



ESSENTIAL

A guide to the Christian life



Grace
Church
Stirchley



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Why Essential?

As a church we exist to help people love Jesus more and more. For the past 9 years we've had no obvious resource to help ground new Christians in the basic foundations of the Christian life. These studies are a way of bridging that gap to give you a foundational understanding of how the Christian life works looking at some key topics including; the gospel, prayer, reading the bible, being part of a church etc.

How it works

Each of the studies follow a similar pattern. If you are leading the study then it would be very helpful for you to familiarise yourself with the questions and answers so that you aren't reading the sheet verbatim. You might find it necessary to be selective with the questions or reword them so they feel more natural to you.

Most of the studies begin with a scenario. It's up to you whether you read the scenario at the start. You can skip the scenario if you know the other person well to talk about how the study might be a challenge more personally. Often the final question returns to the scenario but you could review the study instead if that works better for your situation.

Each study also follows a short passage of the bible and focuses on a single theme or idea. The big idea is included at the start of every study and you'll find it helpful at the start to say what the main idea is. Where the passage raises nuances or difficult questions think carefully before spending lots of time discussing those otherwise the main theme of the passage might get lost.

Most of the studies also have a picture, graph, diagram or illustration to help visual learners engage with the study. It is up to you how you explain it but you will find it helpful to familiarise yourself with it beforehand.

Our hope is that the questions are broad enough and the answers thorough enough, anyone can feel confident using these studies with a friend. Our desire is that the person you are studying the bible with will seek God's guidance to open the bible with someone else in the near future.

For God's glory.

List of studies:

- Safe**
 - To understand the process of God's work in securing our salvation. To see what we were saved from and the eternal security and hope of having become a Christian and what it means to put our trust in the past work of justification.
- Adopted**
 - To grasp the nature of our adoption and what it means to now belong to God and how that is central to my identity.
 - Forgiven, I have a deep conviction in my core that I am a child of God, loved and clothed in his righteousness.
- Life**
 - To see how the purpose of our lives flows from God's mission in the world and how the starting point of my mission in life is God's glory.
- New**
 - To sum up those first 3 lessons, and to see the importance of baptism as we identify with the death and resurrection of Jesus and take on our identity as a new creation.
- Change**
 - To believe that God has called me to a life of change and what I do, and how I behave flows primarily from what I believe about God.
 - To understand what it means to have the help and power of God the Holy Spirit renewing my mind and motives.
- Connect**
 - God has called me into intimate relationship with Him. God desires for me to commune with him, speak with him and that is essential for my mind and soul and my mission as I relate to God in Christ.
 - To understand how to pray and what to pray about.
- Listen**
 - God is trustworthy and He has given me the Bible that I might understand who He is, how He acts in history and therefore know His character. He speaks to me and His Spirit challenges me through the Bible.
 - To begin to understand how to read the Bible for myself and to guide my expectations as I do that.
- Belong**
 - Only the church can fully 'image' God in the world. We are saved to be a witnessing community together.
 - I am called to make disciples and help others in their walk with Christ. Sin is our collective enemy and we must fight alongside one another to contend for that which matters.
- Serve**
 - To begin to see that belonging to God's people comes with responsibilities - and particularly to see how God the Holy Spirit has given me gifts that exist for the sake of others. I have a responsibility as a member of the body to identify and deploy those gifts for the sake of others.
- Speak**
 - My primary purpose in life is to live for Jesus and speak for Jesus.
 - I can map out my relational orbit and see my relationships as God given gifts. I can begin to think how relationships might change now that I am a Christian
 - To understand that I am called to live and speak as a disciple maker for the sake of others.
- Tell**
 - To be able to explain why I am a Christian.
 - To be able to articulate the basics of the Christian faith

Work

- God is not just concerned with my spiritual life on a Sunday, but in the every detail of my life.
- We begin to think through some of the implications of our faith in how we work.
- We also consider some of the tensions of where we might experience rejection, and the opportunities to present the gospel and live consistently with the gospel.

Hope

- To address the inherent expectation that becoming a Christian should make life work out for my benefit. And therefore to be realistic about the reality of suffering is a normal part of both the human condition even as a Christian.
- How can we process difficult circumstances and doubts in a way that might lead to joy even when life is hard.
- With eternity in view we are aware that the the time is short and I mourn, pray and labour for the sake of my friends who don't yet know God.

1. Safe

God has rescued us from condemnation so that we can enjoy him

Although Raj has been a Christian for over a year he can't quite shake off the idea that God is his judge. If he closes his eyes to pray he imagines God, sitting over him, condemning him. Raj finds it easy to compare himself with other people and has a sense that his sins stand against him. He's easily spooked by the idea that God doesn't have enough grace to truly love him. Recently he lost his job and he is now, whilst he still believes in God, he's inclined to wonder if God really does love him at all.

Would you say that God loves you? What is the evidence for his love of you? How would you finish the sentence; God loves me because....

Many people imagine God to be like the line judge at Wimbledon, waiting for a chance to shout "out" when he sees some infringement. In some ways the bible gives us an even more devastating portrayal of God; one where there is no-one who has lived the life that God expects. Paul, a writer of books in the New Testament, speaks about God's justice and quotes a number of passages of the bible that are a sobering portrayal of humanity: 'There is no one righteous, not even one... no one who understands... no one who seeks God'. Rom 3:11-12

Read Romans 5:6-11 and write down the words that describe our situation before we became a Christian.

Picture God as a judge. To escape God's judgement we think we only have 3 options:

Change God - we can pretend to ourselves that God doesn't mind how we live or whether we listen to him. The problem is that the bible describes God as holy, and in Rom 5:10 our *enemy*.

Denial - we can pretend to ourselves that we aren't really that bad or that our sins aren't as bad as other people. The bible, however, tells us that all of us are in the same serious situation. No-one is innocent. Rom 5:8 describes us as *sinners*.

Religion - we can hope that perhaps we might make ourselves good enough for God to love us. The problem is that the problem isn't just with our actions, but our hearts towards God. This is why Rom 5:6 describes us as *powerless*.

None of these approaches works!

In this passage, what does Jesus do to rescue us?

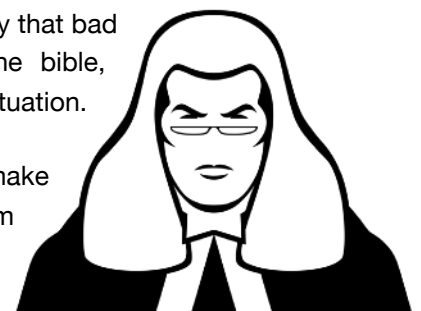
'He died for the ungodly' v6

'Whilst we were still sinners, Christ died for us' v8

'We have now been justified by his blood' v9

If death is the punishment for our sins how does Jesus' death change how God views us?

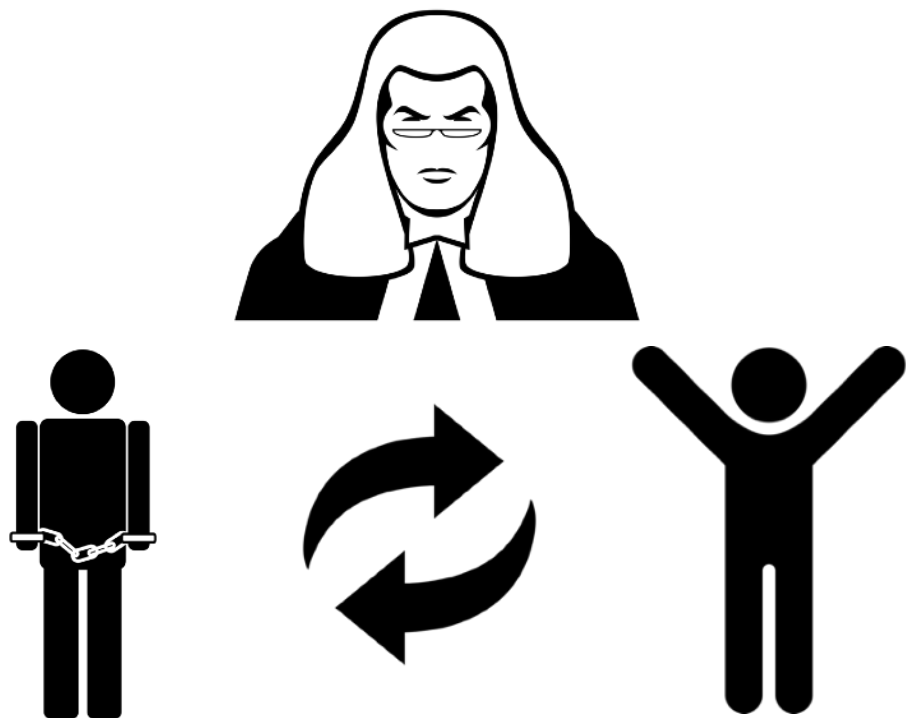
When Jesus died he became sin for us. Because he



Memory verse:: Romans 5:8

God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

was innocent, he was able to bear the punishment for our sins. This means that just as Jesus (the innocent) stood condemned, now I (the guilty) can be considered innocent. It is only because Christ has borne the punishment that I deserved that I can go free.



How does this passage describe our new relationship with God

We are ...Reconciled to [God] through the death of his Son

...justified by his blood

...Through [Christ] we have now received reconciliation

Can that ever be undone? Is it secure? How does it change how we feel about the security of God's love?

Since all this action has occurred according to God's instruction and plan then we cannot undo it.

Are you confident that God loves you? What would you say to Raj in light of these verses?

Often we forget that it is Christ's love demonstrated at the cross that is the measuring stick of God's love for us and we instead use our feelings or our present circumstances. Christians ought to be much more confident of God's love for them, not because we are perfect but because God has displayed his love for us at the cross.

How does Jesus' death change how we think about the future, even beyond death?

Since God has completed the difficult work of making his enemies into his friends, then we should not doubt that he can and will rescue us even through death (v10).

When Shelly became a Christian 6 months ago she believed that Jesus died for her sins and that comforted her from the guilt she previously felt. But often when she is hanging out with Christians she feels like a hypocrite because she has some major battles with alcohol, sex and her relationships. Sometimes she finds it really hard to pray because she imagines God just being angry with her. She wonders - am I really forgiven? Does God really love me?

2. Adopted

Relating to God as our heavenly Father who really loves us.

Private question: If you close your eyes imagine God looking at you, how you imagine he sees you? (A boss, A cruel master, A loving Father?).

Its a very common problem for Christians to perceive God as a cruel lord, demanding more and more from us and this can really hinder how we relate to Him.

Why might we sometimes doubt that we belong to God? What are the things that make us doubt God's love for us?

READ 1 John 3:1-3

How might seeing ourselves as children of God change how we relate to God? Do you think of yourself as a child of God? How did that change when you became a Christian?

Memory verse:: 1 John 3:1

See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!

Why is the image of God as a loving heavenly Father so powerful? How might our memories of our own father shape how we see God and understand his love?

Since God knows everything about us - do you think his view of us changes depending on how we change?

How does being God's child affect how we pray to him? Can you imagine any experience when he wouldn't be able/willing to hear our prayers?

One of the commonest threats to our prayer life comes from how we imagine God; we often imagine God the Father standing over us as Lord and Judge, not as good and loving Father who has truly accepted us into his presence. However, because Jesus has paid the penalty for all our sins, we know we can speak to God as his children because he loves us and has rescued us. And now, whatever we get wrong, the main basis of our relationship with God is as his loved children.

What are the things that we imagine are the most important things about us, that define our very identity (e.g. our nationality, skills, job, football affiliation, role as father/mother, sexuality etc). Why is our new identity as a child of God more important than all those other things?

How does belonging to God change how some people (who aren't yet Christians) now treat us (v1-2)?

Now we belong to God that changes how some people will see us, if people refuse to believe in God or follow God then they may make cruel or unfair judgements about us.



This is a photograph of John Jr, the son of president John F Kennedy, photographed just 3 months before JFK was assassinated. At the time JFK was in enormous demand from the heads of state, journalists and all manner of lobbyists. However he always had time for his children. Its hard to imagine who else in the world would ever be allowed to sit beneath the desk in the oval office! In the same way Jesus told us when we pray, we ought to pray confidently to God 'as our Father in heaven'. When we become his children we should be confident that God sees us as his children and that his love and pride for us is real.

What are the benefits of being a child of God?

How does being a child of God change us (v2-3)? Is it realistic to expect that when we become a child of God that we will immediately become perfect? (See v3)

Is it possible for a child of God to not be changed at all to have some 'family likeness'? (See v4-6)

What would you say to someone who thought that because we are God's beloved children it doesn't matter how we now live and 'God just loves us no matter what'?

Good parents desire the best things for their children, and they seek to protect and steer them to make good decisions that are in the child's best interests. Often we want to carry on as we always have done before because we just don't believe our sins are harmful. Part of having God as a loving Father is having him instruct us towards good things.

What would you say to Shelly?

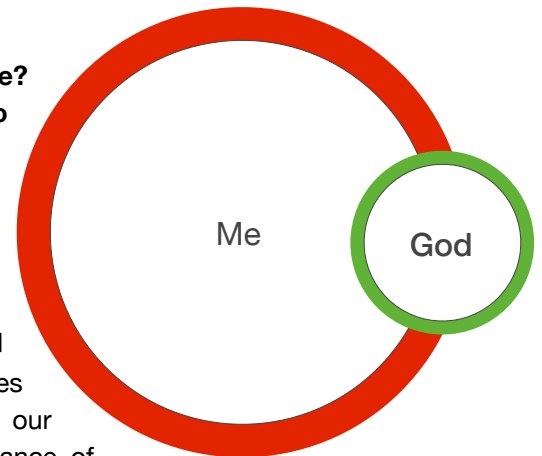
3. Life

My purpose in life flows from God's mission for His world

When Brendan became a Christian he knew some things would have to change, but at the time he had no idea about how much. At first he noticed some of his attitudes about life changing; he began to have a new found willingness to work on his relationship with his mum. But as he thinks about his work as a security guard he can't begin to figure out how being a Christian might change that? He's wondering if he can only be useful to God if he becomes a missionary or a pastor?

**What is the most important thing in your life?
What have you been willing to sacrifice in order to get/achieve this?**

Very often we find the Christian life challenging because we are very used to living life our way, according to our values and priorities; whatever regard we give to God - we continue to be at the centre of our lives and he was on the edge. Sin has distorted our view of our lives and we often live in ignorance of Him, replacing him with our own priorities.



Has becoming a Christian changed this?

READ:: Genesis 1:26-27

What does it mean to be made in God's image? How does this change the importance of human life? What do you think God's mission is for his world? Does that contrast with your mission for your life?

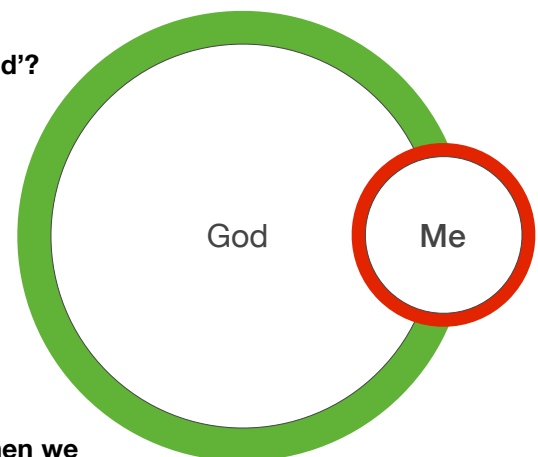
It is a difficult phrase to understand but it hints at the idea that we are made to be in relationship with God and to also be God's representatives on the earth; how we live says something about our creator. It hints at a bigger purpose for humanity than just pleasure or existence for its own sake.

**Do you often think of yourself as 'imaging God'?
Why? Why not?**

Most of us think that our lives are fairly bland and without any great importance, yet we were made for a great purpose, having been saved by Jesus we can now begin to fulfil our destiny to show our God-likeness.

READ:: Romans 12:1-5

How does Paul expect us to live differently when we become a Christian? Why is our life part of our worship of God - rather than just Sundays?



Memory verse:: Rom 12:1

In view of God's mercy, offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship.

Paul seems to suggest that becoming a Christian changes everything about how we live, and now we ought to live in a way that pleases God rather than just pleasing ourselves. This places God at the centre of the purpose of our lives - and places us our lives around Him.

What do you think 'worship' means? Is it more than singing?

Clearly Paul thinks worshipping God is far bigger than singing as it involves our bodies (v1) and our minds (v2) in a growing obedience to God.

Why does worshipping God need to become the central part of our new life as a Christian (v1)?

Because this pleases God. And bringing pleasure to God is now our priority.

What makes living a distinctive Christian life difficult (v2)?

The instruction (v2) to 'not conform' to this world hints at the battle we face to worship. It has often been said that humans are worshipping beings but that we worship a variety of gods, chiefly ourselves.

It can take a long time for us to feel like our lives have a deep purpose. How does this passage help us begin to make sense of what God's purpose is for our lives? How might this passage help Brendan?

It is comforting to consider that we might not immediately know how to live differently as a Christian in every situation, but as our understanding and knowledge of God grows, so does our ability to grasp God's purposes and priorities. As our faith deepens so does our understanding of God's will so that we are able to obey him more.

How does this help us begin to make difficult decisions and major life choices?

We have the bible that can give us insight to God's character and desire. In v2 we have the promise that as we commit to having our minds renewed with truth about God we are able to test and know what God's will is. This doesn't mean all our decisions become easy, but it does mean we can begin to know how to follow God and know the difference between good and evil.

How does Paul immediately apply these ideas in v3-5? How does it change how we are to:

think about ourselves?

Because of how God has saved us there is no room for boasting, God didn't save us because we were special but because we were needy.

relate to one another?

If we are part of a wider body then different parts of the body have different needs and differing gifts. We need to copy Jesus' example of how he forgave us as we relate to other Christians. Pride is a great enemy of Christian unity.

use our gifts?

We are now part of a body of believers. One person on their own cannot fulfil God's purpose in creating human beings, it requires a whole community. Therefore we should think carefully about where God is calling us to serve so that we can play our part in imaging Christ to the world.

Do you ever wish God would give you more clear guidance? According to this passage, how does he sometimes guide us?

4. New

Getting baptised is a picture of the new life Jesus has given me

Paulina became a Christian a few months ago, for her its been very significant because she knows most of her family won't approve of her decision. Recently someone in the church encouraged her to get baptised and invite her friends to the baptism service! Paulina instantly recoiled, it just feels like a huge commitment to do something so public. One the other hand she knows he probably should get baptised to show that she really does want to follow Jesus and she wonders whether God won't bless her if she doesn't get baptised.

Have you ever craved a fresh start; in life, in work or a relationship?

What do you imagine happens at a baptism service?

The person being baptised might invite friends and family

A church pastor will explain what baptism is, in a way that is appropriate for people who don't know anything much about Christianity

A person might (and this is definitely optional) briefly share their story

In the water the pastor will ask the person being baptised 2 questions:

Have you turned away from sin and your old way of life?

Have you turned towards Jesus and put your faith in Him?

The person will then go under the water briefly before coming out.

Memory verse:: Romans 6:5

If we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his.

READ Romans 6:1-8



Why is baptism a symbol of death? What/who do you think has died?

The going down into the water symbolises the idea of us dying to our old habits and way of living. Its saying that those things deserved to die and that before we became a Christian we were living in such a way that we were heading towards death.

What does being raised out of the water symbolise? (v4)

Being raised out of the water is a symbol of the new life Jesus has given us - it is identifying with Jesus' resurrection. The water in baptism also symbolises a washing clean, a new start as a symbol our conscience being cleansed before God.

If Christ has died for our sins and God is truly gracious then does it really matter how we live - after all surely God will forgive us whatever we do?

This is the very question Paul was being asked in v1. Paul says we no longer live in sin because we remember that sin was our enemy, it enslaved us. Why would we want to go back to our enemy from which Christ has freed us.

What does it mean to be 'united with Christ'?

Its easy to overlook the significance of this phrase, but it is vital in order for us to understand the Christian life. Being united with Christ is the main benefit goal of our salvation; relationship with God. This is the new life we now live (v4 and v8).

How does our relationship with Christ change our relationship with sin?

We mustn't misunderstand Paul, it isn't the case that Christians just suddenly stop sinning. All of us will continue to battle with sin throughout our lives. However Paul talks about baptism to remind us that Christ has died for our sin and we have already been raised to new life. We were not saved from sin so that we just return to sin.

Does getting baptised makes us a Christian?

No. Our faith concerns what we believe in our heart and confess with our mouths (Rom 10:9-10) yet we should expect that baptism normally follows becoming a Christian as a simple obedience to Jesus' instruction (Matt 28:19).

Does getting baptised make fighting sin easier?

No. Although, when we remember our baptism, it does help to remind us that our sins derived death and that we have made a commitment to Jesus to die to that old life. That is why Paul uses the example of baptism to help us think through what our relationship is with sin now.

What would you say to Paulina: will God refuse to bless her if she doesn't get baptised?

No. Although she should get baptised to obey Jesus' command even if that means not inviting her family.

FAQs

Do I have to be baptised in order to become a Christian?

No. Becoming a Christian is about putting our faith in what Jesus has done. Over 60 times the New Testament mentions someone becoming a Christian without mentioning baptism (because it didn't need to be mentioned).

If it isn't required, is it OK not to get baptised?

No. Jesus commanded that his followers be baptised, why would you disobey him?

Do I have to be baptised before I can become a member of Grace Church?

Yes. Only if you were Christened as an infant and you strongly believe that was a baptism would we admit you as a member without being baptised as an adult.

I'm can't talk in front of lots of people; do I have to share my story at a baptism service?

No. Although it might help your friends and family understand why you are being baptised.

5. Change

God saved me to
change me.

Mark has thought of himself as a Christian for his whole life. In the past he always assumed that God just loved him as he was, and so he couldn't see any real reason to change. He sometimes went to church, but never consistently and when he did he hated being told what to do by the preacher; he felt condemned. Recently though, he's been confronted with a number of serious mistakes that he has made in life, he's wondering how things might have been different if he had listened to more sermons and got more committed to a church. He looks at his life and wonders if he really is a Christian and whether God can really change him.

Do you find change easy? What scares you about change?

Memory verse:: Col 3:1-2

READ Colossians 3:1-14

Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things.

How does Paul describe us in verses 1 and 12? What has happened to us?

Clearly God has dramatically changed our status (as we have looked at in previous weeks). We are his children; chosen, dearly loved. We have been raised to new life with Christ and God now regards us as his holy people; set apart for his purpose.

How does this change in our status before God motivate us to live differently? Why does this have to involve our minds (v1-2)?

It's only as we begin to understand our new identity as Christians that we begin to grasp the real drive for change. Our very desires and deepest motives are changed so that we aren't trying to be good to earn a reward from God but we are moved by what God has already done for us. We change in the power of gratitude and grace rather than fear. We need to understand the truth of who we are, as God's children, who belong to his family and have a hope of heaven that means we really start to have a desire to change. It also means instead of acting out of fear to stop sinning we also see holiness in a positive way as we look for opportunities to serve God and live distinctive lives for him.

What does the future hold for Christians? How certain can we be that this really will be our future?

Our new life is hidden with Christ, but one day we shall be in heaven with him. Although this new life is, in some ways, invisible now, it is also very real. We do experience very significant change in our lives and we live according to a new set of eternal priorities.

Look v5-14. What are Christians instructed to...

Take off:

Put on:



Many of the sins that are mentioned are not private but how we relate to other people - and the clothes we are supposed to put on are would a significant change to our relationships.

Have other people noticed a change in you since you became a Christian?

How does God's treatment of us change how we think about others (v13)?

It is only because God has first forgiven us; though we ourselves deserved no forgiveness, that enables us to forgive others. Indeed God is our model of what true godliness looks like.

What do you struggle to 'take off'/what sin are you battling against at the moment? When is the battle hardest?

What are you struggling to 'put on' - what sort of change are you praying for?

What bad motives can people have for living good lives?

Sometimes we can try to live good lives to try and impress God, to show how nice or respectable we are. We have a remarkable capacity to be deceitful in our hearts and tell ourselves that the sins we commit in our minds are of no regard. Jesus reminds us how serious our sins in our heart really are (Matt 5:21-22, 27-28, 43-44).

What is the motive for change for Christians? Can we do it on our own? (Titus 3v4-6). How might this help us when we are battling with a persistent sin?

We need a strong motive to change, and really it is only grasping our new identity in Christ that really gives us freedom to change, as we remember that we were not saved to sin but to live as Christ designed us to live. To live in holiness is to live as it is meant to be lived.

What would you say to someone (like Mark) who doesn't really believe that Christians have to change?

What would you say to a struggling Christian who has a dark sin that they want to change but just really struggle to shake off?

Its worth remembering verses like Gal 5:22-25, we are not just called to keep in step with the Spirit but reminded that we have the Spirit of the living God within us. By his power we can change and live differently. I would pray and ask for God's help to strengthen their resolve and believe God's grace.

6. Connect

I speak to God because
He rescued me to enjoy
relating to Him

Margaret has been a Christian for 6 months. She struggles to pray. Her Christian friends seem very confident praying. She isn't. She wonders if something is wrong with her.

Who do you naturally connect and click with? How do you know whether a friendship is real?

What do you think prayer is?

READ Psalm 42

1 As the deer pants for streams of water,
so my soul pants for you, my God.

2 My soul thirsts for God, for the living
God.

When can I go and meet with God?

3 My tears have been my food
day and night,
while people say to me all day long,
'Where is your God?'

4 These things I remember
as I pour out my soul:
how I used to go to the house of God
under the protection of the Mighty One
with shouts of joy and praise
among the festive throng.

5 Why, my soul, are you downcast?
Why so disturbed within me?
Put your hope in God,
for I will yet praise him,
my Saviour and my God.

6 My soul is downcast within me;
therefore I will remember you
from the land of the Jordan,

the heights of Hermon – from Mount
Mizar.

7 Deep calls to deep
in the roar of your waterfalls;
all your waves and breakers
have swept over me.

8 By day the Lord directs his love,
at night his song is with me –
a prayer to the God of my life.

9 I say to God my Rock,
'Why have you forgotten me?
Why must I go about mourning,
oppressed by the enemy?'

10 My bones suffer mortal agony
as my foes taunt me,
saying to me all day long,
'Where is your God?'

11 Why, my soul, are you downcast?
Why so disturbed within me?
Put your hope in God,
for I will yet praise him,
my Saviour and my God.

Memory verse:: Psalm 42:5

*5 Why, my soul, are you
downcast? Why so
disturbed within me? Put
your hope in God, for I will
yet praise him, my Saviour
and my God.*

How does David feel in this Psalm? What kind of situation is he in? Underline the phrases that help you to work this out.

How would you feel about God in the same situation? Would speaking to God come naturally for you?

What true things does he need to remind himself about what God is like?

How does David feel towards God?

How does David describe prayer in v4?

What do each of these verses teach us about prayer and the way we talk to God?

v4

v6

v8

v9

v11

When do you find it hard to pray?

Have you ever seen answered prayer in your life?

Why do we sometimes find it easy or difficult to pray? What changes?

What would you like to improve about the way you pray to God? Are there any practical things that can help us to pray?

7. Listen

The bible helps us to know God and changes us to be like God

Claire became a Christian at the start of the year. At the time she felt like a new person having received a new start and a new direction in life. But after a few months she finds being a Christian hard, sometimes she finds it hard to pray, sometimes she doesn't want to be at church. She has also started to realise that often she can't remember much from the bible sermons on a Sunday. If she could sum her spiritual life up in a picture - she imagines a desert; dry, empty and lifeless.

Think of someone you now really well. How did you get to know them so well? Can you 'read' their thoughts?

READ Isaiah 55:8-11

What is the gap between God's thoughts and ways and our thoughts and ways?

God does not think and act in the same way as us. If we want to know God's thoughts or understand God's actions then we need his word to intervene.

Do you think of yourself being able to know God's thoughts or understand his ways?

What is the thing that travels between the gap between God and us?

God's voice. The bible.



Memory verse:: Isa 55:10-11

...so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.

What difference does God's word make? Why does Isaiah describe this in picture language like rain and snow?

Water transforms landscapes. Above is a picture of the the Okavango delta which is normally a desert; but appears completely different after the rain has arrived. The rain transforms a landscape that is usually dry and dead, and all kinds of animals are attracted to the vegetation that is supported. It is the same in our lives when we live with God's word; it transforms how we live. From death comes life.

What does that mean for those times when we disagree with God? What are the sorts of things you might disagree with God or find difficult to trust God?

You might want to think of some pertinent examples:

E.g. the man who is incredibly wealthy who Jesus says “give everything away and then follow me”. Or Jesus saying “anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart”. Or Jesus saying “do not worry about your life”. Often when we refuse to read the bible its because we don't want God speaking into our lives, challenging our thoughts or desires.

When we find a confrontation between God's word and how we want to live - what ought we remember from Isaiah 55?

We should expect some confrontation because God's thoughts and ways are not ours. We need to remember that God's word to us is not given to us to constrict us or oppress us but to liberate us to true life and hope.

What can we expect to happen if we never read the bible?

The opposite of the picture above - we cannot expect to spiritually thrive. Without God's word to guide us we won't understand God's words and thoughts and we won't experience spiritual refreshment.

Why is the bible trustworthy? Are there things that you refuse to obey or believe?

What are the 'voices' or opinions that shape our minds about things? How does these things influence us?

Friends, favourite magazines, blogs, managers at work, people in church can all have a significant degree of influence over us and change our attitudes towards sex, purpose, money, power, friendship etc. With such a variety of voices it is vitally important for us to prioritise reading and believing God's word.

What practical steps can you take to make reading the Bible more a part of our lives?

Think about times of the day to read the bible

Think about memorising verses

Think about the role of meditating on a verse

Think about good resources that have encouraged you to read the bible

Think about how to read the bible with other people

8. Belong

My local church is a gift from God where I belong, flourish & serve

Cherie became a Christian three years ago, she is quiet, introverted and doesn't particularly like to spend time with other people. She used to have a mantra; "you can't love anyone else until you can learn to love yourself", but recently she's been realising that 2 things have changed; she doesn't love everything about herself and yet she can see a growing capacity to love others. She can't help but constantly compare herself with other people... some people she really looks up to - others she regards as 'below her'. It's starting to have a real impact on her relationships.

Is there a group of people, where you feel like you truly belong? Where does this sense of belonging come from?

READ Ephesians 3:6-12

Who are the 2 groups mentioned in v6? Do you know what their relationship was like before Jesus?

The 2 groups are 'the gentiles' and 'Israel'. The gentiles include all non-Israelites. Before Jesus, Israel has a unique role as God's people; set apart for him, described in the Old Testament. This meant that historically there was constant enmity between Israel and the surrounding nations. It also meant gentiles had no access to the temple, and no access to God.

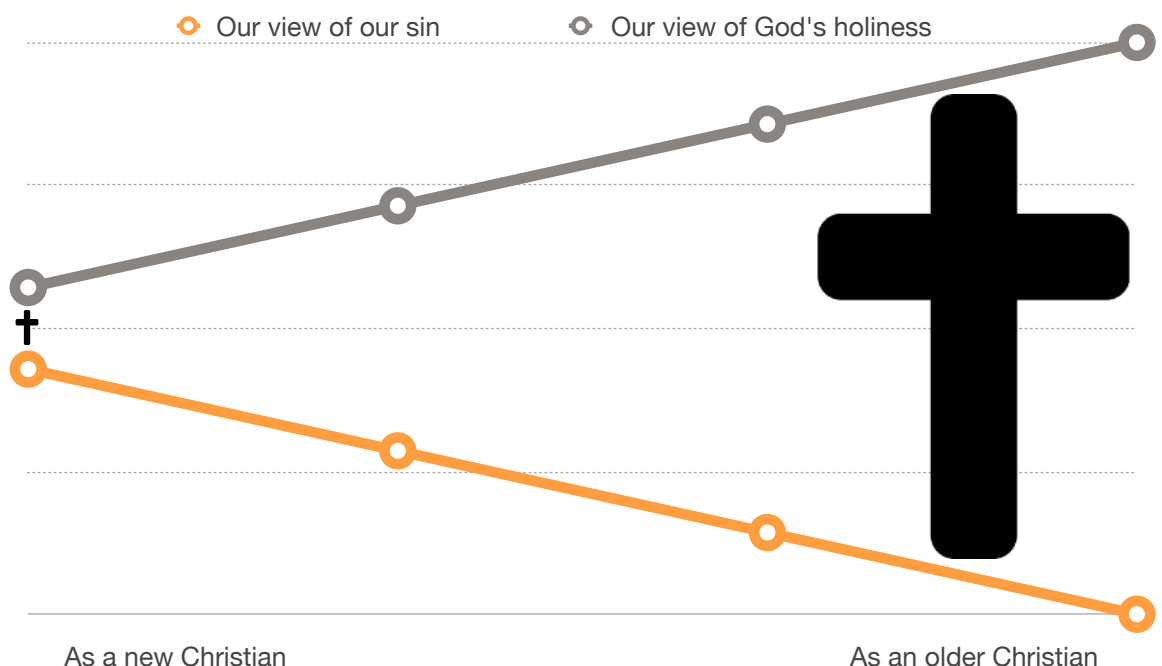
What is the 'mystery' that has now been revealed?

These 2 groups have been united by Jesus; that (v11) through faith we can all now approach God with freedom and confidence. Our boldness before God has nothing to do with our ethnicity or nationality, but everything to do with having faith in Jesus. We are now considered a single body (God's body in the world) and recipients of the promises of heaven that only Israel would previously have had the right to receive.

How does Paul see himself (v7-8)? How does the gospel change how we see ourselves (and therefore one another)? How might this change over time?

Memory verse:: Ephesians 3:12

In [Jesus Christ] and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence.



Paul describes himself as a servant (in v7) and the least of all the Lord's people (v8). This might have been because of his past (as a persecutor of Christians) but Paul had many reasons to boast in his religious credibility (Phil 3:3-7) - and so it's probably just an expression that all Christians perceive; none of us deserve God's love but for the grace of God towards us. Since all of us came to Jesus having nothing to contribute except the sin we needed saving from, none of us can consider ourselves better than one-another.

How does having this kind of view of ourselves change our relationships together?

Grace is a wonderful 'leveller'. As we grow as Christians we stop constantly comparing ourselves with one another with a 'who's best' mentality. Rather we continue to see our own sin and as we wrestle with our sin we see all the more of God's grace at work in others.

What are the sorts of things that might threaten this unity?

Very often it's our view of ourselves that changes our view of others. If we see ourselves as making our life a success, or deserving God's love, it will cause us to look down on others and destroy our unity together. We might have a strong understanding of our own victimhood but a weak understanding of our sinfulness. This is a consistent threat to church in the New Testament as the Jewish Christians struggled to accept new gentile Christians as their equals. A proper understanding of ourselves changes our understanding of one another.

What impact does the unity of the church have on other people who aren't Christians (v10-12)?

This unity expresses the 'wisdom of God' in saving people from a variety of different backgrounds and experiences. What unites us is not the typical things that often bring people together; a shared background, a similar ambition for life, a special interest in sport or music but a conviction about what God has done for us in Jesus. This ought to mean that local churches are as diverse as the communities they serve; with rich and poor, young and old, from different ethnicities, working together and worshipping God together.

Do your non-Christian friends know that you are part of a church? What is their view of God based on how the local church works?

We can be a great hindrance to the gospel by how we behave. We can create all kinds of problems for people's understanding of God if we are:

Ungodly - they might think God doesn't value holiness.

Divided - they might think God is petty and tribal (the opposite of the Trinity).

Shallow - they might think God only cares about surface things

What might be attractive and distinctive about the local church?

When might you be tempted to isolate yourself from other Christians?

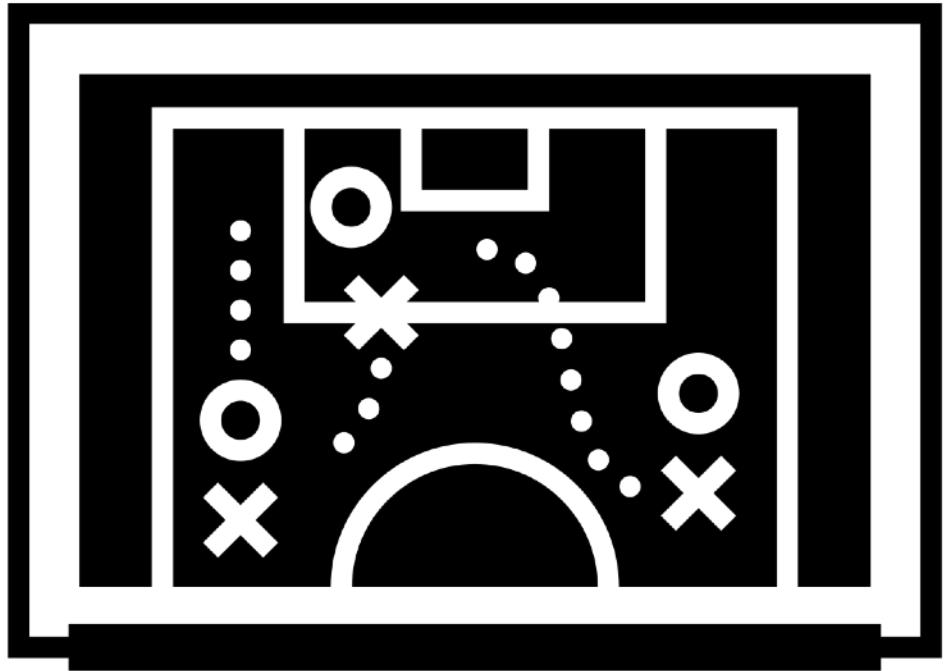
Very often we can find the presence of other Christians difficult when we are running away from God - we don't seek the advice of Christians when we don't want to feel challenged.

9. Serve

I have gifts that I can use to serve other people

What gifts/qualities do you think you have? What do people say you are good at?
What do you think you are good at?

Are you more tempted to boast about your gifts or ignore your gifts?



Why does a team or group of people need a range of gifts/skills? What happens if a team only has one type of person?

Think of a range of examples from a band, football team, orchestra, sales team etc.

READ:: Romans 12:3-12

Memory verse:: Rom 12:4-5

For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.

What picture does Paul give us as we think about being a church family together? How does it help us?

A body is the image Paul uses. Each part of the body has a different job, and you need each part. So in the church, we're all different and have different gifts, but work well together to make a strong team.

Who has given us our gifts? How does this change how we think about ourselves?

God has given us our gifts. This helps us to not to become proud, but humble since we didn't *earn* our gift and therefore can't boast about it. It also helps us to feel valued since God chose us to be just the way he made us.

Why has God made us different and given us different gifts?



No one person can meet all the needs we have. It required a variety of people with a variety of gifts to work well together as a team. The variety of gifts reflects God's character and creativity. As a church we image God best when we are together, depending on one another.

Are you tempted to resent the gifts God has given you? Are there times you wish you had different gifts?

What do you think the different gifts Paul mentions would look like at Grace Church?

Paul mentions gifts such as prophesy, serving teaching, encouragement, giving, leading and showing mercy. It might be helpful to mention that with each of these gifts there is a behind the scenes element. E.g.: A leader is more than just a speaker and motivator, a giver should give anonymously (Matt 6v3)

According to v9-13 how should we use our gifts?

Using our gifts is a way of loving each other. We serve each other humbly, eagerly, patiently and joyfully.

Is it possible to have more than one gift? Should we expect to possess all the gifts?

What might happen if you had a church full of leaders but no givers? What would happen if you had a team full of givers but no leaders?

What is/are the gift(s) God has given you? What ought we do if we really want a particular gift?

Can you think of circumstances in which some of the advice Paul gives us would be challenging/difficult?

How can you use your gifts to serve your church family?

Read more about it

In 1 Cor 12-14 what does Paul warn people about how they use their gifts?

Julian has been a Christian for over 20 years. He comes to church most weeks but leaves without speaking to anyone. Afterall, the church seems to run perfectly well without his help, and truthfully he doesn't want anyone interfering in his life. He's discovered through bitter experience that when you get to know people they make demands on you and expect things from you.

Are there any reasons why you might be concerned for Julian?

10. Speak

I live to help people love
Jesus more and more

Caitlin has been a Christian for a while. During Community Group she says that talking to people about Jesus should only be done by people who are really good at it - otherwise you risk just making a fool of Jesus. She says it's more important to witness to people by living a good life. Some of her friends have been put off Christianity by having Christians 'go on at them about Jesus'. What would you say to her?

What stops you from speaking about Jesus? What are you most afraid will happen?

READ:: 2 Tim 1v7-14

How would you say to someone who asked you "Is Christianity good news"?

Memory verse:: 2 Tim 1:14

*Guard the good deposit that
was entrusted to you –
guard it with the help of the
Holy Spirit who lives in us.*

What direct instructions does Paul give to Timothy in this passage about what to do with the gospel?

- Don't be ashamed of the gospel
- Guard the deposit (the gospel)
- Join him in suffering for the gospel

In v7 & 8 Paul anticipates two reasons why we may not talk about Jesus. Can you relate to these? What are the ways you might be tempted to change the gospel?

Timidity
Shame

Why do we need power, love and self-discipline (v7)

We need power to be confident and brave, so that we will speak the truth to other people even when they might not like what we are saying.

We need love so that we continue to have compassion for people, and see them as Jesus sees them. If we don't have love then we won't be very effective at trying to help them.

We need self-discipline to conquer our fears and apathy and so that we won't distort the message of the gospel but be mindful that it belongs to God.

Paul tells Timothy not to be ashamed of the 'testimony about our Lord' - what is a testimony and why does Paul want it to be shared?

A testimony is legal word, a witness statement or a proof that Jesus is who he says he is

The gospel literally means 'good news'. Later on Paul describes the passing on as teaching because it needs to be spoken and understood.

What role do our lives play in our witness (v9 & 13)?

It is essential to live holy lives which point to Jesus. Indeed the very reason we have the gospel is not only to bring us to heaven but also to transform our lives now.

What purpose did Christ have in calling us (v9)

What is the good news we have to share (v10)? Why is this good news for our friends?

Jesus came to save us and now we can have new life which lasts forever. Jesus has destroyed death. This is good news because it truly answers our fear of death. When Christ defeated death he gives our lives true purpose as we can have hope that all is not lost in death.

Why does the gospel need to be guarded (v12)?

The gospel needs guarding because we often try to distort it, we miss out bits that we find uncomfortable or things we disagree with. The story of the church through the ages is that Christians are not always very trustworthy at protecting the message we have been given. It is a vital responsibility to keep the gospel safe.

How do people try to distort the gospel today?

What does Paul remember when he suffers for telling people about Jesus (v12)?

How does this help us when people are mocking us ?

That he does not need to be ashamed, that Jesus is stronger and his place in heaven is secure.

What would you say to Caitlin? How could you encourage her?

How does this passage address your fears of speaking to people about Jesus?

Who are the people you could speak to about Jesus?

Read more...

How do these passages help us to be confident in speaking about Jesus?

*Hebrews 1v1-3
John 1v1-14
Romans 1v1-6
John 20v30-31*

11. Tell

We have a story to tell that God can use to help others hear about Him.



Can you remember these moments?



Why is it more powerful to witness something for yourself? See/hear it with your own eyes?

How can a testimony/someone's story about becoming a Christian be a powerful thing?

READ 1 Pet 3:13-17

Why does Peter warn us we may face difficulties for being a Christian? Have you ever experienced this?

Peter warns us that we may face suffering for being a Christian, even if we do what is right. He mentions threats and slander. Even though it doesn't feel fair it is still very likely. Across the world there are many Christians who are brutally treated for being Christians.

What are the different possible responses to persecution that Peter mentions in this passage? Which one might you find most tempting?

Memory verse:: 1 Pet 3:15

Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.

Why does our response to persecution depend on our view of Jesus according to v15? What does it mean to revere Christ in our hearts?

How can the way we react to how people treat us be a powerful testimony?

Reacting with peace and kindness is a powerful witness to the difference Jesus has made to our lives. To be able to 'turn the other cheek' or 'love our enemies' is following in Jesus' footsteps. Think of the impact Jesus' actions or lack of actions had on the Roman centurion, or the many martyrs across the ages who have submitted meekly to death because they were so certain of a life beyond the here and now.

What does Peter say we need to be ready to do? How should we do it?

He asks us to be ready to explain why we hope in Jesus-to tell our own story. He advises us to do this with gentleness, respect. He says not to be fearful or frightened, but ready and prepared.

Do you feel ready and able to explain to someone else why you became a Christian? Why/why not?

Who first told you about Jesus?

What did you think when you first heard about him? What attracted you to Jesus?

What convinced you the gospel was true?

How has your life changed since becoming a Christian? What is different about you now:

What do you believe that is different?

What do you do that is different?

Read more about it

What do these people say about their reasons for talking about God...

Paul: Phil 3v4-14

David: Psalm 139

A Samaritan woman: John 4:39-42

What is different about your future?

Who would you like to be able to explain the gospel to? Is there a good time to maybe share your story with them?

12. Work

Work is both good yet hard. God makes our work purposeful



Philip became a Christian 2 years ago. And he's glad for the difference its been making in his life; his marriage is stronger, he is more resilient in the face of suffering, he regularly feels a sense of hope and joy. His work is, however, a 'final frontier' for his old life. None of his workmates know he is a Christian and in truth he never really thinks about his faith whilst he's at work. After all his job feels fairly insignificant, unspiritual even? But last week, someone in his Community Group asked him what difference his faith made to his work and it has got him thinking.

Memory verse:: Col 3:23-24

Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving.

What sort of work do you do? Do you find it fulfilling? What 3 words describe how you feel about your work?

READ Genesis 1:27-28 and 2:15

Why did God give work for Adam and Eve to do?

There something deeply significant in all human work. Blessing others through what we do is part of God's purpose in humanity. Work is part of humanity reflecting the Trinitarian God as we play a part in a society of equals, each with differing roles because God is a Trinity of equals with differing roles; loving and blessing one another!

When we work were participate in what God does in ruling, subduing and multiplying his creation. Causing plants to grow and making things is what God does and yet God gives them as tasks to human beings. He set society to be a blessing to humanity and has given you work to be a blessing to other people. Whether its raising children at home or setting up companies - it is still (fundamentally) other centred work that blesses others.

READ Genesis 3:17-19

Why is work frustrating?

Because of the fall of human beings work becomes (relative to what it had been before) unproductive and unfruitful. So work for all of us feels futile at times. It involves thorns and thistles; computers crashing and systems failing, things not working. Working relationships become difficult and work becomes a means of exploitation

Do you think, in order to be 'spiritual' you need to stop working? Why?

READ Luke 3:12-14

As the message of John the Baptist grew in popularity people came to him to ask his advice. What is his advice to the 2 different groups that approach him in this passage?

Do you think his advice would have surprised his listeners?

John's advice to these new followers of God would have scandalised the Jewish hearers. Tax collectors and soldiers of Rome were enemies of the Jewish nation yet they are instructed to remain in their profession - but work differently. It would be like Jesus saying to someone converted who works in a betting shop being told they should carry on working there.

How does this advice change how we might view our working roles?

What is your attitude towards your work?

READ Colossians 3:22-4:1

What are the sort of attitudes that slaves ought to have towards their masters?

These verses are shocking in the same way as the verses in Luke 3. After all since slavery is hardly a 'fair' state of affairs (after all Paul told slaves that it was right for them to seek their freedom 1 Cor 7:21). Yet Christians are called to live a life of serving others - and our thoughts should be of God, not simply what we can get away with.

What would it demand of a master to properly provide for their slaves?

Slaves ought to be able to do their work without fear or threat, and to be able to pursue their freedom.

How would obeying these instructions change how you do your job as employee or employer?

In what way does the call to 'do you work with all your heart as if working for the Lord' challenge your attitudes towards work?

How do these verses help us relate to employees who are more junior to us?

13. Hope

God is good and uses our bad experiences in ways we don't expect

Michelle became a Christian 4 years ago after God did a remarkable miracle in her life. She had been praying for her father to recover from an awful disease and sure enough God answered her prayers and her father recovered dramatically. Although it was astonishing at the time Michelle has since felt let down by God, particularly when she recently lost her job. Not every prayer has been answered like the one for her dad. Now she is re-thinking her faith and is consumed by this question; "If God loves me why isn't my life easy?"

What gives you perseverance when you are going through tough experiences?

Do you think it's fair that Christians suffer?

The book of Hebrews is written to Christians who have a heap of difficulties and face a variety of temptations competing for their attention.

READ Hebrews 12:1-12

Why are we told to run the race with perseverance? In what ways is the Christian life like a race? Why is perseverance an essential quality?

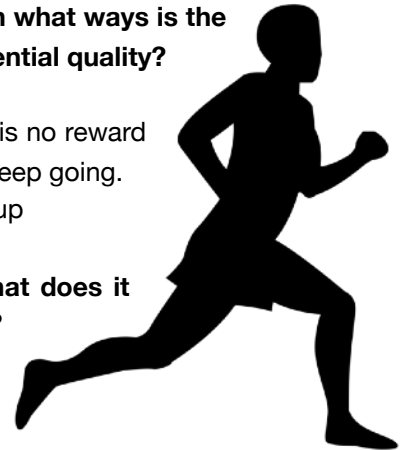
The Christian life is like a running race because:

- The reward is revealed only upon completion - there is no reward for those who give up half way around - we need to keep going.
- The race is sometimes hard and we will want to give up

Why do we need to fix our eyes on Jesus in v2? What does it mean that he is the pioneer and perfecter of our faith?

Looking at Jesus:

- Takes our focus away from the sin that entangles us
- Gives us much needed perseverance
- Helps us overcome our temptation towards weariness and losing heart



Memory verse:: Heb 12:1-2

Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith.

What are some of the struggles that we typically face that prevent us from keeping God's priorities central to our lives?

- We don't expect or want God to discipline us, we only expect him to bless us
- We are easily discouraged when God rebukes us or changes our priorities
- We tend to think that all hardships are purposeless and don't achieve anything

You might want to glance back to chapter 11 to see who the 'great crowd of witnesses' refers to - and what inspired them to keep going. How does their endurance help fuel our perseverance?

Each of these characters faced both:

- horrendous personal opposition or circumstances that could have caused them to question God's purposes.
- The need to endure when it might not have been clear that the outcome for them personally would be positive.

When top British 400m runner Derek Redmond came to the Barcelona Olympics in 1992 it was vital for him to finish the race. In 1988 he had been forced to withdraw 10 minutes before the race, because of an Achilles tendon injury. He had five surgeries over the next year. Half way through the race his hamstring pops. He collapses to the floor and the race is completed without him. However, in what becomes one of the legendary moments of Olympic history, Redmond gets up, and limps to the finish (with the help of his dad), determined to finish the race. His willingness to endure suffering in order to complete his race stands as an inspirational story.



Why do we often find it hard to accept God's discipline?

Because we haven't been disciplined since we were children and the word discipline has connotations for us of being hard and painful. It requires a great deal of humility for us to accept that our way of doing things isn't correct and we need God's help to obey him, and that his discipline is actually an act of love. We really don't want someone seeing into our soul, observing us at our worst, and we don't expect God to show us things about ourselves that we find difficult or unpleasant. By default we want God to fall in with our existing life and bless our deepest hopes and dreams.

How ought we respond when we face difficulties in life (v7 & v9)? Can you think of think of any examples of this in your life and how did you respond?

We ought to view hardship as a form of discipline; unpleasant but still an expression of God's love since through those experiences we learn more about Him and more about ourselves. Very often its our worst experiences that help us to fix our eyes on heaven.

Do you think the normal Christian life ought to include suffering?

We are tempted to think not. Often the implicit 'deal' that we made with God when we became Christians is that God ought to answer all our prayers and make our lives easy. It can be a harsh realisation when we realise that God is willing to use unpleasant experiences to teach us things about his character.

What are the joys set before us (v2)? Why do we find it difficult to hold them at the centre of our thinking?

We face a perpetual temptation to not believe that in the end God will wipe away every tear and that our perseverance will be worth it. When everyone else seems to be living for the here and now it can seem like folly to live with eternity in view.

What can we expect to be the outcome of this kind of discipline?

It is a 'harvest of righteousness and peace' v11. We can expect this type of suffering to be spiritually productive for our godliness, often taking away a love of sinning and replacing it with a love of Him.

How might something like losing our job make me more like Jesus? How would you explain this to Michelle?



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