

Speak, Lord!

“Speak, LORD, for Your servant is listening!”

(1 Samuel 3:9)

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1. INTRODUCTION

It is all very well believing that we can speak to God in prayer, but does God speak back to us? For many people that is just too much to believe! Yet of Jesus it is said, “The sheep hear His voice, and He calls His own sheep by name and leads them out. When He has brought out all His own, He goes before them, and the sheep follow Him, for they know His voice. A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers. ... My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me.” (John 10:3-5, 27).

The whole subject of hearing God’s voice and being guided by Him is very important, especially to young Christians, as there are many important decisions we need to make every day, and if we are to follow in Christ’s steps, following His example (1 Peter 2:21), then we must get to know God and how He speaks.

Getting guidance may not be easy. There are no “short cuts”, for one of the many lessons that God wants to teach us as we seek guidance is that we need to get to know God Himself. As we get to know Him, so we will get to know His voice, and hence what He wants us to do.

Thus the subject “How does God speak and guide His people?” is both one of the most important, and yet one of the most perplexing, subjects for many committed Christians.

If we are not careful, we can spend more time “seeking guidance” than seeking God. Indeed, God can become merely the means to the end – finding out what to do!

For this reason, the next five chapters deal with the subject of KNOWING THE LORD GOD: His nature and character, His love, and the need for faith.

Then, after dealing with seeking and knowing God, we come to the subject of GUIDANCE and the WAYS GOD SPEAKS. One of the main ways God speaks to us is through His Word, the Bible, and through our meditating upon Him and His Word. CHRISTIAN MEDITATION was all but a lost art to most Christians, until it was restored to the Church (to “ordinary” Christians like you and me) in recent years.

Finally, the LORDSHIP OF JESUS CHRIST is most important. If we are not

prepared to be obedient to what God says and what He shows us to do, then we need not bother coming to Him in the first place.

“Those who have received My commandments and who obey them, they are the ones who love Me”, Jesus said, “and those who love Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love them and will manifest Myself (reveal or show Myself, and speak) to them” (John 14:21).

“SPEAK, LORD, FOR YOUR SERVANT IS LISTENING!”

2. THE LORD GOD: THE NATURE OF GOD

Revelation by the Holy Spirit is essential if we are to really know God and what He is like. The natural mind cannot comprehend the things of God; they must come by divine revelation (1 Cor. 2:10-16). Such revelation will revolutionize our Christian lives – how we think, what we say, and what we do. What we really believe about God, and what He is like, will determine how we live (and die!)

Faith comes by knowing God and what He is really like. This will help us to overcome fear, anxiety and confusion, and bring peace, rest and trust. This is why it is so important to know our God and what He is like – His nature and character. However, such knowledge must get down from our head to our heart. Until our knowledge of God grips our heart and spirit, it will be merely cold, intellectual knowledge. Let God touch your spirit with a revelation of Who He is and what He is like!

GOD IS THE CREATOR (Psalm 8:1-9; 19:1)

From the smallest sub-atomic particle or the tiniest cell, to the black holes or galaxies of outer space, God is the Creator and Sustainer of the whole universe. He designed it, He created it, He controls it, He rules over it.

This means:

1. He has a Master-plan and purpose which cannot fail. God is in control! He has a plan for every life He created – for you and for me, our friends, our families – each person. It is our job to seek God for His will for our lives, and, having found His will, to do it, with His help. (Jer. 29:11-14a).

2. God cares what happens to us. Even though God is Creator and far above all, He is involved in His creation and cares for you and me! (Matt. 6:25-33; 10:29-31; Is. 57:15). God is high, lofty, holy; but He is not remote! He is our Creator; He is also our Father!

GOD IS SOVEREIGN (Psalm 2)

God rules supreme over all that He has created. He is King of kings and Lord of lords. Everything, physical and spiritual, in all creation is subject to His supreme control and authority. He rules over all. He is supreme in Heaven, over things on Earth and under the Earth. No human being, no angel, no demon power, will ever successfully challenge His Lordship. Every knee shall bow before Him (Phil. 2:5-11).

This means:

1. Even God's creation, and the natural laws He ordained, are subject to Him. Thus He can change them when He so desires. Because He is the Creator of the universe, He knows how everything works, and can change them whenever He chooses. Thus He can change water into wine, He can heal the sick, raise the dead, set free those who are bound. What we call "miracles" are simply the natural acts of a supernatural God! (Jer. 32:17).

2. But because of the need for order in the universe, and not chaos, God has made various natural and spiritual laws which govern His universe, and which He rarely changes or goes against. However, God is above them: He is not, in this sense, bound even by His own laws.

3. God has chosen to give us free-will. This is amazing because it allows the possibility of rebellion against God! Because God loves, He desires our free-will love and obedience in response. But we can rebel! If we rebel, we will suffer the consequences, but God allows us to choose (Gen. 2:16-17; Gal. 6:7-8; Rev. 22:14-17).

GOD IS ETERNAL (Psalm 90:1-2)

God always was, He is, and He always will be. He had no beginning, nor will He ever cease to exist. When Moses asked God what was His Name, God answered "YAHWEH" or "I AM". The use of this verb "to be", in the continuous tense, illustrates His eternal, unchanging nature (Ex. 3:13-15; Heb. 13:8).

Thus, when Jesus claimed to be the "I AM", the Jews knew that He was claiming to be God, and they tried to stone Him to death for what they thought was blasphemy (John 8:24-28; 8:58-59; 10:30-33).

Notice how often Jesus used the divine title "I AM" coupled with divine claims:

I AM ...

- the Light of the world
- the Resurrection and the Life
- the Door
- the Way, the Truth and the Life
- the Good Shepherd
- the Son of God
- the Bread of Life
- the True Vine
- the First and the Last
- the Living One

God's nature and character never change – He is steadfast and constant in an ever-changing world (Mal. 3:6; James 1:17). Because God is eternal and unchanging, we have great security. In the midst of great uncertainty, change and anxiety, He is the Rock of our Salvation (Ps. 18:46; 89:26). To be obedient to God, then, is to build on the Rock. To be disobedient and go the ways of men is to build on the unstable, ever-shifting sand, which will lead to disaster (Matt. 7:24-27).

We may change. Circumstances around us may change. God may therefore *seem* to change, but "underneath are the everlasting arms" of an eternal, unchanging God (Deut. 33:27). Read Psalm 91. Trust Him!

GOD IS UNLIMITED (Psalm 139)

God is infinite and unlimited in all but the following ways:

1. It is impossible, by His very nature, for Him to sin.
2. In the Incarnation, Jesus, though God, chose to humble and limit Himself to human form, taking on Himself not only humanity, but that of a suffering servant (Phil. 2:5-8).

3. God has chosen never to remember any sin that is cleansed by the Blood; He has eternally wiped it from His memory! (Heb. 8:8-13; 10:15-18).
4. God has chosen, in His wisdom, to give us free-will. This means He allows us to disobey Him and sin, even though He hates sin! He may, therefore, allow us to choose things, or do things, or go our own way, even though He knows these are wrong and will lead to disastrous consequences. He will warn us, but He will not force us. God has limited Himself by not forcing us to do all that He would like us to do.

We can choose to sin; we can choose to be holy. We can accept Jesus Christ as Saviour or we can reject Him. God's absolute and perfect will may therefore give way to His permissive will, because He has chosen to give us free-will. But we do well to obey! (Deut. 30:15-20; Josh. 24:14- 27).

Apart from these ways, God is infinite and unlimited. In particular, He has all power and authority, all wisdom and knowledge, and is present everywhere.

We cannot necessarily understand all these things, but God's Word declares they are true! We may not know how a computer or TV works: the maker says it does, we trust him, do what he says, and find that it does!

Psalm 139, especially, deals with God's knowledge (v. 1-6), presence (v. 7-12), power (v. 13-18) and holiness (v. 19-24).

QUESTIONS

1. Why is an accurate, Biblical knowledge of God and what He is like, so important?
2. God is our Creator. How can we find out His will and plan for our lives?
3. God is Sovereign over all things. What are some of the consequences of this fact? How does this help us in our daily lives?
4. What are the grounds for our security as Christians? What else does God's eternal, unchanging nature mean for us?
5. In what ways has God chosen to limit Himself? In what major ways is God unlimited (infinite)?
6. Why is heart-knowledge far more important for a Christian than merely head-knowledge?

3. THE LORD GOD: THE NATURE OF GOD (continued)

GOD KNOWS ALL THINGS (Psalm 139:1-6)

The Bible speaks of “Christ, in Whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Col. 2:3). He does all things perfectly because He has perfect, total knowledge of all things, and perfect wisdom.

Because God has all knowledge, He (and He alone) knows what is best in every situation. This is why the most sensible thing that anyone can do is to seek His will and do it!

Our knowledge is imperfect: we know something of the past, but many things we have forgotten, or we have a distorted view of them; we know a little of the present, but that is often only one-sided; and we can only guess the future. But God knows it all, perfectly!

This is one reason why His thoughts are far higher than our thoughts, and His ways than our ways (Is. 55:8-9).

We may find it hard to understand how God can know the future, but the Bible declares that He does (Is. 46:8-10). God is timeless, and with God time is no barrier to knowledge. But His knowing the future does not cause things to happen. Our free-will choices do not take place because God knew beforehand that they would. Rather, God knows beforehand the choices we will make. We should seek God’s will; He knows whether or not we will choose to obey Him. May He find us obedient!

God not only knows all things, but God knows *us* and all about us. No-one can hide from God; God even knows what is in the heart of man (John 2:25). Before His eyes, all things are laid bare (Ps 139:2; Heb. 4:13).

God knows all about us, and He loves us just the same! God loves us as we are, but He loves us too much to let us stay as we are!

God’s wisdom, coupled with His knowledge, are such that even though we may not understand what God is doing, or why, we can still trust Him. He knows best!

GOD IS EVERYWHERE (Psalm 139:7-12)

Solomon said “Will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest Heaven cannot contain You; how much less this House (the Temple) which I have built!” (1 Kings 8:27). See also Isaiah 66:1-2; Acts 7:48-50. These verses, and this truth, are a tremendous comfort to those who are facing trials, persecution or problems.

They have, and still do, sustain those who are suffering for the Lord’s sake. He has promised “I will never fail you nor forsake you” (Heb. 13:5). Jesus said “Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the earth” (Matt. 28:20).

He watches over us, day and night (Ps. 121). Therefore the enemy cannot be victorious over us at any time, anywhere, if we will call on the Name of the Lord (Joel 2:32).

There is no room for fear or anxiety (Ps 37:1-11).

But these verses can be very discomfoting if we are rebelling against God or trying to escape from Him! He knows where we are, and what we are doing, even if no-one else on earth does.

Like Jonah trying in vain to escape from the presence of the Lord, we find that God, in love, goes with us and seeks to draw us back to Himself. His steadfast mercy endures forever!

GOD HAS ALL POWER (Psalm 139:13-18)

God has all power and authority in Heaven, on earth and over the things under the earth (Matt. 28:18-20). He is Almighty!

God is the God of the impossible (Matt. 19:26). God is the God of miracles. When necessary He will even go against the natural laws He has made (e.g., iron can float – 2 Kings 6:6), or perhaps He knows of other higher laws, like the laws of aerodynamics which can go against the law of gravity.

We don’t know how God does miracles, but He does. Why do we doubt? Surely, He Who made all things can also control all things!

Jeremiah (32:17) put it so well when he said “Ah, Lord God! It is You Who made the heavens and the earth by Your great power and by Your outstretched arm! Nothing is too hard for You!”

We may have our ups and downs, but God is always on top! And when we feel down, let us look up to the Lord and confess the truth as King David did when he said: “Blessed are You, O Lord, the God of Israel our Father, for ever and ever. Yours, O Lord, is the greatness, and the power, and the glory, and the victory, and the majesty; for all that is in the heavens and in the earth is Yours; Yours is the Kingdom, O Lord, and You are exalted as Head above all. Both riches and honour come from You, and You rule over all. In Your hand are power and might; and in Your hand it is to make great and to give strength to all. Now we thank You, our God, and praise Your glorious Name!” (1 Chr. 29: 10-13).

Our God reigns! He has all power, all wisdom and is all loving! Hallelujah!

GOD IS A LOVING, PERSONAL GOD

Even though God has all power, even though He is the Creator of all things, God is neither remote nor impersonal. He is an infinitely loving God who loves to dwell amongst His people (Acts 17:28; 2 Cor. 6:16-18).

We were created for fellowship with God. Just as God created woman for fellowship with man, so God created us for fellowship with Himself (1 John 1:3; Rev. 3:20).

God’s love is perfect, patient, long-suffering, eternal; and He extends that love to us! God’s love is a perfect love that longs for the very best possible for us.

God’s wisdom is so great that He knows what is best for us.

God’s power is unlimited, so He can bring about what is best and perfect in our lives – *if only we will let Him!* Will you?

THE NAMES OF GOD

The Names of God reveal much about His nature and character. The following are the main names of God:

| <u>HEBREW</u> | <u>MEANING</u> | <u>REFERENCE</u> |
|------------------|-------------------|-----------------------|
| Elohim I AM... | Creator God | Gen. 1:1 |
| Yahweh (Jehovah) | Eternal Lord | Gen. 2:4; Ex. 3:14-15 |
| Adonai | Sovereign Master | Gen. 15:2 |
| El Roi | All-seeing God | Gen. 16:13 |
| El Shaddai | Almighty God | Gen. 17:1 |
| Jireh | Provider | Gen. 22:14 |
| Oz | Strength | Ex. 15:2 |
| Zimrath | Song | Ex. 15:2 |
| Yeshuah | Salvation | Ex. 15:2 |
| Rapha | Healer | Ex. 15:26 |
| Nissi | Banner (Covering) | Ex. 17:15 |
| Mekaddishkem | Sanctifier | Ex. 31:13 |
| Shalom | Peace | Jud. 6:24 |
| Sabaoth | Lord of Hosts | 1 Sam. 1:3 |
| Elyon | Most High God | Ps. 7:17 |
| Rohi | Shepherd | Ps. 23:1 |
| Hoseenu | Maker | Ps. 95:6 |
| El Olam | Everlasting God | Is. 40:28 |
| Tsidkeenu | Righteousness | Jer. 23:6 |
| Shammah | Present | Ezek. 48:35 |
| Eloheka | He is your God | Ex. 20:2 |
| Eloheenu | He is our God | Ps. 99:5 |
| Elohay | He is my God | Zech. 14:5 |

Praise God for this revelation of His nature through His Names! He is our Creator, the Eternal Lord, our Sovereign Lord, ...

QUESTIONS

1. The fact that God knows all things can be both comforting and convicting. Explain why.
2. In the light of Isaiah 55:8-9, explain why it is so important to seek God's will rather than simply follow our own ideas.
3. Fear, loneliness and anxiety are problems that many people face. What comfort does Psalm 121 bring to such people?
4. Why should it be no problem for Christians, who really know their God, to believe in miracles?

5. God's perfect love, great wisdom and unlimited power mean that to surrender to His Lordship is the most sensible thing Christians can do. Why, then, do many Christians struggle with making Him Lord of every area of their lives?
6. The names of God are descriptive of His nature and character. Which four of His names mean the most to you? Why?

THE LORD GOD:

4. ASPECTS OF GOD'S CHARACTER

So far we have looked at some aspects of God's nature. As we now look at some aspects of God's character we will learn the ways of God – ways which are often very different from our ways and our preconceived ideas.

One reason many people get angry, bitter or rebellious towards God is because they do not really understand God or His ways, or His love for them.

GOD IS PATIENT

God has the whole of eternity to work out His purposes – and that is a very long time! God is never in a hurry, because He is never late!

One of the main mistakes we make in interpreting prophecy is *when* will the events occur? Frequently the time interval is a lot longer than we expect (or would like it to be!) e.g., 1 Peter 1:10-12 (Joel and Malachi, the last of the Old Testament prophets, prophesied about 400-450 years before Christ was born).

Nearly 2000 years ago some Thessalonian Christians thought that the second coming was so imminent that they stopped working (2 Thess. 2:1-4; 3:6-12).

A mistake that some of the early disciples made was in connecting the destruction of the Temple (which occurred in 70 AD) with the close of the age (Matt. 24:1-3; Acts 1:6-7). Some believed that Jesus would return before John died (about 95 AD). (John 21:21-23).

God is patient, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance (2 Pet. 3:8-9).

The vision, the prophecy, the calling, may seem slow in coming, but it will not be late, in God's timing! (Hab. 2:3).

GOD IS MERCIFUL

God is merciful and forgiving. Sometimes we feel like David, and wonder why the wicked prosper and the just seem to suffer. "How long, how long, O Lord, before You vindicate the righteous and punish the wicked?" (e.g., Psalms 73 and 94).

But God is doing two things:

1. In love God is seeking to draw the lost to Himself in repentance, so that He may show mercy to them and forgive their sin, as He has forgiven ours.
2. In the Christian's life God is building strength, endurance, maturity and character.

GOD IS JUST

Only God knows all the truth about every situation. "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is right?" (Gen. 18:25).

We must trust Him to do what is right; to ultimately vindicate the righteous and punish the wicked.

"Vengeance is Mine" says the Lord. Our job is to love and forgive those who have wronged us. Let God be Judge. It is not for us to take the law into our own hands (Deut. 32:35-36; Rom. 12:14-21).

This does not mean, of course, that we should not speak out against sin and evil, and oppose that which is ungodly. It does mean that we should not be personally vindictive, seeking revenge or trying to justify ourselves before others.

Let God judge – and if our hearts do not condemn us, but are pure and clean before God, then let us rest in His justice. But if, on the other hand, we have sinned, let us come to the Father in true repentance and confess our sins so that He, in both His justice and mercy, may forgive us for Christ's sake (for Christ has paid the penalty in full).

GOD IS UNDERSTANDING (Hebrews 4:14-16)

Sometimes we feel that no-one understands us, our problems, our weaknesses, our failings – and perhaps that is true, except for God! He remembers we are but dust (Ps. 103:6-14).

One of the great blessings of prayer (talking with God) is that we can tell Him exactly how we feel, and know that He understands.

God is compassionate (He ‘suffers’ together with us). He rejoices with us when we rejoice; He weeps with us when we weep. When Lazarus died, his sisters Mary and Martha wept – and Jesus wept with them! (John 11:33-36).

Jesus understands our sufferings, our griefs, our trials and sorrows, for He has been through them all Himself (Heb. 4:15-16). His grace is sufficient for every need (2 Cor. 12:7- 10).

GOD IS HOLY AND PERFECT (1 Peter 1:14-16)

God is perfect, holy and good. All good gifts, and only good gifts, come down from our Father in Heaven (Matt. 7:11; James 1:17).

“All things work together for the good of those who love Him ...” (Rom. 8:28).

Because God is sinless, perfect and pure in every way, it is His desire that His children should be likewise. “Be perfect, even as your Father in Heaven is perfect” (Matt. 5:48). The aim of every Christian should be not to sin; but if we do sin, “we have an Advocate with the Father, even Jesus Christ the Righteous” (1 John 2:1-2). This is not to excuse or condone sin, but simply to say that all sin can be dealt with and cleansed by the Blood of the Lamb.

God is loving, kind, gentle, gracious, merciful and forgiving. Hallelujah!

GOD IS CONSISTENT AND BALANCED

Two extremes we need to avoid are:

1. Constantly feeling condemned by past sin (Rom. 8:1-4). When we repent of our sin and confess it to God, He forgives our sin, cleanses it in the Blood, and never

remembers it anymore! (Is. 43:25; Jer. 31:34; Heb. 8:8-12; 10:11-18).

2. Being careless about our sin. “Confessing sin” can become too easy – more is involved than merely saying the words, “Please forgive all my sins.” Godly sorrow produces a repentance that leads to a true change of heart, so that we no longer want to go back into sin, but resist temptation and call on the Lord for His help in times of temptation (2 Cor. 7:10).

God loves – but He hates sin. God forgives – but He is angry at evil. God is merciful – but he never condones what is wrong.

God holds in perfect harmony and balance: His love and His justice; His anger and His mercy; His forgiveness and His judgement – as only He can!

For the careless, sinning, backslidden Christians there are strong words of warning (Heb. 6:4-8; 12:4-29).

For the Christian who sincerely loves his Lord and seeks to follow Him in obedience, there are precious words of forgiveness, reassurance and encouragement (John 10:27-29; 1 John 1:7, 9).

GOD IS FAITHFUL AND TRUE

His Word is unfailing. His promises are sure. What God has said, He will do. “God is not a man that He should lie, or a son of man that He should repent. Has He said, and will He not do it? Or has He spoken, and will He not fulfil it? Behold, I have received a commandment to bless; He has blessed and I cannot revoke it” (Num. 23:19-20).

If God has given you a promise – hold on to it! Remember, He is patient and loving, His time is often not our time, and His ways are far above our ways. Trust Him – He will not let you down!

QUESTIONS

1. Why do some people rebel against a loving God?
2. Our impatience may cause us to doubt God or His promises. What does Habakkuk 2:3 teach us in this regard?
3. Why is it always best to leave judgement to God? In what circumstances is it right

for Christians to judge?

4. Should we try to justify ourselves before other people? Why or why not?
5. What would you say to a person who feels that nobody understands them or cares about them? (See Hebrews 4:14-16)
6. What *two* aspects of God's character are especially precious to you personally? Why?

5. THE LORD GOD: THE LOVE OF GOD

No study on the nature and character of God would be complete without a major emphasis on the love of God.

Nowhere do we see true love, in all its holiness, purity and beauty better portrayed than in the Lord Himself, and in Jesus Christ as God made manifest in the flesh.

Paul's amazing revelation of divine love says it is: patient, kind; not jealous or boastful; not proud or rude; not selfish, irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong but rejoices in that which is right; it bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things; this love never ends (1 Cor. 13:4-8). Only in our Lord Jesus Christ do we see this love perfectly exemplified in human life; yet as "imitators of Christ" it should be every Christian's aspiration and goal.

Three kinds of love

We may distinguish three basic kinds of "love":

1. **"If" love:** 'I will love you if you will do such and such.' This is conditional love. Only if the recipient does something will this "love" be extended to them. This "love" is a payment for services rendered! It may be man's idea of love, but it is not God's love.
2. **"Because of" love:** 'I love you because of what you have done for me.' This is gratitude love. The love is given because it is owed; it is a debt being paid. Again, this may be human love, but it is not God's love.
3. **"In spite of" love:** 'I love you in spite of all you have thought, said and done to me.' This is a sacrificial love. In spite of sin, hurts, rejection, rebellion, the love is still extended to the person.

“God shows His love for us in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:8). “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). “Christ loved the Church, and gave Himself up for her” (Eph. 5:25). This is God’s love!

God is love

“God is love” (1 John 4:8, 16). God loves; *true* love is from God. God, in His love and goodness, longs for the very best possible for us (Rom. 8:28-39). God is not remote; He is with us always, whatever we go through (Heb. 13:5). Whatever happens to us, He knows, He loves, He cares. He weeps with us when we weep; He laughs with us when we rejoice. “We do not have a High Priest Who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but One Who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sinning. Let us then with confidence draw near to the Throne of Grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Heb. 4:15-16).

But while God is love, not all so-called “love” is of God. There is a false, selfish, carnal “love” that is definitely not of God!

Love desires the highest good for other people. Love is *also* obedient to God’s laws and commandments (John 14:15, 21).

God’s love and God’s judgement

We are living in an age when God’s love is taught almost to the exclusion of His wrath and judgement.

God does not condone sin. He knows our weaknesses; He knows our sins. But His word to us, *in love*, is “Repent!” To a woman caught in adultery, Jesus said “Neither do I condemn you; go, and *sin no more*” (John 8:11).

God loves people, but *hates* their sin, disobedience and rebellion.

Love is patient, but not tolerant of sin.

Love is kind, but does not condone evil.

Love is forgiving, but does not encourage disobedience.

God’s love is *not* inconsistent with His discipline and punishment (Heb. 12:5-11), judgement (John 16:8-11), justice (Mic. 6:8), or testing (1 Cor. 10:13).

The permissive spirit abroad in our humanist society today, that tolerates as “normal” (or at least “acceptable”) all sorts of evil, sinful, abominable behaviour, is not of God. God loves – yes – but radical surgery may be required to cut out the cancerous growth of sin, and God will do it! He does not put bandages over tumours – He cuts them out, and it may hurt! But He does so in love, knowing that this is essential if we are to *really* live. Hallelujah!

Because God loves – and because God knows best – He may not allow what we want because it is not best. As a good Father, He only allows good things (that are ultimately best) for His children (Matt. 7:11).

Christ, our Example

In these last days God has revealed Himself to us through His Son: “He is the glory of God, and bears the very stamp of His nature.” (Heb. 1:1-3).

We need to know Jesus, if we are to know God (John 14:6-11). We need to “live in the Gospels”, for there we will see the nature, the character and the love of the Lord God wonderfully portrayed in the life of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. May it be so!

QUESTIONS

1. God’s love is described by a number of different words. What is the meaning of each of the following words, and give an example of each: Grace (Eph. 1:7-8; 2:8); Mercy (Lam. 3:22-23; Ps. 103:8-18; Eph. 2:4-10); Faithfulness (Ex. 34:6-7); Goodness (Rom. 2:4); Compassion (James 5:11); Kindness (Rom. 11:22).
2. What does the parable of the Prodigal Son teach us about God’s dealings with us when we (a) rebel, (b) sin, and (c) repent? (Luke 15:10-32).
3. Our society is very tolerant of many sins and perversions. Why? What can Christians do about this? How can Christian parents bring up their children to resist evil when society is so permissive towards it?
4. “Love and punishment are not incompatible. In fact, true love often requires punishment where there is sin, evil and disobedience.” Discuss.
5. To the repentant sinner God extends great love, compassion and forgiveness, but to the rebellious sinner God may extend wrath and judgement (Rom. 11:22-23). How can God’s wrath and judgement be consistent with His love

and goodness?

6. What are some of God's promises to those who are going through difficult times, when God seems so remote? (See Isaiah 30:20-21; 43:1-5a; Hebrews 13:5). What are some other promises like these?

6. THE LORD GOD: FAITH IN GOD

In the last four studies we have been looking at the nature and character of God. One of the reasons why it is so important to know what God is really like is in order for us to exercise real faith in Him. It is hard to have faith in, or put our trust in, someone we do not really know!

How, then, does faith in God come, and how does it grow?

Faith is a gift from God

This fact emphasises God's sovereignty. "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing, it is a gift of God, not because of works, lest anyone should boast" (Eph, 2:8-9).

The supernatural gift of faith is also one of the nine gifts of the Holy Spirit listed in 1 Corinthians 12:4-11.

One of the amazing things about God's gifts is that He has told us to *ask* for them! "You do not have because you do not ask" (James 4:2). "Ask and keep on asking, and it will be given to you ... everyone who asks, receives" (Luke 11:9-10). "How much more will your Father in Heaven give good things to those who ask Him?" (Matt. 7:11).

So faith is given to those who will come to the Lord, ask for and receive, this gift from God.

Moreover, whatever God wants you to do, He will give you the faith for it! His grace, His gift of faith, His enabling, is more than adequate for *every* situation He asks us to face (2 Cor. 12:7-10). How encouraging!

Faith comes from hearing a word from God

Romans 10:17 says, literally, “Faith is from hearing, and the hearing through a word (*rhema*) of Christ.”

Faith, to be true Biblical faith, must be based on the word of God quickened in our heart. Otherwise we may hope or wish or presume, but it is not faith.

The Lord may quicken a passage of Scripture to us, or He may speak directly to our spirit so that we *know* God has spoken and it will surely come to pass (Num. 23:19-20).

It is no use “claiming promises” that God has not given to *you!* Until the *rhema* (living word) of God has been given to you there are no grounds for faith, *but* once God has spoken, then “faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Heb. 11:1). Then you can pray according to the will of God and know, with absolute certainty, that God will hear and answer (1 John 5:14-15).

So, God speaks to us, we hear, believe and obey, and it is done!

Of course, there may be times when we are not sure of God’s will. Then we can still pray, ask God for what we would like, commit our way to Him, and trust Him to work out the answer in His perfect time and way (Ps. 37:1-9).

Faith comes from knowing God

As we seek God, spend time in prayer, meditation, reading His Word, waiting on Him; as we begin to see Him as He really is (His perfect love, wisdom, power, etc.), our faith will grow.

The following Psalms, especially, declare God’s greatness and love (read them!): Psalms 8, 23, 91, 121, 139.

More than anything else, get to know the Lord God: God our Father, the Lord Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit.

Meditate much on Him and His Word. Get a first-hand experience of Him and His love for you! “I *had* heard of You by the hearing of the ear, but *now* my eye sees

You!” (Job 42:5).

Faith comes by remembering God’s past blessings

Sometimes God allows us to go through difficult times. In the midst of these times it is often very difficult to know what God is doing and why. Unbelief looms large; faith seems to flee. In these times it is always good to remember all the good things God has done for you in the past – and hold on!

The annual celebration of the Passover was one memorial that God instituted to remind the Israelites of His deliverance of them out of Egypt (see Exod. 12:21-27, especially v. 26-27).

After crossing the Jordan, the Israelites built an everlasting memorial out of stones to remind them of God’s goodness in passing over the Jordan and into the Promised Land (Josh. 4:1-7).

Israel’s other feasts and memorials; our celebration of Christmas, Passover and Pentecost; even our anniversary celebrations of birthdays, weddings, etc., are all examples of remembering the goodness of God to us.

When things get tough, remember God’s past goodness and believe for the future! These past experiences show us the faithfulness and goodness of God in spite of our weaknesses, failings and sins. As we give thanks to God for all His blessings, our faith will also grow.

Praise God: His steadfast love endures forever!

Faith grows with exercise

Faith is like a muscle – it grows with exercise, with experience and testing (1 Pet. 1:6-9). So Jesus said: “Ask, and keep on asking ...” Let God “stretch” your faith. Just as an athlete or weightlifter tries to better his record each time, let God take you on further in faith each time.

Obedience is a key to faith

Hope has to do with the future, and is, in a sense, passive (e.g., hope for the return of

Christ and the coming Kingdom).

Faith is active – now! We need to “step out of the boat” in obedience to the Lord (Matt. 14:28-33). Peter’s faith may have faltered, but at least he obeyed, stepped out of the boat and walked on water, while the other disciples just sat in the security of their boat.

As God leads and directs you, step out of the boat. But notice that the Bible speaks of walking by faith (2 Cor. 5:7); it never talks of a “blind leap of faith”. Faith is not blind; it keeps its eyes firmly on the Lord! Thus we walk in obedience to God’s word; we do not leap because of presumption!

Praying in faith

It is not the size of our faith that is important, but the greatness of the God in Whom we put our faith. See Luke 17:5-6 and compare with Habakkuk 2:18-20 and 1 Kings 18:21-39. Whether a cheque for \$1 or for \$100,000 can be cashed all depends on who is behind it! Or, to use another analogy, it is the strength of the bridge that is important, not the faith of the person crossing it.

What if ... ?

The question always seems to be at the back of people’s minds: “What if God doesn’t answer?” When we reach a real point of faith in God, when we really know His love and faithfulness, we will be able to say, in all sincerity, “Lord, I don’t understand, but I still trust You.” It is often very hard to understand why God allows some things to happen. It is hard to see what is happening when we are in the middle of the situation. In the middle of the forest we cannot see the wood for the trees, but God, Who is over all, sees the end from the beginning. Trust Him! See Isaiah 55:8-9; Habakkuk 3:17-19; Job 13:15 AV and Mark 4:35-41.

“Since the Lord is directing our steps, why try to understand everything that happens along the way?” (Prov. 20:24 TLB).

The god we can fully understand is a god of our own imagination, but the God Who the human mind and intellect can never fully comprehend – HE IS GOD!

QUESTIONS

1. How do we receive faith?
2. What is the difference between trust and faith?
3. Is it possible to have faith, if God has not spoken to us?
4. To what extent is our faith dependent on the degree to which we really know God?
5. Why is our faith more dependent upon God Himself, than it is upon us?
6. Why should our faith grow progressively stronger the longer we live as Christians?

7. SEEKING GOD

"Seek the Lord while He may be found. Call upon Him while He is near. Let the wicked man forsake his way and the unrighteous man forsake his thoughts; let him return to the Lord that He may have mercy on him, and return to our God for He will abundantly pardon" (Isaiah 55:6-7).

The most important thing that any person can do is to *seek God*. Those who are not Christians need to seek Him for forgiveness and salvation. Christians need to seek Him constantly, so that they might know Him and His ways, better.

So much of our lives is involved in working to earn money, then we spend time on our food, clothes, homes, hobbies, sports, and so on. Yet Jesus said, "Seek *first* the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be added unto you." (Matt. 6:19-34). The Bible encourages us to seek God by emphasising that if we sincerely seek Him, we will *never* be disappointed.

"You will call upon Me, and come and pray to Me, and I will hear you. You will seek Me and find Me; when you seek Me with all your heart I will be found by you", says the Lord" (Jer. 29:12-14).

"Seek, and you will find ... for everyone who seeks, finds" (Luke 11:9-10).

"God rewards those who diligently seek Him" (Heb. 11:6).

What does it mean to seek the Lord?

To "seek" means to look diligently, or search for. It implies time, effort, determination and discipline. In one sense, God does not easily reveal Himself to us — or else we would

take Him for granted. We cannot click our fingers and expect God to jump at our commands! Rather, the reverse should be true — when God speaks, we should obey immediately.

You cannot seek something or someone in a hurry — you can *look* quickly, but not really seek. So seeking God, and listening to His voice, takes time. "WAITING ON GOD" is a term used frequently in the Bible. It means giving God time to reveal Himself and His will to us. Most of us are so busy that we seem to have little time to wait on God.

Consequently, we make rushed decisions — sometimes wrong decisions — and our level of knowing God and His will is not what it should be. To wait on God takes *time* and *effort*, and we will only do this in proportion to the importance we place on it!

We need to seek God as a person seeks treasure. See the parables of the *Treasure Hidden in a Field*, and the *Pearl of Great Price* (Matt. 13:44-46); the *Lost Sheep*, and the *Lost Coin* (Luke 15:3-10); the *Widow and the Unjust Judge* (Luke 18:1-8).

The problem of time

Most of us are too busy. We need to get our priorities right! If we seek God *first*, get things sorted out from Him, then we can save a lot of time.

Isaiah 40:31 says that those who wait on the Lord will renew their strength, they will run and not be weary, walk and not faint.

Seeking implies earnestness, and if we are really earnest and sincere then we will find the time to seek the Lord. For example, Jacob was so earnest in his desire for God to bless him that he would not let Him go until He had — even though it took all night! (Gen. 32:22-32). It was because of his "cheeky" persistence that the man got the loaves of bread from his friend at midnight (Luke 11:5-13).

Why seek God?

The Bible shows us seven reasons why we need to seek the Lord and wait on Him:

1. For forgiveness and salvation (Is. 55:6-7; Hos. 10:12).
2. That we might know Him (Ps. 46:10; Phil. 3:10).

3. That we might know His ways (Is. 55:8-9; Ps. 25:4-5).
4. That we might know the Truth (John 8:31-32).
5. For guidance (Ps. 37:1-9).
6. For strength (Is. 40:31).
7. For everything we need (Matt. 6:33; Phil. 4:19).

How do we seek God?

Waiting on God is spending time in His presence. It is a *heart attitude*. It takes time. As we seek God we both speak to God, and listen to Him speak to us. We do this through:

1. **The Bible**, as we allow God to speak to us through His Word. Read the Bible, study the Bible. Let God speak to you through it.
2. **Meditation**, as we allow the Holy Spirit to speak to us as we meditate on the Lord and His Word. Meditate on a short Scripture (one or two verses), or on the Lord Himself, or some aspect of His character.
3. **Prayer**, as we speak to the Lord and share our hearts with Him. Remember that prayer is talking *with* God — both talking to Him and listening to Him talk to us.

How can we overcome some of the hindrances to seeking God?

1. "How can I find the time? I'm too busy!"

How important a priority is it? Do we *really* believe that God will give us all we need, including renewed strength and wisdom, if we will seek Him first? (Matt. 6:33; Is. 40:31). Ask the Lord to show you its importance, and help you to make the time to really seek Him. For example, compare Martha with Mary, in Luke 10:38-42. Worship comes before service — Matt. 4:10.

2. "How can I deal with distractions?"

Do your best to find a time and place where you will be as free from distractions as possible. Pray that God will keep you from distractions. Wandering thoughts can distract us; Satan will also do all he can to keep us from God. Pray against these things. Bring every thought into captivity to Christ (2 Cor. 10:3-5). Some wandering thoughts may be deep concerns or burdens that we first need to bring to the Lord in prayer, and then leave with Him.

3. *"I get discouraged and give up too easily. It doesn't last"*

Don't attempt too much at once. A short, but profitable, time is far better than a forced extended time that becomes a burden. Even 5-10 minutes at a time, to start with, can be very worthwhile. The length of time spent seeking God is not nearly as important as the quality of that time; our sincerity, faith, determination, etc., are most important. Some time, effort and determination will be required, but if you *really* love Him, that won't be hard!

4. *"Do I really need to seek God? I've got along all right without it in the past."*

Our independence — thinking we can do it alone and do not really need to wait on God for His guidance, wisdom, ability, revelation of His will, etc., — is deception. Dare we pray, "God show me how much I need to depend on You"? Humanism worships man because it says that man does not need God. It is therefore idolatry. May God help us not to fall into this trap!

If we really love the Lord, then we will *want* to seek Him. We will want to draw near to Him and really get to know Him better. This is the fruit of the Holy Spirit working in our lives — a proof that we have been truly born again from above (Col. 3:1-2).

QUESTIONS

1. Why should Christians seek God? Why does God want us to wait on Him?
2. What do you do when you seek the Lord? That is, how do you seek God?
3. Why do most Christians spend little time seeking God and waiting on Him?
4. How can a busy person in today's world really seek the Lord?
5. "If seeking God was the first priority in the Christian's life it would revolutionise their life". Is this true? Why do you agree or disagree with this statement?
6. What cost is involved in seeking "The Pearl of Great Price" — knowing God?

8 KNOWING GOD

Why is it important to know God?

1. **Knowing God is an essential part of salvation.**

Jesus said, "This is eternal life, that they know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ Who You have sent" (John 17:3). Eternal life is not bound up in doctrine, beliefs, or church membership — eternal life, in essence, is knowing the eternal God and His Son Jesus Christ. If we do not know Him, then we do not have eternal life, no matter

how correct our doctrine may be.

2. Effective prayer depends on knowing God.

"If we ask anything according to His will He hears us, and if we know that He hears us ... we know that we have obtained the requests made of Him" (1 John 5:14-15). It is thus important, when we pray, to know God's will, and if we are to know God's will then obviously we need to get to know God Himself. Conversely, one of the reasons God has told us to pray and to seek Him is because, through prayer (conversing with God), we get to know God! Thus we seek God, God shows us how to pray (Rom. 8:26-27), we pray according to God's will, and God answers!

3. Effective witness depends on knowing God.

"You shall be witnesses unto Me", Jesus said (Acts 1:8). Witnessing is sharing our experience of the Lord with others. If we do not really know Him, then we cannot effectively share Him! Our aim, therefore, as Christians, should be "To know God, and to make Him known", and you can only make known what you know!

4. Effective service depends on knowing God.

"The people who know their God shall be strong and do exploits" (Dan. 11:32). Christian service which is done in the flesh will be largely ineffective, but as we get to know God, His will and His ways, our lives, ministry and service will become much more effective and powerful; we will "be strong and do exploits" for our God.

5. Guidance comes from knowing God.

"The sheep hear His voice, and He calls His own sheep by name and leads them out. ... He goes before them and the sheep follow Him for they know His voice" (John 10:3-4). Guidance and its confirmation often come as a witness in our spirits, when we know God and His ways. If we know what God is like (His character), it will not be so hard to know what He wants (His will).

6. Knowing God enables us to see ourselves as He sees us.

"Woe is me, for I am lost! I am a man of unclean lips ... for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of Hosts!" (Is. 6:1-5). When we get to know God and Who He is, when we start to see Him, we also get to see and know ourselves, and who we are! We see our sin, disobedience, rebellion, unbelief, etc.

To know God is to know His character, His will, His ways, His desires, His commands, His guidance. Let us, then, pray as Paul did, "that I may know Him, and the power of His resurrection ..." (Phil. 3:10).

Levels of knowing God

There are four different levels on which we can know a person, and on which we can know God. We can:

1. Know about God

We may have heard of Him and know a little about Him; we may know *of* Him, but we do not know *Him*. This essentially is the level at which most people "know" God; it is the level of the non-Christian or unbeliever.

2. Know God as an Acquaintance

Many people go to church fairly regularly and so become acquainted with God — they know quite a bit about the Bible and the physical and historical aspects of Christ's life; they are acquainted with Him, but do not really know Him. They are "nominal Christians".

3. Know God as a Friend

True Christians know the Lord as their Friend. They have experienced Him in their lives from time to time, and can really sing and mean the words "What a Friend we have in Jesus". Nevertheless, while He is a Friend, there are many things they do not really know about Him and rarely sense God sharing things with them. Like the children of Israel, they see the outward *acts* of God, but do not really know His *ways* as Moses did (see Ps. 103:7). "The Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend" (Ex. 33:11; 34:29).

4. Know God intimately

God longs for an intimate, personal relationship with each one of us, in which God can share things with us and we can share things with Him as a husband and wife share with each other, or as we share with someone we really know and trust.

Examples

These four levels can be illustrated from the life of Christ. Most of the people in Jesus' time on earth only knew *about* Jesus: they may have heard and seen some of what He said and did, but never really understood any of it. His followers, on the other hand, were *acquainted* with Him and knew Him at a deeper level; yet from amongst these Jesus chose twelve disciples who had *friendship* with Jesus and insight into His life that the other followers did not have. Out of these twelve, Jesus chose Peter, James and John who had a special *intimate* knowledge of our Lord (for example, on the Mount of Transfiguration, Matt. 17:1; when Jesus raised Jairus' daughter from the dead, Mark 5:37; and in the Garden of Gethsemane, Mark 14:33).

These four levels can be illustrated by reference to the Temple. Knowing *about* God is like being in the outer court; being *acquainted* with God is like being in the inner court; knowing Jesus as a *Friend* is like being a priest in the holy place; and knowing Jesus *intimately* is like being a high priest who enters the Holy of Holies, into the presence of God Himself.

Similarly, in Ezekiel's vision of the river of life (Ezek. 47:3-5) there were four depths to which Ezekiel was taken.

At which level do you and I know God?

The above four levels are not sharply defined levels, and often we gradually move from one level to another as our knowledge of God deepens. Sometimes crises in our lives draw us closer to God; at other times we mature day by day as we continue to walk with Him. The important thing is: *are we growing in our knowledge of God?* Whatever our present relationship with the Lord, let us press on to know God more intimately! (See Phil. 3:12-14).

Some Greeks came to Philip and said, "We want to see Jesus" (John 12:21). Hebrews 2:9 says, "But we see Jesus ..." Do you long to see Jesus — to know Him more intimately? Can you really say, "As the deer pants after the water brooks, so my soul pants after You, O God" (Ps. 42:1)?

It is recorded of the early Jews that "when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated, common men, they wondered; BUT they recognised that they had *been with Jesus* (Acts 4:13). The secret of the success of the early disciples was that they had been with Jesus; they got to know Him intimately!

In the first three verses of 1 John 1 we read these words: heard, seen, looked upon, touched, manifest, saw, manifest, seen, heard. Nine times John emphasizes that he is not talking about someone imaginary, some vague historical figure, some doctrinal concept, but Someone he knew at the most intimate and personal level. "That which we have *seen* and *heard* we proclaim also to you" (1 John 1:3). John wrote about:

FACT, not THEORY
LIFE, not THEOLOGY
REALITY, not RELIGION

TRUTH, not PHILOSOPHY!

It is worth studying John's first epistle because in its five chapters John uses the word "know" 38 times, frequently in reference to knowing God. For example, what signs are there as to whether or not a person really knows God? See 1 John 2:3-6; 3:6; 4:2-3; 4:6-8.

So, if we are to be effective in our Christian lives, in our witness, and in our intercession, then it is vitally important that we *know God* — not just knowing *about* Him, but KNOWING GOD Himself.

Therefore, "Let us press on to know the Lord!" (Hos. 6:3).

QUESTIONS

1. How does knowing God help me when I pray, and when I am seeking guidance?
2. Why is the level at which many Christians know God, somewhat shallow?
3. Discuss the statement: "Prayer is not so much a technique to be learned as an outgrowth of a relationship with Christ."
4. What does it mean to "see Jesus" (Heb. 2:9)? How can we "see Jesus" today?
5. How does "knowing God" help me when my prayers are not answered in the way I expect or would like?
6. Which is more important: to get guidance, to hear God speak, or to get to know God? Does one of these lead to the other two?

9. KNOWING GOD (continued)

Personality and character

It is important to recognise that personality and character are not the same. Personality is reflected in what a person says and does, while character is what a person really is. It is easy to observe someone's personality by their outward words and actions, but this is only a part of knowing their true character. See for example 1 Samuel 16:7 where God says, "Do not look on his appearance ... The Lord sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance but the Lord looks on the heart." Personality is thus not necessarily a true reflection of character. E.g., a person may appear very self-confident, persuasive and extroverted, and yet may inwardly be very lonely and insecure. Conversely, a person may seem to be very quiet and

shy, and yet inwardly may have great strength and depth to their character.

So we may say that PERSONALITY is the outward manifestation of a person — what they *appear* to be before men; while CHARACTER is the inner moral and spiritual quality of a person — what they *are* before God. E.g., Saul appeared outwardly to be an ideal choice for king, but ended up a disaster (1 Sam. 9:1-2). What we see is thus simply a small part of a person's character revealed through their personality; to really know a person we must know their character.

Most people only know the true characters of a few people who are really close to them, but we all observe many people's personalities.

We need to know God's character if we are really to know God. "God made known His ways (character) to Moses, and His acts (personality) to the people of Israel." (Ps. 103:7). We can all see God's outward acts, but do we know the *ways* of God? When we get to know God in this way it will transform our lives — our praying, our worship, our personal commitment and holiness will be revolutionised as we really get to know God.

So if we are to grow towards spiritual maturity then we need to know God's character. If we know something of His holiness, we will not be careless about sin. If we know His Lordship, we will not be rebellious. If we know His LOVE, WISDOM and POWER we will trust Him *in spite of* adverse circumstances, and the things He allows us to go through. If we know His justice, we will not question His judgement!

Most of our problems are caused by ignorance of God, His Word and His ways. If we struggle with obedience, then do we *really* know and love God? (John 14:15). So often we seek guidance, we seek blessings, we seek answers to prayer, rather than seeking God Who guides, blesses and answers prayer!

How do we get to know God?

There are several ways in which we get to know God, in which we "see Jesus" and spend time with Him.

1. **General revelation.** God has revealed Himself to all mankind in two general ways:

- (a) through creation (see Psalm 8; 19:1-6; Rom. 1:18-23)
- (b) through conscience (see Rom. 2:1-16).

The heavens declare the glory, wisdom and power of God; our consciences demonstrate that God's universal laws are written on our hearts. Even "intuition" and "inspiration" are indications of God's ability to reveal Himself to us and speak to us.

2. **Through prayer.** True prayer is divine communication — talking with God — speaking to Him and listening to Him. True prayer is fellowship with God at an intimate, personal and deep level. Start seeking God. This will take time and effort, but is well worthwhile (Jer. 29:12-14a). It should not be hard to spend time in prayer when we remember that we are sharing with the One Who loves us and cares for us — our Heavenly Father.

3. **Through revelation** of the Holy Spirit. Read Paul's prayer for the Ephesian Christians (Eph. 1:16-23) and note especially the words "that God may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him" (v.17). As you meditate on the Lord, as you worship and praise Him, pray and believe that the Holy Spirit will reveal the Lord to you.

4. **Through God's Word.** The main way in which God shows Himself is through the Bible. Before you read it, ask God to speak to you and reveal Himself through it. Do not simply read the Bible, do not merely seek to learn the Bible or get guidance from it; seek the God Who inspired its writing. God's Word is designed to draw us to Christ (John 5:39-40). Study God's character as revealed in the Bible: The more you read about the Lord and what He said, the more you will become like Him, and the better you will get to know Him. Study the life, teachings and character of Jesus in the Gospels, and let His Spirit transform your life and make it like Christ's (2 Cor. 3:18).

5. **Through our experiences.** We learn about God through His dealings with us in our daily lives. Let us praise God for every lesson learnt, for each personal experience we have of Him and with Him. Let His tests purify your faith (1 Pet. 1:6-9; 4:12-14). We also get to know the Lord as we see His nature expressed in the lives of Godly Christians in their Christlike acts (Matt. 5:16).

6. **Through love and obedience.** By obeying God's commands, and by loving God and loving one another, God has promised to reveal more of Himself to us (John 14:15-21; 1 John 1:2-3; 2:3-6; 4:7-12).

So we get to know God through our daily walk with Him, and through His Word (see Luke 24:13-49). Ask the Lord to reveal Himself to you. It will take time, effort and

determination; it will require your life to change, but Paul called it "the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord ... that I may know Him, and the power of His resurrection, and may share His sufferings, becoming like Him in His death." (Phil. 3:8-10). It will cost something, but the results are well worthwhile!

The cost and results of knowing God

To really get to know God will cost time, effort, determination and discipline. "Seek Me with all your heart", God says (Jer. 29:12-14). There must also be a willingness to allow our lives to be changed. "Be doers of the Word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves." (James 1:22-25). To move into the presence of God will necessitate death to self, a sharing of His sufferings, and true humility (Phil. 3:8- 10). How serious are we about really knowing God intimately? This will determine how far we go in God!

But if this seems too tough, too much to pay, remember *why* it is so important to know God [See the previous chapter]. Knowing God will produce fruitfulness in our lives (Ps. 1:1-3) — it will produce a life that glorifies and pleases God: "Well done, you good and faithful servant; enter the joy of your Lord" (Matt. 25:21). We will know a deep sense of joy, satisfaction and fulfilment.

"Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom ... but let him who glories glory in this: *that he understands and knows Me, that I am the Lord*" (Jer. 9:23-24).

God's character

By using a concordance, look up some of the following aspects of God's character, and study them in the Scriptures.

God is...

| | | | | |
|----------------|---------|----------|-----------|---------------|
| Faithful | Great | Loving | Pure | Understanding |
| Forgiving | Holy | Majestic | Righteous | Unfailing |
| Friendly | Just | Merciful | Steadfast | Wise |
| Glorious | Kind | Patient | Tender | Good |
| Long-suffering | Perfect | True | Gracious | Powerful |
| Trustworthy | | | | |

God is perfect LOVE, WISDOM and POWER, so we can trust Him and gladly submit to His Lordship.

"My determined purpose is that I may know Him — that I may progressively become more deeply and intimately acquainted with Him, perceiving and recognising and understanding the wonders of His Person more strongly and more clearly". (Phil. 3:10a, AMP)

QUESTIONS

1. How does a person progress from one level of knowing God to a deeper level?
2. How important is it to hunger after God? (Matt. 5:6; Luke 1:53; Rev. 3:17)
3. A condition for discipleship was to have been with Jesus (Acts 1:21-22). If we are not *actively* seeking to know Him better and to follow Him more closely, can we truly be a disciple?
4. We need to *know God*, not just know *about God*. What is the difference?
5. What is the cost of knowing God? What are the blessings of knowing God?
6. Why is it so important to really know God's infinite and perfect LOVE, WISDOM and POWER?

10 SOURCES OF GUIDANCE

"The sheep hear His [the Shepherd's] voice, and He calls His own sheep by name and leads them out. ... He goes before them, and the sheep follow Him for they know His voice. A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers" (See John 10:3-5, 27- 29)

Apart from Jesus, the Good Shepherd, speaking to us, we may also hear "the voice of strangers". How can we discern God's voice from other voices, so that we can be sure that we are following the Lord and are not being misguided?

Essentially there are four sources of guidance: God, the devil, ourselves, and other people. James 3:15 speaks of wisdom: (a) from above (of God); (b) earthly (from others); (c) natural or of the flesh (self); and (d) of the devil. Let's look at these four sources of guidance.

God

Whatever God says will always be consistent with what He has previously said in the Bible. God never contradicts Himself, or tells you to go against His Word. "I am the Lord; I change not" (Mal. 3:6). "God is not a man that He should lie, or a son of a man that He should repent. Has He said, and will He not do it?" (Num. 23:19). "Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, and today, and forever" (Heb. 13:8). As we get to know God better we will get to know His voice better, just as we get to know a friend's voice better as we spend more time with them and get to know them.

Notice, however, that faith *must* be based on a word from God (rhema) or on the Word of God (logos). Otherwise we may hope, desire, request or presume, but there is no basis for our faith *unless God has spoken to us* (Rom. 10:17).

The devil

In Scripture, the devil is described in three ways:

As a roaring lion (1 Pet. 5:8-9). Here he is undisguised in his attacks on us. In this case his voice is obvious; his temptations can be seen to be such, and usually there is little problem recognising him. "Submit yourself therefore to God; resist the devil and he will flee from you" (James 4:7). The important points here are to watch out for him, submit to God, and resist the devil; then we have God's promise that the devil will flee from us.

As a wolf in sheep's clothing (Matt. 7:15). Here he is disguised, and it may not be so obviously a word from Satan, but we have the warning that "by their fruits you will know them" (Matt. 7:15-20). If a particular action or decision will not bring forth good fruits that will glorify God, then the "tree" is bad, and there is a wolf speaking from within sheep's clothing.

As an angel of light (2 Cor. 11:14). In this case the disguise is so convincing that apart from discernment of spirits or a revelation from God, it would not be known that the voice was that of the devil. The devil will do all he can to stop us from doing God's will, or to side-track us, or push us to an extreme — anything to keep us out of the centre of God's will. So test guidance by God's Word; test it by the witness of the Spirit; test its possible fruit. Submit yourself and your life to God; resist and renounce the devil and all his works. Note particularly that the Good Shepherd *leads* His Sheep, He does not *drive* them as the devil does (Ps. 23:2-3; John 10:4 "He leads", "He goes before them", "the sheep follow Him.")

Ourselves

Probably the hardest thing to do is to distinguish between God's will and our own. We all have our own human desires and ideas. We can weigh up the pros and cons of a decision and come to a decision which may or may not be God's will. Our desires and our reasonings (intellect) can get in the way of God trying to guide us.

When Peter spoke to Jesus in Matt. 16:21-23 it was Satanically inspired. When he spoke in Matthew 17:4 it was human reasoning. But when he spoke in Matthew 16:16-17, it was not of flesh and blood (human reasoning), it was inspired by the Father. But how can we be sure it is not merely our own good idea, but is, in fact, *God's will*? (Is. 55:8-9). We need to learn to die to ourselves (Gal. 2:20); that is, to surrender and submit totally to the Lordship of Jesus Christ so that we can honestly say "Not my will, but Thine be done". We need to pray that God will take away all wrong desires and reasonings, and give us "the mind of Christ" (1 Cor. 2:16). We need to pray that God will prevent us from being conformed to this world, but instead be transformed by the renewing of our minds (Rom. 12:1-2). This is not easy, and much of this comes as we mature in Christ. This is why guidance should become less of a problem as we grow in Christ and learn to hear and discern His voice.

Other people

"There is safety In an abundance of counsellors" (Prov. 11:14). God often uses other Christians to confirm His will to us. However, there is a lot of unsanctified advice that is *not* of God! (cf. Job 2:7-10). God *could* speak through a non-Christian (and sometimes does) but we would really need to check out that this is what God is saying. Ask mature, wise Christians to pray with you and seek God's will with you (e.g., the elders in your church). Christians also need to be honest and frank with each other — we are not looking for "Yes" people, but those who will seek *God's will* with us and for us. Ultimately the decision and the responsibility for it is ours, but it is a great help to know that those you trust agree with you and support you in that decision.

Examples from the life of Jesus

Jesus faced each of these same sources of guidance that we face:

- **God:** "Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness" (Matt. 4:1), and He obeyed. In fact, He always did those things which were pleasing to the Father (John 8:29).
- **The devil:** Three times Satan tried to misguide Jesus, but each time He refused, "then the devil left Him, and angels came and ministered to Him" (Matt. 4:1-11).
- **Self:** Facing the most traumatic experience that any man has ever had to face, Jesus prayed, "If it be possible, let this cup pass from Me ...", but, dying to His own

feelings and desires, He continued, "... nevertheless, not My will but Thine be done" (Matt. 26:39).

- **Other people:** People sometimes tried to tell Jesus what to do. To some He listened, others He rejected what they said (Matt. 16:21-23; John 11:3-6). He discerned the will of His Father and did that!

Let us, likewise, follow Jesus' example of listening to the Father, resisting the devil, dying to our own desires and ideas, and discerning God's will in what other people advise us. Let us learn to walk by faith, with our eyes on the Lord and our ears tuned to hear the Shepherd's voice! "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and do not rely on your own insight. In all your ways acknowledge Him and He will direct your paths." (Prov. 3:5-6).

QUESTIONS

1. How do I know it is God Who is guiding me?
2. Can I always be absolutely sure that my guidance is from God, and not just my own desires or good ideas?
3. How does submission to the Lordship of Christ help me to be sure that my desires are God's desires for me? (See Psalm 37:1-9).
4. How do we get "the mind of Christ"? (1 Cor. 2:16)
5. How does a person "die to self"? (Gal. 2:20)
6. What does Romans 12:1-2 say we should do in order to prove what is the perfect will of God for our lives?

11. HOW GOD SPEAKS

Jesus said, "The sheep hear [the Shepherd's] voice, and He calls His own sheep by name and leads them out. ... He goes before them, and the sheep follow Him for they know His voice. ... My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me" (John 10:3,4,27)

How does God speak? How can we recognise His voice?

1. God speaks through His Word

God has given us His eternal written Word, the Bible. Through His Word, God speaks both generally and specifically.

God's Word is both a lamp to our feet (giving immediate, daily direction, one step at a time) and a light to our path (giving us guidance for the future, further ahead). See Psalm 119:105.

God can guide us both through a particular Scripture, and through the general teachings of the Bible. (See 2 Tim. 3:16-17). God can quicken a verse or Scripture to you as you read the Bible, or He may bring a verse or reference to mind that has a particular bearing on your situation.

But beware of using the Bible in a "magical" or "mystical" way, such as closing your eyes, opening your Bible at random and putting your finger on a verse! This is not the way God generally speaks.

Matthew 4:1-11 is a good example of how the devil tried to misuse Scripture in order to tempt Jesus, but Jesus rejected his temptations on the basis of His *correct* understanding and use of God's Word!

2. God speaks through His Spirit

As we wait on the Lord, the Holy Spirit often speaks directly to our mind or spirit; we have an "inner witness of the Spirit" that God is speaking to us — we KNOW! It may be hard to explain, but we just know it is God.

While God's Word contains His teaching for all people, of all nations and for all time, there are also *specific* things that God needs to say just to us! And this He often does by His Spirit.

The written Word of God (logos) is an *objective* way of speaking; the inspired Word of God (rhema) in our hearts is God's *subjective* way of speaking. Both are important and both need to be kept in balance.

This "prompting of the Spirit", this "still, small voice", because of its subjective nature, often needs to be confirmed in other ways, especially if the decision or guidance is important.

Divine inspiration, revelation and guidance often come in this way. See John 16:13-15; Acts 8:29.

3. God speaks through God-given desires

"Trust in the Lord, and do good ... Take delight in the Lord, and He will give you the desires of your heart. Commit your way to the Lord, trust in Him and He will act. ... Be still before the Lord, and wait patiently for Him. Do not worry. ... Wait for the Lord" (Psalm 37:1-9).

If we are truly committed to Him, if we have "died" to our own desires and we are in a right relationship with the Lord, then He will take away any wrong desires, put the *right* desires in our hearts, and then fulfill them!

We will then have an inner witness and peace about the situation, and a conviction that it is right. "Let the peace (a spiritual place of rest) of Christ rule (arbitrate or decide on a matter) in your heart" (Col. 3:15).

There is nothing more wonderful than knowing that you are in the centre of God's will, and enjoying the peace and rest that comes with it!

4. God speaks supernaturally, and through the gifts of the Spirit

There are literally scores of examples in the Bible of the ways God speaks and guides supernaturally, and through the gifts of the Spirit. The following references are but a few of the many which could be given.

(a) Through angels (Num. 22:31-35; Matt. 2:13) These angels may appear as people, or as angelic beings, but they are God's messengers (e.g., Gen. 18).

(b) Audibly (Is. 30:20-21; Acts 9:3-7).

(c) Through visions and dreams (Gen. 37:5-11; Job 33:14- 16; Acts 2:17; 10:3, 9-17). A vision may be seen with one's eyes open, or as a strong impression on the mind (e.g., while praying).

(d) Through other miraculous signs (Matt. 2:1-12).

(e) Through the gifts of the Spirit, such as prophecy, interpretation of tongues, discernment, words of knowledge or wisdom (1 Cor. 12:4-11).

5. God speaks through circumstances

God can arrange circumstances in order to guide us. Circumstances, in a sense, are God's ultimate way of guiding us, because God can open or close doors, and no-one is able to withstand Him (Rev. 3:7-8). As we commit our ways to Him, He will open doors for us. See Num. 22:21-35; Acts 16:6-10; Rom. 1:9-15.

6. God speaks through other Christians

"In the abundance of counsellors there is safety" (Prov. 11:14). Christian friends may

often confirm our guidance as being of God. However, it is important that we listen to advice that has been *prayerfully* given. It is easy for Christians to speak in the flesh, to give advice which is *not* God's will simply because they have not sought God in prayer for it! After all, if you have been seeking the Lord in prayer for guidance, why listen to another Christian's advice if they have not even prayed about it? Seek the confirmation of *mature* Christians who have prayed for God's will and confirmation for you. Often what God wants is *not* what we might advise in the natural!. So seek the advice of those who walk, talk and pray in the Spirit, so that you get *spiritual* advice, not carnal!

Moreover, do not go around asking all sorts of people for advice until you find the person who gives you the advice you want! We are seeking *God's will*, not God's blessing on *our will!* (The two may be very different!) Also, as we grow in the Lord, we should not constantly need to seek the advice of others. We need to learn to hear God's voice for ourselves. This is not to encourage independence, of course, but to encourage maturity and to discourage laziness! See Acts 16:9-10,15; 19:30; Col. 4:7-9 ("I have sent him").

7. God speaks through sanctified common sense

Our minds are to be renewed in the Holy Spirit so that our thinking and reasoning is not carnal but spiritual (Rom. 12:1-2). God has given us common sense and if we are walking in the Spirit then the correct thing to do may well be simply what is plain common sense to a Spirit-filled Christian!

However, sometimes we may have to go against "common sense" (at least as the world thinks) because God directs otherwise. See Acts 21:10-14; God had *previously* told Paul he was to go to Jerusalem — see Acts 20:22-25.

What about "fleeces"?

Read Judges 6:36-40. It is not our job to dictate to God how He must guide us. Even Gideon's fleece was not an either/or sign; God *could* have chosen to withhold the dew altogether and so side-step the sign. We cannot force God into a corner, and we must not try! God had already promised Gideon victory, and he knew it (v. 36,37 "as Thou hast said"), so his fleeces showed his unbelief; but in spite of this God graciously answered his requests for a sign.

If our faith is weak, God may answer a "fleece", but this is not the normal way He guides, nor is it really the way for mature, Spirit-filled Christians to know His will.

In some ways, laying a fleece can be an unspiritual and lazy way of trying to force God into a quick and definite answer even when we are not close to God. When king Saul tried to force God's hand he met with disastrous results: 1 Sam. 28:5-19. Fleeces were never laid by Christians in the New Testament Church, after the Day of Pentecost.

How will God guide me?

God, in His Sovereign wisdom and love, will guide you in His ways as you ask and wait upon Him. "All things work together for the good of those who love God" (Rom. 8:28).

The above ways of guidance should all work together to confirm God's will for your life. Ultimately, circumstances and God's peace in your heart will show you that God has been leading you in His ways. *Be assured that if you are truly surrendered to His will, and live close to the Lord, He will not let you go wrong.*

QUESTIONS

1. How can a person tell the difference between thinking their own thoughts, and God speaking to them through their mind?
2. What place do other Christians have in confirming or denying our guidance?
3. Can a person really get completely objective guidance?
4. Should Christians rely on "fleeces" as a way of determining God's will? Why or why not?
5. How can a person keep a balance between being guided only by what seems right ("common sense") and always wanting supernatural signs?
6. What should a person do when they get conflicting guidance?

12. PROBLEMS WITH GUIDANCE

It is not always easy to be absolutely sure that guidance is from God, and that what you are about to do is His will.

The following are some common problems people have with guidance, apart from the difficulties in discerning the difference between God's voice and our own, other people's or the devil's which was discussed in Chapter 10.

1. Time (Patience)

We are very time conscious — often God is not! What seems to us like a very long time is but a moment with God. Therefore, *patience* is of prime importance. Don't rush into decisions or try to force things to happen before it is God's time for them to happen. See Psalm 32:8-9 (The horse runs ahead, the mule lags behind! We need to move *with* God, in *His* time).

Abraham, for example, had a son by Hagar 14 years before it was God's time to give a son by his wife Sarah.

Moses tried to set Israel free from the Egyptians 40 years before it was God's time to set them free.

David, in contrast, was prepared to wait for years until God made him king, rather than kill king Saul and take the kingdom from him, as others tried to persuade him to do.

Daniel waited patiently, with intercession and fasting, until the 70 years captivity in Babylon was up and God's time had come to end the captivity (Dan. 9-10).

Zechariah, Elizabeth, Simeon and Anna all waited patiently and were quite old when God's promised Messiah was revealed to them (Luke 1-2).

So, do not be hasty! The more important the decision, the more certain you need to be of God's will (e.g. for marriage; your training, work, career or ministry; where you live and fellowship, etc.) God may take time to answer, but be patient. God is never in a hurry (He never panics) because He is never late! (Hab. 2:3). Moreover, God will not sacrifice perfection for the sake of time. "Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for Him. Don't worry!" (Ps. 37:7).

2. Motives

We need to watch our motives carefully. Pride and selfishness can deceive us into thinking that *our* will is *God's* will. We need to ask ourselves *why* we want God to guide us in a particular direction. Beware of grandiose, dramatic guidance that glorifies and blesses you, rather than God! (1 Pet. 5:6; James 4:3). Be honest! If your motives are wrong, then ultimately it will be *you* who will lose!

3. Action

It is impossible to steer a vehicle that is not moving! As God begins to direct you, start moving and let Him continue to direct your steps. God does not always reveal the end right from the start. We walk by faith, step by step, as God leads and directs us. The Bible never talks about a "blind leap" of faith!

4. Obedience

There is no substitute for being close to God. This is one of the main things we learn when seeking guidance. Heart attitude and a right relationship with God is *all important*. Guidance and hearing God's voice are not techniques — it is a relationship. In all our desire to get guidance, let us never forget that it is *God*, not merely a "guidance-giver" Whom we are seeking. It is more important to get to know God than to get guidance!

Make all your major decisions while you are in the presence of the Lord, in prayer, and at a time when you know you are right with the Lord, close to Him, and truly surrendered to His will. If you are still not sure if you are doing the right thing, ask God to take it away if it is not from Him, or to strengthen the conviction if it is from Him.

Disobedience may lead to confusion and frustration (cf. David, in 1 Chr. ch. 13-15). Learn to listen to God the first time He speaks, and then obey! As we grow in our Christian faith we should not continually be asking for more and more confirmation!

5. Trust

We should trust God and commit our way to Him. *God is all loving* (1 John 4:8) so He desires the very best for us. *God is all wise* (1 Tim. 1:17) so He knows what is best for us. *God is all powerful* (Matt. 28:18) so He has the ability to give the best to us. Do we trust Him to do this? We need the faith that *knows* that God will not misguide us or let us down (Matt. 7:11). Whatever happens, *trust Him!* Even "though He slay me, yet will I trust Him" (Job 13:15); "Though the fig tree does not blossom ..." (Hab. 3:17-18).

How to deal with conflicting guidance

First, ask God to confirm His way to you. Second, seek the advice of more mature and experienced Christians. Third, do not move until you are sure which is the next step to take. Then trust God for the outcome!

The fear of failure

One thing which makes it difficult for Christians to make decisions is the fear of failure. We really want to do God's will and feel that others will judge us if we make a mistake. Actually, the worst mistake we can make is the one we don't learn from!

If we have truly surrendered our will to God and have sought His guidance, then we

should move forward in *faith*, trusting Him for its outworking. God has a plan for our lives, and if we are committed to Him and His ways then it is primarily HIS responsibility to reveal His will to us, His servants, and it is *our* responsibility to obey.

God *wants* us to hear His voice; He wants us to follow Him in the right way (Is. 30:21). So there is no need for us to strive for guidance — simply rest and listen! As long as we sincerely desire to follow Him and be obedient to Him, He will not allow us to go seriously astray. If we make a mistake He will pick us up again and show us the right way (Ps. 37:23-24). God is a good God! He *loves* His children. Only disobedience takes us out of His will.

God's ways, or our ways?

It is important to realize that God's ways, plans and purposes for our lives may be very different from what we expect (Is. 55:8-9). Sometimes what we think is a disaster, God is using for His glory and to fulfill His purposes! E.g., Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem ended in Calvary — but the death of the Messiah means life and wholeness for all mankind who will receive it! Moreover, after three long days, His death turned into resurrection glory! Hallelujah — "disaster" became glorious victory! Even out of our mistakes God can bring good, because HE IS GOD — HE IS IN ABSOLUTE CONTROL! Hallelujah! Read Romans 8:28-39. Trust God!

QUESTIONS

1. What are some of the reasons why guidance does not always seem to come the way we expect it, or why we do not always seem to hear God's voice?
2. What are some other problems associated with guidance and hearing God's voice? (Ask other Christians how they deal with these problems).
3. Pride, wrong motives, impatience, and sin are hindrances to hearing God. What are some other hindrances?
4. What does Psalm 37:23-24 have to say to those who have rushed into things and made mistakes?
5. What bearing does Romans 8:28 have on guidance, and what comfort can it bring to those who have made a wrong decision?
6. Where is the balance between "waiting on God" for guidance, and moving and letting God guide you as you start to move?

13. MEDITATING ON GOD AND HIS WORD

"Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in Thy sight, O Lord, my rock and my Redeemer" (Psalm 19:14). One of the ways in which we get to know God and His will is by meditating on the Lord and His Word.

More than that, God promises that our Christian lives will be fruitful and prosper if we meditate on His Word day and night: "Blessed is the man whose ... delight is in the Law of the Lord, and on His Law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water, that yields its fruit and its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all he does, he prospers" (Psalm 1:1-3).

"This Book of the Law shall not depart out of your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it; for then you shall make your way prosperous, and then you shall have good success" (Joshua 1:8).

What is meditation?

Meditation is pondering over a few verses of Scripture (usually only one or two verses), under the revelation and illumination of the Holy Spirit, and gleaned spiritual truths from them. It is important to remember, however, that the verses have actual historical truth and meaning, as well as spiritual truths associated with them.

Meditation allows the Holy Spirit to take the written word of God (logos) and make it the living Word of God (rhema) to us. The Word becomes alive, quick, sharp and powerful (John 6:63; 2 Corinthians 3:6; Hebrews 4:12).

Meditation differs from Bible study in that its primary aim is spiritual revelation and edification, rather than simply head knowledge. The Word is designed to lead us closer to Himself, not just to fill our heads with facts, even "truth"! (See John 5:39-40).

Meditation on God and His Word will revolutionize our lives in a way that Bible study may not. It brings fresh, new, insight and understanding to the meaning and application of His Word.

Meditation is the Holy Spirit speaking to our spirit, revealing truth, guiding and inspiring us (Deuteronomy 29:29; John 16:13-15).

Meditation is one of the ways of hearing God's voice (John 10:27). If you learn to listen and hear God's voice through meditation, you will not have many problems with guidance, for this is one of the ways God speaks to us and reveals His will to us.

Why meditate?

God is glorified as we wait on Him and His Word in prayer and meditation. It shows our dependence on God.

God has promised us blessings, fruitfulness, success and prosperity as we meditate day and night (Psalm 1:1-3; Joshua 1:8).

Meditation enables us to get to know God and His Word better. It helps us to memorize God's Word and it helps us when we are seeking God's will for our lives.

Meditating will help us understand Scriptures that we did not understand before. It will also bring new freshness to God's Word and help us to apply it to our daily lives.

Meditation will give us "more understanding" (not necessarily more knowledge) than our teachers (Psalm 119:99). Other people may know more, but they will not necessarily understand more; they may not have the same wisdom. Meditation on truth does not depend on brainpower, but on the divine ability to receive revelation from God. In fact, often our brains get in the way! There are dangers both in having a big head and a small heart, and in having a big heart and a small head! Meditation helps to maintain a balance – it instructs the mind and edifies the heart.

How to meditate

1. Be prepared to spend some time in quiet, undisturbed meditation. Get still before God and begin to meditate on the Lord, His nature, His character, His goodness, His works or His Word (Psalm 77:12; 143:5).
2. Ask God to take away any distracting thoughts, anxieties, sin or any other hindrances to effective meditation. Ask Him to reveal Himself and His Word to you, and then *expect* Him to speak! Luke 24:27-36 is a good example of what God does as we spend time with Him and He opens His Word to us!
3. Meditate on a few verses of Scripture, word by word, phrase by phrase, thought by thought. Meditation takes time!
4. If you are not sure what a word or a name means, look up the meaning in a dictionary, concordance or Bible commentary, but let meditation take the study from the head to the heart.

5. Use various translations of the Bible to help bring out different thoughts on the passage.
6. Be practical and apply what you have learned. Turn your meditation into prayer, worship and action (Psalm 63:5-7; James 1:22).
7. If possible, and appropriate, share with others what God has revealed to you; for example, in group meditation, where the whole group meditates on the same passage, share together afterwards and see what God is saying to the whole group as well as to individuals.

Christian meditation differs from other, non-Christian forms of meditation because it is true Biblical meditation on the Lord God Almighty and His Word. Biblical meditation is a positive waiting on God, pondering on Him, His nature, His character and His Word. It is not making one's mind go blank and receiving whatever comes. The devil is very capable of putting wrong thoughts into minds which are blank and open to receive anything that comes. One of the problems of passively making the mind go blank is that it can open the door to the demonic, especially if evil spirits are invoked! (Matthew 12:43-45).

However, the Christian need never fear that his meditation on the Lord and His Word will ever open him up to Satanic deception; in fact God promises the opposite – God's blessing, spiritual prosperity and success will follow those who wait on God in His way. See Jeremiah 29:12-14; 33:3; Matthew 7:7-11; Hebrews 11:6).

Some suggested passages for meditation

Joshua 1:8-9

1 Chronicles 29:10-13

2 Chronicles 7:14

Psalm 1:1-3; Psalm 19:14; Psalm 23:1-3; Psalm 24:3-5; Psalm 133:1-3

Isaiah 55:6-9

Jeremiah 29:11-14

Joel 2:12-14; Joel 2:28-29

Jonah 1:1-3

Matthew 6:33-34; Matthew 16:18

Luke 10:27

Acts 9:31

Romans 12:1-2

Ephesians 6:10-12

Philippians 2:6-8; Philippians 4:6-8

Hebrews 11:6; Hebrews 12:1-2; Hebrews 13:20-21

James 4:7
1 Peter 1:6-7
1 John 1:1-3
Jude 24-25
Revelation 3:20; Revelation 5:12

QUESTIONS

1. How does meditating on God's Word differ from Bible study?
2. Why is it important to meditate on God and His Word?
3. How can a person avoid over-spiritualizing passages of Scripture?
4. What blessings are promised to those who meditate on God's Word?
5. How does the practice of meditation help when a person is seeking guidance?
6. Meditate on one of the suggested passages and note down what God says to you.

14. JESUS IS LORD!

One of the many positive benefits that comes from seeking the Lord, meditating on Him and His Word, and asking Him for guidance, is that it re-affirms the Lordship of Jesus Christ over our lives.

To live a life which is independent of God is to live a self-centred (and usually selfish) life. Moreover, it sets us up as "boss – in absolute control of our own lives, doing whatever we want to do. Jesus' story of the true and faithful servant (Luke 17:7-10) shows us what our true attitude should be: having done *all* that God asks of us we should then say, "We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty."

It is one thing to say "Jesus is Lord"; it is another thing to make Him Lord in practice! (See Matthew 7:21-27; 15:8-9a; Mark 10:17-22).

We live in an age in which independence is very strong. The attitude of many people is often: "I'm going to run my life, my way. Nobody's going to tell me what to do!" Even Christians are sometimes afraid that God may want them to do something they don't want to do, or will stop them from doing something they want to do! How often do we (secretly!) think we know better than God? To surrender to God's will may seem to be too much to ask. This is why it is so very important that we know that God is a

loving, caring, wise God who *longs for the very best possible* in our lives. The Psalmist knew this; that is why he sang, "I delight to do Your will, O my God. Your Law is within my heart" (Psalm 40:8). John knew this; that is why he wrote, "This is the love of God: that we keep His commandments, and His commandments are not burdensome." (1 John 5:3).

Psalm 37

Psalm 37 contains some excellent principles for guidance, waiting on God and recognising His Lordship. Let us look at some of them.

1. **"Fret not"** (v.1,7,8). Three times the Psalmist exhorts us not to be anxious; do not worry! Our desire for instant answers, rapid revelation and quick guidance can cause us to make mistakes, if we are not very careful. God's guidance does not require us to panic, be unduly hasty, worry, fret or be anxious. Learn to wait patiently on Him. God's time is always perfect. Even though the vision may tarry – wait for it! It will come to pass; it will not be late (Hab. 2:2- 3). God will supply all our needs, without us having to worry (Matthew 6:25-34; Philippians 4:19). Praise the Lord: He is in control!
2. **"Don't be envious of non-Christians"** (v.1) Sometimes it is easy for Christians to become jealous of non-Christians. It is easy to be a selfish, independent sinner. The ways of the unrighteous often seem to be more prosperous (at least from a worldly point of view) than our own ways. Don't be jealous! Learn to see things from an *eternal* point of view, from God's point of view. The things of the earth are temporal and transitory (v.2); the things of God are spiritual and eternal. Far better to have riches in Heaven than treasures on earth (Matthew 6:19-21); to have stored up gold, silver and precious stones, than wood, hay and stubble (1 Corinthians 3:12-15).
3. **"Trust in the Lord"** (v.3) Faith and trust in God are of the utmost importance. Only faith enables us to "see in the, dark" – to continue walking with God even when things seem uncertain, confusing or dark (Proverbs 3:5-6). Remember: faith comes from knowing God and His Word.
4. **"Do good"** (v.3) Be obedient! If we want to continue to be guided by God and to hear His voice, then we need to be obedient to what He has already told us or shown us. Sometimes His guidance is like a "lamp to our feet": it is not until we have taken the step we can see, that God then shows us the next step which we could not see.
5. **"Delight in the Lord"** (v.4) God is far more than a Guide: He is our Lord, our Father, our Friend. Do we really delight in God, in our innermost beings? Do we enjoy His presence, love to talk to Him and worship Him? Or do we simply treat Him like a map – get our guidance and then forget about Him?

If we truly delight in Him, He will do two things:

- (a) He will give us the right desires (and take away any wrong desires); then
- (b) He will fulfill those desires!

This is why it is not a burden to serve the Lord: if we are willing, He will put the right desires within us and then work them out in our lives!

6. "Commit your way to the Lord" (v.5) Hand over your ways to the Lord so that He can direct your paths and enable you to know His blessing and joy in following them. It is not a matter of asking God to bless what we have already decided to do; He *will* bless what he has chosen to do, if only we will follow it. When we commit our way to the Lord and trust in Him, He will act (v.5).

7. "Be still and wait patiently" (v.7,9) God's time is frequently not our time; for example, many prophecies are fulfilled years after we expected them to be fulfilled. To wait on God, patiently and trustingly, is one of the hardest lessons most of us have to learn! But there is no greater joy than to be at peace and at rest in Him, waiting His fulfillment of His promise.

In spite of all that has been said, there are times when we fail, and we fall. What then? "Though he falls, he shall not be cast down; the Lord will uphold him with His hand" (v. 23- 24). God is patient, understanding, kind and compassionate. He knows all our weaknesses, our failings, our faults. If we fall – He picks us up, dusts us down, and puts us on the right path again. "The bruised reed he will not break; the smoldering wick He will not quench" (Matthew 12:20). Our ever-loving Father uses even the bruised reed; He trims the smoldering wick and uses it too, to help light up the world for His glory.

Oh, what trust and confidence we can have in our God! He is in control! Hallelujah!

A servant's ear

In Old Testament times, Hebrew servants were to be set free after six years of service. However, if a servant loved his master so much that he was prepared to serve him for the rest of his life, then a hole was made in his ear, representing the fact that his ear was always open to hear and obey his master (Deuteronomy 15:12-17).

Speaking prophetically about Jesus Christ, the Psalmist said, "Sacrifice and offering (for sin) You did not desire; but You have given me an open ear ... I delight to do Your will, O My God; Your Law is in My heart" (Psalm 40:6-8). Jesus, our Example, came as a Servant Whose ears were open to hear what His Father said (John 5:19,30; 14:10). But it is one thing to *hear* what the Lord says, it is another thing to be *obedient* to our Master. Thus, in Hebrews 10:5-10, the writer (quoting from Psalm 40) says, "Sacrifices

and offerings You have not desired, but a *body* You have prepared for Me ..." Not only did Jesus have open ears to hear His Father's will, but His *body* was pierced too – He was obedient unto death, even death on a Cross.

This is what it means to confess "Jesus is Lord" – our ears are constantly open to hear what our Lord says, and our body is willing to be obedient, even unto death.

"Whoever has ears to hear (open ears), let him hear what the Spirit is saying." Then let him say, "I delight to do Your will, O my God!"

May the Lord give us listening ears and obedient lives!

QUESTIONS

1. How dependent on God do you think most Christians are?
2. Why are many Christians afraid or unwilling to make Jesus Christ Lord of every area of their lives?
3. Apart from *saying* "Jesus is Lord", what else is of vital importance? (Matthew 7:21).
4. What words of comfort and encouragement does God have for those who do fall or fail, in seeking and doing His will?
5. What should we do if it appears that God's guidance is not coming to pass?
6. What is a "servant's ear"? Why was Jesus' *body* pierced, as well as His "ear"?

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