cannot fail to bless and encourage you and open your eyes to the wonder of God's plan for humanity.

May you be blessed, encouraged, and uplifted as you read this booklet.

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The Road Back Home.

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Part 1.

Introduction.

In North Korea there are many prison camps full of families who have been incarcerated for decades. Because of this there are many children and teenagers who know nothing apart from life in a prison village. A few years ago, a young man escaped from one of these villages and managed to make his way to South Korea and to freedom.

The motivation for his escape had been hearing about how good chicken tasted and wondering what it was like. Once free, and like all escapees, both prisoner and free, this man came to realise that N. Korea was not the most powerful nation in the world and that their technology was no match for surrounding nations, let alone the Western World. Many refugees from North Korea speak of how hard and emotionally draining they found this and how difficult it was to start thinking for themselves, having been indoctrinated for decades with an ideology that sought to control at all costs and crush any who questioned the belief system and the ruling class. As the days, months and years went by they came to see that N. Korea was a very small player in a much bigger picture and certainly not an adequate reference point to deciding what was right and wrong; true and false. This brings us to some very important questions.

Have we ever really thought about how we see the world in which we live ? And are we willing to accept that sometimes, like it or not, we see life through the experiences we have gone through, good or bad, then we use them as a reference point to carry on with life in the best way we can? Then again, perhaps we have suffered greatly with family tragedy or illness and are questioning whether God is present or even cares for us at all? Perhaps we have experienced insurmountable difficulty that hasn't really gone away and we have ended up on autopilot so to speak. We keep our head down and carry on with the occasional cursory acknowledgement of God but no real engagement because there is nothing left in the tank.

Perhaps, whether we admit it or not, we have allowed all the negative events in our lives and subsequent emotions, to define us. However, in doing so we run the risk of imprisoning ourselves and allowing all that has gone wrong to become the sketchy blueprint we live by. A simple example of how this can affect us could be that of a bad experience at a dentist causing someone to avoid dentists for the next twenty years with disastrous consequences to dental health.

So how do we see the world around us? Do we start with all the colours, flavours and experiences we have gone through, then produce some sort of crazy mosaic that is just about acceptable but leaves us with the vague feeling that something is missing? Or do we engage with the blueprint that God provides? Do we understand that this is His world and that no matter what has gone on in our lives we are important to Him? Do we understand our destiny in Him, or are we preoccupied with getting to our own destination and place of security? If we have a wrong view of our world and God it is going to be difficult to engage with Him.

It is also going to be difficult to engage if we have only a partial picture concerning scripture, then fill in the gaps ourselves. How do we see scripture and do we realise just how important it is to see the whole picture?

In recent years there have been many conversions to Christianity from Islam, with some converts receiving long prison sentences for doing so or fleeing their home country. For example, in the last twenty years large numbers of new believers have left Iran seeking asylum in the West. In subsequent interviews with immigration at their entrance point into the U.K. some of these believers have been vigorously questioned concerning faith in Christ to find out if they are genuine or just using conversion as an excuse to claim asylum. However, it is and has been, disturbing to hear that relatively new Christians are also being shown passages in the Bible speaking of war, death and destruction in attempts to prove the Bible is just like any other book, full of violence and not to be trusted. However, using a few verses on their own, for any reason, can lead to misunderstanding as the following illustration reveals.

Imagine how you might feel seeing a series of photographs showing a man shooting a dog through the head. I am sure it would be disturbing and probably paint a negative picture of the perpetrator. Now imagine how different you would feel if you were presented with the full story behind the picture which was that a rabid dog was just about to bite a small child and was prevented from doing so by the man with the gun.

In scripture there are some areas which are not pleasant, yet in the light of the rest of scripture we see that they are not the work of a cosmic tyrant, but someone who seeks to nurture and protect and who will deal with the oppressor and false belief systems that seek to overwhelm and destroy truth, wherever they take root. Also to be taken into consideration is that God's anger is not about 'flying off the handle' but a response to evil and the inhumanity of His people whom He wants the absolute best *for* us and not just *from* us.

So how do we view the Bible? Do we see part of the picture or do we spend time seeking to understand the whole picture? Do we realise how much damage we can do to self in having a distorted view of self and only a partial view of scripture Perhaps we see it as little more than a recipe book of verses to help us through whatever we are experiencing at the time.

A journey of discovery.

If two people were locked in a room for twenty-four hours with nothing more than a chess set then unless they did not know how to play at least they could while away the time playing the game.. Not knowing how to play chess, the day would seem longer because there is nothing to do. But what if they knew the names of the chess pieces? would this make a difference. The answer must be 'no' since knowing the name of a chess piece doesn't mean knowing the role of that piece, or the purpose of the game. The result would be the same: twenty-four hours that could feel more like two days!

If we don't know what something is or does, it is easily ignored or perceived irrelevant and this can be one of the problems when it comes to looking at words or ideas in the Bible. This happens especially, when we also recognise that we often import our preconceived ideas into scripture, making life more difficult than it needs to be, though not always seeing the help that is offered.

For example, scripture tells us to submit to God (**James 4:7**). However, for many who have suffered at the hands of a bully or abusive partner this can come across as a negative statement, because it is perceived as losing self again. However, 'submit' in scripture is about finding oneself. For example, in submitting to the dentist owing to a toothache all we need to lose is that which is preventing us from engaging with life. The dentist is not taking away the real us but is removing decay, removing what we have become so that we can get back to who we really are. The same thing happens when we submit to God.

In submitting to God, we don't have to lose any of our self – the people we were created to be. All we need to lose is what we have become by way of the world and the damage it does to our thinking. God has never been against us; He has only been against what we have become, as would any parent in seeing a child adopting thoughts, processes and ensuing actions that cause harm and suffering. Thus, we see that 'submit to God' is not about losing self at all. It is all about finding self. It is about freedom and gaining an understanding of our identity as those made in the image of God. It is about gaining life and losing rubbish, confessing weakness and rising in strength, letting go of wrong thinking and harmful emotions and truly living. However, if we are to really know God then we must recognise that life is not about feeling good all the time but being available to the leading and empowerment of the Holy Spirit (**Rom 5:5**). As Ravi Zacharias writes in his book, 'The Grand Weaver' (page 422), "Faith is a thing of the mind. If you do not believe that God is in control and has formed you for a purpose, then you will flounder on the high sea of purposelessness, drowning in the currents and drifting further into nothingness."

When life is difficult it is easy to put up barriers. However, when we submit to God we find the engaging presence of the Holy Spirit, who uplifts us and encourages us no matter the circumstances. We are made for growth and in handing our lives over to Him we are brought

back to our true self in Him which is why the Psalmist writes, “He restores my soul” (**Psalm 23:3**) that is, “He brings me back to my true self.”

To summarise what we have been saying, people often view life and the world around them through their own experiences and can have a flawed understanding of scripture through not seeing the full picture and reading certain words (eg ‘submit’) through personal experiences. It is in understanding the bigger picture and our place in it we are going to find healing, wholeness and growth. Our beginning was forged before time began, in an incredible act of love. When we lose sight of this we begin to struggle through losing sight of the One who calls us to be a son or daughter.

Incredible beginnings and perceiving the bigger picture.

We live in a world where many are told that whilst life is amazing, it is an accident and with Christianity along with all other religion, being no more than a small piece in a very large jigsaw, no longer of any significance. It is almost as if world history is to be defined by man alone and it is like a huge canvas covering many miles in length and width, with a small dash of colour in one corner representing the arrival and departure of the Christian faith.

As Christians, many of us would be quick to challenge this, yet how many of us live with a similar imbalance concerning *our* lives, *our* history and *our* experiences as they paint the big canvas we consciously or unconsciously live by? On this self-painted canvas, with colours representing all that has happened to us, Christianity is reduced to a small blob somewhere in the religious section of our mind, under the heading, “Where I go on Sunday,” or “Where I go when things get tough.” No wonder many believers struggle. They know about something or someone but little more and it does not go far enough to make a real impact on life. For example, in writing, ‘10 Osbourne Road’ all I am doing is presenting an address that means little to you. However, for me it is more than that because it is the house where I was born and where my first memories were formed. To me it is so much more than an address.

Considering this we could ask ourselves the question: Is God little more than an ‘address’ to me? Do I just know a few helpful scriptures, or do I know the story behind them and more importantly the heart behind the story and how everything fits together into the bigger picture? And what is this picture anyway?

The bigger picture is that the story of scripture is not a colour within the much more extensive canvas of the world. Instead it is scripture that is the largest canvas, as it were and covers the whole of history from the viewpoint of a creator who loves His creation and communicates with man in a multiplicity of ways. In understanding this picture, I can make sense of the world I live in (as shall be seen) and also find great encouragement in really understanding my identity – who I was created to be.

The real “canvas of life” is found in the book which begins with: “In the beginning” (**Genesis 1:1**) and ends with a renewed heaven and earth (**Revelation 21:1**). So, in considering everything we have been saying and before moving on, we need to make something clear. Christianity does not fit into other worldviews – even yours! as if it were a small part of something much bigger. Neither is it some sort of religious experience that has no bearing or impact on real life, if you know what I mean. Instead Christianity is the full canvas, the big picture into which everything else fits and which helps us make sense of the world and all that is going on. It is a picture that contains the answers as to why we are here, why things happen as they do, why there is a world in the first place and why there is still a world today; and so, there is hope. The Bible shows us our true origins and identity which go far deeper and are much more powerful than our experiences in the world and it does so in a language that paints pictures in our hearts and minds; more about this later.

In the language of Genesis chapter one we find our true history in the cosmic setting of creation and blessing. Then as we move into chapter two we start to gain an understanding as to our true calling. We also start to see that we were created to be the pinnacle of God’s creation, called to shape and mould the world and to benefit from God’s love. This is the story of our beginnings, of our identity and of our calling. We are on this earth to be known, to be loved, to know and to love, and in this there is great freedom (**John 7:38; Galatians 5:1**) and security. A clear example of receiving and sharing God’s love is found in the following story concerning the work of the Barnabus Fund.

The Barnabus Fund is a Christian organisation bringing aid to the persecuted church around the world. One of their projects involves buying people out of bonded labour in the brick kilns in India and Pakistan through paying off their debt. Bonded labour traps families in debt for generations through charging high interest rates for very small amounts of money and in such a way that it can never be paid off. Because of this many families have been trapped working in brick kilns on a subsistence wage for many years.

In the last three years (since 2017) over 1000 families have been released through the Barnabus programme. Those released still earn very little money but are now free and have no interest to pay. Some of the families have clubbed together and managed to pay off the debt for another eighty-six families. One man, James Iqbal, who was freed in 2017 said, “It will be my utmost priority to lend a hand in this noble cause in helping my other brothers and sisters. We never imagined that we could be free.” In receiving the love of God in this practical way, men and women have come to know Christ as Lord and Saviour and in turn share that love in a practical way as they help free others. In doing so they reflect the work of God and reveal the love of someone whose creative work has always been for our benefit.

A World prepared - love that is freely given.

Many years ago, I spent some time watching a man making Christmas cards for his children. The cards were three-dimensional, with moving parts made from paper and glue. What I remember most was the painstaking care and love that this man put into making his cards and so in my mind's eye, they were no longer just paper and glue; they were acts of love. You and I live in a world that was created because of love and for love.

God's first **act** of love for us was the creation of the world (**Genesis 1:1**) and the first **gift** of love was threefold; involving the breathing life into man, giving him the world to live in and a giving of self, as man was placed (literally rested) in the Garden of Eden (**Genesis 2:8**). Considering this we see that as well as understanding the gift of love as being life, life in its fullness is defined as living in a relationship with God as our heavenly Father. In living this way, we understand what it means to be human and to be made in the image of God. God created us to share His love.

In his book, *'Let me tell you a story'*, Tony Campolo speaks of the love of his mother. He lived in a city where it was too dangerous for him to walk to school alone, so his mother paid a girl who was a few years older than Tony, to walk with him. As Tony grew older, he thought that the amount paid to the young woman was too much and told his mother he would walk himself to school for a nickel a day. It took a long time for him to persuade his mother to let him to do this, but eventually she gave in and told him she'd give him the money each day as long as he saved it to buy Christmas presents for his sisters.

A few years after his mother had died Tony was talking about this incident with his two sisters and commented on his independent spirit. This is what he then wrote: -

"My sisters laughed at me and one of them said, "Did you think that you went to school alone and came home alone? Every day when you left the house Mom followed you. And when you came out of school at the end of the day, she was there. She always made sure that you didn't notice her, but she watched over your coming and going, just to make sure you were safe and that nobody hurt you "" T. Campolo in: *'Let me tell you a Story'*, pages 9-10.

At times we will all go through situations and circumstances that take us by surprise and life is not always easy. However, no matter how hard it is, it does not have to be impossible and even in the darkest and most difficult times we can know the presence of our heavenly Father. The real trouble for us begins when we assume that He is not there or that we must strive to Him first.

Religious words or life-encouraging pictures?

Over the next few pages, we will be looking at words like 'Eden', 'image', 'sabbath', 'rest', 'tabernacle', 'temple', 'priest' and 'kingdom'. The main reason we are doing this is to understand the depth and colour of these words and underline the truth that Christianity is not something

that fits into the bigger picture of the world but, that the world and all that goes on in it, fits into Christianity. As we do so we will gain a deeper understanding through seeing the real setting which will help us in our daily lives as we engage with the leading of the Holy Spirit and walk in power and authority. However, another point to note before moving on is to briefly focus on Jesus as the Alpha and Omega (**Revelation 22:13**) which has bearing on what we have been saying so far.

The term, 'Alpha and Omega' is what is known as a 'merism' with Alpha and Omega being the first and last letters of the Greek Alphabet.

A 'merism' is a figure of speech where a phrase or statement refers to one single thing. So, for example, "Lock, stock and barrel," which originally referred to parts of a gun is now a phrase used to speak of the whole gun. As the Alpha and Omega, God holds all of history in His hands. He is before all things and He will be present after all things have been brought to their conclusion. Nothing takes Him by surprise, and He is the One who is present with us today. In looking to Him first and foremost, instead of our own plans and agendas there is a quietening and strengthening of the heart and mind in an openness to the Holy Spirit and the truth of His word. The One who holds the past and the future in His hands is with us today.

C.S. Lewis once said, "I want God, not my idea of God" and in a society where some relegate Christianity to nativity plays in primary schools or outdated myth and superstition, we need to make sure that it is God's revelation of Himself that we have uppermost in our mind and not our own ideas.

Creation.

"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth."

Genesis 1:1.

The word 'create' comes from a root meaning, "to fatten the seed." A seed goes into the ground and is nourished and watered and explodes with goodness as did this world in the hands of our creator. In a modern-day setting, think of an empty house being filled with good things and we get the idea of how God created, in order to bless us. This world was created with our arrival and wellbeing in mind.

The work of the Trinity in this incredible gift of creation is seen in simple sublime statements such as, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (**Genesis 1:1**), followed by "...and the Spirit of God was hovering over the deep" (**Genesis 1:2**). Centuries later we find light shed on the actions of the Trinity within creation, as we read, "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God" (**John 1:1**), whilst elsewhere Christ is spoken of as slain from the foundation of the world (**1 Peter 1:20**). So, what do we see in all of this?

In these verses, as with so many others, we see the work of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit involved in creating our world, with the purpose of sharing the love that already exists in the Trinity with man created in the image of God; created to receive and prosper from the love and goodness of another. You have been created with a purpose and that purpose is primarily to receive, for it is in receiving that we are able to grow in strength and stature, holding our heads up and exercising authority over life as was always intended and in Jesus' life, death and resurrection, we see the power of a man in authority.

In the incarnation we see the authority, power and victory of the One who coped with life *on the very terms that had been laid out for all mankind* and in Jesus' sacrificial death we see the highest expression of love from the One who despite being *all-powerful*, willingly entered our place of suffering. This was an awesome sacrifice in love for the rebel, yet religious people mocked Jesus as they watched Him die, Satan sought to triumph over Him, and those whose plans lay in ruins ran away from the One who had shown nothing but grace and mercy.

However, in all of this, whether facing the taunts and accusations of the crowd, the scorn of the religious leaders or the whip of the Roman soldiers and ignominious death on a cross, Jesus remained victorious. After Satan had done his very best to destroy His ministry and after Jesus had endured the wrath of God as the sin-bearer standing in our place, the Temple veil was torn in two, tombs burst open as some of the dead were raised to life (**Matthew 27:51-53**), a crucified thief entered into eternity (**Luke 23:42-3**) and an experienced Roman executioner said, "surely this was the Son of God" (**Mark 15:39**). At every turn of the page and during every moment of His life on earth, whether preaching to the crowds, healing the sick or being smashed to a cross, Jesus always walked victoriously through all that came His way. Everyone is important to God and that includes you and I, and under His leading and guidance as the 'Master of history' we can overcome all things through Him (**Romans 8:37-9**) insofar as we focus our attention on Him.

In a United Christian Broadcast magazine article, this need to focus on the Lord can be seen in an incident shared from the life of Alexander Solzhenitsyn who spent many years in a Siberian Labour Camp. After years in a Russian labour camp, Alexander Solzhenitsyn had become so depressed that he wanted to die. Putting down his shovel, he walked to a bench and sat down, knowing that at any moment a guard could use the shovel to beat him to death. It was then that a fellow inmate took a stick and in the sand at Solzhenitsyn's feet traced out the sign of the cross. As Solzhenitsyn stared at it, his perspective shifted. Realising the cross represented the greatest power in the Universe, he slowly got up, picked up his shovel, and went back to work under the sign of the cross.

There is not one moment when God is not in control, even though it may look otherwise in the world we live in. There is not one moment in life when He is not aware of us and there is not one moment when He is not willing to be with us.

‘Good’ is a word that speaks of covenant purpose and relationship.

In the unfolding canvas of Genesis chapter one the words, ‘it was good’ are proclaimed over each of the first six days (e.g. **Genesis 1:4, 10, 12,18**). But why say this? What is God seeking to convey to us?

‘Good’ is a covenant word in that it is a word about the content and power of relationship. In Genesis it speaks of the world being fit for the purpose it was brought into existence for, this being the arrival of man. In this respect, “it was good,” is not dissimilar from the way parents say, “Yes, it is good” as they step back and survey a newly decorated room ready for the arrival of a soon-to-be-born baby. Think about the creation of the world as the angelic host shouted for joy (**Job 38:7**) and recognise afresh that this was done with you in mind. This is His world and all that He provides – the beauty, the majesty, the wonder of it all – is for our benefit.

The word ‘good’ is a relational word because everything has been created to relate to God. In considering this, we see that ‘good’ speaks of what is in relation to God and therefore that which is functional. It is living according to God’s instruction and in accordance with God’s purpose for man. The opposite of good/functional, is evil, which is living in a way that does not relate to God and is therefore dysfunctional. Think of someone stealing a car and driving it so badly that the engine is completely ruined, and you begin to get the idea. The root of evil is ignoring God and living outside of covenant and with self in control, the fruit of which is seen throughout the world today in the break-up of society and the number of wars that continue no matter what.

Goodness and covenant.

In understanding that ‘good’ speaks of functioning in the right way through being in a relationship with God we see that it is strongly related to the idea of covenant. A covenant is a deep binding relationship between two parties, like a marriage, but not like a business agreement. For example, God informs Jeremiah that the whole reason this world exists and continues to do so is because He has established His covenant with day and night and fixed laws of heaven and earth (**Jeremiah 33:25-6**), not in the sense of a builder maintaining a building but as a father continually providing for a loved one, whilst also being prepared to challenge all that is wrong.

God challenges us because He loves us and wants the very best for us and in our failure to see our real identity and calling in Him, we finish up with a distorted picture of God, the world, and self which will cause problems for us and those around us. For example, if I think I am worthless and can’t see any point to life I may end up disengaging with those around me or, on the other hand, try to prove my worth to others, no matter the cost. Because of this increasingly prevalent thinking there is a need, more than ever, to understand our value, purpose and position in life. “Who am I”? and, “Why am I here?” are questions that must be answered. If they are not then I am more likely to adopt an identity from the world around

me in order to find some sort of security in life. Bearing this in mind let us now turn back to creation again.

God made us in His image.

You and I have been created to receive and share the love that resides within the Trinity, a love that is sacrificial and not quenched by our failure, as seen for example, in the words of **John 3:16** where we read, *“For God so loved the world that He sent His one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life.”* In the term ‘Son’ being used for the Second Person of the Trinity we see what it really means to be made in the image of God. Jesus is the obedient Son, the second Person of the Trinity coming as man and showing us what a true relationship with God looks like.

Image bearers.

In the ancient world kings and emperors would often set up images of themselves in parts of the empire where no one would know what they looked like. However, when it comes to God there is to be no static images like a statue made of gold. This is because it is you and I who are called to reveal the image of God, which means reflecting God’s love and revealing His nature and character, as we exercise rulership over this world. This is our high calling: to know God at a deep personal level and to rule over and care for creation, shaping and moulding it under the guidance of our heavenly Father.

For example, at the height of the coronavirus outbreak in Wuhan, China, Christians put the care of their neighbours above their own safety in giving out protective masks, gloves and hygiene supplies to struggling people on the streets of the quarantined city. As supplies ran short they were then able to receive help for an International Christian organisation, Barnabas.

As image-bearers we are vice-regents, the pinnacle of God’s creation in an amazing world and called to reach out in justice, mercy, grace and love with concern for all regardless of background or status.

Many of us live in societies dominated by so-called celebrities, yet mankind has never been called to point to self, as if it had the recipe to life and the right to oversee all that goes on in our strength alone. Instead we are called to point to the One who is the furthest from us in many respects and also the closest person to us, God, and in starting to understand our true identity and beginning to live out our calling we find healing and wholeness. Surely this is part of what it means to seek first the kingdom of God (**Mat 6:33**)?

We are known, noticed and loved and part of a royal priesthood, called to receive and to give out in incredible ways. We were never meant to walk alone but to be led, guided and loved

by the One whose greatness no one can truly fathom (**Psalm 145:3**); who is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love (**Psalm 145:8-10**). Despite all of this we often spend more time trying to get out of present difficulty, than asking Him to come into it with us.

“See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labour or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendour was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore, do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.” **Matthew 6:28-34**

As those made in the image of God we are to walk with our heavenly Father as image bearers with the word ‘image’ conveying intimacy in coming for a root meaning, ‘in the shade of.’ God wants to help us and the most loving thing that has ever happened to you or I is that He has rescued us from death and given us new life, this being the reason David writes, *“In your generous love I am really living at last! My lips brim praises like fountains. I bless you every time I take a breath; My arms wave like banners of praise to you”* (**Ps 63:3-4**; The Message).

Eden: Meaning and Purpose.

In space and time God created (furnished) a world and placed Adam and Eve in a garden in Eden. Think of a house being built for you with all that you would need within it and you get the idea: this world was prepared for your arrival by the One who has never written you off or seen your life as insignificant and not worth anything. No matter what you may think of your life the simple truth remains that God loves you.

The word ‘Eden’ means delight and conveys the pleasure God has in creating a special place. Think of preparing a room for the arrival of a baby and you get the idea.

Eden was a special place where man and God fellowshiped; a place that was totally open to heaven with a river flowing from it and watering the garden. However, this was no simple kindergarten and certainly not a ‘let’s get back to nature place’. Instead it was the starting point, the entrance by which heaven and earth came together, a place of beginnings, a place where God as a Father would teach and instruct a being created, to know and grow in His love.

Eden expressed the heart of God birthed into space and time for you and me, yet it was never going to be our final destiny. For just as a child matures and in doing so benefits from more of what the parent already has for them, so too man was birthed from dust through the breath of God and was created to grow in grace and love.

Considering this we recognise that as Christians we are not called back to some sort of utopia or serene, peaceful, Eden-like existence with large walls around our lives in order to keep the big, bad world at bay. We are called to walk the paths of this world as Kingdom people, anointed and empowered through the presence of the Holy Spirit as we willingly engage in God's work of redemption. This is our calling and it is only in living out our calling that we find lasting growth, healing and wholeness.

Eden and sanctuary.

What comes to mind when you think of the word 'sanctuary?' Is it a place to run to, a place to recharge, or perhaps it conjures up pictures of the inner rooms in an ancient building? What comes to mind when *you* see this word, 'sanctuary?'

Eden was where God's localised presence was known, a special place, a safe place, a place of resting, knowing and engaging and therefore a sanctuary, known as a 'sacred space,' a different space. We could go so far as to say that Eden speaks of 'space as it should be' because it was where heaven and earth engaged, this being God's purpose from the beginning. Ultimately the whole world was to be this sacred space, a cosmic temple, a special place of engagement, instruction and love, as man reached out of Eden and shaped and moulded the world under the guidance of a loving Father.

In placing man in the garden of Eden, we recognise God's sovereignty as Creator, and also His love because our world is a "This is for you place," a place for engaging, for learning, for receiving love and giving love, sharing all that is ours with others through His generosity and grace.

As an artist puts him or herself into the painting, so God poured His heart into His creation and blessed the world with the gift of life (**Genesis 1:22**). Adam and Eve were especially blessed (**Genesis 1:28**) in being created to engage with God and to help shape the world as His image bearers. Therefore, you were created to receive a blessing and be a blessing to others to find fulfilment in doing so. If we do not see the need to give out to others, then we become the most selfish people in the world, because we know why we are here, what has been done for us and given to us, yet if we take it no further it is a real tragedy. God wants to bless us and for us in turn to bless those around us.

The heart of blessing.

'Blessing' is a word that can easily be left in the religious compartment of our minds along with vague thoughts about it having something to do with church and religious people. Either this, or it is a word used when someone sneezes! However, the heart of the word blessing is a very powerful picture of love and a genuine giving of self, purely for the benefit of the one who then receives. So, what does this word look like?

Have you ever seen a small child giving a picture they have drawn to a loved one? The picture is not going to be a Picasso or Rembrandt but the receiver of such a gift happily sticks it on the door of their fridge, remembering the excitement and love in the small child who gave it. Through the picture the child has given something of themselves and this brings us to an understanding of blessing. The picture behind the word 'blessing' (barak) speaks of giving the best of self for another. It speaks of kneeling before a person with gifts, with the ultimate gift being the giving of self. In the pre-incarnate Son entering this world as a baby we see God stooping low and giving Himself so that the rebel could find forgiveness and freedom.

In the story of our beginnings the seventh day is spoken of as blessed and is set apart as special (holy). What is being underlined in this language is that on the seventh day God gives Himself; sharing the love that already exists within the Trinity.

This desire to bless is also conveyed to us in the Hebrew word for 'image' (tselem) which is used in relation to man when we read, "...let us make man in our image..." (**Genesis 1:26**). It is related because 'image' comes from a root word meaning 'to shade' and it literally speaks of a representative, of one who is close (shaded by the shadow of (**Psalms 91:1**) to another and who receives from and represents them. God has created us to be close to Him so that we can receive from His heart and reach out to others in love, grace, compassion and truth. In all of this we capture something of the heart of blessing along with what it means to be the pinnacle of His creation. If we want to see what this looks like in its full glory, then we only need look to Jesus. In Jesus we see exactly what this is like and His desire to engage with us is that we are spoken of as the body of Christ (**1 Corinthians 12:27**).

In bringing everything we have looked at together so far, we see that this world was birthed from the heart of God as an act of love for us. All that God created was good and Eden is a special place in which God and man rested, this speaking of fellowship together. Because of God's grace and mercy, man is an incredibly intricate and powerful being called to receive from God and share God's heart in how the world is moulded and how people are blessed.

At the risk of being too repetitive we note again, this world was and is an incredible gift for man with Eden as the place where God's localised presence was especially known. It was where man was rested, not in the sense of relaxing, but in the sense of being in the 'at home' presence of a heavenly Father as the pinnacle of His creation. And this brings us to God's call on our lives.

As 'image bearers' the first call on our life is to know who we belong to - whose family we belong to - and to receive from the One who loves us most. In doing so we grow in wisdom, knowledge and understanding under the leading, guidance and empowering presence of the Holy Spirit.

One final point to note before moving on is that Adam and Eve were 'rested' in the garden of Eden, '*in the east*.' The Hebrew word for 'east' (mikedem), can also speak of the past and in doing so directs our gaze to the heart of God before the world was created (**Proverbs 8:22-23**).

God wanted to create a being who could benefit and grow in His love; He wanted to share love with us, and this is why we are here. No wonder King David wrote,

“I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful; I know that full well. “

Psalms 139:14.

The tree of life.

Adam was aware that life was a gift from God and a physical reminder pointing to this was the presence of the tree of life in Eden. The tree was at the centre of Eden (**Genesis 2:9**) and is also mentioned in the book of Revelation (e.g. **Rev. 22:2**). It represents eternal life and is a reminder that man is dependent on God the author of life and One who created us to benefit from His love.

In **Proverbs 11:30** the fruit of righteousness is likened to a tree of life and in **1 John 2:1** Jesus is spoken of as the righteous one, the reason you and I are able to come to God being the fruit of His labour. In **Revelation 2:7** the tree of life is a metaphor that speaks of great blessing for those who are open to, and trust in God, being given fruit from the tree, pointing to life as a gift and the ongoing blessing of salvation through the work of Jesus. As Paul writes to the church across Galatia, “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: “Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.” He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit.” (**Galatians 3:12-14**).

Jesus is the reason we have life, He is the Good Shepherd meaning, He is the true Shepherd of the Covenant who is at one with His Father and He looks after the sheep (**John 10:11**), He has never been against us, but is completely against what we have become by way of the world.

In Jesus, God has stooped low to come to the door of our lives. In Jesus we find the creator entering creation and in sacrificial love intertwined with grace and mercy, He offers rebels a way to come home and into their identity as His sons and daughters.

Eternal Love: On the seventh day God rested.

As men and women of His kingdom, our thoughts are not anchored by what is visible but, in the awareness and presence of our Father. Therefore, rest is not so much a cessation of activity as it is the engagement with someone in whom we experience life as it is intended to be lived. We were not created to walk alone.

In Genesis, the seventh day is the only day with no mention of morning and evening, which is an intentional way of speaking of God’s *eternal* love, a love without beginning and end and a love that is not quenched by our sin. The day is spoken of as blessed and holy (**Genesis 2:3**), with ‘God rested’ (**Gen 2:2**) speaking of Him stooping low and sharing love with man in a

special way, as would a family coming together after the working week. God's love is not quenched by sin as is seen in His approach to man in Eden after sin entered humanity and in this, we see the heart of true religion. True religion does not start with our approach to God but with God's approach to fallen man in Eden where we read, "Where are you?" this being the call of love from a father's heart. Yet so often we forget God's heart; we forget that God feels and God cares and therefore God feels pain.

Think of parents holding a beautiful baby son or daughter in their arms and dreaming of the future they would share with their child. Now think of how those parents would feel looking at their son or daughter all grown up but now broken and hurt, being a shadow of their former selves. Perhaps in this picture, a picture lived out so many times in our fallen world, we can capture something of the pain in the words of God to Adam and Eve, "Where are you?" the heart of which is, "Where is the man I have created?"

God knew exactly where Adam and Eve were and that a change had occurred, but still initiates contact and encourages them to come out from hiding. All too often I capture a glimpse of my own failure and often despair. But when I do, I quickly turn my thoughts to Him. My Father sees everything in my life and does not turn away because true love does not give up on a loved one.

The seventh day to the sabbath.

As already stated, the seventh day has no mention of beginning or end, pointing to the eternal love of God. Continuing along this way of thinking we find the first written record of the seventh day being called the sabbath day in **Exodus 16:23** where we read, "Tomorrow is a day of rest, a holy Sabbath to the Lord." On the sabbath Israel 'downed tools,' and rested with God as a family would rest together at the end of the week, with the sabbath being a sign of the covenant (**Exodus 31:16-17**), the strong, deep and binding relationship between God and man. It wasn't a case that God was not with man on the other six days but a day when man refreshed his mind and heart and recognised that his thoughts were not to be anchored in the visible but the awareness and presence of a heavenly Father. This rest is not so much a cessation of activity as engagement with someone in whom we experience life as it is intended to be lived. We are so much more than our worldly failure or achievements and we were not created to walk alone.

Thus, rest is about receiving, and Sabbath rest was a reminder that we are totally dependent on God (**Matthew 4:4**) and that God is willing to reach out to us in all situations and circumstances to remind us of this. For example, during Israel's desert wandering God's faithfulness is seen in the continual provision of food and water during a forty-year period before entering the Promised Land. During this time, clothes and sandals did not wear out and Israel was led by a pillar of cloud during the day and a pillar of fire at night.

On the sixth day God instructed Israel to collect twice as much manna as on the previous five days so that the nation could rest on the seventh day, the sabbath, with a clear reminder that

God is our provider. If Israel attempted to collect larger amounts of manna on any other day apart from the sixth day, as a means of making life easier for herself, the manna would rot. This again underlines the truth that man does not live by bread alone, but every word that comes from the mouth of God. When we read the Bible once a week or only come to God when we are in trouble as if He were little more than a doctor or counsellor then we forget who He is and our destiny in Him. We become those who assume we can use His resources without recourse to Him and that God is there to sustain our lives rather than handing our lives over to Him day by day and finding what it means to experience life in its fullness, no matter what we are going through in the world.

In the parable of the loving father and the two lost sons (**Luke 15:11-32**) we see where this sort of thinking gets us. For example, the first son in Jesus' parable thought he knew best concerning how to use his father's resources and ended up living amongst pigs (**v16**). The second son also failed in that he kept to basic rules, as if living with his father was just a religious code of ethics. This, without any real understanding of his father's love, or the fact that outward appearances can be deceptive and not reveal what is really going on in the heart. This second son's resentment towards his brother manifested itself with the return of his brother when he became angry and refused to address him as a brother (**v29**) before his father.

In the parable, the son who ended up working amongst pigs illustrates Israel mixing with the world and being dominated by it, whilst the second son illustrates many Pharisees and teachers of the law who were more interested in outward obedience than seeking God with heart and soul. This led to spiritual blindness as can be seen in their attitude to Jesus' healing on the sabbath. Both groups knew something of God's word and blessing but used God's provision in the way they saw fit and therein lies the problem. Man does not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.

Perhaps you are going through a hard time right now and have slowly drifted into more of an acknowledgement of God, than an engagement with who He really is. Perhaps this has happened in a way that you are not really aware of it although your view of the world and everything around you has subtly changed and all you see is the negative, whether this be in the world, the church or even your own family. Yet there is hope; there is always hope and in recognising what has happened we can call out in repentance and faith to the One who will one day restore all things.

In his book, 'Loving God,' Chuck (p 276-7) Chuck Colson, founder of Prison Ministry, shares the testimony of Myrtie Howell, an old Christian lady who lived in hope and certainly saw life from God's perspective as she reached out to prisoners, many of whom wrote back to her, calling her grandmother. Colson speaks of visiting her in the nursing home where she lived and mentions the encouragement he gave her. Reflecting on this visit later he writes, "My heart ached for these pathetic figures, clinging so desperately to something they never had, seeking to save a life that for so many had been only a cruel hoax: seventy, eighty or ninety years of joy, defeat, pain, and pleasure and then just sitting waiting, for darkness to come.

Waiting. Waiting – for this meaningless existence to end. And what was beyond? Nothing? Or more of this hell? If there is no God, or if He can't be known, they why live at all? Meanwhile upstairs sat Myrtie Howell with her wide ninety-one-year old grin of joy and triumph. Ready to live. Ready to die. By now she was probably back at her desk writing to prisoners”

In Rest.

The strength and power of God's presence can be seen throughout scripture and one example of this is in the life of Noah. Noah's name sounds like the Hebrew word for 'comfort' and means 'rest'. In a world of increasing evil, Noah stood with God and was empowered by the One spoken of “as the God of all comfort” (**2 Corinthians 1:32**). Yet it is only in Jesus that we truly see what a fully rested man is like in that He did nothing apart from His Father (**John 5:19-21**).

In rest, we focus on the One who is with us and above us and in doing so, we take captive wrong thinking and damaging emotions as we move forward in the power and presence of the Holy Spirit. S we engage with our destiny rather than just looking to a destination and we look to Jesus, the fully rested man.

Jesus is the Bread of Life (**John 6:35**), and the firstborn from among the dead (**Colossians 1:18**), never to see death again, with 'firstborn' being a title that speaks of authority, power, grace and mercy, yet it and so much more. In a Jewish family the firstborn son would receive a double portion of his father's inheritance in order to be able to look after the rest of the extended family if anything went wrong. You and I are part of the church of the firstborn (**Hebrews 12:23**), having been brought out of the house of slavery (fallen self) and into our true home in the presence of our heavenly Father (**Ephesians 2:6**). In order to live out our calling and know the freedom and power of His presence in doing so, we need to be open to receiving from Him as well as sharing with others. This brings spiritual healing and wholeness no matter what we are going through, yet in no way suggests that we earn blessing

All blessing is through God alone and not our own good works, as if they could earn merit. What good works do is enable us to receive what has already been provided for by God; they do not earn it. Think of being invited to a friend's house for a meal and you get the idea. You do not earn the meal but your response to the invitation enables you to benefit from the meal and the friendship and love of those who prepared it.

Not many people would invite an enemy round for a meal, but in Jesus we see that God is willing to cross all social boundaries and offer life to all people, no matter what they have or have not done. There is nothing else like this grace and mercy on earth. Now, at the risk of being too repetitive, we remind ourselves again of what we have been saying.

In the seventh day (**Genesis 2:3**) being blessed and having no mention of morning or evening there is the picture of God's eternal love for us. Blessing speaks of stooping before another with gifts and in the imagery of sabbath we see God giving Himself to us and Jesus saying to

those who had lost sight of this, that “the sabbath was made for man and not man for the sabbath” (**Mark 2:27**).

In the seventh day being called the Sabbath day (**Exodus 16:23**) we have a microcosmic picture of eternal blessing in the space and time of the weekly cycle, like a shadow pointing to the perfect continuous rest (trust and engagement with God as a receiver of blessing) that God desires for man.

The fact that God is *always* man’s provider is underlined throughout scripture and seen, for example, in that God would provide such a large harvest for his people every sixth year (**Leviticus 25:18-22**), that it would see them through a sabbatical year (every seventh year) and into the eighth when new crops would be sown, whilst feeding on that which was provided for in the sixth year and then naturally grew without man’s aid in the seventh.

In the fiftieth year, (Year of Jubilee) Israel would have a double sabbath year (year 49 and 50) when all debts would be cancelled, and all property taken owing to unpaid debts, would be returned along with freedom for the debtor. In this we see that God does not want society to be built at the expense of others and that all should be given a chance to start over again. When Jesus said that He had come to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour (**Luke 4:19**), He was referring to the restoration of harmony, blessing and freedom that was found in the year of Jubilee. No matter what you are going through you do not have to walk alone. This does not mean it will be easy at times, but there will always be a way through.

The sabbath day, sabbath years and the year of Jubilee ultimately point back to the seventh day and the eternal love of God and then beyond the seventh day to Jesus in whom we find our true rest and the One through whom we enter fellowship with our heavenly Father (**John 14:6**). In understanding all this we clearly see why Paul writes, “...do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or regarding a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ” (**Colossians 2:16-17**).

As God Incarnate (**Matthew 1:23**) and perfect man, Jesus became our representative (**1 Timothy 2:5**), fulfilling all the covenant obligations (**Hebrews 7:22**) that we had so easily broken. Now, through His work alone and in the presence of the anointing of the Holy Spirit, we are empowered as His sons and daughters to reach all who are lost, and to do so through rest, through spending time with Him; through receiving from Him. Be encouraged and engage with God and allow the words of Peter to challenge and uplift you...

“His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires. For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love. For if you possess these

qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. But if anyone does not have them, he is near-sighted and blind, and has forgotten that he has been cleansed from his past sins.”

2 Peter 1:3-9

The Tabernacle.

We now move on from looking at the heart behind creation, the words good, Eden, the seventh day and being made in the image of God, to focusing on the tabernacle and the temple. These were microcosmic representations of God’s original creation, underlying God’s desire to be with man, ultimately fulfilled through Christ. The Bible is God’s rescue plan for man; God stooping low with a love for us that does not compromise His holiness.

Tabernacle, Temple and Special Place.

At first glance the heading to this section may appear to have little relevance to present day life and all that goes on in a 21st century world. Considering this, it is easy to see why the words like, ‘tabernacle’ and ‘temple’ are perceived as religious words relating to something in the Bible or other religions and little more. For example, how does the word ‘temple’ speak to you right now? Perhaps it conjures up sketchy pictures of a building or perhaps you have never given it any real thought because, as already said, it seems somewhat irrelevant to us. To me this is like seeing a golden letter ‘M’ (representing McDonalds) as no more than a golden letter ‘M’ with no realisation of the food that it points to. As shall be seen, the concept of tabernacle and temple and all the imagery associated with them points to God’s presence and our identity in Him.

The language of creation is language which would be very familiar to those in the Ancient Near East, with the seven days of creation being understood as temple language. This is because a temple speaks of a special place, a place where heaven and earth meet, a place where God engages with man and is present as a heavenly Father. This is important for us to understand because when people think there is something missing in their lives, they are correct. However, what is missing, is not so much an absent father, as *their* absence from His presence if you understand my meaning. It is in being with our father that we see what it is to be truly human because being human means never walking alone. If we want to see what a person made in the image of God looks like, all we need to do is look to Jesus (**Colossians: 1:15**)

The language of creation/temple may seem strange to us if we have not encountered it before and is found throughout scripture. For example, the earth is pictured as fixed on a foundation (**1 Samuel 2:8**), as would be a temple building, this speaks of stability and security. It is also spoken of as having foundational pillars in both earth and heaven (**Job 9:6, 26:11**) and with a canopy over the earth, stretched out like a tent (**Job 37:18, Isaiah 40:22; Jeremiah 10:12-13**).

Rain and snow pour through open 'windows' or 'doors' (**Genesis 7:11, Psalm 78:23**) and the skies are described in one place as being spread out like a mirror of cast bronze (**Job 37:18**).

In engaging with all of this we begin to see that the world was to be a special place, a place where heaven and earth interact. A place where we are loved and can engage with our heavenly Father, with all the gifts that He willingly provides for us, from a beautiful sunrise to water and food from the soil. At this point some people would interject and say, "But what about the desolate areas and areas where there is no food or water?" In response to this we would say that this lack is because of what the world has become and is not representative of the world as it was originally.

Just as the seventh day directs our attention to the purpose of creation in that it speaks of eternal love, so too the tabernacle and temple are also microcosmic expressions - in history pictures - directing us to the One who is above us and His original plan for creation.

In the Ancient Near East, temples and palaces were viewed as extensions of divine order and both the Tabernacle and Temple are places from which God's more localised presence was known and His divine order was to flow into every area of life – spiritual, social and political. However, whilst recognising this we must acknowledge that God's presence was also made known in a multiplicity of ways, whether through a burning bush or His dealings with a wayward prophet called Jonah.

We now turn to look at the first of these two structures and the imagery surrounding them.

The Tabernacle and the number seven.

The word 'tabernacle' means 'dwelling place' coming from a linguistic root meaning, 'to entwine,' and therefore pointing to God's desire to be with His people, to tabernacle (entwine) with them. An example of this giving of self, can be captured in God's dealings with Abraham. For example, in **Genesis 15:6** we read, "Abram believed God and He credited it to Him as righteousness." Abram trusted in the strength of God's promises, and as he leant on the Lord, God then entwined (think of the strands of a rope twisted together) his strength with Abram which is the sole reason that Abram was able to overcome difficulty and walk a straight path (**Genesis 15:6**). This entwining and sharing is also captured in Isaiah's words where we read, "Those who hope (wait) on the Lord will renew their strength" (**Isaiah 40:31**), this speaking of a divine exchange. As we focus on who we really are and the One who constantly reaches out to us we are more open to receiving from Him. He becomes our source of strength and security.

In **Exodus 40:17-38** we read of Moses setting up the tabernacle in seven stages, "as the Lord commanded him" and in recognising the use of the number seven in scripture we are pointed back to creation and God's purpose for the world and His desire to be with man. Considering this, the tabernacle along with many of its contents point us to God's redemptive plan, as well as representing a miniature picture of creation. This is also the case with the Temple which

took seven years to build (**1 Kings 6:37-38**) and contained creation imagery pointing back to the original creation and God's plan of redemption. The ultimate fulfilment of this plan – man at home with God – would eventually come about through Christ, the 'God with us One.'

The blocks for the temple were formed at a quarry before being brought to where the temple was being built so that no hammer, chisel or any other iron tool was heard at the temple (**1 Kings 6:7**). As with the tabernacle, the temple was to be a place of peace and recognition of God's presence with His people, as the One who seeks to restore harmony in this world and the only way by which a person may find forgiveness and reconciliation with God. This comes through Christ.

The number seven is also found when looking at the sevenfold ministry of Jesus, the Man of Peace, the Messiah and God with us (**Isaiah 7:14; Matthew 1:23**). As the writer to Hebrews states, Jesus brought us salvation through His blood and entered heaven, the greater and more perfect tabernacle that is not man-made (**Hebrews 9:11-13**). All Old Testament sacrifices are fulfilled in Him.

In speaking of Messiah's sevenfold ministry, Isaiah writes, "The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him — the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord — and he will delight in the fear of the Lord." **Isaiah 11:2-3**. A very important point to note here is that wisdom, understanding, counsel, power, knowledge and clear vision (fear of the Lord) stem from, "The Spirit of the Lord will rest on Him" speaking of love, presence and empowerment. You and I were created to know God and all that we have looked at so far from Eden to the seventh day and rest to the Tabernacle and Temple, remind us of this. We are not alone, and our lives are not about who we are as if we need to be striving for meaning and recognition. They are about whose we are: we are sons and daughters of the living God and our destiny is with Him. The here and now is not all that there is and there will one day be a time when heaven and earth come together, with you and I being very much a part of this. We are noticed, known and loved.

Back to the Tabernacle.

As a microcosmic representation of Eden, the tabernacle is the 'set aside place'. Picking up on one of the items within it we note that it contained lampstands shaped like almond flowers, conveying light and blessing. But why almond flowers, or is it just the case that God liked them and preferred them to other flowers? and apart from this, does it really matter anyway?

The Almond tree is the first to blossom in Israel bearing fruit in spring and because of this it was known as a symbol of life. The presence of the Tabernacle spoke of life – of One who does not give up on us.

In a challenge to the priesthood, it was Aaron's rod that supernaturally budded (**Numbers 17:5-8**) clearly underlying that all life and growth is ultimately from God alone. He is the creator and all else is the created and will answer to Him one day. In coming to God through Christ

we are spoken of as a new creation (**2 Corinthians 5:17**) with the old having gone and the new arriving. This does not mean we do not recall the things that have happened to us, but that through Christ and the presence of the Holy Spirit they no longer have power to control or shape us (unless we allow them to). New life has arrived, is arriving and will one day arrive in all its fullness. Subsequently our identity is not first and foremost about the events that have occurred in our lives but about the One who has come to us with life in its fullest. We are His.

The colours used for the tabernacle communicate the entwining of heaven with earth, with blue, purple and scarlet speaking of the heavens, wealth, royalty and power. The heavens declare the glory of God (**Psalms 19:1-2**) the glory of the true king of kings (**Daniel 2:37**) who brought His people out from the illegitimate rulership of Pharaoh and the house of slavery (Egypt) into the house of blessing. As the writer of Chronicles once stated, "Yours, O Lord, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the majesty and the splendour, for everything in heaven and earth is yours" (**1 Chronicles 29:11**).

The colour blue represents the sky, speaking of the boundary between heaven and earth with blue material being used to cover the ark of the covenant and objects within it whenever it was moved. All this instruction as to colour and layout comes from above the heavens pointing to the One who steps into time in order to redeem. So, what about the gold and scarlet colours?

The gold points to purity and perfection and therefore eternity, whilst scarlet (red) coloured linen speaks of sacrifice. The dyed-red rams skins covering the tent (**Exodus 26:14**) point us to the truth that our sins need to be covered by the work of God. Ultimately this points to Christ (**Isaiah 1:18; 1 John 1:7**).

The tabernacle speaks of God's presence with man and the work of redemption, and in the setting up of the holy of holies within the tabernacle, boundaries are put in place with veils and curtains as a reminder that man could only approach God on His terms. As scripture clearly reveals, there is a higher court of law and a much deeper way of life; life as it should be, which is unattainable by fallen man standing in his own strength. Yet even in these visual reminders of the division between heaven and earth there were symbols of God's grace and mercy woven into the fabric of both the tabernacle and the temple. For example, we have images of cherubim which direct our attention back to Genesis and the first place where Cherubim are mentioned in scripture, where we read...

"So, the Lord God banished him from the Garden of Eden to work the ground from which he had been taken. After he drove the man out, he placed on the east side of the Garden of Eden cherubim and a flaming sword flashing back and forth to guard the way to the tree of life."

Genesis 3:23-24.

Adam and Eve knew where God's localised presence had been experienced - Eden - and their sons Cain and Abel would have gone to the entrance of Eden (**Rom 10:17**) to present their offerings before the cherubim with the blazing sword. If there was never going to be any approach to the entrance of Eden there would have been no need for cherubim to stand

there. God does not need protection in any way whatsoever, but man does. If man were able to wander into God's holy presence he would be destroyed, and so cherubim were put in place as a sign of both judgment and mercy. Cain and Abel would have brought their offerings to this guarded entrance, to this place of judgement and mercy.

In understanding this we begin to see why the image of cherubim were woven on the curtains made of linen in the tabernacle (**Exodus 26:1**) and why the gold images of cherubim were on the Ark of the Covenant looking down at the mercy seat. They were a clear reminder that God is a God of mercy (**Ephesians 2:4-6**). No matter how good or successful we may assume we are, the simple and profound truth is that we can only approach God through His grace and mercy. In mercy we do not receive what we deserve and in grace we receive what we do not deserve. It is solely through the work of Jesus that we can approach the throne of grace with confidence and receive mercy and grace (**Hebrews 4:16**). Considering this there is hope; there is always hope.

Through Christ our representative, the curtain separating the holy of holies from the rest of the sanctuary in both the tabernacle and the temple was torn in two (**Matthew 27:51-54**). There is no longer any separation and death has been swallowed up in victory (**1 Corinthians 15:54**). A prophetic picture of future resurrection is captured in the dead being raised to life at the resurrection of Jesus (**Matthew 27:52**), pointing to a future where there will be a new heaven and earth bound together in covenant love. Heaven, in all its fullness and glory is coming to a renewed earth and you and I will be there. So, in the here and now of this side of eternity we should be encouraged and recognise that the One who raised Adam from the dust of the ground and raised Jesus from the dead can raise us out of the mud and mire and all that seeks to hold us down. As Paul writes, "And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you." (**Romans 8:11**). Be encouraged, the One who ordained that these words would be written is with you right now.

Many years ago, shortly after beginning my ministry in London, there was an evening when I sat down in my living room gazing out of the window at a starlit sky. Ann was putting the children to bed and so I put on some music that had always ministered to me during times of tiredness. Then, as I listened and continued to look at the stars, I found myself asking the question, "I wonder what God is doing right now; right this very second." It was as if someone had been listening to me as an immediate answer came back, "I'm helping you." Sometimes it is in the quiet moments when we really slow down that God speaks the loudest.

The Ark of the Covenant.

Within the Tabernacle and later in the Temple, was the Ark of the Covenant covered in gold, speaking of permanence and purity and on which rested the mercy-seat. Inside the Ark were the Ten Commandments given to Moses, the golden pot of manna and the almond rod of Aaron that budded (**Hebrews 9:4**). All of this clearly indicates God's original purpose of

teaching, blessing, encouraging and uplifting man. For example, the Ten Commandments speak of our Father's teaching and are part of the Torah revealing the heart of kingdom living which is summed up in Jesus' life and the words, "You shall love the Lord...." (**Matthew 22:37ff**).

The Ten Commandments summarise the heart of Torah with the word 'Torah' being derived from a verb meaning, 'to point with the finger or hand' or 'to shoot an arrow.' Considering this we recognize that we are being presented with the picture of a heavenly Father kneeling beside His people and showing them how to get the very best from life. Whilst laws can sometimes be set in place by governments that have little interest in their subjects, the Torah is given to help all, and also points out that man in his own strength cannot fulfil covenant regulations.

The Torah underlines the terms of the covenant between God and man, with blessing and cursing according to how we live or don't live the right way. For example, if I serve God I am available and open to the blessing of the covenant; if I go my own way I live in the 'curse' – the 'separated from my father's love' place, as did the two sons in the parable of the loving Father (**Luke 15**). Ultimately all covenant terms are fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

Within the Ark of the covenant was also the golden pot of Manna (**Deuteronomy 8:16**) speaking of God's provision and blessing during Israel's desert wandering. As has been previously stated, even in a place of discipline God provides for His people, although some were not going to enter the Promised land through a lack of trust in Him.

Finally, the Ark also contained Aaron's almond rod that had budded (**Numbers 17**). As previously mentioned, the Almond tree was the first tree to blossom in Israel and bore fruit in spring. In a challenge to an erroneous priesthood, it was Aaron's rod that supernaturally budded, being a symbol of supernatural power working through a human agency in space and time and clearly underlying the truth that growth and power comes from God alone. God has never asked us to do anything in our own strength.

In all that we have looked at concerning the tabernacle we see how it clearly points us to the love, grace, mercy and power of God. In the presence and contents of the tabernacle we also have a reminder of creation and our calling to walk with the Lord. So, as Paul writes, "Since we live by the Spirit let us keep in step with the Spirit" (**Galations 5:25**).

During years of ministry, I have learned to slow down when trouble comes through the door and focus on the Lord rather than what is happening around me, no matter how much it seeks to grab my attention. It is not always easy to do this because there is so much to distract, and an army of my self-help methods are primed and ready to kick into action at a second's notice. In any situation the greatest problem we face is always going to be self. In slowing down and recognising who we are in Him we become open and available to receive from the One who really is the master of all. Then, in His strength and with our eyes on Him we can keep in step with the Spirit and bring His victory to bear on whatever it is that is troubling us.

The Temple.

Like the tabernacle, the temple was also a microcosmic representation of the original creation and God's desire to be with man, with David writing, "He built his sanctuary like the heights, like the earth that he established forever" (**Psalm 78:69**). The Temple was a symbol of God's earthly dwelling and victory over chaos, the victory of the One who has not given up on His creation and who makes it possible for man to return home.

Initially it was David who wanted to build the Temple, the house of God, yet was told that this would not happen because he was a man of blood. God tells David that he would build David's house and that it would be Solomon (whose name means 'peace') who would build the temple (**1 Kings 5:3-5**). Ultimately it is the Prince of Peace who speaks of Himself as the true temple (**John 2:19-22**) and the One who would bring the dwelling of God and man together as sin and darkness was defeated at Calvary. So, what was the Temple that Solomon built for?

The temple was to be a place of prayer for all the nations, speaking of God's desire to be with man (**Deuteronomy 4:7, Psalm 145:18; Matthew 11:17**) and a focus point for a nation brought from darkness to light. However, this did not localise God as if a temple could contain Him. Isaiah picks up on this when He speaks of heaven as God's throne and the earth His footstool (**66:1**). God will not share His glory with man and so at the time of the inauguration of Solomon's temple the priests found that despite all their preparations, they could not perform their religious duties because the presence of God was so great (**1 Kings 8:27**). If they had been able to perform their religious duties, they could have made the mistake of thinking that it was what they did that brought about God's presence.

The temple, containing the Ark of the Covenant, was to be a place of peace and security with man approaching God through the blood of an animal. The lifeblood of an animal pointed to God as the giver, (**Leviticus 17:11**) and man as the receiver, and provided temporary forgiveness for sin. Its power lay in that it ultimately pointed to Jesus, spoken of as the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world (**John 1:29, 1 Peter 1:19-20, Revelation 13:8**).

In being a miniature representation of creation and redemption, the temple also contained images of Palm trees and flowers. So, was it just the case that God liked Palm trees? No. Everyone knew that the Palm tree could survive in desert conditions long after other vegetation had perished and so the Palm became a symbol of blessing, home and victory. The Palm trees at the entrance of the inner sanctuary were overlaid with beaten gold (**1 Kings 6:31-33**) with gold symbolising purity and permanence. All of this should encourage us. Our security is in Him; our strength is in Him and our future home is a certainty because of Him. Our lives flourish like grass in the field and our glory is like the flowers in the field (**1 Peter 1:24**). Kingdoms rise and kingdoms fall, and the kingdom of God will one day be revealed in all its power and glory in a renewed heaven. You and I are part of that kingdom and the author of that kingdom is here with us right now, in and through the Spirit. Yet how much time we spend engaging with Him is down to us. If we are open to the Lord and want to be drawn deeper into all that He is doing then we are going to grow, even if the world howls against us and Satan stands in our doorway. However, if we are simply going to try and import the things

of God into our version of life, then we will crumble like a dried-out leaf and shatter like a pot thrown against a wall. Then again, perhaps there have been traumatic events that have slowed us down or cut in on our walk with the Lord. If so, then recognise afresh that you have been made for growth and there is nothing in creation that can stop this – except you.

“The **righteous** will flourish like a palm tree, they will grow like a **cedar** of Lebanon; **planted** in the **house** of the Lord, they will flourish in the courts of our God. They will still bear fruit in old age, they will stay fresh and green, proclaiming, “The Lord is upright; he is my Rock, and there is no wickedness in him.” **Psalms 92:12-15**

In my work in the ministry I inevitably meet more people on their deathbeds than most, and one thing that always strikes me is the openness, peace and love that many Christians express at their point of final departure. In many ways this is a privilege to see, but for me also underlines a sad truth. Could not this person have been this way throughout their lives? Could they not have let their barriers down earlier, dealt with their difficulties in His grace more powerfully and shone as brightly as they do right now. As Paul once wrote (**Rom 8:37-9**), there is nothing that can stop us from growing in grace, except, of course, self.

Back to the temple.

On the capitals (heads) of two pillars in the portico of the temple were hundreds of images of pomegranates (**1 Kings 7:18**), this being so because pomegranates symbolised fertility and love due to their many seeds. True love is found in the One who has never let us down, written us off or laughed at us (**1 John 4:8**). This incredible love is found in the One we offended most, whose Son willingly suffered and died in our place, so that we could come home. Yet true love went even further in the sending of the Holy Spirit to empower us as we walk with the Lord. In and through Him all true growth comes about.

The pillar to the south was named Jakin meaning ‘He will establish,’ whilst the pillar to the north was called Boaz meaning, ‘In His strength’ (**1 Kings 7:21**). Considering this we see that the combination of named pillars and pomegranates points to the stability and strength of God present in creation, as the One who establishes life through His love, grace and mercy.

“The Lord reigns, he is robed in majesty; the Lord is robed in majesty and is armed with strength. The world is firmly established; it cannot be moved. Your throne was established long ago; you are from all eternity.” **Psalms 93:1-2**

Other images in the temple that were reminders of creation, are gourds, lilies and a sea of bronze shaped like a lily blossom. The calm water in the sea of bronze in the court of the priests, spoke of God’s victory over chaos. As previously mentioned, in Jesus walking on water and stilling the storm, we see the power of God with man, (**Mark 14:25-7**), a man who was totally at one with His Father (**John 10:30**).

"The disciples went and woke him, saying, "Master, Master, we're going to drown!" He got up and rebuked the wind and the raging waters; the storm subsided, and all was calm. "Where is your faith?" he asked his disciples. In fear and amazement, they asked one another, "Who is this? He commands even the winds and the water, and they obey him." **Luke 8:24-25**

As was the case with the tabernacle, the Temple was also associated with the presence of God pointing back to Eden and God's desire to be with man. In the imagery of the cherubim at the entrance of the inner sanctuary, we also have a clear reminder of God's mercy and grace. The Temple was also associated with mountain imagery (place of security, strength and refuge) and Jerusalem.

Jerusalem means, "foundation of peace" and speaks of God's presence with man. Peace is not the absence of trouble but the presence of a person.

I vividly remember a time when everything that could go wrong did go wrong for me in a big way. I had been asked to trouble-shoot a charity in London that had long departed from its Christian moorings. After many years battling all manner of difficulty I finally became chairman and by the grace of God was able to bring it back to its Christian foundations.

The charity now had a Christian director and along with me, three other Christian trustees for the first time in its history; but then it all went wrong. The director returned to work having overcome cancer and within a week told me that he could no longer do the job. A few days later one of the other trustees had a disagreement with a sister organisation and promptly resigned from our charity without a backwards glance. Then, in the same few days another trustee, in her late forties, was found dead in bed. It was as if everything had gone wrong with little prospect of a recover. Despite all this, I have to say that at the time I felt completely at peace (despite the sadness and loss), knowing the presence of God with me.

He is our peace and security and even when darkness crashes in on us and everything seems to fall apart, we can experience the presence of someone else with us – someone who went through unimaginable pain and suffering to do so despite being all powerful. And yes, by the grace of God I was able to bring in new staff and re-engage with another Christian organisation before handing the work over. Today, because of Him, it is a thriving centre where four churches meet and with a work that extends across the community.

Just a building.

In and of itself the temple was just a building, although being clearly associated with the tabernacle, Eden and the presence of God. Because of this association, it only became the temple (special place) in its fullest sense, when God's localised presence was within it. This explains why the temple could be destroyed at times; because Israel had walked away from God and therefore God allowed them to reap their harvest and withdrew His presence.

In the New Testament Jesus speaks of Himself as the temple (**John 2:19**) revealing what a son walking in the presence of His Father and at the leading of the Holy Spirit looked like. Jesus also speaks of Himself as the gate (**John 10:7**) as the only way by which heaven and earth will

come together. He is also spoken of as the Alpha and the Omega (**Rev 22:13**), the Aleph and Tau, the beginning and end. All things exist because of Him and God is the master of space and time. Evil is contained and defeated and one day will be removed forever and you and I are very much a part of His plan. So, focus on this and be encouraged.

Losing sight of God.

Sometimes the problems we go through are not because the world is so evil but because our view and engagement with God is so weak.

As already mentioned, the temple was truly the temple, (meeting place and microcosmic representation of heaven and earth together) when God was present. Whenever the Temple was plundered or destroyed it was because God's localised presence had departed due to His people wandering from the faith or ignoring truth and turning belief in God into religious ritualistic practices.

The patience of God is seen in that the warnings for waywardness and decadence, were often given for decades before judgement was fully executed, with the purpose of restoring that which was lost.

In the New Testament we find Jesus speaking to Pharisees, Sadducees and teachers of the law, in parables which revealed what God was like to those who were genuinely interested in knowing God. Yet in what in many respects started out as a well-meaning attempt to show the greatness of God and a willingness to obey, faith had degenerated into a legalistic set of do's and don'ts with no real understanding concerning God's heart. Therefore, Jesus spoke of God as a loving Father who ran out to greet prodigal sons (**Luke 15:17-20, 28**). He also spoke of the Kingdom of God as being like a landowner who personally went out in the heat of the day to provide people who desperately needed help, with a day's work (**Matt 20:1-7**).

People enjoy stories, and in grace and mercy Jesus reached out to all and helped struggling and oppressed people to understand the love of God through telling parables, stories that people could almost enter into as they painted pictures in minds and hearts. The parables were also given for another reason, exposing those who were bigoted and trapped in their own, "I'm right about God" ideas in making it hard for them to understand if they were not willing to lay down their own thinking (**Luke 8:9-10**). This wrong thinking controlled the thinking of many religious people even to the extent of them wanting to kill Jesus because He healed Lazarus on a Sabbath day (**John 11:45-50**).

At times God will allow people to reap the harvest of their thinking as was the case with those who prayed loudly in the marketplace in order to be seen by others (**Matthew 6:5-6**). Jesus effectively said, "Congratulations, you have been seen by others, you have received your 'reward' – but it means nothing to my father". So, who is God to us today? Is He more the One who did not heal us or who didn't seem to help us in this or that situation, or the God

who is always present? Have we inadvertently started building and following a picture of God that does not exist in the scriptures and drinking from our own well, so to speak?

"My people have committed two sins: They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water." **Jeremiah 2:13.**

Are we in danger of becoming more outward in ritual and habit concerning God, rather than seeking Him from the heart no matter how painful this may be?

Outward ritual and a heart that is not open to God is empty and void of blessing and power. It is outside covenant living and yet warnings were still given to a wayward people with, for example, Hosea writing, "For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings" (**Hosea 6:6**). This is also the reason the Psalmist writes, "You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise" **Psalm 51:16-17.**

All that God does is because He wants the very best *for* us, yet sometimes through the situations and circumstances we face, we can end up thinking that what God does, is so that He can get the best *from* us. In thinking of God this way there is the subtle shift from knowing our Father wants to give us the very best so that we can achieve our full potential, to seeing God as like a drill-sergeant demanding our best, with no real interest in anything except what He gets from us.

We now move on to look at the role of the priest which, like Creation, Eden, the Seventh Day, the Tabernacle and the Temple, also points to our calling to receive from Him as His sons and daughters.

Priests of God in His creation and the real circle of life.

In our fallen world, the circle of life is seen as little more than man is born, grows to maturity, slowly descends into old age, sometimes kicking and screaming and at other times just giving up on life, and then returns to the dust of the ground. We then become no more than fertiliser for whatever is growing in the soil we are buried in. From my perspective this has always been little more than a half-circle at very best.

The priestly ministry is to a relationship with our heavenly Father, the fruit of which is seen in how we walk in authority and reach out in love to those around us. In living this way, we clearly reveal the role of the priest and the true circle of life. I receive from God and grow in understanding of His wisdom, knowledge and love. As I grow in Him, I am more able to stand in authority and reach out to those around me, in the love that stems from my relationship with God. Living out this two-way relationship (receiving from God and giving back in the way

I share His love) reveals the beauty and wonder of the circle of life. The real circle of life is about receiving from our heavenly Father and growing in the way we share what we have been given, seen in how we treat others and the world we live in. In this respect we are also giving back to God as we live as sons and daughters.

The role of the priest, is a role of receiving and sharing which is the true circle of life and therefore always speaking of growing, developing and moving forwards no matter the opposition. We grow into this freedom, as would a toddler growing to maturity in the care of a loving family. The child is a recipient of love right from the beginning, but as he or she grows they can benefit more from who their parents are and what they have. For example, if the parents are talented musicians, the growing child may benefit from their love of music as they teach their child the wonder of music and how to play. You and I were created to be taught, encouraged, uplifted and strengthened in a dynamic two-way relationship with our heavenly father. Imagine what it could have been like if we had experienced this from the very beginning. Unfortunately, this has not been the case and there are many areas of our life that have been affected in a negative way by the world in which we live. Until we came to Christ there is the strong possibility that some of the choices we made, actually reduce our circle of activity instead of bringing the freedom we hope for. Meanwhile others may have had a difficult start to life and never really progressed beyond survival mode, where walls of resistance were built up in a bid to stop the hurt, pain, isolation and feelings of failure that continually knock at the door late into the night. Sometimes it is hard to break free from this because it is all that people have known, which explains why it is so important to understand the full picture that scripture reveals, as God transforms our lives (**Rom 12:2**), on a journey of healing and restoration, strengthening and enablement. All scripture is God-breathed (**2 Tim 3:16**) and is for our blessing and benefit, coming from the author of life who breathed into the dust of the ground, raised a man called Adam and as the master surgeon then created Eve. We are a royal priesthood, representing the true circle of life to a fallen world.

Prior to man's descent into sin, the heart of priestly living is found in a deep and abiding interpersonal ministry. In this ministry, man was always the receiver and God the provider. Therefore, anything man brought back to God was ultimately what God provided in the first place in a pure act of love towards man. As man then grows in wisdom, knowledge and understanding he returns love to God in a deep abiding relationship. A very simple way of illustrating this could be in imagining a small child picking flowers in the garden and then giving them to parents, who had initially bought seeds and planted the garden in the first place. In grasping this we see the role of a priest. It was not and is not a religious role in the way many have come to perceive. It is about receiving and giving; it is about relationships and the very first thing that God wants you to do is to receive from Him.

In knowing God's presence Adam and Eve would have been aware of His calling to *receive* and *share* with each other, with no thought of personal gain. They were also able to exercise dominion over creation in their calling to shape and mould their environment and bring out

the very best that was *already* inherently present. In this we see the heart of the priest – a ministry of receiving and giving, of growing and sharing.

After sin entered humanity the role of the priest became stained and flawed, as can be seen in every generation since Eden. We seek to own and control, to take and not give and so often fail to recognise our true history and calling.

In the patriarchal families the head of the family would take the role of the priest in coming before God (e.g. **Gen 35:2-3; Job 1:3-4**). Later, in the nation of Israel, the High Priest and priesthood represented man before God. Yet how was this possible? How was it that a sinful person could represent others before God? The answer is that it was through blood (**Leviticus 17:11; Heb 9:22**).

Due to sin man has forfeited his life, yet as we clearly see through scripture, God remains gracious and faithful to covenant. In Old Testament times, God accepted the blood of an animal as a substitutionary death in our place, providing temporary remission of sin. Therefore, in coming through the blood, a priest is someone who *brings back* to God that which *only God can provide* – life. Bear in mind that this shedding of blood was not to placate an enraged tyrant, but to make a way where man could approach God who is perfect in every way. In doing so man is approaching the One who graciously brought into being the path to forgiveness and reconciliation. Therefore, the power of the Old Testament sacrifice, was *not* anything intrinsic within the animal itself but in that it pointed to God as the giver and man the receiver, ultimately pointing to the gift of life in Christ (**John 1:29**).

In God's ministry through Abraham, Israel was called to be a light to the nations in the role of a royal priesthood. She was chosen to mediate between God and the nations sharing the love and knowledge that was freely given by a heavenly Father. The rebellious nature of man is seen in how nations often came against Israel, and also, in how Israel sometimes strayed from their trust in God and the obligations of the covenant, assuming they could do things in their own strength. Despite this, God did not give up on mankind or Israel and in the fullness of time (**Galatians 4:4**) Son, the Great High Priest (**Hebrews 4:14**), came as our representative and bridged the gap between man and God (**1 Timothy 2:5**) by paying the price for our transgression which was God's desire right from the foundation of the world (**1 Peter 1:21**). God has always been interested in us, has always been coming for us and has always been willing to give the very best of Himself so that you and I could come home. We do not feel as if we deserve anything from God and the truth is that we do not. Yet feelings are not to control us as if they were a potter moulding our lives. It is the truth that is found in God's word (**2 Timothy 3:16**) that is to shape and mould our lives and can do so even when the enemy is standing at the door and wanting to make us feel small and insecure. Everything that we can be by way of the kingdom is because of His love and grace and so there is always hope as can be seen from looking at scriptures such as Zechariah chapter three.

In **Zechariah 3**, we read of Satan standing with Joshua the High Priest (representing Israel) in order to accuse him. Joshua was standing in filthy clothes, indicative of the state of the nation

at that time. Satan accuses and is rebuked by the Lord who says, “...Is not this man a burning stick snatched from the fire?” Joshua then has his filthy clothing removed and replaced with rich garments. This was also the case with the returning prodigal son where he was given the best robe in the house which would have been his father’s (**Luke 15:22**). No matter how you or I feel or look, or how loud the world or the powers of darkness want to accuse us, the truth is that we belong to God. We have been raised up with Christ and seated with Him in heavenly realms (**Ephesians 2:6**), we are indwelt by the power of the Holy Spirit (**1 Cor 3:16**) and His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness (**2 Pet 1:3**). It is in meditating on these truths first and foremost, rather than trying to work everything out, that enables us to understand and engage with our true destiny in Him.

Jesus – the High Priest.

If you or I went to see one of the heads of state in this country or any other country, the chances are that we would be continuously denied access. Yet, when it comes to the supreme power behind the Universe, there is now no barrier concerning the highest authority in the Universe, because through Christ, the High Priest, the door to heaven is always open for us (**Hebrews 4:16**). Apart from this, the highest authority chooses to be known of as ‘our Father’ (**Matthew 6:9**).

Christ is our High Priest (**Hebrews 9:11**), our representative (**1 Timothy 2:5**) and cornerstone (**1 Peter 2:6**). In Christ we are now spoken of as living stones (**1 Peter 2:4**) being built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices to God through Christ (**1 Peter 2:4-6**).

Spiritual sacrifice is about giving our lives to Him as He gave His life to us. The fruit of this is seen in understanding our identity in Him as we walk in the power of the Holy Spirit and reach out to others as God has reached out to us. This is what it means to be made in the image of God and, in this respect we can say that true spirituality is full humanity as clearly seen in Jesus, whose life showed a complete dependence on His Father and the leading of the Holy Spirit.

The clothing of the priest – pointing to our role in creation.

In the Old Testament, the High Priest would represent the people of Israel on the Day of Atonement and in and of himself, had no merit before God whatsoever. Like everyone else, his approach was through the blood of a lamb, because in breaking a law there is always a price to be paid.

In the Old Testament the clothing of the high priest (**Exodus 28:15-21**) points to man’s original calling to live as the pinnacle of God’s creation, being able to transcend the natural and relate to and receive from God. For example, the blue material of their clothing points to the

heavens. Other colours included purple, speaking of status and royalty, gold pointing to purity and eternity and white denoting right standing before God. All believers are now clothed in the work of Christ (**Galations 3:27**).

On the fringe of the High Priests tunic were small pomegranates and bells, with Pomegranates (which can contain over fifteen hundred seeds) speaking of fruitfulness which ultimately comes through God's involvement with man.

The different coloured precious stones on the priest's breastplate point to the colours of creation and their number (12). along with the name of a tribe on each stone which points to the High Priest as representing Israel before God.. If you shine light through a precious stone, you see its real beauty and colour and on the occasions when Israel served God and reached out to help others, we see what being made in the image of God looks like in space and time. as the light of His presence began to reveal their true identity in Him. The breastplate of precious stones was also known as the breastplate of judgement with the High priest representing man before God as an intercessor.

Think of a stained-glass window as sunlight begins to stream through it, highlighting the many-coloured pieces of glass and the picture represented in how the different colours were carefully placed together by the artist. Without sunlight neither the incredible depth of colour nor the picture they paint could be fully appreciated, but with the arrival of sunlight a transformation takes place as what is already present is revealed.

In keeping in step with the Holy Spirit our true colours (humanity as it should be with God) being revealed as darkness is overcome and the light of His presence brings restoration healing and wholeness. In *genuinely* seeking God, as opposed to having a 'pit-stop ' prayer and glance at scripture every so often, we embark on an incredible journey of transformation and continually discover what it means to be His son or daughter in the life we now lead.

All around our world men, women and children are being transformed through the love of God impacting their lives and shining His light as they reach out to others. Businessmen are no longer driven by money but share their knowledge and what they have with others. Those who have been controlled by substance abuse find power releasing them from the roots of addiction and then as His love empowers empower them with love and compassion as they turn to help others.

At the height of the Coronavirus outbreak in Wuhan, China, Christians, with the help of Barnabus Aid, an international Christian organisation, put on protective clothing and masks and went out in the streets handing out protective masks, gloves and hygiene supplies in a city which had been quarantined. Elsewhere in India, Christians working with the International Justice Mission helped rescue slaves from bonded labour, with ex-slaves then starting to help rescue others.

Across the world young and old people are finding hope and security in Jesus and in understanding their identity and calling then gossip good news to others with incredible groups of people rising out of the rubble of life and seeking to free the oppressed who then, in so many cases, then refuse to live as victims but as they turn to help others.

In all of this and in so many ways we see the true beauty of humanity, for it is humanity at home with the father and standing in strength despite weakness and reaching out with an ability that is way beyond their natural resources and shining the light of the gospel in words, action and the power of the Holy Spirit.

Ultimately it is Jesus, the light of the world (**John 8:12**) who shows us what being made in the image of God really looks like and through Him all believers are spoken of as the temple of the Holy Spirit (**1 Corinthians 3:16**) and living stones (**1 Peter 2:5**) built up as the 'called to God' ones. As the great High Priest, Jesus holds us in His heart and stands in our place as our representative.

Unlike any other priest, Jesus did not come to offer a sacrifice but to become the sacrifice (**Hebrews 10:11-12**) and open the door to salvation. This is why John could write of Jesus as the 'Lamb who takes away the sins of the world (**John 1:29**) and it is why the writer to Hebrews writes: -

"Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again, and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when this priest (**Jesus**) had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God." **Hebrews 10:11-12**

In Jesus the Great High Priest, we see the heart that reaches out in order to reconcile us to God and the One who restores and sustains new life at great cost to Himself. Considering this we understand why Paul tells the church that all the promises of God are 'yes' (**2 Corinthians 1:20**) through Jesus. Because of Jesus, we can approach God with full assurance of faith (**Hebrews 10:22**) knowing that we can receive both mercy and grace (**Hebrews 4:16**). We do not receive what we do deserve but do receive what we don't deserve. In Christ and through the empowering of the Holy Spirit, (**Romans 13:14**) we can begin to fulfil our true destiny as we reach out to others, in compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience (**Colossians 3:12-14**), forgiving others and binding all this together in love. We are a royal priesthood, part of the household of God, we can receive from Him because of all that is ours through the Great High Priest Jesus Christ and can share with others in the power and presence of the Holy Spirit.

There are times in the ministry when, try as I might, I still get it wrong. It is as if I drift into my own ideas of what is required of me, seek to do the best I can and then fall flat on my face. What has happened is that good intentions have fuelled me, and I start moving off in my own strength. However, God's word is not a recipe showing us how to produce our own walk with Him, or how we can become squeaky-clean and super spiritual. All He asks is that I remain

open to Him and in doing so recognise that I do not manufacture my own goodness or merit, but can participate in all that God is doing and know the goodness of His presence with me, come what may. Christianity is not a, 'hold on with your fingertips' set of beliefs. It is light even in the darkest of places, strength when our own has come to an end, power to overcome all that challenges and a love that reaches out to us even when it has gone horribly wrong.

Jesus cleanses the Temple (Matthew 21:12-15).

The temple in Jesus' day had been reconstructed by Herod who had doubled the size of its foundations and in doing so changed the whole outlay of Jerusalem. The outer courts were designed for gentile believers, with a great deal of the intellectual and spiritual life of the city taking place in these courtyards.

However, in Jesus' day the outer court had become a place of exploitation where money lenders charged exorbitant exchange rates for the temple coinage and greatly inflated prices for sacrificial animals (**Matthew 21:12-13**). In many ways the outer court had come to speak more of religion in the hands of man than God and the power of God was not present – until Jesus arrived.

Jesus entered the temple area and drove out all who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves. "It is written," he said to them, "'My house will be called a house of prayer,' but you are making it a 'den of robbers.'" The blind and the lame came to him at the temple and he healed them. But when the chief priests and the teachers of the law saw the wonderful things he did and the children shouting in the temple area, "Hosanna to the Son of David," they were indignant."

Matthew 21:12-15

In the ministry of Jesus and in all the miracles that He did, we see the norm of the Kingdom of God amid the chaos of our world. God has not written us off and does not stand on the touchline with no real interest as to what is going on in our world and in our lives. God is with us (**Matthew 1:23**).

In Jesus' words and actions, we see, for the first time since Adam, a man who reveals exactly what full humanity should look like in the life of one who related to His father in deep and abiding love. (**John 5:19**). Jesus is also the 'God-stooped low' One (**Philippians 2:5-11**), the Incarnate Son and second person of the Trinity withholding deity and living with us as one of us and without sin. In engaging with His father and by the leading of the Spirit, Jesus healed the sick, raised the dead and cast out demons. Above all things, He shows us what life with the Father is all about, then He gave His perfect life as a sacrifice so that we can have freedom and life to the full (**John 10:10**). Here, in the above reading we see the master of life walking into what should have been a house of prayer for all the nations.

As the perfectly man of the sabbath, Jesus walks into the Temple courts and finds, ensconced within them, the puppeteers of religious enterprise preying on those who had travelled for many days to worship at the Temple. As already mentioned, as the wayfarers came in, they were charged exorbitant prices for all that was required by way of offering and sacrifice. In righteous anger Jesus throws out the money lenders and points out that the Temple was to be a house of prayer for all nations (**Isaiah 56:7**). Then people were healed.

People were attracted to Jesus because they found an authority in Him that did not seek to dominate or crush and which instead encouraged, uplifted and freed so many who were dominated by the world around them and caught up in all manner of sickness and suffering. Many had experienced the authority exercised over them by blind leaders, as well as the authority of an Empire with a coinage that bore images of the goddess Pax (peace) and Victoria (victory) along with Mars, (god of war). Despite being the legitimate owner and ruler of all things, we find the power of the Kingdom being exercised in and through the life of Jesus, the Suffering Servant (**Isaiah 42:1, John 13:3-14 Philippians 2:7-8**) and the Lord of life (**1 Timothy 6:15; Revelation 17:14**).

In Jesus, people saw a heavenly King revealing the heart of God in word and deed with acts of grace, mercy and love that drew the hearts of many. Some had been sold the lie that God was distant and far off in the 'over there of time' (**Psalms 90:4; 2 Peter 3:8**), a historical person, and not a present reality. Yet now, in Jesus, the master of space and time many were coming to understand that God was with them (Immanuel-God with us) and the "I will never leave you nor forsake you" One (**Isaiah 41:10-14; Hebrews 13:5**).

"He went down with them and stood on a level place. A large crowd of his disciples was there and a great number of people from all over Judea, from Jerusalem, and from the coast of Tyre and Sidon, who had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases. Those troubled by evil spirits were cured, and the people all tried to touch him, because power was coming from him and healing them all."

Luke 6:17-19.

This is the one who entered the house of prayer as One made in the image of God, the fully rested man, God stooped low and true King of Kings. He was present at the beginning (**John 1:1**) and spoke in the authority and power as the Second person of the Trinity Incarnate. He knows His world; He knows all that has happened to it and He knows where He is taking it and we are very much a part of that journey.

"If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him." By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive. Up to that time the Spirit had not been given since Jesus had not yet been glorified."

John 7:37-39

In Genesis we read of water flowing from the Garden of Eden (**Genesis 2:10**) and in Israel's desert wanderings, we read of water flowing from the rock (**Numbers 20:11; Psalm, 105:41**)

with this blessing ultimately pointing to Christ (**1 Corinthians 10:3-4**). Water is a symbol of blessing and we are spoken of as being planted by streams of water (**Psalms 1:3**) and those from whom living water flows (**John 7:38**). We are also led to streams of living water (**Revelation 7:17**), speaking of fullness of blessing.

Centuries after Israel's desert wanderings, Ezekiel, a refugee whose name meant 'God will strengthen,' had a vision (**Ezekiel 1:1**) whilst living fifty miles from Babylon in a place called Tel-Abib, by the river Kebar. In his vision Ezekiel saw the power, perfection and beauty of the One who holds all things in His hands accompanied by heavenly beings and what looked like a man approaching on a throne of sapphire (**Ezekiel 1:26**). For a small man in a world-class Empire which dominated the landscape this vision was a clear reminder that earthly kings and kingdoms were nothing compared to the Holy One. In a later vision Ezekiel sees the entrance of the heavenly temple (**Ezekiel 47:1**) with water coming out from under the threshold toward the east. Eden was in the east, and as has already been said, 'east' can also refer to the past, directing our attention to God, who is before all things. Do not lose hope for as we have just mentioned, we are planted by streams of water (**Psalms 1:3**) and through believing in Jesus, streams of living water can flow from our lives (**John 7:38**).

A few years after my father died my mother started working as a missionary in China and was only thirty kilometres from Tiananmen Square at the time of the student uprising in 1989 and soon became aware of how many students died as the uprising was brutally quashed.

A young college student called Chai Ling was one of the student leaders in the Square, but managed to escape to America despite being China's most wanted woman. Chai is now a Christian and, in her book, 'A Heart for Freedom' she writes: -

"I now see that the thirst I had is the longing for freedom placed in our hearts by God. Only when I came to know God could I truly begin to comprehend his unique purpose for my life. I've since been given renewed strength, healing, and insight to explain my perspective on China's past, the meaning of the Tiananmen movement and God's future plan."

Chai Ling in, A Heart for Freedom, page 9

All across our world, and often in difficult circumstances, men, women and children are coming to place their trust in Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour, realising this is His world, as they see the truth and begin to walk in the power of the Holy Spirit.

One man who struggled with his walk with the Lord and then decided to do something about it, is Nike Ripken who wrote, 'The Insanity of God'. Dr Nik Ripken was a missionary who worked in Somalia where his faith took a major battering. He started to wonder if faith could survive under persecution and began travelling to many countries in order to collate testimonies from Christians who had suffered varying forms of hardship. One of those testimonies is Dmitri's story (page 58).

Dmitri lived in a village four hours north of Moscow. He had been raised in a Christian family but, over the decades, communism had destroyed many churches and places of worship, with pastors being imprisoned or killed. As an adult with a young family, Dmitri found himself a three-day walk from the nearest church, making it virtually impossible for him to attend more than twice a year. One night a week he would do a Bible study with his boys who grew spiritually and asked him to sing songs as well. It was a small village and neighbours began to hear the singing, with many asking if they could come along. The gathering grew to over fifty in a few short weeks and came to the attention of a communist official.

Dmitri was fired from his job and his wife lost her teaching post, with their boys being expelled from school. Dmitri was eventually arrested and spent seventeen years in a prison over seven-hundred miles from his home. Every morning at daybreak he would stand at attention by his bed, face the east and raise his arms in praise to God and sing a heart-song to Jesus. The other prisoners laughed at him, cursed him and sometimes threw human waste at him to shut him up – but every morning he sang. He would also try to find scraps of paper and write down bible verses. Whenever his jailors saw them, they would confiscate them. He was told that if he signed a confession denying Christ and saying he was a paid agent of a western government; he would be released.

One day, after many years in prison, the authorities came and told Dmitri that his wife had been murdered and his children taken away by the state. They said, “We have ruined your home and your family is gone.” Dmitri’s resolve broke and he told God that he was giving up, saying to the guards that he would sign the confession which they then went away to prepare. He was told that he would need to sign it the following morning.

That evening, his wife, children and brother were touched by the Holy Spirit to pray for Dmitri who they sensed was at a particular low. They did, and as they did so God allowed Dmitri to hear their prayers over seven-hundred miles away. The next day, with renewed strength, he told the guards what had happened and that he would no longer sign the confession. He was later beaten and threatened with execution. This is what happened next:

“As he was dragged down the corridor in the centre of the prison, the strangest thing happened. Before they reached the door leading to the courtyard – before stepping out into the place of execution – fifteen hundred hardened criminals stood at attention by their beds. They faced the east and they began to sing. Dmitri told me that it sounded to him like the greatest choir in all of human history. Fifteen hundred criminals raised their arms and began to sing the heart-song that they had heard Dmitri sing to Jesus every morning for all of those years.”

Dmitri’s jailors instantly released their hold on his arms and stepped away from him in terror. One of them demanded to know, “Who are you?” Dmitri straightened his back and stood as tall and as proud as he could. He responded: “I am a son of the Living God and Jesus is His name.”

The guards returned him to his cell and not long after this Dmitri was released, and he returned to his family.

No matter what we are going through the truth is that we are part of an incredible family that knows no cultural, geographic or ideological boundaries and that His church, whilst often facing great difficulty, is continuing to grow.

Revelation and the temple.

Towards the end of Revelation, there is no specific mention of the temple by name in the New Jerusalem (meaning 'possession of peace'). This is because the '*Lord God Almighty and the Lamb, are its temple*' (**Revelation 21:22**) with crystal clear water flowing from the throne of God. In other words, peace, security, and friendship are fully matured because God is present with His people as heaven and earth come together.

This is also captured in the imagery of the new Jerusalem descending from heaven and looking like a cube **Revelation 21:15ff**. This is not a picture of a city of bricks and mortar but a vision of God and His people together (as is **1 Corinthians 3:16**), in language that would have been clearly understood by those who initially read it, being a picture of intimacy, love, security and power.

The reason Jerusalem is pictured as a cube is because the holy of holiness in the tabernacle and temple were also cubic in shape, and therefore the imagery underlines the truth that through Christ we are in the holy of holies in the presence of the 'turn my face to them' One (**Numbers 6:24-26**).

In considering and understanding this we recognise that in a cube-shaped descending Jerusalem whose name means 'Possession of peace,' we have a picture of completion and intimacy in the presence of the Lord. Around the city is a thick wall that is made of Jasper, this again points to the protection and covenant care of God. Through His grace and mercy, the sheep are with the Shepherd (**John 10:11**), the Father with his children (**John 10:29**).

"But whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom."

2 Corinthians 3:18.

End of part one.

The Road Back Home.

We all have a story – but we are also part of another story: his story.

Part 2.

Our history.

Our history is not the few generations we are aware of or being rooted in the nation or religion we were born into, instead our story begins within the heart of Trinity and God's desire to share love with another.

This world was created for us and we were to be image-bearers, living in the shadow of the One who encourages, instructs, and uplifts us, helping us grow and experience more of what has already been provided for us. We were placed in a garden called Eden meaning 'delight,' with this name and conveying the heart of God who walked with man in the cool of the day. However, this Eden was not a utopia we have to regain or a place to return to and hide in, but instead it was a place to move out from as we learnt to shape and mould the world through His love, guidance and provision. Everything was for our benefit and although we were to judge God ("he is holding out on us") and abuse our privileges, He was always going to be the One who would ultimately give Himself in sacrificial love, so that we, the rebel, could come home. That is what perfect love does.

In the language of the seventh day and the lack of mention of the morning and evening, we are pointed to eternal love and even after the fall, continue to see God's mercy in a multiplicity of ways. Not least so in the tabernacle (entwining) and temple (house of engagement) pointing us back to Eden - a special place, and forward to the arrival of Jesus Christ, God Incarnate.

In the imagery and colours of the tabernacle, the temple, and the work of the priest, we recognise our calling as image-bearers who receive and give out in incredible power, His power. We are known, noticed, and loved and throughout the Old Testament, there was always the reminder that the Creator would stand in creation as the Incarnate Son who came in flesh and blood. He came as a servant and His ministry was one where even a bruised reed would not be broken, or a smouldering wick snuffed out. He wept over Jerusalem, was nailed to a cross, judged for our sin, and then rose on high to be seated at the right hand of God. Therefore, we too, through His grace, compassion and love are seated in heavenly realms, in that the work of salvation is complete concerning our position in Him and is now being appropriated in and through the leading of the Holy Spirit.

In knowing more of God through reading His word, through prayer and the presence of the Spirit, we see the One who holds all things together and we are not then caught up with all that is vying for our attention. We are able to see all things as they really are. Abraham

Heschel captures something of this need to see properly in his book, 'I asked for a Wonder' (page 41) where he writes, "We do not step out of the world when we pray; we merely see the world in a different setting. The self is not the hub, but the spoke of a revolving wheel. In prayer we shift the centre of living from self-consciousness to self - surrender." In war, even the victor will lose good men, but in surrendering to God, all we need lose is what we have become by way of the world, which was never meant to be part of who we really are in the first place.

We are known and we are loved.

Sometimes when I wake up early on a sunny morning, I can almost imagine what a renewed Earth at one with heaven might be like, as I look across creation. On these rare occasions, it is as if the freshness of early morning air and the peace and tranquillity of a new summer's day has lifted my heart and mind, helping me 'see' heaven and earth intertwined in a future that awaits us all (**Isaiah 65:17, 55:22**) and is promised by the One who knows and loves us most.

On these early summer mornings, it is as if God had walked through His world during the night and renewed the faded grass, reinvigorated the colours in the flowers, leaves and trees and purified the air I breathe. As I think along these lines, I am reminded that this world is important to my heavenly Father and so are all of us. I am reminded that He has not let go of this world and will not let go of us and that the here and now of this moment in time is important to God. Although this world bears little resemblance to the wonder of creation in its first days, one day there will be a renewed heaven and Earth, because He says so and you and I will be part of it.

This world has *never* been ignored by God and neither have you or I and it has never been pushed to one side, as if it were no longer of any consequence to the One who created it in an incredible act of love.

This is our heavenly Father's world and therefore there is nothing trivial or insignificant about it. Our heavenly Father is about His work of transformative grace right now and you and I are part of that work. Therefore, although our meaning, purpose and the origin of our being is couched in the distant past, we are part of a story that is happening right now. It is the oldest story in history and the most up to date story in history and across the world people are hearing about Jesus, with many accepting Him as Lord and Saviour. One such story is about Joe, a taxi driver.

In his book, 'Anointed for Business,' Ed Siloso tells the story of Joe, a taxi driver in the Philippines who, shortly after becoming a Christian, wanted to reach people in 'Sweet Moment's', a club near his taxi rank. Joe started going into the bar and ordering a soft drink whilst praying peace over the place, also praying for all the employees and customers. He got to know Brian, the barman, who was a gambler, drug user, drug dealer and pimp to around thirty-five prostitutes. Their friendship grew and Joe was able to lead Brian to the Lord and later see him baptised. As Brian emerged from the water, the power of God came upon him

and he experienced an instant transformation as addiction left him. Those in Brian's work environment began to see this change and many of the prostitutes turned to Christ. Joe and his wife moved into a neighbourhood near the bar so they could minister to all those who were coming to Christ, and his wife would bake rice cakes and pray over them as she distributed them among their neighbours. One of the neighbours was Teddy, a lawyer and owner of the bar. He would later testify how he came to Christ saying that it all started when he ate one of the cakes baked for him by a taxi-driver's wife. As he did so the name 'Jesus' popped into his mind. He became interested in what Joe had been teaching his employees, joined the Bible study, and eventually committed his life to Christ. Today the club is a church building.

Our history, identity and calling.

Our history is couched in eternity past and not the handful of generations we may know through personal history. Our true history and calling goes back before the beginning of time and is found in the heart of Trinity and God's desire to create a being capable of receiving and growing in love. Therefore, before atoms and molecules were spoken into being there was already a reason for creating you, and that reason is love (**1 John 4:8**).

The incredible story that surrounds life, is that you and I were thought of before the painting was put onto canvas and before the ingredients of the Universe came together. In allowing these truths to shape our thinking we can experience great power and freedom, because the call of eternity begins to shape and mould our minds and push aside all that we have become by way of a fallen world. This incredible story about our origin and destiny also shows us why it is that the Bible starts by mentioning a special place of blessing (**Genesis 1:1**) and why it ends with a coming together of heaven and earth (**Revelation 22:14f**); a place for you and I to live with our heavenly Father.

Adam: Amazing.

When Adam was raised from the dust of the ground with the breath of life from God, his body contained over sixty thousand miles of blood vessels, with oxygen filling lungs with a surface area of seventy square metres, containing three-hundred thousand small blood vessels, all intricately interconnected. Then, as air entered Adam's lungs, it did so through nasal passages capable of distinguishing over ten- thousand different smells. Then, as this incredible being surveyed a creation gifted to him in love, he did so with eyes composed of two million working parts, with one million nerve fibres connecting each eye to the brain and a visual cortex capturing 1.5. million pulse messages per millisecond, translating them into pictures with incredible colour, contrast, and depth. Then as Adam began to walk in creation, he did so with a body containing over seven octillion atoms and a bone structure as strong as granite. Later, as he lay with Eve, her fertilised egg, (invisible to the naked eye) contained all the genetic coding for this incredible physiology, including an awesomely powerful brain that is

billions of times more complex than the most advanced mobile phone. From conception to the last breath taken this side of eternity, man is fearfully and wonderfully made (**Psalm 139:14**) and at no stage does man have the right to abuse life, whether in the womb or through the misguided process of euthanasia. All life has value to God and is His creation; it is not to be tampered with at will.

So, as we move forward in our studies, think again of this incredibly powerful being raised from the dust of the ground through the breath of God because it speaks of your origins, of how and why you were created. You were created in the image of God with the Hebrew word 'image' (tselem) coming from a root word meaning 'to shade,' and literally speaking of one who is so very close (shaded by the shadow of) to another and who was created to receive love, blessing and protection. This is your foundational history, your identity and the reason you live and breathe today is because God has not given up on you and because God *is* the God of grace, love, compassion and mercy.

Adam: A powerful and intelligent being.

The power and perception of Adam's mind is seen in how he named all the animals (**Genesis 2:19-20**) and was able to retain the information. In the Ancient Near East, naming something or someone spoke of insight into the nature and character of that which was named. A modern-day example would be to say that Dopey in Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, is called Dopey because he is dopey.

In the Ancient Near East giving names also speaks of authority over that which is named. Considering this we see Adam showing incredible depth of understanding concerning creation and exercising God-given authority over that which was named.

Adam was not some sort of hippie. He had incredible insight and a powerful memory as he walked with God and exercised lordship over creation. In many respects we could say he was the first farmer, chemist, botanist, artist, all-round scientist and so much more. He knew the nature of his surroundings (knowledge), how everything fitted together (wisdom) and what the purpose and meaning of his existence was all about (understanding); and yet there is more to man than this.

Body/soul/spirit.

In Genesis, the creation of the animal kingdom (**Genesis 1:26**) is different from the creation of man. God made wild animals and livestock according to their kinds, whilst in contrast to this God formed Adam from the dust of the ground and *breathes* into his nostrils the breath of life, creating man in His image with the call to rule over His creation (**Genesis 1:27; 2:7**).

Adam was raised from the dust as a living body-soul-spirit and *not* as a being with a soul-spirit trapped inside a body, or as if spirit were some sort of higher entity. Adam was a unified person with his body-soul-spirit acting as one. Think of a cake where all the ingredients have come together as one cake, and we begin to get the idea.

The difference between man and the animal kingdom is not an added component, but that God has given spiritual abilities to the body-soul-spirit, which are different from that of the animal kingdom. The spirit of a person speaks of the driving force that empowers life, and in a worldly sense, can speak of our drive to dominate our environment where we often feel insecure, whilst paradoxically sometimes exhibiting pride in what we achieve.

Adam's spirituality was not some sort of extra or superior mode of existence. Instead it speaks of being able to relate to God which is what it means to be fully human. From this we see that spirituality is not hiding away and looking for some sort of higher experience as if it makes us more at one with the cosmos; nothing could be further from the truth. Spirituality is full humanity in all its glory and power as seen in how Jesus, the image of the invisible God (**Colossians 1:15**), walked with His father (**John 5:19-20**).

We are noticed and valued.

With increasing amounts of information being fed into our minds from just about everywhere on the planet, it is easy to feel small, unimportant, and undervalued. Although from a worldly perspective this may be true, it is not kingdom thinking. No matter how insignificant we may feel, the truth is that we are of great value to God. Think of it like this.

Imagine seeing a powerful man park his car in a town he had never visited before and then start walking towards the town centre. On the fingers of his right hand are two rings, one of them being a recent purchase which hit the headlines because of the high amount that was paid for it at a well-known auction house.

As this large man walks towards the town centre, he is stopped by two police officers who inform him that the town has a one ring policy and anyone breaking the law would have all rings confiscated along with a hefty fine. On the basis that he had not been aware of the law, the police officers then give him the opportunity to surrender one of the rings. To their surprise, the newly informed lawbreaker immediately takes off his recently purchased expensive ring, hands it over and carries on walking without a backwards glance.

The officers were surprised, because the second ring on the man's finger was little more than a small strip of plastic, more like a ring from a Christmas cracker than anything else. What they could not have known was that it was of greater value to the man than the one surrendered, because it had been given to him by his three-year-old daughter on his birthday and so meant everything to him.

At times we can all feel small and insignificant, but it is at these times that we need to ask ourselves the question, “Who or what are we measuring our worth by in the first place and why?” Have we fallen into the trap of making judgements over our lives based on all that has happened to us, good or bad? Or do we take captive this thinking and exercise faith, recognising that we are of great value to God and always will be. We may feel insignificant and may have damaged our lives through destructive thinking or through trying to get a better hold on life, but the truth remains that no matter how damaged we feel, we are still of great value to God. At the risk of labouring this point, think of it like this.

Imagine owning an antique ring valued at £2000 and with £500 of gold within it. If you smashed your ring with a hammer it would still be worth the £500 no matter the shape or state of the gold because the same amount of gold is still present.

Our lives are important and valuable to God, regardless of how others view us and despite all that has happened to us, whether by our hand or the hand of others. Considering this no one has the right to write their lives off as insignificant and no one has the right to write off the lives of others.

However, whilst considering this we need to recognise that God did not save us because we are of value, or as if we had something that He has to have. We are saved because we are loved (**2 Corinthians 5:17**) and in a real sense can go further than this and say that love creates value in that which was lost. Think of it this way.

Imagine watching a person who had unknowingly purchased a house in a floodplain. Over the next few years, the house is flooded on numerous occasions and rendered virtually worthless even though the owner still decorates it to improve its value. Yet no matter what he or she does to the house by way of decoration and overall improvement, it is never going to be of any value due to its location in a floodplain. The only way the house could gain value is if it were relocated to higher ground. This is what happened when we accepted Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour; we were taken out of sin and darkness and brought into light and blessing. As King David once wrote, “He lifted me out of the slimy pit, out of the mud and mire; he set my feet on a rock and gave me a firm place to stand.” (**Psalms 40:2**)

We are of great value to God, not because of any perceived worth that we attribute to ourselves as if there were something in us that God just had to have. We are of value because He says so and we are always noticed and loved. However, if we fail to see this, then we become slaves to our smallness, holding on to anything that makes us feel better

Why we often strive for perfection and why things go wrong.

In the world of advertising everything appears to be geared towards perfection, from flawless skin, the best holidays and everything from cars to jobs and the right pills to take! Combined with this can be the quest for a sense of security in life which goes way beyond the norm as is the case of a millionaire who never thinks he or she has enough to retire on, being

constantly goaded by a 'what if this happens to me?' mantra. So why do we spend so much time striving for perfection and a sense of security?

Perhaps the answer lies in that we were created for a deep abiding relationship with our heavenly Father, in a perfect environment given to us in love: this world. We were made for perfection and have been striving for it ever since man fell into sin and left Eden. This explains why so many seek some sort of illusive Utopia where everything will apparently be alright.

We strive for perfection (albeit in the wrong way) because we were made to know God in a perfect world and are now seeking that which has been lost, although many are unaware of what that loss is. We build in order to provide security for self, but from God's perspective, this is like leaning on a spider's web which can never fully support us, for as Job writes: -

"Can papyrus grow tall where there is no marsh? Can reeds thrive without water? While still growing and uncut, they wither more quickly than grass. Such is the destiny of all who forget God; so, perishes the hope of the godless. What he trusts in is fragile; what he relies on is a spider's web. He leans on his web, but it gives way; he clings to it, but it does not hold."

Job 8:11.

Created to think!

"... but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die."

Genesis 2:17

As the creator, God has the right to make demands of His creation and expect to be obeyed. However, these demands are not those of a cosmic tyrant but a loving father who wants the absolute best for us. When God says do not sin, He is seeking to protect us.

In telling Adam and Eve not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, God is not saying that they are not to know the difference between good and evil. Instead the command is pointing out very clearly that man is *not to attempt to gain universal knowledge* in his own strength and without reference to God. We were never made to 'go it alone' so to speak as indeed a small child is not expected to go it alone and find out all about the world on their own. If we have a partial picture concerning something, we inevitably 'paint' the rest of the picture ourselves; what we need to be doing is coming to the One who sees and knows all things.

A question that is sometimes asked in considering God's command is, "If God loves us why put a tree in the garden and a prohibition in the first place?" In answering this there are at least two points we can note.

Firstly, there was nothing intrinsic within the tree that made it good or evil. Although there was physical fruit, the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil was in the *actions* of Eve and then Adam in eating of the tree. It is not so different from saying that there is nothing

intrinsically wrong with money in and of itself, whilst on the other hand, the *love of money* is spoken of as a root of many kinds of evil (1 Timothy 6:10).

Secondly, the reason there was a tree in the garden with a prohibition surrounding it is because there is a big difference between innocence and righteousness - and we are called to be righteous! (to walk a straight path). We could think of it this way: imagine seeing a small boy playing in a garden without a fence which backs on to a motorway. The child is unaware of the danger of the motorway, but his parents are not bothered about this because every time he strays towards the road, his mother shakes a packet of sweets and he automatically comes running. Apart from this there was no other communication concerning the road. How would you like to leave your child in the care of parents like this?

Man was not created to be irresistibly drawn to God as if he were a small magnet constantly being drawn to a larger magnet, or a flower drawn to the light without any choice in the matter. We have been created with freedom of choice and decisions need to be made if we are to move from innocence to righteousness.

In complete contrast to this, evil seeks to remove choices, drawing people down the wrong road and trapping them. Ask a drunk to walk in a straight line and you get the point!

Finally, and before moving on from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, we remind ourselves how the term 'good and evil' is used and what it refers to.

As previously mentioned, the term 'good' speaks of what is functional through being in a relationship with God and operating according to its true purpose, whilst the word 'evil' speaks of what is dysfunctional, therefore outside of a relationship with God and operating in chaos and destruction. Adam and Eve were to reap the harvest of dysfunctional living, but there was still hope because ultimately God was going to step in and help them, despite being the offended party.

Subtle persuasion raising doubts about the nature and character of God.

In Satan's encounter with Eve we have what could loosely be called the first example of false advertising coming into play. The heart of advertising seeks to persuade us that we are not complete. It then goes on to promote and sell us the solution to this perceived need, often at great cost and in a way that traps and controls. For example, in being persuaded that we need a certain style of clothing in order to feel good, we become more susceptible to paying a higher price for items.

Satan enters the scene through a serpent and persuades Eve to assume God is withholding something from her and therefore, by implication, she is not complete and has a need which is in her power to fulfil. He then encourages Eve to do something about this and from then on everything starts to go downhill, *not* because of the power of the enemy, but the doubt which was acted on by Eve and subsequently Adam.

In adopting a different line of thinking Adam and Eve stray from the protective care of God, assuming God is withholding something from them, something they have a right to possess. In doubting God, Adam and Eve were effectively putting themselves in the place of their Creator through redefining God (he *is* someone who holds out on us), and assuming they knew how to make up for the perceived lack they now felt.

In thinking this way Adam and Eve were effectively putting God in second place as does any Christian who lives their life without prayer and the reading of the word. In doing this, God is perceived as little more than a doctor, a counsellor, or a person to go to in times of difficulty, but only then. In truth, He is the reason we live and can exercise authority over our lives.

At the risk of sounding too repetitive, we note again that whilst scripture clearly states that God is love (1 John 4:8), Adam and Eve were persuaded to think that God was withholding something from them, which by implication, meant that He did not really love them. This in turn, led to them taking matters into their own hands and eating the fruit of the forbidden tree. This doubting of God's love has been repeated down through history countless number of times by those who judge God because of what has or has not happened to them. For example, "why am I not healed?" or, "why has God let this happen?" In doubting God, we are taking matters into our own hands, putting self in the position of the creator.

Eve was deceived by the enemy as Adam stood next to her without intervening, despite having the power to do so. After Eve had taken fruit from the tree, Adam then deliberately eats what is offered to him. In doing so, Adam put Eve and his own thinking in first place instead of God.

We were created to grow in all that God provides yet so often plant ourselves in the soil of our thinking, resulting in stunted or arrested growth and eventually death.

In the biblical framework of thinking, biological death is the end of that which is already dying and the end of all the opportunities to receive forgiveness and reconciliation with God. However, in complete contrast to this, for the believer biological death is the final *release* from all that would hold us back and ultimately the full harvest of God's victory in a renewed heaven and earth as physical /spiritual beings.

The downward spiral of wrong thinking.

Most of our thinking can have an emotional response attached to it, and if our thoughts are wrong then these emotions are going to enforce wrong belief. For example, if a person grows up thinking they are useless, they are more prone to feeling inadequate and a failure when difficulty arises. In this context emotions are counter-productive and need to be challenged along with a change of thinking. This is why David wrote, "Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Saviour and

my God.” (**Psalm 42:11**). Our thinking needs to be in line with our identity and calling as those made in the image of God who are loved, valued, and cared for.

Adam and Eve succumbed to a wrong worldview, which combined with an emotional response resulted in feelings of vulnerability (covering their nakedness,) and running from the only One who could really help them. Fortunately, God did not leave them to their own devices and in His call, “Where are you?” we see the heart of true religion which is all about God’s approach to man and not man’s to God.

Despite being sinners (**Romans 3:23**) we have hope (**Romans 6:23**) because God has not given up on us and even in the difficult situations, we see Jesus reaching out through ordinary people in extraordinary ways. For example, in her book ‘Chasing the Dragon’ (pages 159-160), Jackie Pullinger writes about her time helping addicts in Hong Kong’s walled city, saying, “Few of the junkies had had any exposure to Christianity before coming off drugs. Far from being a hindrance this actually helped them. Now they would arrive saying: ‘I have heard how Ah Kei (or some other friend) has changed. He says it’s Jesus who did it. I think Ah Kei is the meanest addict I know. If Jesus can change that one, he can change me too.’” She continues, “Their faith did not depend upon any understanding of theological concepts but upon seeing Jesus working in others and their willingness to let him work in their lives too. Each time they prayed they were answered, and their faith grew as they were healed... Most of our boys began to understand Jesus with their minds only after they had experienced him in their lives and bodies.”

Our calling: dominion and *not* domination.

Man’s dominion over creation is derived from God’s rulership with scripture, likening Him to a potter, and man to clay (**Isaiah 64:8**). Therefore, whilst events in this world have some bearing on our lives, they are not part of the *foundational* shaping of life as if the world has the right to own and mould us.

Owing to the rebellious nature of sin, ensuing vulnerability and attempt to take the place of the creator, we often seek to dominate rather than mould and shape the world under His guiding hand. However, the heart of seeking to dominate nature through illegitimate means is our quest to find security through the appropriation of goods for self, often at the expense of others, with no thought of sharing. We now have more power to help people than at any other time in history, whilst still allowing thousands to starve each year and we live in a world where there are more slaves than at any other time in history.

Most of us will struggle with identity, relationships, health, finance, and general wellbeing from time to time and life is not always easy. However, it is when we focus too much of our own attention on problems that we can end up straying from God and losing sight of who we really are in Christ (**2 Corinthians 5:17**). Therefore a question we are always going to have to ask ourselves, is are we really focusing on whose we are on who we are as a son or daughter

of the living God or, are we so focused on the problems and working our way out of them, that we have begun to lose sight of who God really is?

We may want to know all the answers to life's problems and the way out of the difficulties we find ourselves in but are not called to be spiritual detectives or to work everything out for ourselves. In light of this, there may be the need to admit that sometimes we have given too much power to the circumstances we find ourselves in, by allowing our quiet times with God to falter and be reduced to little more than a few sentences or mantra sort of prayer that has no real heart in it. What God calls us to do is step away from the hubbub of the world, shut ourselves in a room and engage with Him in prayer as our Father in heaven (**Matthew 6:6**). However, this shutting ourselves away is not to be in a monastic fashion where the world is shut out as we build a sanctuary for ourselves. Instead it is in a way whereby we focus on God, the author and provider of life, thank Him for who He is, thus revealing our trust in and availability to Him and then reaching out in His strength, power and love, to those around us.

Exercising dominion over life will never come about through seeking to dominate and control this world as if it were ours to do with as we please, or through focusing on our problems first and foremost. In handing our lives over to Him wholeheartedly we may feel vulnerable but will find all the power and authority we need for life. No wonder we are constantly being called to engage with, "Our father in heaven" (**Isaiah 64:8; Matthew 6:9**). We were made for God and therefore our security must come through engaging with Him. If we don't we will end up being dominated by wrong thoughts and their attached emotions on a roller-coaster to nowhere. In that 'nowhere' there is also the father of lies (**John 8:44**) who uses circumstances and situations to paint a different picture of God (and self) in our minds, that has no bearing on scripture.

Consequences.

Adam and Eve chose to break God's law and the consequences of doing so were then spelt out, as was the promise of a saviour (**Genesis 3:15**). Sin always has a harvest and price to pay which should not surprise us. After all, whilst someone can choose to never eat or drink again, they cannot choose the consequences; they will eventually die. In doubting God, sin had the uppermost hand and there were consequences. God's law had also been broken and required a payment to be made; one they had no hope of paying themselves.

Consequences: Increase in pain through childbearing.

"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."

Genesis 3:16

Lawbreaking is counter-society and separates us from life as it should be lived. It also forfeits one's place in society since breaking the law incurs judgement and a penalty. Eve had chosen to put herself in the place of the creator, as did Adam, and became a lawbreaker which would result in their removal from Eden. This also explains why the pain of childbearing increases.

The physical and emotional pain of birthing a baby whilst living as a runaway in a derelict house, would be greater than that of birthing a baby in a warm and safe environment in the presence of loved ones. Considering this we see why? the pain of childbirth increases for Eve as she leaves Eden, combined with the fact that her physical wellbeing (and Adam's) was going to decrease as is seen in the gradual reduction of man's lifespan.

However, in removing Adam and Eve from the Garden, we must never assume that man is now of no consequence to God or that God is not concerned for them. Yes, Adam and Eve had to leave the Garden, but in a very real sense, God was already ahead of them on a cross at Calvary (**Revelation 13:8**) in that God had *always* been willing to come for man and stand in His place. That's what perfect love does – a love that does not compromise holiness but combines with it in incredible ways. The offended was going to stand in the place of the offender and the sinless One was going to undergo judgment for the sin of the world.

Consequences: "Your desire will be for your husband and he will rule over you." (Genesis 3:16).

It is possible to desire good things, but desire can sometimes be counter covenant if what we desire is not in accordance with God's will. Desiring something, good or bad, can mean we constantly think about it and strive to obtain that which is desired, sometimes against our better judgment.

As already mentioned, if a person is persuaded to think they absolutely need something they want (such as a pair of designer jeans), they are more likely to pay a far higher price for the desired item. Considering this we recognise that desire can seek to own control and master that which is desired. However, the object desired can often begin to own us as can be seen in how people can't stop thinking about it?. At this point we could also note the words found in **Genesis 4:7** and spoken to Cain where we read, "...if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; *it desires to have you*, but you must master it." Cain was not willing to deal with his anger and attributed his problem to his brother whom he ended up killing.

As a result of sin, many relationships can be more about owning another person than anything else, utilising them for personal blessing and gain, more about taking than giving. The result of Adam and Eve's actions meant that desire and control came into play in personal relationships in a way that was never intended. This is the opposite of covenant living where there is a giving of self for the benefit of the other and no thought of personal gain.

In perceiving our needs can be met outside of Christ, we turn from truth to error, from light to darkness and from life to existence, with a world full of broken relationships underlining this to all who are not too blind to see. Owing to the fall, the authority to stand alongside, support and provide the best for one another is often distorted or lacking altogether in a bid to rule over and dominate the environment and those around us. For Eve, this desire to own and control was directed at Adam and for Adam, this was ruling Eve.

Consequences: the ground is now cursed (Gen 3:17).

Before transgressing God's law, Adam and Eve lived in a perfect world and were encouraged to nurture and shape it under the guidance and love of their heavenly father. But through sin they were now illegitimate rulers, as would be the case of a drunk officer in command of a troop of soldiers. Through alcohol the chain of command is now broken and therein lies the officer's main problem.

Through sin, Adam and Eve had broken the chain of command between God and themselves and perhaps naively thought life would carry on in the same way. However, this thinking is as flawed as that of a politician ignoring party rules whilst still expecting to receive the privileges of being a party member. It's just not going to happen.

Adam and Eve's actions crossed the line, so to speak, whilst at the same time rendering themselves unable to live in accordance with God's law of love. They were now separate from God and because of their actions the land became cursed ("Cursed is the ground *because of you...*" **Genesis 3:17**).

The chain of command had been broken and the land no longer responds in the way it was created to, although this may not have been understood at first. After all, whilst a flower placed in a glass of water may look the same as when in the soil, it is different, having been removed from its original environment. Adam and Eve were created to live in the soil of God's promises but had exchanged soil for sand.

Through Adam and Eve's actions the ground is now separated from its true spiritual foundations (**Genesis 5:29**) as man reaps the harvest of his actions and goes it alone. From this we see that the picture behind 'curse' is to be *separated from the strength and blessing of one's natural environment*.

An example of this can be seen in the conquest of the Promised Land at the time of Joshua, when the Gibeonites fooled Joshua into making a covenant agreement with them to stay in the land which they had no legitimate rights to. A few weeks later their deceit was exposed, and Joshua pronounces judgment saying, "Why did you deceive us by saying, 'We live a long

way from you,' while actually you live near us? You are now under a curse: You will never cease to serve as woodcutters and water carriers for the house of my God" (**Joshua 9:22-23**).

In Joshua's words we see the effect of a curse – being separated from one's natural environment in that, the environment was no longer going to bless them in the way it had done previously. After their deception, the Gibeonites were still living in the land, but no longer benefitted from the land, in the same way, as is the case when a person is imprisoned for committing a crime against society. In a sense, the prisoner is cursed in that he or she lives within society, whilst being separated from society and all its benefits because of breaking the law. In getting what they wanted, the prisoner now lives with the consequences.

The curse is the natural consequences of sin and can be seen for example, in the parable where a prodigal son ends up living amongst pigs, instead of as a loved son in his father's household (**Luke 15:15-16**). He was still a son, but unable to benefit from his father's love, due to wrong thinking, and was now dominated by his environment. The same can be true of us when we forget prayer, the reading of God's word and the leading of the Spirit; wrong thinking, emotions and environment will soon begin to dominate. In considering this, one of the most important decisions we make, is to decide what is most important to us in life. If God is not first, then we deny reality, along with our calling and destiny, having never been created to 'go it alone.'

We are God's creation (**Genesis 1:27-8**), created to walk with our heavenly Father and what this walk is to look like is clearly seen in Jesus. He did not value reputation or position (**Philippians 2:5ff**) and was willing to walk with all people (**John 4:7ff**) regardless of their background. In Jesus we see the One who knew the love of His Father and shared this love with all. He was always totally at home with His Father whilst walking in a world that must have borne little resemblance to God's original creation. He never hoarded anything for Himself, ignored or walked over others and is the most powerful person who has ever walked in history, whilst at the same time being the most gracious, compassionate, and loving.

Over the years I have read hundreds of books and found many encouraging stories which help me see some of the ways that the power and grace of God touches our lives through others. One story that has always made me stand back and go "wow" concerns Nelson Mandela who was imprisoned for twenty-seven years on Robben Island. During his incarceration a young prison officer, Christo Brand, struck up a friendship with Mandela despite a forty-year age gap between the two.

Mandela eventually became President of South Africa, yet never looked down on or gave up on those around him. He kept in contact with Christo Brand and when Christo's oldest son Riaan was tragically killed in a car accident, he rang Christo whilst he was on the way to identify his son's body. Mandela said, "I heard about your boy. It is a terrible thing when a parent has to bury his child. I understand how it feels because I lost my own son in the same

way. I wish I could give you some strength to bear this.” Christo pulled over in his car and Mandela then continued to speak with him for over twenty minutes.

Nelson Mandela could have sent condolences through one of his aides but didn’t. Neither did he only speak to Christo for a couple of minutes. Instead the President gets alongside a now retired prison guard and speaks with him for twenty whole minutes. It is this that speaks to me of the love, grace and power of God. God has come alongside us. He didn’t send a secretary and He didn’t send a postcard. In Jesus we see God with us, so be encouraged and give time to the One who holds this world in His hands and has always had time for you.

There is an old African Proverb which says, “If you want to go far, go together.” If we want to move forward in all that God provides, then we need to make sure our focus is on Him and then, who knows, even in the business of our lives we may stop and reach out to someone who is needing help, as Jesus did in coming into this world.

“He was supreme in the beginning and — leading the resurrection parade — he is supreme in the end. From beginning to end he's there, towering far above everything, everyone. So spacious is he, so roomy, that everything of God finds its proper place in him without crowding. Not only that, but all the broken and dislocated pieces of the universe — people and things, animals and atoms — get properly fixed and fit together in vibrant harmonies, all because of his death, his blood that poured down from the Cross.” **Colossians 1:18-20**
(The Message).

“.....by the sweat of his brow.”

Adam is told that he would work by the sweat of his brow (**Genesis 3:19**), speaking of the frustration in seeking to dominate and control life in his own strength. Adam and Eve were separated from God, living with the consequences of their actions, and experiencing death, which if left unchecked would finally result in eternal separation from God.

Adam and Eve now knew the power of sin over their lives but did not have the power to fully overcome sin or deal with its consequences. The punishment for sin was death in all its fullness and initially involved Adam and Eve being thrown out of the Garden of Eden as transgressors, who were now in the field of existence, as opposed to the field of life with God. The destructive nature of their actions had been spelt out to them, yet, as mentioned, the grace of God was also found in their place of failure. How could this be so?

When an all-powerful perfectly holy being decides something, it is as good as done the moment a decision is made. This is how it is that we can say that Jesus was already ahead of Adam and Eve on a cross at Calvary. In an incredible act of sacrificial love (**Revelation 13:8**) the pre-incarnate Son was chosen before the creation of the world, to come and stand in our place (**Ephesians 1:4**). He is the One who bridged the gap between life and death and will one day bring heaven and earth together and you and I will be there too.

Consequences: death.

Some see death as no more than the end of life as we know it, but scripture paints a vastly different picture. Death is the weaker end of life and outside covenant living, which is why Paul writes, “when you were dead in your sins...” (**Colossians 2:13**) to those who in a worldly sense, were still very much alive.

Death is the prodigal son in the pig pen (**Luke 15:24**), the young man controlled by wrong thinking and past decisions. The fruit of his past was living with him in the present and present surroundings now controlled his life. Death is also the older brother who was not even prepared to call his returning brother a brother and who did not understand the love of his father, despite having worked for him for years.

Death is an ever-present outside covenant existence; the here and now slow-growing harvest that destroys the very life so many think they are building as they walk in their own strength. Death seeks to crush, limit, confuse and is never static, it is often unrecognised and unnoticed, like a fire in a house with occupant’s asleep upstairs.

Death is ever active, yet, paradoxically, never moving forward in a positive way, with its captives like hamsters running on a wheel, always remaining caged. Considering this we see why scripture views death as existence opposed to life (**Colossians 2:13**) and standing as if one’s own riches were of great value, whilst being viewed from God’s perspective as naked (**Revelation 3:17**). Death is the empty way of life handed down to us (**1 Peter 1:18-19**) before we came to Christ. Death is heading back to old ways of thinking, like a dog returning to eat vomit (**2 Pet 2:22**) and speaks of our own ideas of achieving merit and righteousness from God, which He likens to a used sanitary towel (**Isaiah 64:6**). Death is all these things and so much more.

All too often we end up living amongst the pigs so to speak yet fail to see that the journey there began in assuming we can live in our own strength and by our own rules, which we inevitably break. However, in our quest to succeed we do little more than seek to deal with feelings of insecurity and an awareness that something is missing. In distancing self from God, we effectively imprison ourselves with our worst enemy, self.

We live in God’s world as if it were ours do to with as we please and therein lies our biggest problem, with our version of life being little more than existence. What we build imprisons us even when we build to protect life or cope with difficulties we have faced or are still facing. In doing so we curtail our freedom and imprison self with thoughts and emotions. Attitudes become the bricks in the house that surrounds us, being able to walk across the floor of our ‘prison’ is then perceived as freedom! From God’s perspective nothing could be further from the truth, for we are prisoners pacing the floor of a cell which we have locked ourselves into.

Owing to sin, it is as if we live in world where the ugly duckling never becomes a swan and Pinocchio never becomes a real boy; a world where the cowardly lion never gets his courage and the scarecrow never gets a brain. We live in a world where Humpty Dumpty continues to

fall, again and again, never getting put back together, and we live in a world where on so many occasions, Cinderella remains ridiculed and abused by stepsisters and under the tyranny of her stepmother.

In this world there are many who have a complete lack of awareness concerning their identity and calling, so cannot see what is wrong because they have nothing to measure life by or anchor it to. Combined with this there is an enemy (**1 Peter 5:8**) continually seeking to accuse (**Revelation 12:10**), pull down, isolate, and destroy life as we know it. However, in grace and mercy God continues to reach out.

A friend of mine from a Jewish background used to be a high priestess in occultism, and towards the end of her time trapped in darkness, attempted suicide on three occasions. One of these involved jumping from the second-floor window of a psychiatric hospital where she was a patient. A few weeks after this, she was so bored that she picked up a Gideon's New Testament and started reading John's gospel. Until then she had shown no interest in the Bible, seeing her identity as Jewish, despite being involved in witchcraft.

My friend told me that as she read John's gospel she could not put it down. God was speaking to her through His written word and after reading it she committed her life to Christ. She was to experience many ups and downs over the years but was instrumental in leading many to Christ who had given up on life. Many who were so wrapped up in darkness that it seemed impossible they could ever find Jesus did so because He reached out to them. This is how my friend was saved - how Cinderella became a princess - as the One who has absolute mastery over chaos, forgave her and rescued her from darkness.

His world. Order and chaos.

In the beginning God's word created basic elements and then brought them together to create a world. Using a previous illustration, think of mixing ingredients together and producing an amazing cake and you get the idea.

The design of this world is staggering and clearly points to a place where our arrival was anticipated. Yet owing to the fall, neither this world nor self is as it should be and when we try to get two and two to make five, things go wrong. Think of two- year-olds mixing cake ingredients in a kitchen by themselves, result: chaos.

In living with little or no reference to God and with a limited perception of life we quickly move from functionality and relationship to dysfunctionality and distance from God: to chaos. Think of an underaged person stealing a car and driving it into a wall, and we get the idea at an extremely basic level.

Scripturally, chaos is outside covenant existence - being separate from God and existing rather than living life with our heavenly Father. The fruit of this can be seen in the many wars and

genocide that has occurred even in the last few decades. For example, in the Rwandan genocide, over one million people were killed in a three-month period in 1994 as the Hutu majority government persuaded their people to kill despised Tutsi neighbours. Whilst this is an example of chaos, it shows how quickly and easily it can appear on the horizon, even in previously well-ordered societies. On a more local level chaos can be seen in the sowing of a belief system that tells you what you need to wear in order to be part of the 'in' crowd.

In Hebrew thought, the sea was often perceived as a sign of chaos in that it is untameable, being a place where men, cargoes and ships were often lost in unknown depths and sudden storms. This helps explain why sea imagery was often used to describe wickedness with one example being found in Isaiah where we read, "But the wicked are like the tossing sea, which cannot rest, whose waves cast up mire and mud. "There is no peace," says my God, "for the wicked" (**Isaiah 57:20-21**). It also explains why God's judgment of sin came in the form of a flood in the days of Noah (**Genesis 7:11-12**) when the heavens were opened and the springs of the deep burst forth as the sea rose and covered the earth (**Genesis 7:11-12**).

It is as if God were saying, "You refuse to listen to me and have chosen to go the way of wickedness leading to chaos and destruction. If this is what you want – chaos and destruction then I will bring judgement using the elements that you perceive as a symbol of wickedness and destruction: the sea.

However, even in judgement there is hope, because God continues to make a way for man to find forgiveness. At the time of the flood this was through His dealings with Noah and in the case of one of the criminals on the cross, it was in the words of Jesus who said, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in Paradise" (**Luke 23:43**).

In scripture, forgiveness carries the picture of being lifted out of the place of judgement which is what we see in Noah's ark being lifted on the waters (**Genesis 7:17**). It is also what happened to us when we accepted Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour and is why Paul writes, "And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ" (**Ephesians 2:5-7**).

Another point to note before moving on, is that the Ark was covered in pitch, making it waterproof (**Genesis 6:14**). The Hebrew word for 'cover' is 'Kaphar,' which is where the word 'atonement' comes from. Noah trusted God and was lifted from the place of judgement in an ark covered with pitch, with Noah and his family being concealed by God's grace and mercy. However, atonement goes beyond this, in that it speaks of imposing something *to change the appearance of that which is covered*. Concerning the Ark, it speaks of the overlaying pitch that makes the wood waterproof (**Genesis 6:14**) and elsewhere it speaks of God covering sin (**Exodus 32:30**). Ultimately you and I are covered in the work of Christ (**Galatians 3:27**) which is the sole reason we can approach the throne of grace with confidence (**Hebrews 4:16**).

Noah believed in God, he trusted in Him and was brought into a position of safety and security through being covered in God's work. He was lifted out of the place of judgment and into continuing fellowship with God in a renewed world. One day we will stand with Jesus in a renewed and at-one heaven and earth. This is our destiny.

A final point of interest is that Noah's name sounds like the Hebrew word for 'comfort' and means 'rest' (speaking of engaging with God). Think about it: insofar as we rest in the Lord, we grow in His grace. No matter the chaos around us, God is supremely in control and we can grow.

God's sovereignty over chaos (typified by the sea) is also seen in the words of **Psalm 104:7-9** where we read

"But at your rebuke the waters fled, at the sound of your thunder they took to flight; they flowed over the mountains, they went down into the valleys, to the place you assigned for them. You set a boundary they cannot cross; never again will they cover the earth."

No matter what is going on in your life or mine right now, God is always in control and has always been the absolute master of chaos in whatever form it is found, whether an aggressive empire like Egypt, Babylon or Rome or the presence of Satan himself.

In Egypt, God showed His power over evil and chaos through His mastery over the elements, as well as all forms of demonic and military power. In Jerusalem, God showed His power in servanthood and the weakness of the flesh (**Mark 10:45**) as the perfect man who stood in our place (**1 Corinthians 15:47**), Jesus conquered sin, death (**1 Corinthians 15:55-57**) and all the powers of darkness (**1 John 3:8**). You and I need never lose a battle for all things are ours in Christ (**2 Corinthians 1:20**). Yes, we may struggle and feel as if the whole world is against us at times, but the truth remains that we are His and He always has the victory (**Romans 8:37-9**) over all things.

In Jesus.

In Jesus we see what it is to rest in the Lord (to be in His presence) and in Jesus we understand what it means to be a son or a daughter of the kingdom. In Jesus we understand what priestly living is all about and see what it means to be made in the image of God. Everything Jesus did was out of intimacy and obedience to His Father and in the powerful work of the Priest, we see our calling to receive and share the blessing of all we have with those around us. Considering this we recognise that in order to exercise the authority of the Kingdom and experience His power through our lives we must live according to our true calling. It is in our spiritual DNA, and therefore we must reach out to others recognising that no matter how small what we do may seem, God recognises and accepts it (**Matthew 9:41**). Living any other way is to hinder our ability to know the presence of the Holy Spirit.

It is because of Jesus' presence with His people that we can live out our priestly calling as those who receive and give out grace. Take for example, the story of Evelyn Brand which I came across whilst writing a book on Revelation.

In 1909 Evelyn Brand, a single woman, felt God's call to go to India. She married a man called Jesse and began ministering in rural India through medical supplies, education, and road building. For seven years they worked hard without seeing one person come to Christ.

Towards the end of their seven years, a Hindu priest became so ill that no one would go near him, yet Evelyn and her husband nursed and supported him as he lay dying. The priest said, "This God, Jesus, must be the true God because only Jesse and Evelyn will care for me in my dying." Before he died he gave his children to Evelyn and Jesse to care for. People saw all this going on and started to look at the life and teaching of Jesus with many finding Him as Lord and Saviour. Evelyn and her husband served God for thirteen years before her husband died.

Despite being fifty years old, Evelyn continued to serve God in India for another twenty years. Then, when she was seventy she said to her son, "This is how to grow old. Allow everything else to fall away until those around you see only love." Although her home mission office told her they would not give her another five-year term, Evelyn continued to serve and had a shack built to live in. She bought a pony and travelled from village to village telling everyone about Jesus and did so until she was ninety-three. She then travelled around for two years on a stretcher until her death at the age of ninety-five. In Evelyn we see the work of Jesus, the great High Priest, and our priestly calling as those who receive and share life in the power of the Holy Spirit.

".....You also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ." **1 Peter 2:5-6.**

Through Jesus we are a royal priesthood and are spoken of as living stones (**1 Peter 2:5**) offering spiritual sacrifices (all that we do is in accordance with Him), being a 'temple' where God's Spirit is present (**1 Corinthians 3:16, 2 Cor. 6:16,19**). The presence of God with us is also captured in the imagery of a bride and as the body of Christ (**Revelation 19:7; 1 Corinthians 12:27**) in whom we are built up.

Jesus crosses all boundaries.

Jesus entered a world of social exclusion with a ministry of social inclusion, despite being the most offended person who has ever walked in history. All were welcome and Jesus often sat and ate with men and women from incredibly diverse backgrounds whom others did their best to avoid. In living this way, we see the prophetic in action and a foretaste of the world to come, a world with no oppression and no oppressed, where people support rather than ignore and where agape love is experienced at every level.

In the way Jesus reaches out to all people we encounter: -

- the all-embracing power and blessing of the kingdom of God (**1 Corinthians 4:20, 2 Cor. 4:7, Ephesians 1:18-19**),
- in compassion (**Matthew 9:36, 15:32, Mark 1:41**),
- grace (**John 1:16**),
- mercy (**Mat 20:30-34**)
- love (**John 13:1**)
- an ever-present deep desire to fellowship with people (**John 10:10, Rev 3:20**) regardless of their ethnicity or background.

Because of Jesus there will be a day when all suffering comes to an end (**Revelation 7:16-17**). There will be a resurrection where all that is evil will not only fall away, (taken away as if wrapped up like old robe - **Heb 1:10-12**) but be completely destroyed as the world is renewed (**Romans 8:19-21**) and morphed into its full glory as heaven and earth meet (**Revelation 21:1-5**).

We are Kingdom people.

“For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and approved by men.” **Romans 14:17-18**

You and I are part of a kingdom that has no geographical boundaries or borders, and which reveals the rule and reign of the One who created and sustains all things in love. This reign is perfectly realized in heaven and continues to reach out to a fallen world in grace and mercy with the offer of life instead of death, reconciliation instead of judgment and friendship instead of enmity. In considering this it is hardly surprising that the story of the Bible, the story of the Kingdom, is both the oldest and most up to date story at the same time because it is continuing right now.

In looking at creation, Eden, rest and the development of the tabernacle and temple along with the role of the priesthood -all fulfilled in Christ-, we are continuously reminded of our true position and calling. We understand our beginnings in the garden of Eden and our destiny when we are with God in a world that has come together with heaven.

In the way Jesus lived His life and brought kingdom life (miracles) in the power of the Spirit and in accordance with His father’s wishes, we see what man made in the image of God is really like. Through this servant-hearted king (**Philippians 2:5-11**) we have a man in authority because He was under authority, and in Him see: -

- the stilling of storms (**Matthew 8:23-26**),
- raising of the dead (**Luke 7:11-15, 8:49-56, John 11:43-45**),
- removal of sickness and suffering (**Luke 7:22**)
- and abundant provision for those who deserve nothing.

This does not mean that life will always be easy for us, but it will be life.

A former atheist and occultist who came to Christ despite the storms going on both in and around her life, spoke of her past after watching a Christian-based film. She says,

“One night (in one of these ‘ceremonies’) I witnessed a demonic possession / failed exorcism, that turned my worldview upside down. I was scared out of my mind in the following months, so pathetically scared that I contacted a family member who’d always tried to talk to me about Jesus. He told me to read the gospel of John. I started reading it and then this overwhelming sensation of love came over me. I heard a voice saying, “Get down on your knees.” Then a second and third time. I obeyed, got down on my knees, and there He was (I had my eyes closed but could sense Him standing before me). The Jesus I hated so passionately, even though I knew nothing about Him or His words. And I certainly wasn’t in need of any forgiveness, why would I need that as a prideful atheist? But then He said, “I forgive you,” and at that moment I understood exactly what He meant, as I burst out crying, I was forgiven!!! A sinner forgiven by grace through faith in Christ. Watching the Mary Magdalene scene, I sensed the same feeling of liberation. So many years of pain and fear gone in a glorious moment. It’s completely okay if no one ever believes me, I know that it’s true because, I was that one and now I am completely different and the thing that happened in-between was Him. Praise the name of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.”

On this side of life, we are the grass that withers (**1 Peter 1:24**), and the mist on the river (**James 4:14**) that is present one minute and gone the next, whilst in Christ we have eternity with a quality of life (**1 John 5:13**) that is tasted here and now through the presence of the Holy Spirit, (**1 Cor 3:16**) and a secure future .

Our calling is to receive from Him before anything else, then to walk in authority as sons and daughters of the kingdom of God and in doing so reach out to others as He directs us. We cannot save the world, but we can be obedient to our moment in time, touching the lives of those around us with the help of the Holy Spirit, who works with us and not simply through us as if we were a tap to be switched on and off.

We are a royal priesthood (receivers and givers) and a holy nation (those set apart as special), a people rested in His presence by whom we exercise power and blessing, doing far more than our natural capabilities would dictate.

We belong to someone and life is about whose we are and not who we are, as if we must work it all out on our own. Our lives have been redeemed from the slave-pit of wrong thinking in a world that has built its own blueprint and then fiercely defends that which ultimately destroys life. Our lives have been given back to us and the good work we are called to, is to live as His sons and daughters remembering that Jesus only ever did what He saw His father doing (**John 5:18-19**). Kingdom power is the power of the servant-hearted, rooted and established in a father’s love and mirroring His love, grace, and mercy in a fallen world.

Hope: Because God has not given up on us.

We live in *His world*, a world given in love and misused and abused by us, in our unholy quest for self-fulfillment and a desperate attempt to find security and recognition. Nothing is as it should be and the owner of this world would be perfectly justified in winding up affairs right now, as would we if property had been trashed, rules ignored, and love spurned. Thankfully, God is not like us and so there is hope.

Hope is not in something we wish for such as a financial windfall or a new job, which may or may not come about. Instead hope is rooted in the nature and character of the Lord Jesus Christ in whom we find our security. In considering this, we see that hope is not about striving for something but being rooted in someone, who challenges us to look to Him as the One who has all things in His hands. Because of Him we are now the 'brought home' ones, established in the love of the One who gave His life so that we could live. In Him we find the strength and power to overcome all things.

As Isaiah writes, *"Those who hope (wait) on the Lord will renew their strength"* (Isaiah 40:31) with the word hope coming from the root meaning, 'rope'. Therefore, the picture conveyed by Isaiah is that of slowing down and intertwining our lives with the One who loves us most. It is about focusing on the Lord, who then takes our weakness and replaces it with His strength, not because of anything good in self, but because of His incredible grace, mercy, and loving-kindness; and so, there is hope.

There is hope because life is not so much about our story, with its ups and downs, disappointments and heartache, isolation and struggles; instead, it is about Him. Life is about Jesus. It is about His story of which we are a part; a story of sacrificial and unconditional love, the story of the call of a father and healing and wholeness that can arrive in our lives because of His grace and mercy and the fact that we are loved. Because of Him we can move from existence to life and our lives can become a story of power, grace, mercy, compassion, and kindness.

"Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come."

2 Corinthians 1:21-22

In grace, God gives us a new home, a new life and a hope that is rooted in the One who singlehandedly provides what we need, through allowing His Son to be battered and smashed to a cross. His clothing was the bruises and wounds of our sin, showing what sin does to perfect love. Our clothing as Christians is His work, as God rescues us and places a fence of protection around our lives.

God reaching out.

If God had not reached out to Adam and Eve (**Genesis 3:9**), they would have remained imprisoned by wrong thinking and if God had not reached out to Abram there would have

been no Israel. If God had not called Moses through a burning bush (**Exodus 2:3-4**), there would have been no release from the Egyptian house of slavery and if God had not fed His people in the desert (**Exodus 16:31**), they would have perished long before reaching the Promised Land, we could go on. There is hope, because God instigates redemption and has always been willing to reach out to us in a way whereby we can come to Him in repentance and faith.

Repentance is turning away from self to God and seeking forgiveness of sin. It is a leaving of the house we have built - our place of safety - and coming home to our heavenly Father. The 'house' we existed in was our thinking, our reasoning, our attitudes and emotions, woven together and used to build life and protect self. However sometimes we have lived so long in this 'house,' that we are unaware of all that is present in the bricks and mortar of our thinking. To illustrate the point, think of it like this.

If you or I worked in a fishmongers, after a few minutes we would no longer smell the fish, although the smell would still be present. Then again, if we spray on deodorant in the morning we would not smell it later in the day, but others would.

We were lost and living in our own strength, therefore some of our wrong thinking and attitudes can still be invisible to us. Because of this we need to be handing our lives over to God each day and not just our situations or perceived problems. In Him we are going through a process of transformation of mind and heart (**Romans 12:2**), as we begin to live out our renewed identity in the power and presence of the Holy Spirit. We are not called to be spiritual detectives and work out everything in our own strength, but as His light shines we will see the invisible and allow God to deal with all that holds us back. All God asks of us is to listen to Him and be obedient to the One who wants the best for us.

When I was a young boy, I started piano lessons. Most of the initial lessons centred around playing scales or simple tunes with one hand. Despite the initial frustration at not playing real music, my teacher encouraged me to persevere and I was eventually able to play all manner of compositions. My obedience did not earn me anything from my piano teacher but enabled me to benefit from the absolute best that he wanted for me.

God does not need our obedience as though there was something lacking in Him and neither does our obedience make God any bigger. Obedience is for our benefit and through obeying God we find strength and stability, as we learn and grow in a love that has been freely given (at no cost to self), then reaching others in the love we have received. God commands us to obey Him (**John 14:15**) and His commands are not optional. In obeying Him we can benefit from all that God has provided for us in Christ. Obedience can be difficult at times and dare we say it, may even seem pointless on occasions. Yet in obeying God we find blessing, even during pain and incredible loss as the following story reveals.

In his book, *Free of Charge* (page 190), Miroslav Volf writes of a Franciscan monk from Susanj (Bosnia) called Markovic and a Muslim woman, who were both swept up in the war of the mid-1990's. Muslims had killed twenty-one men from Susanj and nine were relatives of Markovic. Volf writes: -

“Three years after the massacre, in the fall of 1996, Markovic visited Susanj. Occupying the house in which his brother used to live was a fierce Muslim woman. He was warned not to go there because she brandished a rifle to protect her new home. He went anyway. As he approached the house she was waiting for him, cigarette in her mouth and rifle cocked. She barked: “Go away, or I’ll shoot you.” “No, you won’t shoot me”, said Markovic in a gentle but firm voice, “You’ll make a cup of coffee for me.” She stared at him for a while, then slowly put the rifle down and went to the kitchen. Taking the last bit of coffee, she mixed in some already used grounds to make enough for two cups. And then deadly enemies began to talk as they partook in the ancient ritual of hospitality, drinking coffee together. She told him of her loneliness; of the home she had lost, of the son who never returned from the battlefield. When Markovic returned a month later she said to him, “I rejoice at seeing you as much as if my son had returned home.””

Our new life in Christ is about growth and we are to grow out of the soil of His goodness (**Psalm 1:3, 2 Corinthians 1:20**), into the fullness of what it means to be His image-bearers in the shadow of His grace, love, blessing and mercy. We are seated in heavenly realms, speaking of our position in Christ (**Ephesians 2:6**) and are called to growth through the written word (**2 Timothy 3:16**) and presence of the Holy Spirit (**Romans 8:9-10**).

“Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, “Abba, Father.” So, you are no longer a slave but a son; and since you are a son, God has made you also an heir.”

Galatians 4:6-

Sharing with one another.

This world was formed because of God’s desire to share love with another and continues because His love is a sacrificial love, as seen in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Therefore, our world was built and continues to exist because of sacrificial love, a giving out of self. Because of this and the fact that we are called to be His image bearers in the power of the Spirit, there is the need to recognise that some of our healing and wholeness comes about through living the right way. This right way is receiving and sharing what we have received as we reach out to others in His love, grace, and mercy. In doing this we often experience healing and restoration, because we are now living the way we were created to live – it is in our spiritual DNA.

We are God’s workmanship and church like every other area of life, is one place where we can share the blessing of being His with those around us. In coming before God corporately, there is also the clear reminder that we are much more than work and much more than our bank accounts, our position in society or our achievements; we are His.

Many of the people we meet in church will be radically different from us and are also on a journey, having come to God the same way we did, through the work of Christ. They, like us,

are now learning about their identity and calling in Him and like us, are not always going to get it right but are equally accepted in grace, mercy, and loving-kindness.

Church is not a place where others entertain us, or a restaurant we only return to if the food is to our liking. Neither is it a pitstop for us to recharge batteries in order to live out our version of life. Church is nothing of the sort.

Church is *His place* and a place we can go to even when we have got it horribly wrong. It should be the place of corporate gathering, where we know we are accepted and a place with those who do not reject us because of our failures yet may challenge us in love if necessary. It is to be a place of support, but not compromise and a place where first and foremost we don't seek to feel comfortable but know that we are strengthened and empowered despite our weaknesses.

In considering this, we recognise that Church is to be a place of hope that is not dependent on the earthly, a place of growth that is not dependent on our achievements and a place of learning and engagement, with eternal truth pouring forth from scripture and the leading of the Holy Spirit. As previously mentioned, we are part of the oldest story on earth and at the same time part of the most up-to-date story on earth, because the outworking of this story is happening right now, this very second. And so, there is hope; there is always hope and He has promised never to leave us or forsake us as we journey towards our destiny in Him.

If God gave the keys of a mansion to a family living in a caravan and told them that it was a gift they could move into the next day, He wouldn't then say, "so you just have to put up with what you have for tonight." Instead God is the sort of person who would come into the caravan and help with the packing. That's what He is like; He is dependable and willing to engage with us right now and we are important to Him.

Today is also important because it is important to the One who knows the number of hairs on our heads (**Matthew 10:30**). Our calling is to embrace these truths and open our lives to exploring the freedom that we now have in Christ.

"I lift up my eyes to the hills — where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth."
Psalms 121:1-2

A reminder before concluding.

Our history is not simply rooted in the years we have walked the dusty paths of this world or the past few generations of family life. Whilst this is part of our history it is not the root. Our history of origins is rooted in the truth of eternity past when life was breathed into man and the first couple were placed in Eden, in a perfect environment and as the pinnacle of God's creation. We have been created to receive, created to live in covenant with God our heavenly Father, and created to share life.

In failing to understand our true calling many of us have searched for security elsewhere in anything from fame, fortune or personal relationships that are often one-sided and more about what is taken than given. Either this or we have given in to the things that have happened to us and simply seek to retain some sort of status-quo as we keep the world at bay. In living this way, hearts and minds are damaged in a quest for perfection, meaning and security that can only be found in Jesus.

We live in a world fattened for our presence, a world that was good because it was fit for the purpose it was created. We live in the seventh day, in the presence of the One in whom we rest and because of Him, our history is rooted in Eden, in His love and will be established fully as heaven and earth meet.

Through God's presence in the creation of the tabernacle, the temple and a people called to be a royal priesthood we see the heart of the One we have offended most pointing us to our true calling as He reaches out to the rebel with restorative grace. In the imagery within the tabernacle and temple we have small representations of creation, with these 'signposts' reminding us where we came from, whose we really are and God's desire to be with us. They also underline grace and mercy in that we approach God through His work alone (**Ephesians 2:13; Hebrews 4:16**) ultimately seen in Christ.

In the seventh day and the sabbath we recognise eternal love and our call to rest with our heavenly Father, being reminded that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of God (**Matthew 4:4**). In being called a holy nation (**1 Peter 2:9**) we also recognise that we are set apart from what this world has become, by God. We are now Kingdom people, set apart as special. Therefore, being holy is not about what we avoid, so much as life lived in partnership with God. The more engaged we are with God the more open we are to see our lives from His perspective as those who are fearfully and wonderfully made.

In being called "A royal priesthood" we are reminded of our calling as those who receive *and give out* of the blessing that is ours, because of His unconditional love. In living this way, we see what it means to be human. It means walking with God.

As previously mentioned, the physical temple (like the tabernacle) without the presence of God was just a structure, as is a body without life, being little more than a bunch of chemicals, albeit pointing to something that was. It is when the temple and tabernacle were indwelt by the presence of the Lord that they were truly the tabernacle and temple. In a real sense they are God's house, God coming to be with man, a centre point to life and place of peace, security and communication as He engages with His covenant people. In considering this we see why Jesus speaks of Himself as the Temple (**John 2:19**), because in Him, God truly comes amongst men. In Jesus we have God incarnate (**Matthew 1:23**), the perfect man and the firstborn over creation (**Colossians 1:15**) who came to reveal what God was like (**John 14:6-14**) and to show us what sinless man (**1 Peter 2:22**) looks like in a deep abiding relationship with His heavenly Father; our Father in heaven.

Our Father is the One who brings us back to our true self (**Ps 23:3**), the Shepherd who guides and leads us to feed on wisdom, knowledge and understanding. He is the “Why are you downcast?” One (**Gen 4:6**) who reaches out to us. He is the “Come now let us reason together” One (**Isaiah 1:18**) who wants to help us think through what is really going on. He is the “Where were you when I created the world?” One (**Job 38**) who calls to us to look to Him and the “made you alive with Christ” One (**Col 2:13**) who delivers us from sin and brings us home. The peace that Jesus gives us will ultimately be the complete removal of that which is counter-covenant, the removal of Satan, the power of sin and all that separates us from our heavenly Father.

Because of Him we have been brought home, are being brought home and will one day be fully home as Eden matures, and heaven and earth come together forever. The shalom peace that will then be present, is captured in many places in scripture, not least so when Isaiah writes: -

“The wolf will dwell with the lamb and the leopard will lie down with the goat. The calf, the young lion, and the fattened calf will be together, and a child will lead them. The cow and the bear will graze, their young ones will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like cattle. An infant will play beside the cobra’s pit, and a toddler will put his hand into a snake’s den. They will not harm or destroy each other on my entire holy mountain, for the land will be as full of the knowledge of the Lord as the sea is filled with water” **Isaiah 11:6-9**.

Your future and mine is certain because it is His future and He wants us to be part of it.

“For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” **Ephesians 2:10.**

In conclusion.

A few months ago, my wife and I stayed in a small hotel just outside a large city. As we were leaving the following morning, we noticed a signpost pointing to a military graveyard and decided to visit it out of curiosity. On arriving at the graveyard, we found row after row of white granite crosses. The rows seemed like an army of untold stories, lines of soldiers-past slumbering in a world still full of chaos; boots no more to march through time. It was a very moving experience and as I contemplated this sea of gravestones, I was struck by the tidiness of the graveyard and was aware of four groundsmen in attendance despite the early hour on that beautiful summer’s day. In continuing to look across the cemetery, it seemed as if the clean-cut rows of white were greeting the sun, whilst standing to attention on freshly shaved grass, bidding a silent welcome to the day that I now walked in. And what sort of day was this? In considering where I was standing it was a hard-earned day, a day of blessing purchased by the blood, sweat and lives of so many of yesterday’s men and women. But because of what they had given it was a day of freedom for me, birthed through the sacrifice

of those now lying in the cemetery in which we stood. A cemetery of shattered dreams and cut-short lives.

As I continued viewing this silent sea of green, crossed with regiments of sun-kissed stone, I was reminded of the tragedy of sin and suffering, then drawn to the real reason I could stand in this place of heroes and heartache on a beautiful summer day. I remembered again that the real reason this world continues to live and breathe, albeit in short sharp intakes of breath at times, is Jesus. Through the sacrifice of this perfect Son, this incredible King who stepped into my place of judgement and paid for my wrongdoing, I was now able to come to my true home in Him. Because of someone else's incredible grace and mercy, I could enter my true place as a son in an eternal kingdom and receive from a Father who has always been reaching out to me. So, there is hope; there is always hope.

Christianity is not something that fits into our lives as if it were a doctor's surgery or an oasis to run to when things get difficult. If this were so then it is little more than a self-help system alongside so many others in the marketplace of life. Neither is it a power source to recharge as I embark on my agenda. Christianity is not a part of something as if the world were large and the Christian faith small. Instead Christianity is all-encompassing and everything else needs to be seen within the word-view it presents, whether this is the goodness of God or the failure of man and the work of the enemy. A squatter who wants to rule like a king in a world that has never been his.

God is, and always will be, the Alpha and Omega, the First and Last, the Beginning and End and you and I are the redeemed of God – the bought back and being brought back ones, as minds are transformed in His power through an understanding of our identity, position and calling. And what of the One we serve?

He is the One who is beyond the horizons of the horizon, the One who is here right now in the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. The sole reason we live, breathe and have our being, is because this world was founded on God's sacrificial love, and whilst reaping what it has sown on many occasions, has not been fully left to its own devices by the One who has never given up on it. Our world has a beginning, a purpose and a destination as heaven and earth come together because of the sacrifice of a King above all Kings, our Saviour. So, although we are a small part in a big picture, we are noticed and loved; be encouraged.

".... I know whom I have believed and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him for that day."

2 Timothy 1:12

Seeing God as He really is. Exodus 20: 1-4

Part 3.

*“The law of the Lord is perfect, **reviving the soul**. The statutes of the Lord are trustworthy, **making wise the simple**. The precepts of the Lord are right, **giving joy to the heart**. The commands of the Lord are radiant, **giving light to the eyes**. The fear of the Lord is pure, enduring forever. The ordinances of the Lord are sure and altogether righteous. They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold; they are sweeter than honey, than honey from the comb. By them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward.”*

Psalm 19:7-11

Introduction.

Through the Exodus and because of God’s love and continuing commitment to His Covenant, Israel was brought out of the land of slavery as the chains that bound her were systematically removed by the One to whom all life must answer.

However, a change of circumstances does not automatically mean a change of heart as if we suddenly have the right blueprint for life all in one go. All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God (**Rom 3:23**) and our main problem is always going to be wrong thinking in the place where God tells us life is lived first and foremost: our hearts. In the way God worked with Israel and the laying out of the Ten Commandments we see God providing a recipe for life and growth that was more like a perfect three-course meal than the dry bread of wrong teaching and social domination by another belief system.

The word ‘commandment’ comes from the Hebrew word ‘dabar’ meaning ‘word’ and speaks of divine communication from the One whom Jesus speaks of as ‘Our father in heaven’ (**Matthew 6:9**). In the giving of God’s law, we see the heart of a father seeking to shape and mould those who were separated, distorted, and disfigured in heart and mind, because of both the oppression of the enemy and their personal sin. Therefore, in the giving of the law we have functionality being brought into the dysfunctionality that arises when man ignores God; we have freedom from bondage, a regaining of identity and the ability to make sense of the world we live in. However, whilst adherence to God’s law can bring a certain amount of stability, security, and strength, ultimately it cannot save us. Nevertheless, in Jesus we have an advocate who fulfilled the law so that we could become the forgiven ones and live as sons and daughters in His kingdom.

In Jesus, we have a truth that is not found in any other belief system across the world or down through history. In Jesus, the lawgiver comes alongside the lawbreaker showing nothing but love, grace, compassion and mercy, and in a way that completely fulfils God’s law of love. He then stands in the place of the lawbreaker in order to pay the penalty for sin.

The Ten Commandments underline what is required in what can be termed a marriage relationship, with Jesus summarising the laws in the words, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind” and “Love your neighbour as yourself.” (**Matthew 22:37-40**). Throughout the biblical story we clearly see that God cares for

His people and is concerned about their response to His love, knowing that aside from Him there is no hope for the sinner walking the road of destruction.

God's ten commandments remind us, as does all of His written word, that we are part of a different story, that we are called to march to a different drum beat so to speak. Due to sin we are out of step, misinformed and misdirected, yet it does not have to remain this way and in and through Jesus there is always hope because through Him the words of Jeremiah are fulfilled, "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts" (**Jeremiah 31:33**). Love is never a one-way street and our response to God's love opens our hearts to receive and give.

God does not force us to adhere to His commands because that does not necessarily change us. God *informs* us, through both word and deed, and *expects* us to align our thoughts and actions with His: those of a loving Father. Therefore, spiritual health and wellbeing are to be anchored in a person and not a system with the impact of this being seen, for example, in Psalm 19:7 where we read "*The Law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul.*" In this verse the Hebrew word 'reviving' speaks of *turning back to a starting point* which also explains why King David could write in **Psalm 23:3**, "*He brings me back to my true self.*"

The law of the Lord is perfect (complete in every way) and revives the soul (through showing us how to live according to our Father's wishes). The statutes of the Lord make us wise (able to discern properly) and prevent us from being so caught up in the troubles of the world with Isaiah saying on one occasion, "Do not be dismayed for I am your God" (**Isaiah 40:31**). Incidentally, the word 'dismayed' has, at its heart, the idea of poor vision and of being blind. Too often we struggle emotionally because we have allowed things to make us blind to the presence of God.

We are to seek His presence in all that we do and not being blind as to His presence, which is the root behind the word 'dismayed' in **Isaiah 40:31**: "Do not be dismayed (blinded) for I am your God. In being overwhelmed and caught up with all that goes on around us we become distracted and dismayed, that is being blinded to presence of God.

The precepts (responsibility God places on His people) are for our benefit and bring joy (uplifting the heart and mind), as we engage with His commandments (the exercising of correct judgment), which brings light and life into our lives (**Psalm 19:7ff**). Ultimately this only comes about through the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit.

In the New Testament we find Jesus encouraging His listeners in saying, "*Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.*" (**Matthew 11:28-30**). The burden of wrong-thinking and the accompanying emotions has a high price tag and heavy burden attached. Unlike this, Jesus' burden is light with the imagery of the yoke not being lost to those who listened to Him. Oxen would go for at least two fittings for a yoke so that it fitted perfectly. In a not dissimilar way, God's teaching is a 'perfect' fit for our lives and yet feels uncomfortable at times because of what we have become - as would a new suit on a man who had put on ten kilos whilst waiting for it to be made! Another point worth noting is that a stronger, more experienced ox would

be yoked with an inexperienced one and carry most of the burden. In Jesus we have a High Priest who understand our weakness and helps us through the engaging presence and power of the Holy Spirit.

God's teaching, the instructions of a loving Father are summed up in Jesus' words found in **Matthew 22:37-40** where we read, *"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.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."* As Paul writes elsewhere, *"Love does no harm to its neighbour. Therefore, love is the fulfilment of the law"* (**Romans 13:8-10**).

The Commandments (words).

(1) "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. "You shall have no other gods before me." **Exodus 20:2-3.**

What we call the Ten Commandments are modelled on the framework of an Ancient Near East treaty which, in this case, begins by speaking of the historical links between God and Israel. In the opening words we see God effectively saying, *"This is what I am like. I am the One who takes the initiative, I am the One who has rescued you.; I am the One who gives my best because of my love for you. You are my treasured possession"* (**Exodus 19:5**). Therefore in the words, *"I brought you out of the land of slavery"* there is the reminder that the One who gave the law to His people is the One who rescued them and who continually gives out to His people, expecting the same in return. In the New Testament we see Jesus confronting Satan concerning power and defeating darkness on every occasion in order to release people from darkness and set them free. All this was done out of Jesus' relationship with His heavenly Father and for the purpose of bringing us into that relationship as forgiven, healed and restored men, women and children.

We capture something of this deep relationship between two parties in Jesus' words where He says, *"The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it"* (**Matthew 13:44-46**). Jesus begins by saying that the kingdom of heaven (the rule and reign of God's unconditional love) is like treasure and that if it were a physical treasure, a person would willingly give up everything in order to get it. In any relationship the greatest thing you can give is self.

Jesus then speaks of God giving His best in likening the kingdom to a merchant who gives up everything to purchase a pearl of great value. God gave His Son (**John 3:16**) and we are the pearl; God wants you to be with Him.

In the lead up to Israel's deliverance from Egypt God revealed His absolute power in how He dealt with Egyptian gods such as Hapti the male-god of the Nile, Heqt the frog goddess of fertility, Set the god of the desert and Re the sun god. Among the so-called Egyptian gods was

also Nekbet, a vulture goddess and protector of Upper Egypt. Her priestesses wore cloaks of feathers signifying protection whilst ultimately destroying the people who sought her help. In a clear display concerning who was really in charge of the world, God defeated the powers of darkness and dealt with the most powerful army in the known world at that time as He led His people to freedom. The domination, exploitation and life-sapping ways of Egypt and her belief system were the complete opposite of God who stooped low and brought His people out as on eagle's wings (**Exodus 19:4-6**) so that they could be His treasured possessions (**v5**).

'You have seen what I did to Egypt and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to me. If you will listen obediently to what I say and keep my covenant, out of all peoples you'll be my special treasure. The whole Earth is mine to choose from, but you're special: a kingdom of priests, a holy nation.'

Exodus 19:4-6

It is in the context of God's covenant love, grace, and mercy that we see the call to recognise who God is and the call to have no other gods *before* Him. In the Ancient Near East there were many so-called gods who were said to rule the seen and unseen words and sometimes work together in doing so. However, the God of scripture is nothing like this; He is not one amongst many but the only God, creator of heavens and earth and master over all.

"So — who is like me? Who holds a candle to me?" says The Holy. "Look at the night skies: Who do you think made all this? Who marches this army of stars out each night, counts them off, calls each by name — so magnificent! so powerful! — and never overlooks a single one?"

Isaiah 40:25-26.

God is the One who releases us from *our* house of slavery, who *breathes* life into broken people and gives us hope in a difficult world and strength to live as He frees us from wrong thinking and half-baked ideas.

In the incarnation we see God stooping low and entering humanity. He is the sole reason we have been rescued from the house of darkness — the existence that we called life! The Lord God is the One who understands how the world has fashioned our thinking and blinded us to the truth and crippled our lives, yet the world never had the right to do this in the first place. He alone *is our creator*.

"Yet, O Lord, you are our Father. We are the clay; you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand."

Isaiah 64:8.

"...the Lord your God..."

The word 'Lord' (I am the *Lord* your God) speaks of covenant relationship with its Hebrew root (Adonai) speaking of One who has authority, ownership, and mastery over life (**Gen 2:7**). He is the door to life, the One who protects and nourishes (**Psalms 1:1-3**) and enables growth. He is in covenant with us and, like a Shepherd, leads us into green pastures (**Psalms 23:1-2, Ezekiel 34:11-2**) to feed. His love endures forever (**Psalms 136:3-4, John 10:11, Hebrews 13:20-21, 1 Peter 5:4**). He alone restores our soul, brings us back to our true self, the self that He created us to be and not the one smashed and damaged by the world. There are no other gods before Him.

We sing a new song.

Through God's grace and mercy, Israel was able to sing a new song with Moses saying: *"The Lord is my strength and my song; he has become my salvation. He is my God, and I will praise him, my father's God, and I will exalt him"* (**Exodus 15:2**). In Israel songs were stories and ways of learning truth. God had come into Israel's suffering, chaos and domination by evil and released them from the chains of oppression. He raised them out of oppressive darkness so that they could reorientate their hearts and minds as they embraced truth.

"He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty".

Psalm 91:1.

The Exodus prophetically looked forward to the second Exodus through Jesus where all who bow the knee to the Messiah are taken from darkness and welcomed into God's Kingdom. The fruit of the final exodus from sin and suffering is seen in saints standing before a tamed and judged sea (the sea was a symbol of chaos).

In light of this we see how the singing of the song of Moses and the Lamb speaks of God's complete triumph over all who oppose Him and all who sought to place others under their own illegitimate rule. God judges evil and reveals His superiority over all that has ever raised or will raise its head against Him. He is the Holy One who brings His people to His holy dwelling (**Ex 15:13; Col 3:14-15, Rev 5:12**).

(2) "You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand [generations] of those who love me and keep my commandments. **Exodus 20:4-6**

In 21st century western society many think of idols as something made from wood, stone, or precious metal. However, an idol is anything in the created order that we focus our full attention on as a means of security and wellbeing apart from God. Therefore, an idol could be money, position, or in the case of many villages we visit in India, it can be a temple full of idols of gods in Hinduism. It is this belief system that keeps communities trapped with no hope of progress since their false belief dominates them and prevents them from breaking free. In our insecurity and vulnerability, the road back to old ways of dealing with life or going back to what we are used to can seem attractive. In the New Testament we see Jesus systematically confronting people's allegiance (and sometimes commitment) to wrong thinking and old ways, helping them to see the love and power of God in both word and deed.

Whilst Moses was receiving the first set of the Ten Commandments there were those in Israel who became increasingly insecure and allowed the familiarity of old ways to resurface in an attempt to find security. This manifested itself in the making of a golden calf.

The Hebrew word for calf refers to a young bull which would be familiar to the Israelites and those who were with them because of their time in Egypt and knowledge of the Egyptian god Apis (the god of strength and fertility) whose image was cast in the form of a sacred Ox or calf.

Whether we like it or not, we can often be influenced by past experiences, good or bad, which resurrect themselves when we struggle. For Israel, present circumstances with a leader who had disappeared and a sketchy belief in God led some to seize the opportunity to bring their own teaching in saying it was many gods who brought Israel out of Egypt (**Exodus 32:8**), with others assuming it was an image of their god (**Neh 9:17ff**). The calf may have been made from gold because the Egyptians believed gold to be the skin of the gods.

In Exodus we see the inability of idols to feed and support man, being underlined as Moses ground the golden calf into powder, scattered it on water and made the Israelites drink it (**Exodus 33:20**). It is as if God were saying, “Go on then, let your idol really feed you.” We also see the judgement of God against this form of idolatry in that 3,000 people died (**Ex 33:27**).

How do we view God?

How do we see God? Has He become something of an absent landlord because of past experiences or still perceived as a harsh taskmaster because of a legalistic religious upbringing? Then again, perhaps He is seen as some sort of doctor to go to when ill, but not really bother about most of the time? If any of this is true for us then we have made God in our image, fashioned by our understanding or the events we have gone through.; this is not God.

If we want to see what the image of God looks like then we only need to look at one person: Jesus Christ, for in Him we see what man is called to be and what God is like.

Look at Jesus’ care for the woman at the well in the middle of the day, and His compassion for the crowd who were like sheep without a shepherd and you see sinless man in the image of God serving His Father. Look at how Jesus always walked with His Father and how He reached out and opened the eyes of the blind. He willingly engaged with the needs of a Centurion and came alongside tax collectors. Look at how He raised the widow of Nain’s only son and how He breathed life and healing into lepers and set demoniacs free and you see a man made in the image of God, a man walking with His heavenly Father in the leading and empowerment of the Holy Spirit. Look at all that Jesus did and you see an obedient son and so you see exactly what it means to be made in the image of God (**Colossians 1:15**).

“...We look at this Son and see the God who cannot be seen. We look at this Son and see God's original purpose in everything created. For everything, absolutely everything, above and below, visible and invisible, rank after rank after rank of angels — everything got started in him and finds its purpose in him. He was there before any of it came into existence and holds it all together right up to this moment. And when it comes to the church, he organizes and holds it together, like a head does a body.”

Colossians 1:15-18

Jesus saw all people as having great value and viewed them as sheep without a Shepherd (**Mt 6:34**). Yes, some of them were distorted, corrupted and rebellious in many ways – but they were still human beings made in the image of God. They were not, first and foremost, a

prostitute, a tax collector, or a thief, for example, this speaking of what they had become or what had happened to them. Jesus saw beyond all of this – beyond the pain, the rebellion, the suffering, and labelling – to who they really were – men and women made in the image of God.

You and I are made in the image of God (read Genesis one and two). We are called to be like Him by leaning on His truth, allowing his strength to engage our lives by the Holy Spirit and thus being able to walk a straight path, so to speak. If we genuinely bow the knee before God we need bow to nothing else.

“... I the Lord your God am a jealous God....”

“Do not worship any other god, for the Lord, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God”

Ex 34:14

God is passionate for His people with the Hebrew word ‘jealous’ (quana) *equally* speaking of being zealous (qu’nah), coming from the same root. For example, when Jesus made a whip and drove out moneylenders who were exploiting ordinary everyday people in the temple forecourts (**John 2:13-16**), His disciples recalled **Psalm 69:9** which says, *“Zeal for your house consumes me.”* With the Lord’s name being ‘Jealous’ we are being told that He is zealous and will come against all that seeks to represent Him falsely or receive worship due to Him alone. It is when we lose sight of God that we really begin to run into trouble.

“The Lord will march out like a mighty man, like a warrior he will stir up his zeal; with a shout he will raise the battle cry and will triumph over his enemies.”

Isaiah 42:13

“...punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me...”

In any given law-abiding society, the purpose of punishment is multifunctional. For example, it reveals that lawbreaking does not go unnoticed and that transgression has a price to pay. Punishment also acts as a deterrent to many who are tempted to break the law and also protects society from the lawbreaker in that lawbreakers are often imprisoned. But why does God speak of punishing to the third or fourth generation?

Many groups in the Ancient Near East lived in close-knit communities with three or four generations of a family under one roof. Invariably, beliefs, attitudes and behavioural traits would, to a certain degree, pass from one generation to the next. A present-day example of this could be a five-year-olds wrong attitude towards a rival football team purely through hearing his father constantly slandering them. In this respect we see why the third or fourth generation is mentioned and that sin is never static. When parents ignore God’s teaching or reinterpret it, there is a greater likelihood that their children will adopt a similar practice and then suffer for their own wrongdoing. Another point to take into consideration is that those who *hate God* speaks of the personal hatred of those who were unwilling to acknowledge God. Punishment is for personal sin and not because of the sin of parents (**Deuteronomy 24:16**).

God's purpose in punishment is to call sin to account, stem its flow *and* to encourage individuals, communities, or nations, to *expand their vision* - to look beyond themselves to the One who holds all things in His hands. This is why David writes, *"I lift up my eyes to the hills — where does my help come from?" (Psalm 121:1-2)* in a Psalm that speaks of God watching over His people.

God call us to look to Him as the provider of life and challenges wrongdoing in a variety of ways because He cares for us. For example, God does, at times, allow us to reap the harvest of sin in order to remind us that man does not live by bread alone but every word that comes from the mouth of God.

In grace and mercy, God's Spirit will convict the world of sin (**John 16:7-9**) as He encourages us to turn to Him. Not everyone knows that what they are doing is wrong through being brought up in a fragmented world which makes little sense to so many and where man

In considering this we see that asking God to convict someone of sin is an act of grace and mercy and has to be done in love and not through taking the moral high ground. We are called to love the sinner and hate the sin.

"For the Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish."

Psalm 1:6

"...showing love to a thousand [generations] of those who love me and keep my commandments."

In Hebrew thinking the number one thousand is not necessarily a literal number because it was used to speak of enormity and fullness and can refer to families, tribes, or groups of people. What it underlines is the truth that God blesses abundantly.

God has given His absolute best to us and through His gift of life and presence of the Holy Spirit scripture states that we can reap a harvest that is a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown (**Matthew 13:8-9**). This speaks of incredible blessing since the average profit on a harvest in Jesus' day was said to be around 5%!

God is passionate towards all He has made and is zealous about His people. He is the only way by which a person can be saved and there is no one like Him. He is the One who stoops down to raise us up by standing in our place and paying for our wrongdoing.

"For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect. He was chosen before the creation of the world but was revealed in these last times for your sake."

1 Peter 1:18-20.

(3) “You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name.” **Exodus 20:7.**

In the Ancient Near East, a person’s name was intricately connected to their nature and character, therefore, using the name of God whilst ignoring who He really is, was viewed as a serious betrayal of friendship and love. Israel was not allowed to use God’s name as some sort of talisman in order to get things done and was not to try and endorse what they wanted to do by saying “God says so,” without understanding the will of God. In our present day when so many endorse what they are saying in this way, we need to be careful.

In contrast to this, speaking in God’s name reveals an awareness of His greatness and character and the recognition that we are blessed through His grace and mercy alone.

In John **16:23-24** we read, “In that day you will no longer ask me anything. I tell you the truth, my Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete.”

To ask in the name of Jesus is not simply pronouncing ‘Jesus’ as if his name were some magic talisman that gets everything done instantly. “In the name of Jesus” recognises that we receive because of what He has done and should ask with a servant’s heart as we seek to see Him glorified in all that we do. In considering this we realise that there is a need to engage with God in prayer so that we know His will and are guided by Him concerning how we pray. In this respect, “In the name of Jesus” speaks about asking in a Christlike way, depending on God and finding and experiencing the guidance and empowerment of the Holy Spirit as we do so.

(4) “Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labour and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates. For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore, the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.” **Exodus 20:8-11.**

Nowhere in the Ancient Near East, apart from Israel, are there any parallels to the sabbath which speaks of resting in all that God has done for His people, an awareness of His eternal love, man’s high calling and God’s willingness to forgive and embrace the sinner. All foreigners who had left Egypt with Israel (**Exodus 12:42**) were also allowed to benefit from the Sabbath, (God’s covenant blessing) insofar as they embraced the One who stoops low to raise man from the dust and debris of his own thinking. As David once wrote, “*He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap...*” (**Psalms 113:7**).

Through the Exodus God delivered Israel from the illegitimate rule of the Pharaohs and in their subsequent desert wandering continued to look after them, providing bread, water and meat to a people who deserved nothing in and of themselves, but were able to receive everything because of His grace, mercy and loving-kindness.

The sabbath points to God's eternal love and desire to be with man and, on Israel's part, required a cessation of personal activity to give full attention to all that God had done, is doing and will do, along with who they were called to be in His grace and mercy. Therefore, the Sabbath was a day of being rather than doing because life is not to be defined by work but by our call to engage with our heavenly Father. This is why the sabbath is set apart as holy, meaning it is set apart as special. Ultimately Christ fulfils the Sabbath in that it is through His work that we find our true rest.

In the Deuteronomic record of the fourth commandment we find an addition to the record in Exodus, which says, *"...remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the Lord your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm....."* (**Deuteronomy 5:15**).

Israel was called to share God's compassion and mercy remembering that they had been slaves in Egypt and that God had stooped low to raise them up as on the wings of an eagle (**Exodus 19:4**). All of us are called to remember where we have come from and to live as God's image-bearers in a fallen. In doing so we reach out with a love that does not look for any other reward than the uplifting and blessing of those we engage with. In forgetting where we have come from, who we are and our calling to engage with God and the world we live in, leaves us near-sighted and blind (**2 Peter 1:5-9**).

(5) "Honour your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you." **Exodus 20:12.**

If the younger generations in Israel were going to be able to exercise authority over creation and to be a light to the surrounding nations they needed to honour the teaching of God that was lived out by and handed down by prophets, priests and kings and their parents. To put it simply, they needed to submit to God's authority in order to stand in authority.

For example, Israeli parents were expected to go into great detail concerning all that God had done for His people and point out that He was the sole reason they were in the Promised Land and that they were called to reflect His nature and character in how they lived with one-another. If Israel forgot this and assumed they deserved to be blessed because of their own achievements, then it would not go well for them in the land which was essentially a gift given in love, grace, and mercy for humanity. The failure to honour teaching was one of the reasons God humbled His people in the desert in order to teach that, "man does not live by bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord" (**Deuteronomy 8:3**).

It is important to realise that honouring parents was not learning to get through life with the best education the world could provide but about life itself which is defined by God. In knowing God, it is then easier to understand self and know why the world is here, what has gone wrong and how to fulfil our calling in Him.

The lack of character development that comes from ignoring the teaching of God is powerfully captured in the following quote from a teacher who survived the concentration camps. He writes...

"I am a survivor of a concentration camp. My eyes saw what no person should witness. Gas chambers built by learned engineers. Children poisoned by educated physicians. Infants killed by trained nurses. Women and babies shot and burned by high school and college graduates.

So, I am suspicious of education. My request is: help your students become more human. Your efforts must never produce learned monsters, skilled psychopaths, or educated Eichmann's. Reading, writing, and arithmetic are important only if they serve to make our children more human." Haim G. Ginott, 'Teacher and Child: A Book for Parents and Teachers.'

Living long in the land.

'Living long in the land' speaks of covenant security in the Lord and the accompanying quality of life that comes through knowing God. God wants us to get the absolute best out of each day no matter what comes our way. In ignoring Him we often rush through life and soon lose our sense of security and wellbeing in Him.

(6) "You shall not murder" Exodus 20:13.

Murder speaks of premeditated killing, of thinking and planning about how to take another life for no other reason than anger or hatred or for some form of personal gain or benefit. This is vastly different from the taking of life through having to defend a nation against an enemy who seeks to conquer and destroy. In scripture God calls government to protect citizen's rights to life and speaks of Himself as the One who "defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the alien, giving him food and clothing" (**Deuteronomy 10:18-20**).

Premeditated killing for no other reason than personal satisfaction or gain not only happens on a one-to-one level but also on a national scale and becomes easier when the lives that are being taken have already been devalued. This can be clearly seen, for example, in Nazi Germany shortly before the onset of the Second World War where the Jewish population was mocked, ostracised, and blamed for all that was going wrong in Germany. After the defeat of Germany one Nazi war criminal was asked why he allowed his soldiers to mock and ridicule prisoners before shooting them. In reply he said that it made it easier for his soldiers to kill people that they saw as insignificant and not really human since they were not part of the master race. This line of reasoning was also very evident in the Nuremberg trials that were held in Bavaria between 1945 and 1949 with many war criminals justifying their activities with, "they were not real people anyway."

Scripture speaks about the value of all life and calls on governments to protect citizen's right to life. All life belongs to God who clearly states, "Do not murder," and even in the darkness where life is so often trivialised He brings light and life. For example, I recently read the story of Sara, a young woman who at the age of 14 joined the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) having been attracted to the groups' Marxist ideology. Many years later she found out that members of her family had become Christians, she was encouraged to denounce them by her fellow guerrillas who were aware that the gospel ran counter to their ideology. Sara eventually left the FARC, got married and placed her trust in Christ.

Because God saved her from a violent life with the FARC, Sara shares God's Word with others who have given their lives to the guerrilla group. Along with her husband she distributes Bibles. The ministry has not gone unnoticed and they have been threatened on many occasions by FARC leaders.

We are called to love people and this loving is not dependent on what they believe because we are told to love the sinner and hate the sin. And, as one man once said, the only person we look down on is the one we are about to raise up. All life is valuable because God says so and all life belongs to Him.

(7) "You shall not commit adultery" Exodus 20:14.

Adultery involves a complete disregard for God, a total lack of interest concerning covenant relationships with others and deliberately ignoring the feelings and trust that others have invested in a person. Adultery damages at every level and destroys family life.

Adultery is utterly selfish, train-wrecks trust and never remains static, it damages families and communities in the process with its focus on what a person can take rather than a deep love and commitment to what they had already been given by a loved one.

Jesus clearly states that adultery is rooted in the way a person thinks in saying, "You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery.' But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (**Matt 5:27-29**).

Lust is about perception and using someone or something for personal gain and gratification with no concern for anyone but self. Therefore, lust always takes in order to use and in doing so shows selfishness and an unwillingness to accept covenant teaching. In the area of sexual intercourse, it is, "I am using your body for my personal gain" with total disregard for the other person who has given their absolute best – themselves.

In complete contrast to lust, love involves a deep knowing of a person and the giving of self to that person purely for their benefit and not personal gain.

(8) "You shall not steal" Exodus 20:15.

The roots of the Hebrew word 'steal' (ganab) speak of taking something which does not belong to you; the removal of something from its rightful place and rightful owner purely for personal gain and with no regard to others. For example, in Israel there was the practice of dishonest scales (**Proverbs 11:1**) where traders adjusted scales so that they were 'balanced' in their favour, resulting in customers paying more than they should have.

However, the word 'steal' (ganab) also has links with the idea of kidnapping, speaking of removing someone from their normal environment for personal gain. Without stretching this point too far, we can see a form of kidnapping going on at the time of the Jubilee year in Israel.

The Year of Jubilee was to be a time of freedom, when all debts were written off, enabling those who had struggled and ended in bonded slavery to be set free from debt and have their

lands returned to them enabling a fresh start. This ruling would put a stop to the rich exploiting the poor and prevent absolute poverty because it meant that everyone's hereditary land would eventually have to come back to them. Unfortunately, there is no record of this every happening and therefore, in a real sense, families were kidnapped in that rights and privileges were ignored as Jubilee was bypassed and they were prevented from returning to ancestral homes.

Stealing from others invariably causes unnecessary heartache and pain for the victim(s) because stealing is not always about taking someone's property, as traumatic as this might be. For example, every man, woman, and child has the God-given right to be loved and cared for; to be nurtured and encouraged and respected and protected. However, this is not always the case in a damaged and broken society where many have had their sense of identity, security, and well-being, taken from them.

For example, think of the young toddler whose parents constantly argue and shout at one another. Even at this early age the toddler is having something stolen from them, this being their God-given right to a peaceful, secure, and safe home. Now think of the young teenage girl teenager who has continually been bombarded by the media which tells her how she needs to look and dress in order to be part of the 'in crowd.' Has not this young girl, at the very entrance of adulthood, had her sense of identity and understanding of unconditional love stolen from her. Has she not been kidnapped by subtle advertising campaigns, many of which continually whisper "you are not good enough" into confused minds?

Then again, think of the young couple who work every hour under the sun in a society that measures success by way of wealth and status. The couple slowly become strangers to each other and time together becomes little more than recuperation for the next bout of work rather than resting together and learning the art of give and take.

Now think about the priest and the Levite who ignored the suffering of a savagely beaten and unrecognisable man on the road from Jerusalem and Jericho (**Luke 10:30-32**). In refusing to stop and help we could assume they did nothing, but this is not the case. What the unnamed priest and Levite did was add to the man's suffering through leaving him where he was. In this respect, they stole time and healing from a fellow human being and, in doing so, revealed a complete lack of understanding concerning the heart of God.

In many respects we were unrecognisable when God stooped down to raise us up. We were unrecognisable in that we are nothing like the man or woman God created us to be. However, God still came for us, stooped low, and raised us from the dust despite it being 'men of dust' that hammered His Son to a cross. Jesus hung on a cross in nothing more than His underwear and yet in another way, was clothed. He was clothed in our sin, our wrongdoing, our mistakes, and failure as He underwent judgment in our place so that we could be clothed in His work (**Gal 3:27**). However, despite having received so much, we can still steal for others with our inactivity or lack of willingness to really look at what is going on in our world.

For example, all across the world there are sick and suffering people who live in slums and have children who struggle with malnutrition and disease. The reason they struggle is not because there is no treatment for disease or people who could help them; they struggle because there are often very few people who really care about them.

Every man, woman and child has a God given right to know that their real identity and wellbeing is to be rooted in the love of a heavenly Father, and that there is a saviour who loves them and who will free them from all wrong-doing. Any nation, culture, family, or individual who suppresses this truth is, at the very core of it, stealing a person's humanity in that being human is about knowing and walking in the love of a heavenly Father with a strong sense of identity, meaning and calling in life.

When we live for self and get wrapped up in what we think we should get out of life we soon become like the thief who take from others; meanwhile God's word clearly states, "Do not steal."

(9) "You shall not give false testimony against your neighbour" Exodus 20:16.

The context of this commandment is that of a law court where the application of justice has the purpose of seeking to restore fragmented society. Justice expresses a concern for the sinner and a hatred for sin and the falsification of testimony along with character assassination shows a complete disregard for one's neighbour and society that is to be built on God's truth, honesty, and respect for fellow man. As one man once wrote, *"False testimony, corrupts the very foundation of a lawful society without which no lasting civilisation can survive."*

In June 1944, a twenty-four-day battle commenced for the island of Saipan as American troops launched an attack on the Japanese. As the battle raged, it became obvious to the Japanese that they could not win so they mounted a suicide Banzai charge against heavy opposition which resulted in the death of over four thousand Japanese soldiers.

The Japanese Emperor Hirohito realised that the captured civilians on Saipan would find out that the Americans were not the evil people depicted by Japan in their character assassination of the U.S.A. This, in turn, could then create a propaganda problem which could be used to subvert the fighting spirit of the Japanese army. In light of this, Hirohito made an official announcement (later denied) to Lieutenant General Yoshitsugu Saito who was commander of Saipan. He told the commander to promise all civilians who committed suicide an equal status in the afterlife with the soldiers who had died in battle. By the time American Marines had advanced to the northern tip of the island, thousands of civilians had committed suicide by jumping off cliffs (men, women, and children) in order to get their so-called privileged place in the afterlife. The combination of the character assassination of America resulted in a fear which combined with a false sense of national pride and erroneous belief in the false promises of the Emperor caused the death of these innocent civilians.

The above story speaks so loudly of abuse and tragedy, yet gossip can also speak the same way if we are not careful. Gossip is often no more than character assassination through sharing with others the negative things in a person's life, or their failings, without any concern for the whole person and, in doing so, ignoring God's command to love our neighbour.

Jesus wept over Jerusalem because He saw the whole person; He did not just see sin. Jesus saw men and women made in the image of God and was fully aware of what their rejection of truth would lead to. How do we view others?

(10) "You shall not covet your neighbour's house. You shall not covet your neighbour's wife, or his manservant or maidservant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbour" **Exodus 20:17.**

The Hebrew word for covet (chamad) comes from a root word speaking of wrongly desiring what rightfully belongs to another. In the Ancient Near East this was pictured as lifting the eyes to focus on what others have, to the detriment of seeing what one already has. The root behind all of this is discontentment and envy, both of which destroy life and separate households.

You and I live in an imperfect world but were created for perfection and because of this and sinful nature we can easily become dissatisfied with what we have, especially so in modern-day society where so much advertising tells us what we need in order to be successful. However, as Paul writes to Timothy, *"...But godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it."* **1 Timothy 6:6-7.**

Concluding thoughts.

"For the kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power. "

1 Corinthians 4:20

When Jesus spoke about the kingdom of God there were some who assumed He would defeat Rome and all who oppressed Israel. However, as they heard His words and saw His ministry to all – their enemies included – they came to realise that His ministry was one of social inclusion and not exclusion. The offer of forgiveness and reconciliation with God was made to all, regardless of achievement, ethnicity, social status, or background.

The kingdom of God points us back to the perfection of Eden and God's unconditional love, yet above and beyond this to God's perfect rule and reign.

Clothing.

Insofar as we seek first the Kingdom of God, knowing His presence and submitting to His rule, we are able to walk in His authority and experience freedom in Christ. It is only because of God's presence and incredible grace that we are able to experience His authority over our lives and walk in authority through life, no matter what comes our way. This can be seen right from the outset of Genesis when God clothed Adam and Eve in garments of skin (**Gen 3:21**) after they had fallen into sin and promised them a future which would ultimately cost God His absolute best. Incidentally, the word garment ('kuttoenet') is thought to speak of clothing worn by one in authority. You and I are the 'brought back home' ones and are clothed in the work of Christ (**Galatians 3:27**). We are clothed in power from on high (**Luke 24:49, 1 Cor 3:16**),

and in that which is imperishable (1 Cor 15:54). In considering this we recognise our need to fully understand our position and calling in Him and not make the mistake of being naked, isolated, and trapped by our circumstances in a world that mixes its ingredients together the wrong way.

"But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet.'"
Luke 15:22

In returning to his father, the first prodigal son was on the road to restoration and healing, and due to his father's love, grace, and mercy, able to walk in authority. Instead of being dismissed or assigned to a low position in the backyard of the community, this now-returned son was clothed with the best robe, had a ring placed on his finger and sandals on his feet. Through the incredible love, grace, and mercy of the person he had wronged most, the son found unexpected and costly restoration and healing.

Healing.

In Hebrew, the word for 'healing' (raphe) speaks of healing as a restoring of something or someone to a normal state; of being renewed and make fresh. This is the opposite of being heavy burdened and 'out of joint' so to speak, like a jigsaw puzzle that has worn edges, with individual pieces being forced together.

The strength, power, and healing that we receive comes from the One who knows how *all things* should fit together and healing contains both physical and spiritual elements. Because of Jesus our rags have been exchanged for riches and we have been clothed in forgiveness, love, grace, mercy, and power insofar as we stand in authority – His authority.

Shielded.

"...Every word of God is flawless; he is a shield to those who take refuge in him..."
Proverbs 30:5

In a world of slick-advertising and promises that are so easily broken it is important to recognise that God is perfect in every way. His word is flawless, living, and active, and as the writer to Hebrews states, *"God means what he says. What he says goes. His powerful Word is sharp as a surgeon's scalpel, cutting through everything, whether doubt or defence, laying us open to listen and obey. Nothing and no one is impervious to God's Word. We can't get away from it — no matter what"* (Hebrews 4:12-13).

God's word states that He is a shield to those who take refuge in him – so our part is to come to Him on a regular basis, with hearts that are open to His leading and guidance. A heart that is open to God does not just read scripture but enters into the world of scripture; it does not

have favourite verses like a few colours on a page, but sees how all scripture fits together, how the colours paint an incredibly beautiful picture of the truth.

The word shield does not speak so much of an inanimate object like a metal shield as it does of God's protection and guardianship. For example, in a time of crisis, Isaiah told King Hezekiah that God would care for Jerusalem like a mother bird hovering with wings spread over her young in the nest (Isaiah 31:5). We could also think of a vineyard or garden protected by a wall or hedge or an army protecting a nation, yet there is more.

The Hebrew word for 'shield' is also a play on another Hebrew word but before looking at this we could ask, "What is a play on words? "

A modern-day example of a play on words can be found in a cartoon picture of two beef steaks with one saying to the other, "So we *meat* again." Another well-known word play is the caption under a picture of a toad sitting at a bus-stop which reads: "I'm waiting for a bus because my car just got *toad*."

The word 'shield' is a play on the Hebrew word for a gardener and, in the context of the verse we began with, this makes sense. God's word is perfect in every way and is planted in our lives. He tends the 'garden' of our hearts and minds and refines and nurtures our lives as we move from being centred on self to being rooted and established in Him. In doing so the love, wisdom, strength, and power that we gain in transformed minds and hearts helps shield us from wrong thinking and emotions. In all of this we also find the help and presence of the Holy Spirit who encourages us as we go through this refining process with the One who loves us most. Remember that Jesus clearly states that, "Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him," this referring to the presence of the Holy Spirit.

"He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers."

Psalms 1:3

Our Shepherd.

God is our Shepherd (**Psalms 23**). He is the covenant-bringer and relationship-maker who sought to share His love with us even though we rebels and far from Him. We are royalty yet we did not know it; we were clothed in the rags of our own making and chained by our failures. We were the fallen ones pacing the floor of our dungeons and calling them home in a world that had become little more than existence. Yet now, through His grace we are free and becoming more free as we continue to walk with Him. In Christ alone we have the assurance that one day, we will taste the fullness of all that He has done for us in a renewed heaven and earth. So, let us be encouraged and slow down and engage with the world of scripture, allowing God to shape and mould our lives as He restores our true identity in Him in a life-long journey of love and encouragement. It will not always be easy but be encouraged and walk with your head held high and in the power, authority, and blessing of a child of a

heavenly Kingdom who has been redeemed by the blood of the Lamb. Let us walk as a son or daughter into our calling as part of the body of Christ and engage with our destiny in Him as we reach out to a fallen world in the presence and power of the Holy Spirit.

Every blessing.