

# So You Want To Follow Jesus?

Maybe you've been thinking you want to follow Jesus and become a Christian, but just aren't sure how to take that step. You *think* you might know what it means *to follow Jesus*, but it'd be good to get some clarity and direction – *what's next?*

Or maybe you've never thought about following Jesus...until now. But something has got you interested, you don't know what exactly, but you want to know – who is this Jesus person your Christian friends at school or uni call 'Lord and Christ'? What does *that* – *Lord and Christ* – even mean?

## separated by sin

In my previous article '[A guide for LGBTQ Christian teens](#)', I talked about how much God loves each one of us. He loved the world so much that 'while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us' ([Romans 5:8](#)). You could be thinking, '*sure, that's nice, but what does it mean 'sinners'? I haven't done anything wrong*'.

Sin is not necessarily a hot button topic in our world today. You're more likely to be encouraged to '*live your truth*' than told '*you are a sinner in need of forgiveness*'. If we do stop to think about sin, we probably tend to view it as *really bad things*, like *murder* or *hating on someone* or *lying*. Most of us would probably think of ourselves as *pretty good people*, but the truth is, when compared alongside a completely holy God, we all fall far short of His standard of 'good'.

Sin is not just about specific actions; it also refers to a broken relationship with God and a tendency to stray from His holiness. The reality is that you are separated from God because of your sin, no matter how small or insignificant it might seem.

The Bible describes our situation as being like slaves.

Although humans were created to rule over this world and all the creatures that live in it wisely and well, as God's image-bearers, we gave that up in the Garden of Eden to give our allegiance to someone other than God. We allowed ourselves to be mastered by sin and so became its slaves (2 Peter 2:19).

No doubt this resonates with your own life experiences. Even when you've wanted to do the right thing or tell the truth, we often don't make the right choice in the moment. You've probably done things or made decisions that you now regret but it seemed impossible at the time to choose differently.

But the good news is that God didn't want to leave humanity in a state of brokenness and separation from him. He wanted to fix up the issue of sin, to make a way for us to be forgiven for our mistakes, and to show us the way to live in right relationship with Him.

He sent Jesus to save us, to redirect our lives towards His good and abundant way of living, and to help us see that our true reality, who we *really are*, is *one beloved of God*, intended for glory and greatness.

## **Lord + Christ**

God sent His Son Jesus into the world "not to condemn its people but to save them! Everyone who has faith in him will have eternal life and never really die." (John 3:16-17, CEV).

Being saved involves *having faith* in Jesus. So the logical next question is, *who is Jesus?* Who *is* this person that I would put my faith in him? What does it even mean to *put my faith in Jesus?* Great questions!

The best place to start\* to learn about who Jesus was is in the New Testament with the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

The gospels provide an account of the life, teachings, death,

and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and are foundational texts for understanding His ministry and message. In them, you'll read many amazing stories of what Jesus did, the miracles he performed, who he said he was, the reason why he came, and, finally, the almost unbelievable account of his resurrection from the dead, which validated Jesus' divine identity and his claim to be the Son of God.

The gospel of John comments that *"these [things about Jesus] are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name."*

***(If you haven't read the gospels for yourself, why not take some time over the next few weeks to read through what they say about Jesus...)***

The book of Romans, written by the Apostle Paul, says that "this is the very message about faith we preach: If you openly declare that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." Romans 10:9

He's telling us that *having faith in Jesus* means believing that Jesus is the one that God sent to save us from our sins (*Christ* or *Messiah*, means 'anointed one' (Isaiah 61:1), that Jesus is Lord and therefore has rightful authority over our life, and that he really is the Son of God, as proven by his resurrection from the dead.

The gospels therefore offer both an invitation and a challenge. Do you accept that you need forgiveness, that you are separated from being in right relationship with God? Do you believe Jesus is the one sent into the world to offer that forgiveness and restore you to God? Do you believe that his claim to be the Son of God is true and that he really did rise again from the dead? Do you believe he is Lord of all, just as capable now, as then, of commanding the winds and waves, and will you trust him with the direction of your life?

If the answer is yes to all of these, then *this* is what it means to follow Jesus! This is what it means to be a Christian.

## **disciples not decisions**

Every Christian's life starts at a certain point, with a decision, but that one decision alone is not enough. Following Jesus is a life marked by *discipleship*, which is really just the process of learning to be like Jesus more and more each day. That's a topic I intend to talk more about in a later article.

But following Jesus *does* start with *having faith*: confessing that Jesus is Lord, and believing that God raised him from the dead.

So if this is you, if you find yourself fully convinced about who Jesus is and what he came to do, and that he truly was the Son of God, whom God raised to life again, the Bible says that as soon as you realise this, you should declare your faith publicly by being *baptised* – fully immersed in water.

Baptism is God's arrangement for a person to gain a clean conscience based *on their faith* in the work of Jesus Christ. I'll be talking a bit more about that in my next article in this series (Letters To My Kids) so look out for that soon, but if you'd like to chat about baptism in the meantime, I'd love to hear from you!

Let me know your thoughts on this topic (you can message me publicly or privately here or on my socials), or any questions you'd like answers to on this topic (or anything else) in upcoming articles!

*“And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptised, and wash your sins away, calling on his name.” – Acts 22:16*

\* the gospels aren't the only place we read about Jesus. Both the Old Testament and New Testament have a great deal to say about Jesus and who he was! In fact, the promise of Jesus is found in the very first book of the Bible, Genesis. [Here are 55 Old Testament prophecies](#) about Jesus, covering his birth, ministry, death and resurrection, and role in the church.

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## The Dark Heart Of Christmas

Christmas is a unique time of year.

Traditionally, it's seen as a season of joy, hope, celebration, and family—a chance for many to unwind and find rest as the year draws to a close.

Yet, for others, the story is different. Christmas can be a lonely and isolating season, marked by fractured relationships, the pain of missing loved ones, or financial pressures that overshadow the festivities. It can feel less like a time of rest and more like a whirlwind of exhaustion and unmet expectations.

For many, Christmas is a complex mix of emotions—hopeful yet heavy, joyful yet sorrowful, warm and welcoming but also marked by loneliness and discouragement. It's a time that holds both the brightest lights and the deepest shadows, depending on where one stands.

It seems to me that all these emotions are deeply rooted in the true Christmas story—a story far removed from the sanitised, child-friendly version we often share. Yes, Christmas is a time of hope and celebration as we mark the birth of Jesus Christ. But it's also a season for introspection and solemnity as we reflect on why Jesus came and the profound purpose of His arrival.

Christians are often accused of being overly focused on [sin](#)—and it's true that we sometimes tend to emphasise sin more than the grace that forgives those sins. But sin, and humanity's separation from God, are central to the Christmas story.

Without sin, there would be no need for redemption or reconciliation with God. Without sin, there would have been no need for Jesus Christ to come "to save his people" (Matthew 1:21). Without sin, Jesus would not have had to die. At the heart of the Christmas narrative lies a profound hopelessness—a darkness that calls us to pause and reflect.

## Jesus | The Hope Of The World

Before there was a baby in a manger, there was a crisis in a garden—a catastrophic severing of humanity's relationship with God. It was a moment that cast a long shadow of darkness over the world and which set the scene for the arrival, many centuries later, of a Saviour. Jesus came as the light that would pierce the darkness, bringing hope and redemption to a world in desperate need of reconciliation with God.

One of my favourite chapters in the Bible is the opening of the Gospel of John. John begins his account of Jesus Christ's origins with words that echo the first chapter of Genesis. He reflects on the darkness present in the beginning—a world without form and void—and reveals how light entered that darkness. That light, John tells us, is Jesus, through whom God's unfailing love and faithfulness has come to humanity. It is through him alone that God has been fully revealed to us.

*"Comfort, comfort my people,"* the prophet Isaiah would write, *"Speak tenderly to Jerusalem. Tell her that her sad days are gone and her sins are pardoned. Yes, the LORD has punished her twice over for all her sins."* Listen! It's the voice of someone shouting, *"Clear the way through the wilderness for the LORD! Make a straight highway through the wasteland for*

*our God! Fill in the valleys, and level the mountains and hills. Straighten the curves, and smooth out the rough places. Then the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all people will see it together. The LORD has spoken!" | Isaiah 40:1-3*

## **It's Definitely Good News**

"Keep it positive," my daughter urged when I mentioned I was writing about the deeper, darker side of Christmas. "Not everything has to be a negative." And I do understand her point. Christmas, with its twinkling lights, joyful songs, and festive feasts, is a season meant for happiness and celebration.

Do we really want to turn our thoughts to more solemn, existential realities? Do children really need to understand *why* Jesus came into the world? Some might say it feels like 'raining on the parade' or being a bit of a party pooper during such a joyful season.

But I think the answer should be yes.

Reflecting on the deeper meaning of Christmas doesn't take away from the celebration—it adds depth and significance. The joy and festivities are wonderful, but they become even more meaningful when we understand the "why" behind them: Jesus came into the world because of God's immense love, to bring light into darkness and offer hope and reconciliation. Christmas is definitely *good news*, but its true significance shines brightest when we understand just how broken things were before it.

For children, this truth doesn't need to feel heavy or complex. Instead, it can be shared as a simple, hope-filled message—that Jesus is the ultimate gift, given to bring peace, love, and joy to the world. Far from lessening the joy of the season, this understanding can make Christmas even more special.

## God-With-Us

Christmas celebrates the gift of grace found in Jesus, a gift that came at a great cost. While the festivities—lights, songs, and feasts—bring joy, they are merely the wrappings around this profound truth: Jesus Christ is the ultimate gift, the hope of the world, fulfilling God’s mission to redeem humanity.

John tells us that the light that was in the beginning, the Word Himself, would step in the very creation He had made in order to save and redeem it. In his human body, the war against sin and death would be waged and won.

His name would be Emmanuel, that is, *God-With-Us*, and he would save us from our sins.

*“What gift of grace is Jesus, my Redeemer,  
There is no more for Heaven now to give,  
He is my joy, my righteousness, and freedom,  
My steadfast love, my deep and boundless peace” | City Alight*

As we celebrate Christmas, we can embrace both the joy and the meaning of the season. The twinkling lights, festive songs, and shared meals remind us of the happiness this time of year brings. But it’s also an opportunity to reflect on the deeper story—the arrival of Jesus, the true light of the world, who stepped into our darkness to bring grace, redemption, and reconciliation.

At its heart, the Christmas story contains both joy and sorrow, loss and restoration, light and darkness. Christmas is about this extraordinary gift—freely given—and a hope that continues to shine brightly today.

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# Loving The Church

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*“You can develop a healthy, robust community that lives right with God and enjoy its results only if you do the hard work of getting along with each other, treating each other with dignity and honour.” | James 3:18, MSG*

Loving the church can be hard.. Frankly, at times, she can seem like a big, fat disappointment.

Infighting. Divisions. The failure of leaders and the apathy of congregants. The assimilation to culture. A preoccupation with prestige and power. Intolerance. Liberality.

Sometimes the church is hard to love.

*“It is clear that the church regularly breaks our hearts, disappoints, and even damages us. Both history and our current headlines reveal a church that can be a deeply flawed, sinful, and unhealthy institution, marred by acts of injustice, corruption, abuse, misogyny, and oppression. The contemporary [American] church is wrecked with bickering and division, celebrity worship and unaccountable leaders, false and shallow teaching, and a Christian industrial complex formed around greed and vanity.” | Tish Harrison, A Church Called Tov*

Negative experiences often lead people to ‘give up on church’. They decide they will ‘follow Jesus’ but reject the church. Their solution: to walk an individual and untroubled path, to become a solitary lighthouse bravely resisting the wild seas alone.

And I get it. I do.

It's an unsettling reality that many people who've left the church and moved away from Christian community have suffered real disappointment and hurt at the hands of the church. For many, their view of the church has been (justifiably) tarnished by their negative experiences within it.

People can be very wounded by the church, unfortunately, because it's made up of imperfect people who often mess up.

But here's the rub.

We are the church.

All of us, together, collectively, communally.

There's not *ourselves* and then, over there, *the church*. There's not *me*, in my own personal little faith bubble, and then, over there, the raging, incompetent screw-up of a *church* that I, personally, have no connection to (and neither do I want to).

There aren't *some Christians* who just love doing church and other Christians who, well, it's just *really not their thing*.

'An individual Christian does not a church make.'

## **We are the church**

Christianity is, by definition, collective, and communal. There is no church, without all of us.

Too often we separate out Jesus and 'the church' in our minds as if they're two different identities. We say we love Jesus but we're less enthusiastic about his people.

But the church is Jesus' body. Loving Jesus means loving the church too. It's part of him and he's part of it. He died for the church, for his people, and it's in his death and resurrection that we are brought together in community.

Jesus said that he would build his church, purchased with his own blood, and of which he is the chief cornerstone (Matthew 16:18, Acts 2:28, Ephesians 2:20). His language is organic, inclusive, and corporate. He is in the house-building business and we are each his individual stones, selected and fitted together, according to his good pleasure (1 Peter 2:5).

We therefore can't say we love Jesus but we hate his people/body... it's simply incongruous.

Loving the church isn't an optional extra to our life of faith. It's an intrinsic part of it, with all its joy, pain, and disappointment. She is us and we are her.

### **3 Reasons To Love The Church:**

#### **1. Because Jesus Asked Us To (And Because He Loves Her)**

Jesus brings real people, diverse and divided in life, into common union together, into relationship, into the messy, untidy reality that is the church, not because they are worthy, but because Jesus died for them and that is enough.

It's around the Passover table, over the first Christian communion, and right before Jesus was betrayed, sentenced to death, and then crucified, that he gives his disciples a new commandment to live by once he is gone.

*"...love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this, all people will know that you are my disciples if you have love for one another." | John 13:34-35, ESV*

By loving one another as he has loved us, all the world will know that we are his disciples. The world will see your love for each other and know, without even having to ask, that you are followers of the king.

Love isn't always easy, but it is the more excellent way. And it's the way that Jesus has asked us to take.

First, we were loved, now we love.

Sure, we will have to work at it at times (and 1 Corinthians 13 is full of pastoral advice on how to go about this) but, quite simply, loving each other – loving the church – is what Jesus has asked us to do.

He loves her and he wants us to love her too.

## **2. Because The Church Is The Hope Of The World (Despite Her Flaws)**

Around that communion table, Jesus could see the seeds of the church – his church – that was soon to be born. His small band of followers represented the expansive and diverse family that God would build through him, for the glory of His name and in pursuit of His purpose.

*“You are my ambassadors”,* Jesus had told them, *“and behold, I am with you, even until the end of time.”* (Matthew 28:20).

From the dark soil of an empty tomb, the seeds of Jesus' church sprang forth, bringing new life and hope.

The church – full of saved sinners – is the place that tells of God's goodness and faithfulness, and His enduring love for humanity.

The church is the place that speaks hope, shining the light of the gospel into a dark world.

The church is the place where broken and damaged people find healing and redemption, basking in the warmth of God's radical grace.

The church is the heart of God's kingdom mission, spilling over into the world and showing that a different way is

possible: life that gives life, in abundance.

We love the church because, despite her flaws, she is the hope of the world, the place where people finally come home.

### **3. Because We Were Made For God's Community**

We were made for community and we grow and are nurtured in community. (Yes, we are wounded in community but it's also in community that we heal. *"Healing might not come from the community where the wounding took place, but community is needed for healing nonetheless."* | Rich Villodas)

It was in the very beginning that God said, 'let us make humanity in our image and after our likeness.' To be with God and to be like God, together: this is what we were made for and the purpose of human existence. This is why we all feel that deep longing to belong, why we continually search for meaning in the mundane. God has placed eternity in our hearts (Ecclesiastes 3:11).

We aren't really 'Christian' in its fullest sense unless we're doing life together within the God-community we were created for. Otherwise, we're just like a random toe or finger, disconnected from a body and essentially useless (1 Corinthians 12:12-27) (in this analogy, that is; please don't read that to be saying 'you are useless'!).

The Apostle Paul has this to say about the body of Christ: *"A body is made up of many parts, and each of them has its own use. That's how it is with us. There are many of us, but we each are part of the body of Christ, as well as part of one another."* (Romans 12:4-5, CEV)

Each one of us, brought together, makes up the body and, as Ephesians 5:29 comments, "None of us hate our own bodies. We provide for them and take good care of them, just as Christ does for the church."

This is what we were made for! Relationship with God and relationship with His people. Church people are kingdom people, living in a fellowship under King Jesus, with lives that are “connected to things before the creation of the world and extending far into eternity.” (Ecclesiastes 3:11)

We love the church because she is the community of God.

## **Finally...**

Sometimes the church can feel hard to love. Sometimes we rub up against people who don't exactly show Jesus as we think he ought to be seen. *Sometimes we are those people.*

But for those who have been disillusioned by the church, please know that she is full of people who really are the real deal; people who love Jesus, love his people, and are working every day in his kingdom mission with sincerity and authenticity. I know, because I've met them!

So, don't give up hope in the church, in finding your place in it, and in loving her, despite her flaws.

She is us.

We are the church.

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# **Heaven + Earth: The End Of**

# The Story

Inarguably, it's the end of any story that's the most important part.

While the beginning of a tale gives context and setting, and the middle gives the story its shape and drama, it's the ending that provides meaning and gives resolution to the narrative. It's the ending that makes sense of everything, that allows all the intersecting threads of drama, intrigue, risk, loss, joy, and homecoming to find their place and purpose within the story and, particularly, in its overarching conclusion.

Humanity's story; an ongoing tale of love and war, victory and defeat, joy and tragedy, has not yet reached its conclusion, but, surprisingly, its ending *has already been written*.

While scientists and philosophers have had much to offer to the conversation about our origins and humanity's remarkable traverse through history, with all of our astonishing achievements, they have little to offer on the subject of where we might all be going or how our story finishes. When it comes to science, we are left largely in the dark about the questions that matter the most.

*What are we here for?*

*What is the purpose of life?*

*Where will we end up?*

## Life's Most Profound Questions

It's to the Bible alone that we can turn for answers to life's most profound questions. It has much to say about not just how we supposedly got here and why, but also how humanity's story will reach its epic conclusion.

The Bible is the living, Spirit-breathed Word of God, the written revelation of what God has been doing in the past, what He is still doing right now, and what he has intended for the future of humanity.

The Word of God is like a vast tapestry, its main theme interwoven with many sub-plots and side stories that run like golden threads through an intricate design. Each of these threads complements the complete telling of God's story and confirm again and again to us the way in which God views the world, the people who inhabit it, and how important each one of us are to Him.

Far from being just black text on white pages; this book unveils the purpose, intentionality, and creative action of the Eternal One; breathed out, captured by way of quill and scroll by the faithful scribes who heard 'the voice of God', recording the Eternal's story for all to read.

What we also learn about God's story is that the master storyteller hasn't been absent or detached from His story, but fully present and, in fact, His full, enveloping presence, His close and intimate dwelling with humanity was actually the point of the story all along. What began in a garden, where God once [walked with us](#), will find its epic conclusion in a 'new creation', in a restored and regenerated earth where God at last dwells with His people.

The end of our story will actually be *our new beginning*. The conclusion of our story doesn't end with us going to be with God; but *with God coming to earth*, returning, at last, *to be with us*.

God's story has a conclusion, an ending, a moment when all the loose strings are neatly tied up and we'll sit back, with a sigh of satisfaction at a tale well told and an ending more glorious than we could ever have imagined.



## The Purpose Of God

Much of scripture is given to expressing the heart of the Creator and what His hopes and dreams were for this place we call Earth, along with us, its inhabitants, as His intended image-bearers.

*“Then God said, “Let us make humans in our image, according to our likeness. They will rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, the livestock, the whole earth, and the creatures that crawl on the earth.” | Genesis 1:26, CSB “Yet as surely as I live and as surely as the whole earth is filled with the glory of the LORD.” | Number 14:28, ESV “And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all humanity together will see it. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.” | Isaiah 40:5, ESV “On that day the LORD will become King over all the earth – the LORD alone and His name alone.” | Zechariah 14:9, ESV “And blessed be His glorious name forever: and let the whole earth be filled with His glory; Amen, and Amen.” | Psalm 72:19, ESV*

It was always the purpose of the Eternal to fill this good earth with His glorious presence, as deep and as expansive ‘as the waters cover the sea’. Despite human failure and many, many detours in this story, God has declared that His purpose will not be thwarted. He will accomplish what He intended for His creation, even to [His own personal cost](#), as it turns out.

*“I declare the end from the beginning and ancient times from what is still to come. I say, ‘My purpose will stand, and all My good pleasure I will accomplish.’” | Isaiah 46:10, ESV*

## The Kingdom Of God

This glorious and absolute rule and reign of the wise and faithful king is what the New Testament terms the ‘*kingdom of God*’.

The gospel is the good news that in Jesus, who is both saviour and king, God is saving, rescuing, atoning, justifying, ruling, and reconciling people for the glory of His name and in pursuit of His purpose.

What many people think of as 'the gospel' – being 'saved' – is actually only just one aspect of a much larger story, *the full gospel* ('good news') story of God's will and purpose for the earth and how humanity is part of that.

*"To grasp the significance of the message of the kingdom in the ministry of Jesus, we can also resort to statistical analysis. The term basileia (kingdom) occurs 162 times in the New Testament and 121 of those are in the Synoptic Gospels where the preaching of Jesus is recorded. The formula "kingdom of God" or the "kingdom of heaven" occurs 104 times in the Gospels. This message is not only the inaugural message of Jesus and the focus of His great Sermon on the Mount, it is his final message. "After he had suffered, he also presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God" (Acts 1:3). The gospel of the kingdom includes the necessity of salvation since the very message begins with the call for repentance, but it goes beyond the call to salvation and includes the demand for kingdom-focused living. It insists that we are saved for a purpose." – SBC Life*

The kingdom of God is more than social justice or personal salvation. 'The kingdom of God' is the promise of God from the beginning to fill the earth with His glory, essentially, all of Himself, and to rule justly in the hearts and lives of all of humanity. It also includes the promise of total reconciliation with humanity; only made possible in Jesus (Ephesians 1:11-12, 1 Timothy 1:16-17, 2 Timothy 4:18, 1 Peter 4:11, Romans 11:36, Revelation 1:16).

# Heaven + Earth

God didn't just create humanity with purpose, He also created the earth with purpose. He cares deeply about what happens to this place we call home and all that He intended it to be.

A critical and essential reality of the kingdom of God includes its physicality. 'The kingdom' is not just an individual, spiritual, Christian *experience* but a literal reality that will be fully expressed and outworked *on the earth*.

Interestingly, intrinsic in the idea of 'kingdom' are the following five things: King + Rule + Realm + Law + Land. You can read more about these different aspects in the articles. '[The People Of The Kingdom](#)' and '[The Kingdom | Now, But Not Yet](#)'. However, the particular focus in this article is the reality of 'land' or physicality. This reality, when compared against many different passages in the Bible informs our understanding of what, or more specifically, where, this physical reality is intended to be.

Contrary to what many people may think, *going to heaven is not a Christian's final ending or God's promise*. Resurrection and *life* – heaven's own eternal life – on a regenerated and restored earth, is the hope for every [person of the kingdom](#).

*Earth* is the place where God's will is to be done (where His kingdom will be fully revealed) in the same way as it is in heaven (Matthew 6:10), *earth* is the intended inheritance of those who have been faithful, (Psalm 37:11, Matthew 5:5), *earth* is the place where peace and safety will finally reign supreme (Isaiah 2:4, Ezekiel 34:25) and where righteousness will take up residence (2 Peter 3:13), and *earth* is where all creation will finally be set free from its bondage and brought into the glorious freedom that God always intended for it (Romans 8:21).

*Earth* is the place where the curse of Eden will finally and completely be overthrown and God will return and take up residence amongst His people. Our long exile will be over.

*“And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying: “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man, and He will dwell with them. They will be His people, and God Himself will be with them as their God.” Revelation 21:3, BSB*

“As N.T Wright and other New Testament scholars have shown, it’s important to understand that kingdom terminology refers not to some faraway paradise filled with disembodied souls, but rather to the will and reign of God, unleashed into the world through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.” (Rachel Held Evans). N T Wright puts it this way: *“Jesus’ resurrection is the beginning of God’s new project not to snatch people away from earth to heaven but to colonize earth with the life of heaven. That, after all, is what the Lord’s Prayer is about.”*

The life of heaven – the “life and light of mankind” came to earth in the person of Jesus, shining brightly and giving hope in a damaged and disordered world. In Jesus, we can see the intention of God all along for His creation. In Jesus, all the fullness of God’s glory was displayed in human form and we can see the kind of life God has intended for us.

What God began in the resurrection of Jesus is what He intends to do for all of creation; to regenerate, to restore, and to fully dwell with His creation in all His glory.

The earth, renewed with heaven’s own life, is the epic conclusion to the story, and the final pages close with this promise: *“The angel showed me a river that was crystal clear, and its waters gave life. The river came from the throne where God and the Lamb were seated. Then it flowed down the middle of the city’s main street. On each side of the river are trees that grow a different kind of fruit each month of the year.*

*The fruit gives life, and the leaves are used as medicine to heal the nations.*

***God's curse will no longer be on the people of that city. He and the Lamb will be seated there on their thrones, and its people will worship God and will see Him face to face. God's name will be written on the foreheads of the people. Never again will night appear, and no one who lives there will ever need a lamp or the sun. The Lord God will be their light, and they will rule forever.*** (Revelation 22:1-5, CEV)

*"One day the veil will be lifted; earth and heaven will be one; Jesus will be personally present, and every knee will bow at his name; creation will be renewed; the dead will be raised; and God's new world will at last be in place, full of new prospects and possibilities." | N T Wright*

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**What happens after the end? Well, the short answer is *we don't know*. We're told so much in the Bible about God's purpose, His original intention for creation, and the lengths to which He has gone to get that story back on track. (Although, side-note, was it really ever truly off-track...?). We're also told how this particular story will conclude.**

**But what comes after? As it is written, "No eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him" (1 Corinthians 2:9). The great Christian author, C S Lewis, puts it this way: "All their life in this world and all their adventures had only been the cover and the title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story which no one on earth has read: which goes on for ever: in which every chapter is better than the one before." (The Last Battle)**

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# Fidelity In Friendship

Derived from the Latin word *fidēlis*, fidelity is the quality of being faithful, loyal, accurate, or true. And it's a quality essential to all authentic, interpersonal relationships.

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# The Kingdom | Now, But Not Yet

(Not a reader? Take a listen instead ↓)

The sovereignty and rule of God has always existed and will always exist ([Psalm 47:7](#), [1 Chronicles 29:11](#), [Exodus 15:18](#), [Psalm 103:19](#)).

He is Almighty God, maker of the earth, sovereign over all, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. He alone claims the title of the One and Only God and that there is none like Him in all the earth. The Psalmist declares the wonder and worthiness of this Eternal God, who is clothed in light, who stretches out the heavens like a tent, and who walks on the waves of the sea (Psalm 104:2, Job 9:8). All of creation bows in obeisance to His majesty, for all things owe their existence to Him (Psalm 104:30, Psalm 6:4, Psalm 96:11, Luke 19:40).

He is the God of promise, at whose Word the universe came into being and whose Word will never return to Him void, not accomplishing the purpose for which it was sent (Genesis 1:3, Isaiah 55:11). His loving devotion endures forever. He is faithful, true, just, and all glorious (Psalm 136:3, 1 Timothy 1:17).

His sovereignty is over and above all other kingdoms and His rule absolute (Isaiah 37:16, 1 Timothy 6:15). All the earth is His and everything that is therein (Psalm 24:1). This glorious and absolute rule and reign of the only wise and faithful King is what the New Testament terms the *'kingdom of God'*.

## **In The Beginning**

This is the reality of the story in the beginning. Affirming God's sovereignty gives shape and purpose to the role for which humanity was created, that is, to rule wisely and well on behalf of earth's Sovereign.

*"Then God said, "Let us make humans in our image, according to our likeness. They will rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, the livestock, the whole earth, and the creatures that crawl on the earth." | Genesis 1:26, CSB*

*"Yet as surely as I live and as surely as the whole earth is filled with the glory of the LORD." | Numbers 14:21, ESV*

Adam and Eve were given the authority and privilege of ruling over God's good creation, filling all the earth with His glory and accomplishing His purpose (Genesis 1:26). However, instead of partnering with God, they choose to undertake this rule on their own terms, enacting their own will instead of the will of the Eternal One.

As a result, they experienced disruption in their relationship with the King, and the consequence of their disobedience was

catastrophic. The evil of sin entered God's good world, and would eventually spread like a dark, cancerous mass across the surface of the earth, setting in motion the destructive cycle the world has been subject to ever since.

Another kingdom was willed into existence, the kingdom of this world; earthly, transient, and dispensing death instead of life. It's ruled over by the spirit of corruption; where envy, murder, anger, and strife find footing and flourish. It's a dominion of darkness, from which there is no escape.

Every human is born into this kingdom, enslaved to the ruler of this world. We're born physically alive but spiritually dead. Without our spiritual connection to the King of all the earth, we're nothing more than 'dead men walking', living in darkness and far from the eternal life God intended for us.

## **Theocracy, Monarchy, Liberation + Redemption**

For centuries, God's story of liberation and redemption – part of His 'Kingdom Mission' – has been enacted in the history of the world. He wants to save and rescue His creation from this dominion of darkness, in which labour is futile and the only outcome is death.

God is for us; He loves us and wants to reconcile and transform us so that we can live the life of purpose for which He created us.

*“For the creation eagerly waits with anticipation for God's children to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to futility – not willingly, but because of him who subjected it – in the hope that the creation itself will also be set free from the bondage to decay into the glorious freedom of God's children.” Romans 8:19-21, Christian Standard Bible*

This liberation and redemption was brought into sharp relief



firstly by covenants made to [Abraham](#), through whom God promises to bless all the world ([Genesis 12:1-3](#), [Genesis 13:14-17](#), [Genesis 15:1-21](#), [Genesis 17:1-11](#)).

Abraham's twelve sons and their descendants, those who came to be known as the nation of Israel, were further witnesses to God's promises; the people through whom all the world would come to learn of the One and Only Sovereign over all. God ruled His people at this time through *theocracy*, a system of law and priesthood, and the intention was that the surrounding nations would look upon His chosen people, blessed and ruled over by God, and turn to worship Him also (Isaiah 41:20, 43:10).

The nation of Israel struggled with their unique and privileged identity. They would worship and serve God for a season and then, when things were going well, they would become complacent and selfish, turning aside to worship gods made of wood and stone, like the nations around them. They abandoned their covenant with their King, over and over again, but He did not abandon them (Judges 17:6, Jeremiah 9:6).

Reestablishing His sovereignty over their lives, He reiterates His promises of liberation and freedom, through His just and righteous rulership, to the famous shepherd-boy-turned-king, [David of Bethlehem](#). He makes David king to rule over His people, and promises that, through him and his family, He intends for all nations to find blessing and peace. Ruling by way of *monarchy*, the nation of Israel was to be once again a blessing to all the world and witnesses of the Creator and King of all the earth (2 Samuel 7:8-12).

The tides of human history rose and fell. Israel's fortunes ebbed and flowed with these tides, experiencing periods of glorious peace and stability, as under King Solomon, David's son, but, also, periods of terrible wickedness and decline. In the final days of the monarchy, Israel demonstrated a complete deterioration in both faith and witness until, finally, they

were enslaved and forcibly removed from their land under Babylonian conquest and occupation (Psalm 78:10-11, Jeremiah 32:30, 2 Kings 17:18-20).

The final book of the Old Testament, [Malachi](#), offers a glimpse into the hearts of those who had been specially chosen by God as His witnesses. Even with the perspective of their glorious history and events like the Great Exodus from Egypt, they had completely given in to apathy. They had neglected God's promises; and spiritual lethargy and a corrupt priesthood had spread unfaithfulness, cancer-like, throughout the nation (Malachi 1-4, Ezekiel 21:27).

God reigned still but His people had long since rejected Him. The glory of His presence departed from them and would not return again for over 400 years (Ezekiel 10:15-19).

## **I Am**

It is into this vast length of silence that the King finally speaks, announcing His impending arrival into the story of not just Israel, but the entire world (John 1:19-23,28 cp Isaiah 40:3-10). His rule and sovereignty and indeed, His purpose – that all the earth be filled with His glory – was now to be fulfilled through *christocracy*; a system of rulership in the name of His Son, the Christ, the Messiah.

*“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone....for to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.” | [Isaiah 9:6-7, ESV](#)*

The message was clear. God was still King – He has always been King – and His reign, fractured early on in human history (Genesis 2), was going to be properly reinstated through His Son, Jesus. The Word of God had been sent out and it would not return to Him void. God's kingdom, advancing for centuries, was now being planted right in the heart of hostile territory, ground that, in the past had not only been dangerous to the King's messengers but, in many cases, fatal (Matthew 21:27).

[The Word became human, like us](#). Anyone who saw him saw all the radiance of God's glory; the exact representation of His being and the imprint of His nature ([Hebrews 1:3](#), [John 14:10-11](#)). The glory of the King had returned to take up residence amongst His people.

Jesus, who was in the very nature of God, emptied himself and took the form of a servant, made in the likeness of humans that sin ([Philippians 2:6-7](#)). He was God-With-Us. who became the representative of us all and in his human body, the war against the ruler of this world would be waged and won.

In Jesus Christ, it would become possible for all families of the earth, of any nationality, to find liberation, redemption and experience the righteous rulership of the King of Kings.

[The gospel](#) was the announcement of good news that Jesus, God's only Son, is both Lord and King of the kingdom and that, in him, God is saving, rescuing, atoning, justifying, ruling, and reconciling people for the glory of His name, all in pursuit of His purpose. The work that God had been at for a long time now culminated in a tiny, obscure town in the middle of the demoralised and Roman-occupied nation of Israel.

*Earth in shadow, restlessly hold.  
Labour's waiting, in silent hope.  
For the promise, it longs to know, what heaven holds.  
Then the angels, in holy haste.  
Lift their anthem, your Saviour lays,*

*in a manger, in humble form.*

*Your King is born.*

### ***Prince of Heaven | Hillsong Worship***

## **Repent, For The Kingdom Of Heaven Is Hand**

When Jesus arrived on the scene, he went and resided in the land of Naphtali, the 'way beyond the sea', so that the words spoken so long ago by Isaiah the prophet might be fulfilled: *"the people dwelling in darkness have seen a great light, and for those dwelling in the region and shadow of death, on them a light has dawned"* (Matthew 4:15-16, ESV). The implications are clearly profound, with deeply spiritual overtones. The light and life of humanity had finally arrived and the hope of liberation and redemption would be realised.

Then, he began preaching, saying *"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. Repent of your willfulness, your self-governing, your persistence in finding identity in false gods who cannot save and who do not, in reality, rule or even exist. Repent and turn to the One who rules heaven and earth, the maker and creator of all things, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords."*

*"To grasp the significance of the message of the kingdom in the ministry of Jesus, we can also resort to statistical analysis. The term basileia (kingdom) occurs 162 times in the New Testament and 121 of those are in the Synoptic Gospels where the preaching of Jesus is recorded. The formula "kingdom of God" or the "kingdom of heaven" occurs 104 times in the Gospels. This message is not only the inaugural message of Jesus and the focus of His great Sermon on the Mount, it is his final message. "After he had suffered, he also presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God" ([Acts 1:3](#)). | SBC Life*

Jesus demonstrated the power and reality of the Kingdom of Heaven, through the miraculous – evidence that he was Lord of all; healing sickness, forgiving sins, multiplying bread and fishes, walking on water...raising the dead (Matthew 15:30, Matthew 14:13-33, Luke 8:49-56).

He qualified what the Kingdom of Heaven looked like; a kingdom defined by mercy and love, failure and forgiveness, exile and homecoming. The citizens of this kingdom, he said, were otherworldly; children of light and salt, whose transformed lives of goodness and steadfast confidence would witness to the glory and power of this kingdom (Matthew 5:2-11, 13-14, Luke 15:11-32).

He stated plainly the way to this kingdom; by believing in him and being born again of water and of spirit, further expanded on throughout his ministry as referring to the representative death in baptism and [regeneration of new life by the Spirit](#) (John 3:5, 16, John 8:24).

He taught that the kingdom was not in some far-off place, out of sight, but here, right now, in their midst (Luke 17:21).

*“The kingdom, Jesus taught, is right here – present yet hidden, immanent yet transcendent. It is at hand – among us and beyond us, now but not yet. The kingdom of heaven, he said, belongs to the poor, the meek, the peacemakers, the merciful, and those who hunger and thirst for God. It advances not through power and might, but through missions of mercy, kindness, and humility. In this kingdom, many who are last will be first and many who are first will be last. The rich don’t usually get it, Jesus said, but children always do. This is a kingdom whose savior arrives not on a warhorse, but a donkey, not through triumph and conquest, but through death and resurrection. This kingdom is the only kingdom that will last.” | Rachel Held Evans, 1981-2019*

Other places in scripture, particularly the writings of Paul

the Apostle, affirm that the revelation of God's original plan of creation, the redeeming, recreating, and re-ordering of all things, together with the reconciliation of creation to its Creator, all find their true and most meaningful significance in Jesus Christ [the King], the Word-Made-Flesh (Ephesians 1:3-10; Colossians 1:15-20; Hebrews 1:1-3; Romans 16:25-26; 1 Corinthians 8:6).

The invisible God, the King of all the earth, was now revealing Himself visibly through His Word-Made-Flesh, in whose hands the world and all that is therein, has been placed and who is Lord of all (John 3:35; Acts 2:36, Ephesians 1:10; Colossians 1:20).

## **The Church Of Christ Is Born**

*“When Jesus came preaching the Kingdom of God, he was preaching much more than personal salvation for the individual. He was preaching “a new day in an old story” – the story of God the King – and God as king in King Jesus. The one gospel is about Jesus the Lord, the King, the Messiah and the saviour. This is the story that alone makes sense of Jesus’ choice of the word ‘kingdom’ to explain the mission of God to the world.” (Scot McKnight)*

When people give [allegiance to Jesus the King](#), they are transferred out of the dominion of darkness and into the kingdom of light, the Kingdom of God that has always existed and will always exist (Colossians 1:13). To be born again is to be [regenerated](#); the termination of people of the old creation, people enslaved to the ruler of this world, and the germination of them in the new creation with the divine life (Ephesians 4:17-24).

All of the darkness, the failure, the chaos, and ruin of our life is surrendered to the King, who erases it in the water of baptism (Matthew 3:15, Matthew 10:28, Acts 22:16, 1 Peter

3:21, Colossians 2:12, Mark 16:16, Matthew 28:19-20, Ephesians 4:4-6). Light enters the darkness. New life is ignited in us and the new human is reborn.

*“The gospel of the kingdom includes the necessity of salvation since the very message begins with the call for repentance, but it goes beyond the call to salvation and includes the demand for kingdom-focused living. It insists that we are saved for a purpose.” – SBC Life*

These collective ‘citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven’ are the community of believers that the New Testament calls the church, whose guiding and functioning principle is simply to incarnate Christ, the King. They are his witnesses, empowered and commissioned by him to represent him and the sovereign reign and rule of God to all the world (Acts 8:12-16,36-38, Luke 24:47).

*“You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” | Acts 1:8. NIV*

*“Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” Matthew 28:19, NIV*

## **‘Kingdom’: King + Rule + Realm + Law + Land**

1. A kingdom is a people governed by a **king**. In truth, there is only one kingdom that reigns over all, whose king is God. He has always been king, ruling firstly through *theocracy*, then by *monarchy* and now through *christocracy*. The kingdom of God has gone through many phases and a reasonable chunk of the Old Testament is dedicated to the telling of this story. You can read more about this in the article [‘Jesus, King Of The](#)

## World.

2. The king must **rule** over the kingdom. In biblical language, this is always firstly redemptive, and then secondly through wise governing. As Scot McKnight, historian of early Christianity, theologian, and author comments, *"kingdom redemption' is the work of God, through Jesus, and by virtue of his sin-solving cross and new-life creating resurrection, unleashed to those who are needy because of their sins. Any kind of "redemptive" activity that does not deal with sin, that does not find strength in the cross, that does not see the primary agent as Jesus, and that does not see it all as God's new creation life unleashed is not kingdom redemption, even if it is liberating and good and for the common good."*
3. There has to be **people** for there to be a kingdom. In the Old Testament (OT), this was the nation/kingdom of Israel. But Israel, like a tree, has deep roots and grafted-in branches, seen in the New Testament (NT) to be the church (Romans 11:1-28).
4. A kingdom must have a governing **law**. In OT times, this was achieved through the Torah, also known as the Law of Moses. When Jesus arrived, scripture takes care to tell us that he didn't destroy this law but fulfilled it completely. By his life, death and resurrection, a greater law came into being – the Law of Cruciformity; loving as Jesus loved. Jesus stated that the entire law of the new covenant, the law which governs people of the kingdom, is summarised in these words "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind. Love others as much as you love yourself" (Matthew 22:37-40).
5. A kingdom must have a **land**. In the past, this has been, at various phases, in literal places like the Garden of Eden or the land of Israel. But right now, 'the land' is wherever the church (the community of kingdom people) takes up physical space. Wherever kingdom people reside, God, in Jesus, rules. One day, this 'tree of the



kingdom' will fill all the earth and God's rule and glory will be seen in all things – as He intended from the beginning (Numbers 14:21, Habakkuk 2:14, Matthew 6:10, Revelation 21: 1, 4, Matthew 13:31-32, Mark 4:3-32).

*“[This] good news is as epic as it gets, with universal theological implications, and yet the Bible tells it from the perspective of fishermen and farmers, pregnant ladies and squirmy kids. This story about the nature of God and God's relationship to humanity smells like mud and manger hay and tastes like salt and wine...It is the biggest story and the smallest story all at once – the great quest for the One Ring and the quiet friendship of Frodo and Sam.” | Rachel Held Evans*

## **What About God's Promises To Israel?**

Jesus was [born King](#), destined to inherit the ancient throne of David, his royal ancestor through his human descent. He will rule wisely and well, not just over Israel but over the whole world. Not only was he the descendant of King David and therefore the legitimate heir to the throne of Israel, he was also the Son of God and therefore the promised saviour and King of the world. The confluence of these two aspects is no coincidence and we can only be astonished at how God chose to bring all these things together to achieve His purpose.

God has in no way forgotten His promises to individuals or to groups of people and implicit in that are literal promises to the people of Israel, elements of which still await fulfillment ([Isaiah 52:7-9](#), [Luke 2:25](#), [Acts 26:6](#)).

*“And he shall set up a banner for the nations, and shall assemble the outcasts of Israel, and gather together the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the*

earth.” [Isaiah 11:12, NASB](#)

*“But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times.” – [Micah 5:2, NIV](#)*

Jesus left his [fledgling church](#), those first disciples who represented the expansive and diverse family that God would build through him, with a promise: that He would one day return, to take them to himself, to restore and renew all the earth, to overthrow all the different manifestations of the kingdom of this world, and to fully establish the Kingdom of God, filling the earth with His glory. Those who confess him as Lord, Saviour and Christ [King] will be saved, including those from the nation of Israel (John 14:3, Acts 1:10-11, Romans 10:9, Titus 2:13, Revelation 1:7, Romans 11:14, Ephesians 1:10, Revelation 5:13).

When he returns, *to bring salvation* to those who eagerly wait for him (Hebrews 9:28), Israel, the people who had been God’s witnesses, and indeed all the peoples of the earth, will hear the final entreaty of the King of Kings: *“Turn to me and be saved, all you ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is no other.”*

*“By myself I have sworn, my mouth has uttered in all integrity a word that will not be revoked: Before me every knee will bow; by me every tongue will swear. They will say of me, ‘In the LORD alone are deliverance and strength.’”* *“All who have raged against Him will come to Him and be put to shame. But all the descendants of Israel will find deliverance in the LORD and will make their boast in Him.”* | [Isaiah 45:22-25, NIV](#)

One day, all the earth will be filled with the glory and

sovereignty of the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords and God will once again dwell with His people. *“The kingdom of the world will become the Kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ, and He will reign forever and ever”* (Revelation 11:15).

What God began in the [resurrection of Jesus](#) is what He intends to do for all of creation; to regenerate, to restore, and to fully dwell with His creation in all His glorious sovereignty.

*“One day the veil will be lifted; earth and heaven will be one; Jesus will be personally present, and every knee will bow at his name; creation will be renewed; the dead will be raised; and God’s new world will at last be in place, full of new prospects and possibilities.”* | N T Wright

*“In the days of those kings, the God of the heavens will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed, and this kingdom will not be left to another people. It will crush all these kingdoms and bring them to an end, but will itself endure forever.”* | Daniel 2:44, Christian Standard Bible

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**The kingdom is described in the Bible in several ways, such as ‘the kingdom of heaven’ (the gospel of Matthew), ‘the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ’ (2 Peter 1:11), ‘the kingdom of Christ and God’ (Ephesians 5:5) and ‘the kingdom of God’ (the gospels of Mark and Luke). You can read more about its people in the article [‘The People Of The Kingdom’](#). You may also enjoy [this podcast](#), produced by The Bible Project: Jesus and the Kingdom of God.**

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# New Beginnings

God is all about new beginnings. We see the story of humanity starting out in Genesis with a new beginning; light and order being formed out of darkness and chaos.

And we see this theme of light and order echoed in the [new beginning that Christians find in Jesus](#). In 2 Corinthians 5:17, Paul the Apostle confirms that *“if anyone is in Christ, they have become a new person, a ‘new creation’. The old life is gone, a new life has begun. And all of this is a gift from God, who brought us back to himself through Christ.”* (NLT)

This is, of course, one of the key aspects of the gospel message of good news.

## The Gospel Initiative

In the beginning, God made humans in His image, to be in close, harmonious relationship with Him – His family – and be His perfect image-bearers on this earth. But the first humans, Adam and Eve, sinned and in doing so, caused damage and disruption to the relationship between God and humanity. They were no longer able to be God’s perfect image-bearers, as He had purposed for them, and were now subject to mortality and death, which would separate them from God for eternity.

Much of the Bible’s message is subsequently taken up in telling the story of God’s efforts to address the problem of sin, and its consequent outcome, on our behalf. God began this firstly through a single man [Abraham](#), in whom He promises to bless the whole world (Genesis 12:1-3), then through a chosen people, the nation of Israel, who were Abraham’s descendants (Isaiah 43:10), and then finally, through His perfect Son, Jesus Christ, the greatest of all Abraham’s descendants (Revelation 3:14).

No one who came before Jesus was able to live a perfect life.

Then Jesus arrived on the scene, a new kind of human, who fulfilled God's law and lived the perfect life as God's ideal image bearer. He willingly gave himself on behalf of the world as [a perfect sacrifice for sin](#). He died on the cross for the sins of the world (1 John 2:2) and was raised to life again three days later in a glorious new beginning (John 20:16-18). He was the first of many whom God promises will be just like him, if they confess Jesus as Lord and saviour (1 Corinthians 15:20-23). By [being baptised](#) "into Jesus", a person becomes a new kind of human – "a new creation"- and a whole new life begins.

This invitation to confess Jesus as Lord, to repent of our sins and to trust in Jesus' sacrifice for our forgiveness, committing to a new life 'in him', following him in all things, is offered to everyone! (2 Peter 3:9). God doesn't want [anyone to be lost](#) – so if you are convicted in your heart of sin and want to be baptised into Jesus, don't hesitate! (If you'd like to speak more about baptism with someone, I'd love to chat! You can get in touch via my contact details [here](#)).

Once a person has made [a commitment](#) to a new life by being baptised, they become part of the family of God. It's a new start, a new beginning, with a whole new life ahead of them.

But, as with new year's resolutions, new beginnings have a way of losing their gloss and the excitement and determination can begin to fade. The Christian life is full of ups and downs and we can lose our passion, become discouraged, or forget the reasons why we even chose this life to begin with.

There are a couple of great examples of new beginnings found in the Bible that I believe can help us in this Christian life – whether we're just starting out or whether we've been at it for a while.

# The Story Of Ruth

The first example is [the story of Ruth](#). You may already be familiar with the background of Ruth's story. She was a widowed Moabite woman, married to an Israelite man who had relocated to Moab ten years earlier. Upon his death, she chose to leave her country of birth and travel back to Israel, with her mother-in-law, both of them with little possessions and a very uncertain future. Her "new beginning", following on from the death of her husband, brother-in-law and father-in-law certainly looked bleak and her circumstances were very reduced. Her position in Israelite society would be expected to be marginal at best – the Moabites had been cursed in earlier times for their opposition and hostility to Israel (Numbers 24:9), and naturalised Moabites were forever excluded from the congregation of Israel (Deuteronomy 23:3).

We might initially look at her story and assume she was to be simply an inconsequential outsider to the plan of God, peripheral to His purpose. Her 'new beginning' certainly didn't shine with the kind of hope and 'homecoming' we would expect.

Our lives can sometimes look like Ruth's story and we may struggle to see through the reduced circumstances of our current moment, viewing them as the end rather than the beginning.

But God loves a good plot twist. When we think things are hopeless and we cannot see a way through, He confounds us, perfectly weaving our own personal stories into the greatest story of all. What can seem like the end is really a different kind of beginning and those circumstances that seem hopeless are actually leading us to something beyond our expectations.

**If you're in a season that feels like the end rather than the beginning, don't despair and feel that God has given up on your life. He hasn't.**

If you're struggling with addictions, with issues in your relationships, with spiritual drift, or financial strain, don't feel that these things signal the end. God is still there and He is still working. You just need to believe that. The only thing that Ruth really had to go on was faith – faith that the end of her story would be worth the wait – and that's all you need too, even if your faith is only the size of a mustard seed!

Believe that God, who is Himself the beginning and the end of all things, is still intimately involved in your story, even if you're struggling to see the next chapter. The prophet Malachi tells us that the names of those whose lives honour God are specially written in His book – and that they are God's treasured possession. God's heart towards them is as a father of his son (Malachi 3:16). If all you take from today is this: remember you are greatly loved and God is for you!

## **The Story Of Nehemiah**

The second example is the story of Nehemiah and the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem. After being in exile for many years, the people of Israel had been allowed to return and had finally begun rebuilding the temple and the walls of Jerusalem. This occurred under the leadership of firstly men called Zerubbabel and Ezra, and finally, a man called Nehemiah, who was cupbearer to King Artaxerxes, King of Persia. It was a time of great hope and fearless faith.

Rebuilding took place in three waves, with the building of the walls coming last, in the third wave under Nehemiah's leadership. This endeavour began with singleness of purpose and a spirit of reformation but after only 26 days into the project, people became discouraged and wanted to give up. Only 26 days in! Less than four weeks! They had become overwhelmed by fatigue, frustration, opposition, and fear.

Pressures from without, burnout from within, unreasonable

expectations, and fear of failure. Many Christians feel all these emotions and challenges, probably many times, at different stages in their Christian life. As with the people in Nehemiah's time, Christians need to be reminded of their purpose and reinvigorated with a sense of mission!

*"If people can't see what God is doing, they stumble all over themselves" | Proverbs 29:18, MSG*

**If you're in a season of discouragement and feel like you're drifting or have lost your sense of purpose, this message is for you. Do not give up!**

Although our purpose and mission may look different today from theirs back then, it's all part of the great story that God is telling. And we need to remind ourselves of this regularly, to maintain our focus and vision. New beginnings, even ones that start with passion and fearlessness, soon become simply 'the job at hand', and we need to be mindful of all the pressures, emotions, and challenges that come with it. ***It can be easy to lose sight of the fact that we're involved in the greatest, most radical project in all of history!*** What we do is important and *does* have value, even if we can't quite see through to the other side of the project right now.

The message from the story of Nehemiah is to make time to regularly step aside from everything that's going on in our lives and remind ourselves of the story that God is telling, and that we're now part of.

Humanity was always created with purpose, to be God's perfect image-bearers and the scope of this is so much greater than you or I, in our current moment. Remind yourself of the importance of the things you do every day, in pursuit of this purpose and mission, whether small or great. And realise that every contribution you make, in your ministry to God, has eternal significance.



How do you do this? Well, here's some ideas. Take 10 minutes out to read your favourite Bible chapter. Haven't got one? Make it your mission to find one. Have a coffee with a friend. Catch up with a mate after work. Invite another family around for dinner and reconnect over the good news in Jesus. Listen to a Christian podcast. Take a half-hour out for your own personal worship session with all your favourite songs – or make it bigger and include others! Take some quiet moments to think about your personal skills and gifts and consider what you can bring to ministry in your church. Start a new Christian book. Volunteer your time to help those more disadvantaged than yourself. Have a heart-to-heart conversation with God.

How about setting a reminder in your phone, in your diary, calendar, or notebook, and, using the story of Nehemiah as an example, remind yourself at least every 26 days to 'check-in and show up'. Go on, do it right now!

## **The New Covenant**

Finally, I want to remind us of what has made all of this possible – the new covenant that came about through the death of Jesus Christ.

*“In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you.’ | Luke 22:20, NIV*

*“Because of this oath, Jesus has become the guarantee of a better covenant.” | Hebrews 7:22, NIV*

*“How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God! For this reason Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may*

*receive the promised eternal inheritance—now that He has died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant.” – Hebrews 9:14-15 | NIV*

God has personally dealt with the human condition of sin through the giving of His only Son. There is forgiveness of sins to all through this new covenant. By his blood and in his name, in his freedom we are free! There is no new beginning as awesome as the new beginning we find in Jesus Christ!

Amen!

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# **An Easter Tale**

**(Not a reader? Take a listen instead ↓)**

Let me tell you a tale.

It starts in a garden, long, long ago.

And what a garden it was – literally, a paradise on earth. A place of grandeur and beauty, filled with trees of every description and with leaves in every shade of green, soaring upwards toward a sky so blue it hurts the eyes.

The sound of a great river can be heard flowing through this garden paradise, a source of life and refreshing for all the living things that call it home. In the still shade of the trees, quiet pools of deep emerald green can be found, surrounded by rocks and ferns. If you listen carefully, you

can hear the sound of animals scuttering through the brush, and, overheard, birds sing joyfully in the trees, lifting a chorus of praise to the One who created them.

A perfect garden; beautiful, unspoiled, glorious.

If the tale had ended here, it would be a short one, perhaps, but satisfying nonetheless.

But this is not the end of the story.

Come a little closer, deeper into the heart of the garden and you will see two trees, shimmering softly in the golden sunlight. Laden with ripe, juicy fruit, they're the most beautiful trees you've ever seen. You watch as a woman, standing underneath the long, slender boughs, reaches out her hand and plucks a piece of fruit from one. She passes it to the man standing beside her. Reaching out again, she takes another and, as they both bite into the fruit, you see movement in the branches as the sinuous form of a serpent winds itself up and away into the leaves of the tree.

Juice trickles down their chins and drips onto their bare feet. You long to join them, sharing in the delicious fruit and in a moment that seems bathed in the golden light of pleasure and contentment.

Yet, you suddenly sense a change in the air. You can see that the two humans can feel it too. Their expressions change and the sudden heaviness you feel is reflected in the set of their shoulders. Emotions chase across their faces. Discovery, understanding, disappointment, shame...

You hear a voice. A question. Even watching from a distance, you feel the need to hide, to shrink, and turn your face away in discomfort.

*"What have you done?"*

You listen closely as the conversation unfolds.

A punishment; life ending in death.

A promise; death ending in life.

The conversation concludes with words spoken with great love but also great sadness *"By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return.*

*And now, you must leave."*

A sharp metallic scent fills the air, new and unexpected in this place. You turn your gaze and see that a lamb has been slaughtered, its blood soaking into the ground. A mournful cry passes through your body, rising up towards heaven, and, with a deep heaviness, you realise that all of creation is echoing your cry, a keening filled with pain and loss.

Something terrible has happened in this garden. A darkness is falling in Eden. A great evil has entered paradise and Death close on its heels.

The two humans move eastward, clothed in the skin of the lamb, and then pass beyond the borders of the garden, out into wildlands they've never seen before. A flaming sword is placed at the entrance to the garden, turning every which way so that it appears to form a fiery cross. Shimmering creatures stand on either side of the sword, guarding the way back to what lies at the heart of the garden; the abundant and eternal life of God.

This is a tragedy too great to bear, a terrible price to pay, and yet you cannot look away. What did the voice mean, life springing from death? Is all lost? Surely there is still hope?

Centuries pass. The darkness only grows deeper and heavier.

The whole world lies under the power of the evil one and the heart of humanity has become hardened and sick. A long silence, nearly 400 years, has passed since anyone has heard

even the voice of God. Hope seems lost.

But this is not the end of the story.

Under a star-sprinkled sky in a small middle-eastern town, shepherds are out in the fields watching over their flocks. It's census time and the town is filled to overflowing with travellers from all over the nation. The fields are the quietest place to be right now, and the shepherds are welcoming the reprieve from the thronging crowds.

Suddenly a great light appears all around them, illuminating the fields for miles in every direction. A voice speaks aloud. *"Good news of great joy for all people! Your saviour is born!"*

Salvation! Hope! The shepherds know what these words mean. The words of the promise have been passed down, in hallowed whispers, through every generation since the beginning of time itself. One day, the saviour will come. One day, the way back to the garden will be opened again. One day we will go home.

The life and light of humanity was appearing, at long last. Light was piercing the thick gloom, shining in the darkness and now they knew the truth and a promise realised, that the darkness will not overcome.

But when? And how?

The ruler of this world has a foothold in every corner and many are enslaved to his bidding. The child must be kept safe, hidden in plain sight in a small, non-descript town, thought to be of little worth, until the time is right. Not even his own family would know the truth of who he is. Not yet.

Seasons come and go. The moon waxes and wanes. Time passes.

The child is now a man, fully grown, and full of grace and truth. One day soon he will wage war against the kingdoms of this world; one by one they will fall at his feet and he will stand victorious, the triumphant conqueror and saviour of

humanity.

And, even now, you think that the moment must surely have arrived. You find yourself standing in another garden, known as "the oil press", due, most likely, to the presence of the young olive trees growing in abundance all around. The ground is rocky under your feet and the moon bright overhead.

A small band of men lie asleep and, as you come closer, you see that the man is a little way off from the sleeping men, kneeling down with his hands clasped in prayer.

You can sense the great weight and desperate solitude that lies upon him; sorrow is clearly etched across his features and, as you watch, great drops of sweat fall from his brow, soaking into the ground like blood.

The sound of footfalls and the murmur of voices can suddenly be heard floating on the still night air. A crowd of men draws close, some who look to be perhaps priests of the city, others of more humble occupation, all carrying swords and clubs. The man and his friends, now roused from sleep, stand waiting.

The leader of the crowd steps forward and kisses the man's cheek in greeting and, all at once, the rest of the crowd moves forward, as one, to seize the man, a signal having clearly been given.

Chaos erupts, a sword swings wildly and a man screams, clutching at the bleeding side of his head where moments before his ear had been. Then, suddenly, his ear miraculously reappears, reattached and healed, and the crowd falls away astonished and afraid. You can hear the man sternly reprimanding the one in whose hand the sword is found.

*"Put your sword away, for all who take the sword will die by the sword."*

You are confused and suddenly afraid. This is not how you

expected this to go. You want to run away and, turning your gaze, you see that the small band of followers that had come with the man have done just that.

He is left alone, surrounded by a crowd who are at once afraid of him but also enraged by him. Their hate for him is palpable, and envy and violence are thick in the air.

They step forward again in sudden decision; the man is seized, unresisting, his hands are bound, and, as he is led away to be tried, you want to weep. All those years of obscurity and safety, all the hope of the world resting in this man, and even he was no match for the dark evil in the world.

You hope for a miracle but you have seen what men can do.

The sun finally rises, illuminating a terrible sight. The man is struggling up a hill, the weight of a timber crossbeam pressing down on his bruised shoulders and back. He has been viciously beaten and his back is covered in deep welts, A rough circle of small, gnarly branches, fashioned to resemble a crown, has been jammed upon his head. The sharp barbs of the thorns cut deeply into his flesh, blood dripping down his neck and onto the wood of the crossbeam across his shoulders.

At the summit, the man is unceremoniously stripped naked, his arms are forced apart, bound to either side of the timber crossbeam, and heavy, iron nails are hammered through his wrists and into the timber.

The crossbeam is raised high above the gathering crowd, the man sucking in shuddering breaths with each jostle, and attached to a large, upright post already fixed in place. The post, stained with darkened streaks, tells the terrible history of this place, and, as the man's ankles are hammered to the upright, fresh blood flows, joining the old.

You want to turn away, you cannot bear to look any longer on the horror and humiliation, but you cannot. It seems as if the

whole world's gaze must surely be turned towards this sight, forced to give witness to the deprivation and evil endured by this man.

You can taste misery and guilt, like sawdust in your mouth and feel a terrible clawing in the pit of your stomach.

At about 3 o'clock in the afternoon, the man dies. The crowd, who came at first for sport, are now deeply shaken by what they have seen, and return to their homes full of sorrow and contrition. A Roman centurion standing nearby raises his voice, surely in protest of what has taken place. "*This*", he exclaims, "*was an innocent man.*" You, too, lift your voice in agreement but it is lost on the wind.

Yes. A perfect human, good and true, and all the hope of the world rested in him. An innocent man but also now a dead man.

There is nothing more that can be done.

The man's body is taken down from the cross, wrapped in a linen shroud and placed in a newly cut tomb; he is the first to rest in this place. A stone is rolled across the entrance and the long-hoped-for saviour of the world is left alone, in the still darkness of the grave.

But this is not the end of the story.

A soft breeze is blowing as the first streaks of dawn creep over the distant horizon. A bird sings sweetly from a branch overhead and the grass is cool under your feet as you wander through this peaceful place.

You are in yet another garden and, as you draw closer, you realise you are near to the place where the man's body had been laid. You can hear voices, the low, intimate conversation of a man and a woman, and, as the path rounds a corner, you see them standing together beneath the trees, close but not touching. The woman has been crying, you can see her cheeks



are wet with tears, but, strangely, her eyes are shining not with sorrow but instead with joy.

She turns suddenly and brushes past you, breaking into a run and is quickly lost to sight. Only the man remains.

And now you can his face clearly and you draw in a sharp breath, hope suddenly fluttering inside your chest; it cannot be!

For you saw this man betrayed, beaten, brutally executed, buried...not three days past. You saw the light of the world, condemned and put to death and yet here he stands before you, alive.

Radiant. Restored. Resurrected.

*"I am the Alpha and the Omega" he says, his voice warm with feeling, "the beginning and the end. The one who is and who was and who is to come. Fear not.*

*I am the first and the last. I died and, behold, I am alive forever."*

He smiles and now a sob catches in your throat.

*"I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though they die, yet will they live. I have swallowed up death in glorious victory and all those in me will be made alive too, an abundant and eternal life.*

*Do you believe?"*

You nod, scarcely daring to trust what your heart knows to be true. The curse *has* been overcome, the promise *has* been fulfilled. *"Life to death, death to life, like seeds, like soil, like stars."\**

*"In this world, you will have trouble" the man continues "but take heart! I have overcome the world.*

*It was prophesied that I, the Christ, should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in my name to all nations, beginning in this place.*

*And now, dear heart, go, and tell the world the good news.*

***I am risen!"***

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**Genesis 3:19, 1 John 5:19, Malachi 1:1, Luke 2:10, John 1:14, Luke 22:44, Mark 15:25, John 20: 18, Revelation 1:17, Revelation 22:12, John 11:25, 1 Corinthians 15:22, John 16:33, Luke 24: 44-46, Matthew 28:19-20**

**\*quote by author Rachel Held Evans (1981-2019)**

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## **Judging // Discerning**

It seems to me that it has become increasingly difficult to speak into many issues or situations that the church faces today; not because the Bible is silent, not because the church doesn't have or hasn't held a historical position on a matter, and not because we, as Christians, don't know *what we ought to be doing*. Rather, we are feeling pressed into silence, in many instances, simply on the basis of one little verse found at the beginning of Matthew 7; "*Judge not, that you be not judged*".

This verse, plucked from Matthew's gospel, thrown around *ad voluntatem* by Christians and non-Christians alike, and often applied wildly out of context, is causing widespread paralysis for many Christians and indeed the church, preventing us from

being able to affirm and proclaim the reality that Christian life calls us to.

Afraid of being labeled 'judgy', 'divisive', or 'self-righteous', we're clamming up about things we really should be vocal about, choosing silence over sincerity. We're focused on preaching love and acceptance (both good things, by the way), but we're failing to qualify how and what that looks like in a Christian context.

Not only does there seem to be a growing degree of confusion about the difference between '*judging*', particularly in the context of Matthew 7, and '*discerning*' for the individual Christian, there also seems to be some confusion about the church's responsibility and role in all this.

Perhaps embarrassed by our failures and our unchristian treatment of both believers and unbelievers in the past, we're now collectively overcompensating by saying nothing at all, reducing the church's critical witness of the name of Jesus, in many instances, to a 'cloud with no rain'.

Many times, the church actually looks no different on the inside to the way people are living on the outside, as if coming to Christ *changed nothing at all*.

## **The Christian Ideal**

Christians are called to a life of holiness, of renewal and transformation; becoming part of the new creation found in Christ. Christians are those who have accepted the call out of the dominion of darkness, with all its pointless chaos and unfruitful works of darkness, into kingdom life; and the acknowledgment that living God's way, according to His plan and purposes for humanity, is good for us and glorifying to Him.

*"You can't read the New Testament without seeing the call to holiness in the Christian life. But that holiness is a work*

*of God's grace as the Holy Spirit empowers the believer to live a life pleasing to God. New Testament holiness is a joyous privilege not a heavy burden and duty. New Testament holiness enhances life, it never diminishes it." | Lance Ralston*

God's way is the benchmark for Christian living, the way we should aspire to, the truth we ought to affirm. It's referred to often in scripture as *walking in the light, walking with God, or walking in the way* and I talk more about this in my article ['Walking With God'](#).

The caveat to this is, of course, that we are *not there yet*. The Christian life is a journey, not an instant transformation. *We have been saved, we are being saved, and we will be saved*. Sanctification, the *'being saved'* part, means we are all a constant work in progress, being renewed and conformed daily into the image of Christ.

What this means, in real terms, is that we will still mess up, sometimes in big ways. These lapses in our Christian walk are stumbles off the path leading us home, deviations from the good way that God has intended for us to live.

While these failures can often be hard to move past, it's important to recognise that they don't need to define us, at least not in a negative way.

We are not that terrible decision we made five years ago, five months ago, or five days ago. We are more than simply the sum of our mistakes. I talk more about this in my article ['Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow'](#).

The joy of Christian life is that sin no longer has the same hold over us as before. We belong to Jesus and his blood cleanses us from all sin. In him, we can find forgiveness and find it many times over.

In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul the Apostle wants us to comprehend the reality that we are no longer in this battle on our own. He says, *“May you have the power to understand, as all God’s people should, how wide, how long, how high, and how deep his love is. May you experience the love of Christ, though it is too great to understand fully.”* (Ephesians 3:18, NLT). God is with us in this fight, empowering us daily through His Spirit and washing us clean in the blood of the lamb.

What may seem impossible to us is made possible by the love of Christ.

## **Objective Truth**

It feels difficult to write this article without coming off as intolerant, self-righteous, or bigoted. Any time one states a definite opinion on a matter as if that position is the right one, one risks sounding dogmatic and judgmental and I acknowledge it may be no different in this case.

I think our post-modern society has further exaggerated this reality. Our 21st-century culture posits the idea that truth is not absolute and universal (as was once accepted), but rather that our truth *is* truth, even though that truth may be merely subjective and based on or influenced by our own personal feelings, tastes, or opinions.

Conversely, our neighbour’s truth, based on or influenced by their personal feelings, tastes, or opinions is also just as true, irrespective of the reality that our two truths may be diametrically opposed to one another.

It’s often no longer acceptable to hold to and defend certain views as anything more than being subjectively true, particularly in religious or moral matters.

The Bible cuts through this subjective narrative and states that truth is objective, rooted in the person and character of

God Himself. Whatever we hold to be true to the Christian faith has its roots in God (or should, at least), who has been revealed to us in His Word, and which is sufficient to inform our Christian way of life and ethics.

*“Every scripture, inspired of God, is profitable to teach, to reprove, to correct, to instruct in justice.”* (2 Timothy 3:16, DR). This is what is meant by *sola scriptura* – that the Bible is the sole infallible source of authority for Christian faith and practice.

As Christians, we believe that biblical truth is not *our* truth and therefore merely subjective, it is God’s truth. We hold to the reality that God’s truth was demonstrated in Jesus for all humanity to see; and we acknowledge his supremacy and authority over our lives. In doing so we affirm that living God’s way is right and true and good.

The question is, what do we do, individually and collectively, when Christian life doesn’t look as it should, where there is disregard or apathy toward living God’s way, or where it seems that sin is being trivialised, tolerated, or overlooked?

What does the gospel of Matthew mean when it says ‘judge not’? Is an individual’s responsibility different from that of the collective body, the church? Is it being too judgey to talk about sin?

And how does the church protect the name of Jesus, displaying the glory of God to the nations, in practice?

## **Judging Or Discerning?**

### **Discerning**

I want to make the distinction between discerning and proclaiming what *God’s way* is, and judging someone’s eternal reality.

Long ago, God intended to use the church as an example of His incredible wealth and grace towards humanity and His intention and plan to bring everything together under Christ, for His own glory. She is imperfect and yet magnificent because the living God is the source of her existence and empowerment. As individuals and collectively, as the church, it is our mandate to preach God's good news to the world and to live as if we believe it to be true.

Paul the Apostle puts it this way: *"Live no longer as the Gentiles do...for they wander far from the life God gives because they have closed their minds and hardened their hearts against Him. They have no sense of shame. They live for lustful pleasures and eagerly practice every kind of impurity...Put on your new nature, created to be like God-truly righteous and holy."* (Ephesians 4:17-24, NLT)

He goes on to give several examples of what *'being like God looks like'*: no longer lying, no longer using foul language, no longer stealing, no longer engaging in sexual immorality, or being selfish or greedy (amongst other things). He states, *'with the Lord's authority'* (v17), that those things are not of God, are not life-giving, and ought not to be pursued by a person professing to be a Christian.

Discerning God's way of living (*'carefully determining what pleases the Lord'* (Ephesians 5:10)), which is intended to be life-giving and good for humanity, is a vitally important element of our Christian discipleship, and, collectively, as a witness to the watching world.

Moral truth exists, vested in the person and character of God Himself, and Christians ought to be preaching and pursuing it with all their hearts, both individually and collectively. To do otherwise is to reject the authority and supremacy of God over our lives.

## Judging

Yet, we don't get it right a lot of the time. Sin no longer has the same hold over us as before, but we still give it plenty of opportunities to gain a foothold in our life.

And too often, we, as individuals, look sideways at our Christian family and privately (or publicly) make bold pronouncements about their *eternal salvation* based on past failures or current struggles. We judge them harshly and with finality in the secret recesses of our hearts, by standards that we would buckle under ourselves.

We say to ourselves, 'they *may* have found forgiveness with God (though we highly doubt it) but they will never find forgiveness with us or in our church, no matter their repentant heart or confession of failure'.

Matthew warns us about taking such a harsh position of judgment against our Christian brothers and sisters, for with the same inflexible judgment we exact we risk being judged ourselves. If we truly believe and accept the grace God has shown to us, this same grace needed to be demonstrated by a life oriented towards forgiveness to others. I talk more about the implementation of grace in my article '[The White Flag Of Grace](#)' and the necessity of forgiveness in my article '[Forgiveness Is A Tough Gig](#)'.

We need to hold in careful tension the critical reality of the eternal consequences of not living God's way, of choosing a way that is not life-giving, resolutely naming sin and the need for repentance, alongside the reality that Christians still mess up and that forgiveness is always possible with God and should be practiced between individuals and within the church.

(In saying that, there are often consequences that flow from our actions which may negatively impact our life moving forward, particularly in relation to our ministry or



relationships in the church. These consequences are often complex, requiring wise pastoral care and support to work through.)

We are not to judge one another's *eternal salvation* based on past or present struggles but neither are we to overlook our calling to holiness and the orienting of our lives toward God.

## What Is The Church's Responsibility?

The Apostle Paul dealt with some real doozy situations in his letters. Take, for example, the situation in the church in Corinth; a case of sexual immorality not even heard of among 'pagans' (1 Corinthians 5:1-2). A believer in the church was boldly and proudly 'living in sin' with his stepmother, or, as some translations have it, his father's wife.

Paul is horrified at such a situation and tells the church that, collectively, they ought to be in mourning in sorrow and shame. Such things ought not to be even named among the people of God, let alone practiced (Ephesians 5:3).

The letter to the Corinthians is a very confronting letter, in many respects. Paul leaves no room for doubt as to what he thinks about the situation and what the church must do. He (shockingly) tells them that they must remove the man from their fellowship. *"You must call a meeting of the church. I will be present with you in spirit, and so will the power of our Lord Jesus. Then you must throw this man out and hand him over to Satan so that his sinful nature will be destroyed and he himself will be saved on the day the Lord returns."*

He continues, *"In my other letter, I told you not to have anything to do with immoral people. But **I wasn't talking about the people of this world.** You would have to leave this world to get away from everyone who is immoral or greedy or who cheats or worships idols. I was talking about **your own people** who are immoral or greedy or worship idols or curse others or*

get drunk or cheat. **Don't even eat with them!** Why should I judge outsiders? **Aren't we supposed to judge only church members?** God judges everyone else. The Scriptures say, "Chase away any of your own people who are evil." (1 Corinthians 5:4-9)

It's very clear, the church is not to sit in judgment of the world, that's God's prerogative. But we *are* to collectively judge the conduct and witness of the church to which we belong (essentially, the whole body is responsible for judging the whole body) and leave no space for evil to grow, unchecked. For those Christians who are unrepentant and proudly indulging in sin, the church isn't even to eat with such people (1 Corinthians 5:11).

(It's important to note here that one church is not at liberty to sit in judgment of another. A local church has oversight over its own members, not over another church. The authority to remove a lampstand of Jesus or determine whether a lampstand should be removed from its place of influence belongs to the King alone (Revelation 2:5). No person or group should dare presume such authority over Jesus' church and its local expressions.)

Yet the church can sometimes be too hasty in pronouncing judgment. Paul clearly differentiates in other places in scripture between those Christians who are *indulging in sin* (1 Corinthians 5:9) and those who find themselves *caught in transgression* (Galatians 6:1). His pastoral advice regarding the response to each is different, despite both being issues of 'sin'. An important element of church discipline is to sensitively and accurately establish the nature of a situation, before deciding how the church ought to proceed.

## **Restoring**

First and foremost, we are ambassadors of the great ministry of reconciliation; of pointing to the work of Christ, and our

great need for forgiveness and reconciliation to God.

We are part of God's great mission of restoration and redemption and this reality should be at the forefront of any response to sin in the church.

The church has a responsibility to make sure that we are accurately representing Jesus to the world; preaching the necessary call to holiness of the Christian life whilst acknowledging we are not yet made perfect and we still mess up.

We ought to seek first, on every occasion and at every opportunity, to restore a person who has *wandered away from truth*. We pray for them and with them, we remind them of the realities of the gospel, of the forgiveness found in Jesus, and of the healing warmth of God's light.

We love them, we accept their struggle with sin as something common to us all, and yet we encourage them not to shrink back from Christ in shame but rather to turn to him anew in humble confession and repentance.

One of the most powerful and eternally significant things a church can do is to rescue one who has fallen into sin. "*My dear brothers and sisters, if someone among you wanders away from the truth and is brought back, you can be sure that whoever brings the sinner back from wandering will save that person from death and bring about the forgiveness of many sins.*" (James 5:19-20)

Discipleship within the local church means that each member acknowledges they are part of the body, a body that collectively has the authority to declare who belongs to Jesus and the responsibility of teaching, caring for, correcting, loving, and disciplining its members.

The church, therefore, *affirms a person's profession of faith in Jesus and gives oversight to that individual's*

*discipleship, and, in turn, the individual submits his or her discipleship to the care and oversight of the church and commits themselves in service to the building up of the church. It's a symbiotic-esque relationship referred to by Paul in 1 Corinthians 12 as 'one another-ing'.*

## **Protecting**

Unfortunately, as the case in the church at Corinth demonstrates, there will be some who are completely unrepentant, who *'make a practice of sinning'* (1 John 5:18), and who reject the pursuit of holiness that Christians are called to. These people *"are ungodly men and women, saying that God's marvellous grace allows us to live immoral lives. The condemnation of such people was recorded long ago, for they deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ."* (Jude 1:4)

An individual Christian is not responsible for overseeing another Christian's membership in the body of Christ, but the church, made up of all its members is. It's how the church protects the name of Jesus.

*"Church discipline, then, is fundamentally about love. The Lord disciplines those he loves (Hebrews 12:6). The same is true for his church. Love in the Bible is holy. It makes demands. It yields obedience. It doesn't delight in evil but rejoices in the truth." (1 Corinthians 13:6) | Jonathan Leeman*

*"But what happens when we live God's way? He brings gifts into our lives, much the same way that fruit appears in an orchard – things like affection for others, exuberance about life, serenity. We develop a willingness to stick with things, a sense of compassion in the heart, and a conviction that a basic holiness permeates things and people. We find ourselves involved in loyal commitments, not needing to force our way in life, able to marshal and direct our energies wisely. Legalism is helpless in bringing this about; it only*

*gets in the way. Among those who belong to Christ, everything connected with getting our own way and mindlessly responding to what everyone else calls necessities is killed off for good – crucified. Since this is the kind of life we have chosen, the life of the Spirit, let us make sure that we do not just hold it as an idea in our heads or a sentiment in our hearts, but work out its implications in every detail of our lives.” | Galatians 5:22-25 MSG*