

Certainty for Life

Questions, Answers, Discussion Guides

John Diacos



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JOHN DIACOS



Larksong Enterprises

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INTRODUCTION

Life is full of questions. Some are practical—about family, finances, or the future. Others are deeply personal, touching on our fears, our hopes, and our sense of belonging. And then there are the ultimate questions: Who am I? What is my purpose? Can I know God, and if so, how? These questions are not lived out in theory, but in the context of family loyalty, the pursuit of security and the struggle with anxiety.

In my previous work, *Certainty for Life: An Invitation to those in Eastern Orthodoxy*, I sought to present the urgent challenge of Jesus to embrace the assured forgiveness and new life he offers. However, this Gospel raises many questions for Orthodox people in particular. This book is my attempt to answer those questions honestly and respectfully, drawing on the wisdom of Scripture and the reflections of Church Fathers.

Each chapter addresses a theme that touches us all: the pull of family loyalty, the search for security, the reality of fear and anxiety, the influence of fate and superstition, the honour due to Mary, the clarity of God's self-revelation, and the trustworthiness of the Bible.

You will find that I do not shy away from the hard questions. Faith is not about ignoring reality or suppressing doubt. Rather, it is about bringing our deepest questions into the light of God's truth, and discovering that he welcomes our honesty. My hope is that, as you read, you will find not only answers, but also encouragement, challenge, and—above all—certainty.

INTRODUCTION

At the end you will find discussion guides for both books with questions designed to help you reflect, discuss with a friend, or explore further in a group setting.

My prayer is that these pages will help you meet the everyday challenges of following Jesus, and that you will grow in your knowledge of God and of yourself and in your certainty of salvation.

CHAPTER ONE

Familial Loyalty

The Importance of Family

It would be difficult to overemphasise the importance of my family to me, and perhaps you feel the same way about yours. My family was my whole world as I grew up. I had wonderful parents, brothers, cousins, aunts, uncles, and grandparents. They provided me with deep love and acceptance through all of life's circumstances. They instructed, encouraged and supported me. Victories were celebrated; disappointments were commiserated. Even after I had moved out, my parental home was always a refuge from the world and an island of stability within which to relax (and of course to eat!). Their love provided a stable foundation, giving me confidence in life and preparing me for the responsibilities of adulthood.

Every significant event in my life happened in the context of my wider family. Every birthday, Easter, Christmas, holiday, weddings, graduations, soccer games and just everyday life were spent with them. I experienced the precious love of parents and grandparents for their children and grandchildren, and saw that care returned to them as they aged. Now that they are gone, some of the colour in my life has disappeared.

To disappoint my family, to bring them regret or shame or dishonour or to risk their disapproval or rejection was something to be avoided at all costs.

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Which makes what Jesus has to say about family all the more shocking.

Jesus on Family

This is how Jesus described the commitment he requires from those who follow him:

Therefore, everyone who will acknowledge me before others, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven. But whoever denies me before others, I will also deny him before my Father in heaven.

Matthew 10:32-33

Christ does not seek fans, but followers. To follow Jesus is to place him first in all your relationships. For those who do, Jesus will be their advocate before the Father, and their forgiveness will be assured. It means that no one is to be more important than Jesus in the life of his people.

If, instead, they cannot prioritise Jesus before others, then they demonstrate that they wish to please people in preference to serving Christ. Christ will then declare before God that they are not his people, and they will face God's judgement alone. The stakes could not be higher.

Serving Christ will always come at a cost.

Don't assume that I came to bring peace on the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I came to turn

**a man against his father,
a daughter against her mother,
a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law;
and a man's enemies will be
the members of his household.**

Matthew 10:34-36

ANSWERS & QUESTIONS

When a war breaks out and the conquering King arrives at your doorstep, there are two options: continue to fight, or surrender and hope for mercy. Jesus enters the world to be God's King and calls on all people to turn their backs on their independence and follow him. But he knows that some will continue to fight against his rule. The result will be hostility and discord between those who fight and those who surrender; between those who live for themselves and those who serve King Jesus. This should not be surprising: people will hate Christ's followers because they hate Jesus (John 15:18).

This will split even the closest of our familial relationships as Jesus makes us choose. Who will come first – our family or Christ?

The one who loves a father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; the one who loves a son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.

Matthew 10:37

This is an extraordinary statement from Jesus. Respect for parents and children is deeply ingrained in God's biblical values. The fifth of the Ten Commandments is to "Honour your Father and Mother." Those who do not care for their own family are condemned in God's word.¹ Yet notice carefully what Jesus is saying here. It is not that we cannot love our family- no, that obligation remains. Instead, we must love Jesus *more* than our family.

On what basis can Jesus ask for those most important of human relationships to come second to him? It is because of who Jesus is. He is not just a friend, or an employer, a teacher or a leader. He is God become man,

¹ 1 Timothy 5:8

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God's King. He is the one who gave us life and salvation and all things good, *including our families*. Jesus insists that he be treated as our God, the one to be served before all others.

This is critically important to us- for salvation can only come through a relationship with him.

And whoever doesn't take up his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Anyone who finds his life will lose it, and anyone who loses his life because of me will find it.

Matthew 10:38-39

Jesus acknowledges the cost of following him by describing it as "taking up your cross."

When someone was observed walking and carrying a cross, as Jesus did in his final days, it was because they were on their way to their execution. In that situation, the condemned person is no longer concerned with the demands of everyday life. In light of their imminent death, none of it mattered any more. Saving up for the future, shopping for Christmas, planning that next holiday, all became irrelevant trivialities. Not that they had any choice, for as the condemned, they had been committed by their executioners to the sole task of walking the path before them to their death. They would not be excused to attend a work function, a wedding, or a funeral. Nothing else was allowed to distract them from the task before them.

However, unlike the condemned, Jesus is saying that those who follow him must take up their cross *willingly*. Just as Christ gave his life for us, so we must now live our lives for him. Everything else, including our families, must come second to serving our creator. If we wish to follow after him,

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nothing can be allowed to overrule; no allegiance can be more important than our service of Jesus.

Familial relationships are essential and exert a significant influence over our lives. However, how we relate to Jesus will determine where we spend eternity. Nothing in life can be more important than this. Even if we are disowned by all who know us, what we will gain in Jesus will be far better.

“...my brethren, we see this exemplified daily. Some young man is minded to give himself up to God’s service; his father is opposed to it; they are “divided against each other:” the one promises an earthly inheritance, the other loves an heavenly; the one promises one thing, the other prefers another. The father should not think himself wronged: God alone is preferred to him. And yet he is at strife with the son, who would fain give himself to God’s service. But the spiritual sword is mightier to separate them, than the ties of carnal nature to bind them together.”

Augustine (AD 354-430)

Expositions on the Psalms, Psalm 45

Making the Choice

All families have their norms and expectations. They have boundaries outside of which their members are expected not to tread. There will be issues that will threaten you with expulsion from your family. It could be marrying someone of whom they disapprove, or pursuing the wrong career, or following the wrong political party or cause. I have friends who, as adults, have submitted to their parents' demands in each of these areas. They have broken off engagements, worked in a field their parents favoured but which they loathed, or abandoned cherished causes. They have changed their life

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directions in significant ways to keep the peace and their place in their families.

But Jesus is too important to make that kind of compromise. Where we stand with him determines not just this life, but where we will spend eternity. And the sad truth is that some families will insist that allegiance to them should overrule service to Christ. They may declare outright antagonism or even violent opposition to all things Christian. They might ban all talk of God. Perhaps they will criticise you for being too religious or brand you a fanatic. Or it may be as subtle as scheduling Sunday family lunches to coincide with Church. Sadly, it might end with familial relationships being permanently fractured. If we value and love our families as we ought, all of this will be incredibly painful.

Jesus knows our Pain

Jesus does not take this for granted. For he personally experienced the pain of familial rejection in his choice to serve God.

Early in his public ministry, Jesus started to act out of character for a carpenter from a rural town in Judea. He taught in synagogues with authority; he cast out demons and healed the sick and called on twelve disciples to follow him. Large crowds followed and gathered to hear him speak. This is what happened next:

When his family heard this, they set out to restrain him, because they said,
“He’s out of his mind.”

Mark 3:21

ANSWERS & QUESTIONS

Without doubt, the family of Jesus knew him to be a man of integrity and responsibility and worthy of their respect. His conduct had always been upright and selfless, for after all, he was without sin. They had every reason to place their confidence in his character and actions. Yet even for Jesus, his family drew a boundary around what they considered to be excessive devotion to God. They knew he was religious, but in their opinion, this behaviour was too much. The only explanation for them was that he must have lost his sanity. Some of our families will arrive at the same conclusion about us.

This must have caused Jesus great pain to have seen the doubt, fear and concern in his family's eyes and hear it in their voices. Out of his love for them, Jesus would have wanted to have pleased and comforted them. This must have torn at his heart to reject their pleas to divert him from his service of God. Jesus had a choice to make, and it was a matter of priorities. Would he conform to the wishes of his family or the demands of his heavenly Father? The choice was painful, but in the end, obvious.

We too will face the same difficult choices- perhaps with our families, our friends, our work colleagues, even our spouses. There will be pain, but serving Jesus must always come first.

Continue to Honour Your Parents

So how does this fit with the command to honour our parents? How are we to serve Christ first, perhaps in opposition to our parents, yet also respect them?

If you are an adult, then you honour your parents by *not* continuing to obey them forever. You honour them by maturing and taking responsibility

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for your own life. My children are all grown now, and I do miss the closeness that came with their dependence on us. Yet I know that the goal of raising a child is for them to become an adult and make decisions on their own. This honours me as a parent, even though I might sometimes think they have made an unwise decision. Of course, I will warn them if I feel it necessary.

In the same way, your loving parents may voice their concerns to you about following Jesus. However, you do not disrespect your parents by serving Christ. In fact, even if they do not acknowledge it, no greater honour can be paid to a parent than to have a child serving God and destined for eternal life.

However, maybe you are still a child: someone of an age where you are dependent upon your parents. Your obligation to obey them remains. Their opposition may take the form of preventing you from gathering with other Christians or being taught by them. Out of obedience to them, you may need to observe those restrictions until adulthood. But until then, do whatever you are permitted to do to learn more of Christ and grow in your obedience to him. Read the Bible, pray and continue to follow Jesus. Love and obey your parents to the best of your ability.

But adult or child, pray for your family. They will not be perfect, but thank God for the good they have done for you. Be thankful for the times they have supported you, the kindnesses they have shown you and the self-sacrifices they made. Be thankful for your favourite meal from their hands. Tell them how grateful you are for the good they have done.

Be patient with them. Listen to them. Appreciate and understand their life circumstances and what motivates them. Forgive them for when they have let you down or hurt you. Model to them what it looks like to follow Jesus.

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If they do not yet, pray that they too will come to follow Jesus and, as you are able, share with them the one way of salvation through Christ. But respect your parents by not preaching at them and declaring all the mistakes they have made. They changed your nappies and wiped your nose, so they may find the Gospel message hard to hear from you. Instead, patiently explain the truth and invite them to read the Bible with you or another Christian so that God's word will convict them. We know that God is merciful and kind and is able to open the hearts of those we love to accept the truth and be changed.

A New Family

We, however, have no promise that our families will also serve Jesus. Friction in the closest of our relationships may continue for the rest of our lives because we persist in following Christ. It may be part of the cost we must pay in carrying our cross.

Jesus warned us that he came to divide families. We need to ensure we're on the right side of that division. It is worth it for eternity.

Yet God is generous and kind and gives us even more. Jesus said, "...everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields because of my name will receive a hundred times more and will inherit eternal life." (Matthew 19:29)

Our familial relationships may be strained or entirely broken, but God provides a new family. For as Jesus calls on people to follow him, he is not gathering random individuals- he is assembling a community. United together in Christ, we are brothers and sisters, fathers and mothers, and children to one another. Joined not by blood but united in our worship of Christ. We are a new family committed to loving and serving one another.

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Wherever we go in this world, we will encounter new brothers and sisters and mothers and fathers in Christ who will welcome us where they meet and into their homes. There we will find a refuge from the world and, within it, encouragement, acceptance, generosity and love. They are a new family whose love we can enjoy now and into eternity.

Even better, those who follow Jesus gain a heavenly Father who gives us unconditional love. Though he is the all-powerful creator of all things, he wants us to know him intimately as a Father. Jesus addressed his Father as “Abba,” the affectionate Aramaic word for “dad,” and we are invited to do likewise (Romans 8:15).

You will have your own familiar word for father. In Greek culture, it is Baba. For you, it may be Papa, Tato, Tata, Tatko, Dada, or something else. You might have a good, bad, or complicated relationship with your father, or not have known him at all.

My Baba was a good, generous, and loving Baba, and though he has now gone, I love him still. But I have a heavenly Baba who loves me more. A heavenly Baba who loves me more deeply and constantly than any earthly one could. He is always there to listen to me and answer me whenever I pray. He continues to speak to me through his word, the Bible. He guides and protects me and can be wholly trusted with my life. He will be there to welcome me into his heavenly home forever.

We must choose. If we are committed to doing whatever it takes to please our family, we will not be serving Christ. However, if we are committed to following Christ, we will inevitably disappoint our families. Yes, there is a relational cost in following Jesus. But what we receive in return makes the cost entirely worth it.

CHAPTER TWO

Financial Security

My parents lived through the Second World War. They lived in fear, fled invading troops, endured occupation and struggled to find essentials. Soldiers and others in authority could not be trusted. Food was poor quality and in insufficient quantity, and death was an ever-lurking presence. They never knew what the next day would bring. As a result, for the remainder of their lives, they valued and sought material security.

They immigrated to Australia from across the world in the hope of a better future. Here, they discovered a sense of security for which they longed. They embraced the opportunities to be rewarded for hard work. They always worked two jobs, and annual leave from one was just an opportunity to take another position. They bought a house and paid it off. Food was plentiful and always covered the table. It was always a matter of pride and good hospitality to ensure that everyone could enjoy and eat their fill and have leftovers for a week. Of course, it was more than that- it was an attempt somehow to erase those years of hunger and scarcity and uncertainty.

My parents worked and saved and provided so that their children and grandchildren would never have to struggle, never lack anything. I love them deeply for how they sacrificed their lives for us. They sought for us that

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security of which they had been deprived in their youth. To have a house in which to live, to have food on the table and money in the bank and a career to provide it all, that was what it meant to them to be secure. It is proper and responsible to work hard for the ones you love.

Yet none of these things can be relied upon to provide lasting security. Rising food prices, cyclones, droughts and disease that destroy produce, a world economic crisis, the loss of your job, illness, war, another pandemic, and we discover that everything that now seems sure, like a comfortable life, disappears.

A Man who Secured his Future

Jesus told a story about a man who worked hard and planned for the future.

A rich man's land was very productive. He thought to himself, "What should I do, since I don't have anywhere to store my crops? I will do this," he said. "I'll tear down my barns and build bigger ones and store all my grain and my goods there."

Luke 12:16-18

Here is a success story we would celebrate. It's about a hard-working pastoralist who is so well off that he doesn't have to immediately take his grain to market to sell it off to feed his family. He does not have debts or mortgages to repay. No, he is way richer than that. His problem is that he has so much that he needs bigger storage facilities for his wealth. He has so much money that he can even afford to destroy his perfectly good old barns to make way for bigger new ones. Well done to him.

"Then I'll say to myself, 'You have many goods stored up for many years. Take it easy; eat, drink, and enjoy yourself.'"

Luke 12:19

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On the surface this is nothing remarkable. His new barns were his superannuation fund- and they were full to overflowing. He has so much stored up that he can now afford to retire. He no longer needs to work. Now was his time to relax. In fact, we might praise such a man for his astute work-life balance. He could instead have chosen to accumulate more and more and worked himself to death. Instead, he recognises the value of rest above that of a bank balance. Now he can spend time with the grandkids, travel, pick up a hobby, take up golf, lawn bowls or pickleball. He believes he has secured for himself the good life. So, the following line in Jesus' story comes as a surprise.

Fools place security in their wealth

But God said to him, "You fool! This very night your life is demanded of you. And the things you have prepared—whose will they be?"

Luke 12:20

God can see through the façade of our lives to see what is really going on. His assessment of this man is that he had been a fool.

I have attended many funerals and engaged in the conversations afterwards about the recently departed's life. Usually, as we like to remember the good times, there are more good stories than bad. However, occasionally, some attendees speak with justifiable bitterness about the deceased. Often, they are their closest relatives who recount how little was the time the departed had spent with them, or had mistreated them or abandoned them when they were needed most. But I have yet to hear anyone describe the deceased as a fool: as someone who did not simply make a few bad decisions

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but was fundamentally misguided in the ways they lived their life; as someone who missed out on the most essential things in life.

Of course, people are subjective, and we all have our own agendas. We react out of anger, revenge and even envy, and in addition you cannot please everyone. Yet, while we won't be there to hear them say it, it would be awful to have others assess the entirety of your life in that way.

But Jesus is not delivering to us the common public appraisal of this man's life. This is God's *objective* assessment. This is the verdict that matters. God's view is not that this man simply made a few mistakes, but rather that the entire direction of his life was in error- he wasted his life. This may be shattering to hear from friends and family who might expel you from their social circles. But it would be infinitely worse to receive this assessment of your life from the one who has the power to separate people from his goodness forever in hell: not at your funeral, but before God as a judgement on your life.

So why does God conclude that this man was a fool? It is in the next verse.

That's how it is with the one who stores up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God.

Luke 12:21

Notice what God's assessment of this man's life is *not* about. There are no accusations that this man exploited his workers, or that he acquired his wealth by betraying, cheating, or stealing from others. There are no comments made about financial planning or investment. His foolishness was not in failing to diversify his investments out of agriculture and into bitcoin.

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On the contrary, he has been industrious and responsible, and in the Bible God commends us to do both.

Instead, this man's foolishness was that he put his confidence in the wrong place. He placed his life into his own hands, instead of into God's.

He is Foolish to Place his Security in Money

Many of us who are reading this book share this rich man's problem. We live in the most prosperous time in the history of the world and in the wealthiest countries. Most of us currently have no concerns about our next meal other than what we fancy eating. Most of us have a source of income and money in the bank.

The danger of money is that it deceives us into thinking we can handle all of life. After all, enough money gives us the power to do almost anything. With cash, you can not only acquire food and clothing and shelter, but nearly anything else as well. If you want your house repaired, painted, or extended, then someone will do that for you for money. You can pay an army to protect you, a cook to feed you and a personal trainer to get you fit; you can get someone to cut your hair, massage your back or fix your teeth. With enough wealth, you can even have your own private spaceship.

Money makes us more attractive to others. Being able to share money with them or to look the best, drive the fanciest car or live in the nicest places can gain us friends and even a spouse. In fact, we are attracted to the person who always looks immaculate and tidy and has a house and life to match, because we associate all those things with them being in control of their lives. All of this is the result of money.

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This is the enormous appeal of gaining and keeping personal wealth. Money allows us to believe we need no one else, for wealth is our security. We think we do not need God's help. We believe that we can meet any crisis, we reason, if only we have enough money.

That is why this man, having accumulated great wealth, felt he was the one who could determine his future. Five times he speaks to himself and then resolves what he would do- *for himself*. It is all centred on him and he takes all the credit. At no point does he give thanks to God for his productive land. And his only concern is in providing for himself. He doesn't mention his family or consider the needy who might benefit from his overabundance of grain. He instead takes all the credit for himself, makes all the decisions himself, does it all for himself, and places all his confidence in himself alone. He believes with all his wealth that nothing can overcome him.

This trust in riches is the root of this man's folly, for there is no certainty in temporal wealth. In our own experience, we know that even the richest cannot guarantee their wealth. Stock markets rise and fall, investments and banks fail, unemployment hits, wars and natural disasters, and even pandemics strike. This man, in particular, with his wealth in barns, could have it stolen or burned or flooded or afflicted by diseases or eaten by pests.

This man had spent all his life growing his wealth, confident that it would provide for his future. Yet it could disappear in an instant. This is foolishness.

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He is Foolish not to Invest in Eternity

But the heart of this man's error is that he had concentrated on his temporal wealth and missed investing in the most important thing. He had not invested in eternity.

Jesus gives a warning to those who would prefer anything to following him:

For what will it benefit someone if he gains the whole world yet loses his life? Or what will anyone give in exchange for his life?

Matthew 16:26

I am always saddened to hear of a person who is dying as a result of exposure to some industrial substance, like asbestos. Some of them persist through years of legal action in pursuit of compensation from the responsible company. Some die without seeing justice, and others receive it with only weeks to live. I often wonder what could compensate someone for having their life cut short like that. Would \$100 million, or \$500 million? No amount of money could substitute for a life. What does it matter when you will not be alive to enjoy its benefits?

Even if this man were a trillionaire, God would still conclude that he had been a fool, that he had wasted his life, if he failed to invest in eternity. No amount of money can compensate anyone for missing out on eternal life. No amount of money can buy our way in. And once we are dead, all that money we have accumulated for our own use- that was the basis of our confidence, our source of power- all of it will go to someone else. Then we are left with nothing to show for our lives.

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When I was quite little, I had a recurring dream where I would be playing with a shiny red fire engine. When I would awake, I would be upset that I could no longer play with the truck, for it had been left behind in the dream. So, I resolved that the next time I dreamt of that fire engine, I would tightly hold it to my chest so that I could take it with me. Of course, no matter how many times I tried that strategy, it always met with disappointment. The fire engine was part of my dream and could never cross over into real life.

We do not know whether the rich man in Jesus' story thought of his place in eternity or not. However, in all his plans for the future, he had not provided beyond this life. None of his earthly wealth transferred into God's kingdom. The great irony of this rich man's life is that after it was over, it was not he but another who benefited from his wealth. As the saying goes, you can't take it with you or, put another way, there are no pockets in funeral shrouds.

Here is Jesus' investment advice:

Make money-bags for yourselves that won't grow old, an inexhaustible treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys.

Luke 12:33

"Money bags" are symbolic of where our wealth is stored. Jesus is urging us to place primary importance on investing in God's Kingdom, rather than our personal kingdom. The riches of God's Kingdom do not result from our individual effort, for it costs us nothing. Yet the cost was great, for Jesus gave his life to gain us a share in heaven. If we want this enormous gift, we have but to accept it from God and then live our lives serving him, putting our lives and our security in his hands.

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There is no investment like this. Nothing can take it away or destroy it. God himself guarantees the return.

Where is Your Security?

How awful to hear from God the words, “You fool.” For it is the same foolishness as that of the rich man if we choose to invest our life in anything or anyone other than in God. None of the wealth of this world and none of its instruments of power will buy any status in God’s heavenly Kingdom. And ultimately, what is left will be handed over to another. No human authority, not yourself, a government, a general or a priest, can assure you of a place in eternity. The only one who can do that is God. And praise be to him, for he offers it freely to us in Jesus Christ.

Wealth and earthly power are transitory. Others will attempt to take it, and some will succeed, for we live in a world of sin. This will make for hard times and heartbreak. But through the ups and downs, those who follow Jesus can know that God continues to care for them. He knows our needs, he sees our tears, he hears our prayers and answers them. It is in our trustworthy God’s hands that our lives must be placed.

So, when bills are due and we do not know how we will pay them, trust in God. When the car we need for work needs repairs we cannot afford, trust in God. When we get sick and can no longer work, trust God. When our bank balance is overflowing and we are challenged to honour God in its spending, trust God. Bring all these things to God in prayer, confident that he is more capable and caring to provide us with what we need than we or anyone else. Trust in the goodness of God for now and into eternity.

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So where does your security lie? In money and power that can disappear in an instant? Or in the eternal God who will certainly welcome his followers into his Kingdom?

CHAPTER THREE

Fear and Anxiety

Responses to danger

All of us are born into a world that contains many hazards which threaten our safety and well-being. In his wisdom, God designed us to protect ourselves by avoiding them. It is one of the features of human existence that is so fundamental that nobody needs to teach us to fear.

Babies are born with an understanding of danger. In a well-known experiment conducted in 1960, infants were encouraged to crawl across a sheet of Perspex placed over a one-metre drop. Even though the Perspex would hold them, the babies could not be enticed even by their mothers to put their weight upon it. Babies have an innate depth perception that warns them from falling down heights. Their fear keeps them safe.

But as we develop, we start to appreciate that there are more dangers. We become scared of what might lurk in the dark or under our beds or of what could happen if we are left alone. Fairy tales and other bedtime stories presuppose and reinforce this apprehension of darkness and unfamiliar individuals.

Consider the great villains of books and films: the witch in Hansel and Gretel who lures children to her gingerbread cottage so she can fatten them

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up and eat them; the witch who keeps Rapunzel locked away; the wicked stepmother who enslaves Cinderella and the Queen who exacts revenge on Snow White for being more beautiful than her; the terrifying Ursula in Little Mermaid; and the downright chilling Maleficent in Sleeping Beauty, who curses Princess Aurora to sleep for 100 years. These stories appeal to our fears- and even more to our desire to conquer them- for we cheer when these villains are defeated.

That is why children love the thrill of the roller coaster at an amusement park. It's why they love jumping out and surprising their friends to give them a scare. Fearful experiences resonate with children because they already assume the world is a frightening place, and they understand the appeal of mastering it.

Adults anticipate more danger

The older we get, the greater our capacity to anticipate dangers as the range of our fears broaden. We come to appreciate that random accidents and terrorist attacks, earthquakes and mudslides, tsunamis and economic ruin, theft and murder are around us all the time. We also start to understand the danger of illness, accident or death coming to our family, our children, our friends, and ourselves. We fear how we might die- the progressively debilitating illnesses that paralyse us or those like Alzheimer's that take our personality away, or cancer, or car accidents, drowning or being trapped. Then we fear what will come after death- being forgotten by all who knew us or by facing the judgement of God. Even if we think that after death comes non-existence, we come to appreciate that death means we will miss out on the joy of living, so we fear that as well.

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Fear is an *appropriate* response to danger. It prods us to prepare, makes us take care, heightens our awareness and warns us against taking unnecessary risks. Fear makes us look both ways when we cross the road; fear stops us from putting our hands in fire or from touching deadly animals; fear drives us to keep our children safe from household chemicals and pools and from placing forks into toasters. There is no shortage of dangerous things in our world to which we should respond with fear and care.

We all want to master our fears

But not only do we fear more things as we age, so our desire to master these dangers increases. We try to anticipate them by making plans and constructing strategies to deal with them. We work on our health to try to avoid the illnesses we fear. We save money to avoid debt and being unable to pay our bills. We take out insurance to cover any misfortunes. We wear a seatbelt when we drive and a helmet on a bicycle. This is all wise behaviour. It is prudent and responsible to prepare for the future.

The problem is that we cannot control the future. So, we keep on planning and trying, yet no matter how much we do, we are powerless to stop bad things from occurring. We lie awake at night trying to anticipate all the bad things that might soon happen and thinking about how to avoid them. But the potential for future danger will always exist, and we can never be sure we will be able to deal with it all. And so, anxiety is born. **Anxiety is the dread of being unprepared for the future.**

The truth is that if we are relying on ourselves to secure our future, we are right to be anxious. We are right to plan and to responsibly and wisely steward our resources. But we cannot anticipate every danger, and even if we could, we would not be able to navigate all of them. We are not in control of

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our future, neither ten years from now, nor in one week, or even one hour from now.

We need to trust the One who is in control.

Anxiety is Futile

Jesus says,

...don't worry about your life, what you will eat; or about the body, what you will wear. For life is more than food and the body more than clothing. Consider the ravens: They don't sow or reap; they don't have a storeroom or a barn; yet God feeds them. Aren't you worth much more than the birds?

"Consider how the wildflowers grow: They don't labour or spin thread. Yet I tell you, not even Solomon in all his splendour was adorned like one of these. If that's how God clothes the grass, which is in the field today and is thrown into the furnace tomorrow, how much more will he do for you—you of little faith?

Luke 12:22-24, 27-28

Birds don't plan for the future; they don't store up food or have bank accounts or credit cards. Yet when they need food, God feeds them. Similarly, the flowers do not make their own clothes or shop at Country Road or read fashion magazines, but God dresses them with spectacular natural beauty. Neither the birds nor the flowers do anything to earn what they receive, nor do they ask for help, and yet God richly provides for them.

How much more, points out Jesus, does God value people above animals and plants? Any good human parent would not water their plants and feed their cat before looking after their child. Seeing how God provides so

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generously for the whole of creation, how then can we doubt that he will care for us, his valuable children?

Therefore, says Jesus,

Don't strive for what you should eat and what you should drink, and don't be anxious. For the Gentile world eagerly seeks all these things, and your Father knows that you need them.

Luke 12:29-30

Do not be anxious that your future is not in your control, for all things are under *God's* control. God knows what we need. He has all that we need. God is good and gives us what we need.

Notice, Jesus is not saying do not work, buy food or cook. Neither is he promising a certain minimum income or even three meals a day. Nor is it a criticism of savings or investments or retirement planning. Instead, it is all about *who you trust* for all these things. In plenty and in scarcity, who is it that is in control, who knows what we need and only seeks to do what is for our best? It is not us, for we are not in control, we only think we know what we need, and we cannot be trusted always to do good.

It is infinitely better to trust our lives to God. To trust that he will provide for us. It is the recognition that we have nothing except what God generously gives us. It is foolish pride that imagines that the only reason we have food on the table is our hard work. It is God who gives us our intelligence, education, training, health, strength and the opportunities that are all required before we can earn the money to live—God who provides the sunshine, the rain and the soil that makes our food grow. God gives us a stable and peaceful society.

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It's why, over the centuries, followers of our God have prayed to give him thanks before every meal. Because it is God who gives us all we have. In plenty and in scarcity, he is the one to whom we should present our requests. For he knows what we need, and he longs to give it to us.

Stop Worrying

Can any of you add one moment to his life span by worrying? If then you're not able to do even a little thing, why worry about the rest?

Luke 12:25-26

Anxiety doesn't achieve anything, says Jesus; it's a waste of time.

Try it. Sit in a corner and work yourself up, getting upset, increasing your anger at the injustice of the world, or being frustrated with yourself, at being scared of what others will say, or disappointed with your lot in life. But you will not live any longer- in fact, you will probably shorten your life on account of stress. Nor will you grow any taller, get any wealthier or have a more secure future.

Anxiety, points out Jesus, is irrational. It does not work. Anxiety is us wanting to think we are in control, but we are not. Only God is in control. And if God is in control, what we need to do is trust him.

Serving God is the Solution to Anxiety

"But seek his kingdom, and these things will be provided for you. Don't be afraid, little flock, because your Father delights to give you the kingdom.

Luke 12:31-32

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Jesus' command to us is to live in the service of God's Kingdom- in other words, with him as our King. It is what this whole book is about- that God calls on us to repent, turn away from self-reliance and instead follow Jesus.

One of the benefits that Jesus points out is that we no longer need to worry. We can be confident that God will care for us. He delights to give us his very Kingdom of Heaven, so we know he will give us what we need now. Let us look forward to that day when there will be no more anxiety, nor will there be anything left to fear. There will only be joy. And there will be feasting and plenty for all, for done with this world of sin, God will richly bless all those who live for his Kingdom.

Hand Over Your Anxiety to God

However, in the meantime, like me, you may continue to struggle with anxiety. What should we do?

The apostle Peter writes,

Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God, so that he may exalt you at the proper time, casting all your cares on him, because he cares about you.

1 Peter 5:6-7

God invites us to bring all our fears, all our anxieties and concerns to him in prayer.

I. Admit you need help

The first step in dealing with your fear is to admit to yourself that you need help. To accept that yes, I am finite. I am rightly fearful of the world around me because I am not in control.

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Some of us might find this challenging to concede. However, in the face of reality, it is harder to maintain the fiction that we are independent and self-sufficient. Ultimately, it is a tremendous relief to acknowledge the truth.

2. Ask God for help

Secondly, we need to ask God for help. That is what it is to “humble yourself” before God. It is to admit our need for help to God. It is to confess to him that we are not in control of ourselves or the world. It is to acknowledge that God is the one who controls the world. It is to give up our self-rule and ask God to take over control of our lives.

By this, we are asking God for a new start, a new life under his providential “mighty hand.” By this, we become one of God’s people, one for whom God longs to care.

3. Give God your Fears

The great news is that God welcomes the prayers of his people. He is not bothered by our requests as we can be by our friends. God does not reluctantly help but instead loves to help those who serve him. He wants us to give all our fears, all our anxieties, to him so that we no longer have to worry. Being able to approach God in prayer and confidently hand him our concerns is where the solution to fear and anxiety starts. For we can be sure that God is in control and loves us, so we can be confident that he will do what is best for us with those things we fear.

But God does even more. Those who become God’s people have their minds transformed and their perspectives reoriented. God realigns our values, so we see what is essential and what is not. He shows us that sometimes what we fear is actually trivial, and what we value and love is

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really unimportant. Then he changes us to value and love what is truly valuable: the eternal things, which only God can give us and guard for us, so that we can never lose. God enables us to face our fears and worries by showing that they are really nothing when we are his beloved people.

It will not be instantaneous- it will take time to learn to trust in someone other than yourself and to change your priorities and what you value. But the more we trust God, the more we are liberated from the fear that controls us.

I invite you to take the first step to freedom from fear. It starts with humbling yourself before the God of the universe. It continues for the rest of your life as you grow in your confidence in God's loving care of you.

Why not pray to God now and ask him to take control of your life? Tell him your fears and worries and ask him to take them from you. Ask God to start changing your mind to no longer be worried about the unimportant but to value the eternal.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Fates, Luck & The Evil Eye

Templing the Fates

Why are the stories of Greek Mythology still being told today? It is partly because they are such excellently composed tales, refined by multiple storytellers over centuries. They contain incredible beasts and describe supernatural settings from Mount Olympus to Hades that excite our imaginations. But I think the greater part of their appeal is how these stories reflect our thinking back to us.

The gods who sit at the centre of the action act in very human ways. They are selfish, manipulative, vengeful, exploitative and violent. They are only benevolent when they obtain a benefit in so doing. The gods act as people would, given the opportunity and power, wealth, idleness and immortality. The writers may not have been reflecting a very optimistic view of human nature, but certainly an accurate one.

What also draws us to these tales is that they lift the curtain and suggest a supernatural world that influences our own, for the gods influence the lives of mortals- from the outcome of the Trojan war to the life of Odysseus, whose entire life journey, good and bad, is determined by the influence of the gods. The Greek myths reflect the way people naturally think about the

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way the universe works, the hidden influences on our lives, our fears and our hopes.

I find this best illustrated in the idea of *the Fates*, personified as three weavers, sisters who determine the course of human destiny. The first of them spins the threads of human existence in the womb. The second measures the lifespan and the number of ordeals that a person must face. The third is given the task of “cutting the thread of life” to determine when a person is to die. The seemingly random nature of human life is simply because the Fates determine it to be so.

We continue to use language that reflects this mythology. We still speak of someone’s “unavoidable fate,” or that “fate has determined”, or “fate has delivered our enemies over to us.” If you live carelessly, you are “tempting the fates” into delivering to you a bad outcome. Those who resign themselves to the randomness of the universe are described as being “fatalistic.”

Indeed, when faced with the randomness of life, many of us do think fatalistically. When we are confronted by the reality that some live long and others die young, or why some suffer with disease or strife, and others prosper, we conclude that this is the nature of an impersonal universe. It is not the result of good or bad or any overarching purpose. Life is entirely outside of our control, so we can do nothing other than stoically *accept our fate*.

Luck and Superstition

It is the same thinking that drives our idea of “luck.” There is good luck and bad that randomly falls upon us. Sometimes you have one or the other or a mix of the two. This, too, has been incorporated into our thinking and

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language. “Good luck” or “Best wishes” are considered polite farewells, and “how fortunate” is the appropriate remark when something good occurs or you have a near miss from disaster or “misfortune.” When something bad happens, “you must be jinxed”, or it was just “bad luck,” but “take a chance” once more because “third time’s the charm.” Though we speak of a lady who might be kind enough to send some good luck your way, no one is quite certain how to obtain either type. However, that does not stop us from trying.

This is where superstition comes in. Superstition is the belief that by certain practices we can attract good luck and repel the bad. It’s good luck to cross your fingers, find a four-leaf clover or mount a horseshoe- right way up, of course, because upside down and all the luck falls out. Some numbers bring you good luck, like 7 or 8, and others bring bad luck, like 13 or 4. You must throw salt over your left shoulder when you spill it to blind the demon who sits there and witnessed your carelessness, to prevent it from bringing you “misfortune.” You risk bad luck when you walk under a ladder, open your umbrella inside (demons like to gather under open umbrellas), put shoes on the bed, cross the path of a black cat or for the groom to see the bride in her dress before the wedding day.

My mother’s favourite practices were to prohibit whistling at night (I believe it attracted evil spirits), to never speak of death (it tempted fate), and, of course, to never tempt *The Evil Eye*.

The Evil Eye

Many of us would be familiar with the concept of the Evil Eye. It is the belief that, in envy of another, a person can bring a curse upon them through their malevolent glare. My mother was cautious in speaking about any of her sons’

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achievements to anyone lest it incite this Evil Eye. Protection from these curses is sought in the characteristic blue-in-blue eye beads. You will find these widely displayed throughout the Mediterranean on footpaths and in shops in an attempt to ward off evil. You would have seen several in my parental home. Spitting metaphorically into “the eye” is also believed to shield you from the curse: an idea that is so widespread that it even featured in the movie *Big Fat Greek Wedding* (which my Greek friends and I would say was more documentary than fiction!).

Bad News and Worse News

These different ideas and practices reflect four principles that we commonly hold.

1. Powerful supernatural forces exist
2. They exert influence over us
3. We are not in control of them
4. We can gain control using the proper practices

Well, I have some bad news, then worse news- but followed by some really great news. The bad news is that, though we would hope otherwise, we are right about the first three.

From the very beginning pages of the Bible, God warns us that Satan is real and dangerous and behind all the evil in the world. Satan is motivated by his hatred of God to destroy all that is good. Because God loves us, Satan is determined to destroy us also.

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Satan's primary tool is deceit, for he is the prince of lies. He convinces our willing ears with the lie that we know better than God and should act in our own selfish interests. It is he who tempts people to hate and anger and violence and racism and exploitation and denigration and to all that is destructive in this world. It is his lies that keep us captive to sin and under his power and make us doubt God's goodness. His lies strive to separate us from the God who loves us, thereby ensuring our condemnation and eternal death. As the Apostle Peter warns, "Your adversary the devil is prowling around like a roaring lion, looking for anyone he can devour." (1 Peter 5:8)

But here is the worst news: we are also wrong on the fourth point. Supernatural forces are beyond our abilities to control. Any thought we have otherwise is simply another lie from Satan designed to enslave us to him.

When I see the clairvoyant who can accurately describe an audience member's dear departed Aunt Freda and deliver a believable message from them, I always hope that it is simply entertainment. Very often, that is the case, as skilled performers can draw out the required information, or it has been gleaned previously from overhearing that person's conversations, online, or by other means. For if it is not a trick, the only other alternative is that this performer is in communication with genuine evil forces. And far better to be a fraudster than to obtain information from Satan, for he provides nothing obligation-free. His only desire is to enslave and destroy us. The same is true of Ouija boards, witchcraft, reading palms and coffee grounds, horoscopes and Tarot cards. They feed us Satan's lies to believe him instead of God's truth. They encourage us to think we can dabble in the occult and still be in control. But in this, we are deceived. Satan is not to be trifled with, and he cannot be controlled. He will only lead people away from God and truth and into disaster and death.

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But God breaks into our reality to deliver us truly great news.

Evil is Comprehensively Defeated at The Cross

God has not abandoned us to evil. Jesus comes to liberate us.

And when you were dead in trespasses and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, he made you alive with him and forgave us all our trespasses. He erased the certificate of debt, with its obligations, that was against us and opposed to us, and has taken it away by nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and disgraced them publicly; he triumphed over them in him.

Colossians 2:13-15

This passage pictures our rebellion against God as having created a catalogue of sin. It is a brief of the evidence stacked up against us. It is a detailed record of our consistent failure to meet our obligation to love and obey and be thankful towards God as our creator. It is conclusive evidence of our guilt before God and that we deserve his condemnation and death.

In many places in the Bible, Satan is described as the one who accuses people before God of these sins.² He charges us all before God as being unworthy of him. It is something he whispers in our ears as well. It is so effective in producing doubts in us because it is true that we are sinners who deserve God's judgement. Satan works to keep us captives to sin so we can be separated from God forever in death.

But at the cross, Jesus accomplishes an act of amazing and undeserved love for his people. He takes their sin upon himself, and in so doing, he

² Revelation 12:10; Job 1:6-12, 2:1-5, Zechariah 3:1

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cancels the debt of our lives that we owe. That “certificate of debt,” the book of evidence arrayed against us, has been cancelled, nailed to the cross with and by Jesus. No more can our sins be used to condemn us. No more is sin a barrier between us and a relationship with God.

In addition, through the cross, Jesus demonstrates that he is more powerful than Satan, even over death. Life and death are under God’s control, not the devil’s. The evil powers are disgraced at the cross, for despite their threats, they are shown to be truly powerless in the face of God.

The “rulers and authorities” of evil have been disarmed, for their weapons and ammunition have been removed. The sin with which they accused us, and the threat of death, have been removed by Jesus. Satan no longer has any power over those who serve the God who is really in control. We have been liberated from serving Satan, sin and death to now serving God and receiving life.

“The Lord rebukes you, O Devil, he who came into the world and dwelt among us in order to destroy your tyranny and set us free;
who on the wood of the Cross triumphed over the opposing powers”

*Holy Baptism*³

³ St Andrews Orthodox Press Sydney 2008 p7

Implications

Fate and Randomness

A universe ruled by fate and luck is random and impersonal. There is no justice, there is no meaning to anything that occurs, no mercy or compassion. There is no choice but to suffer in silence, for there is no one to whom to complain or who has the power to change our circumstances.

Thankfully, the universe is not subject to those random forces, but is ruled by God. He is a God who is in complete control, and he intends good for us. He is not a mere force, but is personal and longs to bless us. He knows our concerns, and hears our prayers, and provides richly for us. When we face suffering or pain or are in need, he will listen, and he will answer. He gives meaning to all events, for he will set all things right in the end. God cannot be frustrated by evil and suffering, as we are, because he is in control. God cannot be thwarted in his good purpose to transform his people so that we will glorify him and enjoy a relationship with him forever.

The end is certain

So why then do we continue to see evil in our world?

Consider the winner of the 100-metre sprint at the Olympics. The times are displayed on the screen, and the victor is declared. The race does not need to be run again and again. Everyone, including the champion, is aware of who has defeated all other contenders. But the winner has not yet ascended the podium and received their medal. They have won, but the victory has not yet been finalised.

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Jesus defeated Satan once and for all for us on the cross. Nothing more needs to be done to assure our victory. Now we only await that final day in the new creation when we will receive the crown of victory that Jesus has won for us. Then we will see the full effects of Christ's victory on the cross, for evil will be banished forever, and life will be lived to the full without the interruption of sin.

In the meantime, we live in a world where we still experience the work of sin and Satan, of suffering and evil. This is the final thrashing about of the devil, who knows he has been defeated and that his time is short.⁴ But those who serve King Jesus have nothing to fear from him.

Perhaps in the past, you have been involved in elements of the occult and continue to be frightened by its power. Maybe you are concerned that one day you might stumble into a séance or be cursed by someone. Possibly, you are terrified of ghosts and spirits, or you worry about being possessed by demons. Be reassured- Jesus is more powerful than all the powers of Satan. Demonic forces cannot overtake you, as God's Spirit, who lives within every believer, will not share you with another. Take hold of this promise to those with Jesus on their side: "Resist the devil, and he will flee from you." (James 4:7)

No more are those who serve Christ enslaved to superstition or lucky numbers or charms or require protection from the Evil Eye. Jesus liberates us from all that, for there is no back-and-forth struggle between evil and good with an uncertain outcome. Christ's victory over evil is complete. He will not allow anything or anyone to take us away from him. We can look forward to that day of great joy when evil is banished forever.

⁴ Revelation 12:12

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For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Romans 8:38-39

CHAPTER FIVE

Honouring Mary

Mary, the mother of Jesus, was an impressive woman of faith. At a young age, God gave her the challenge of a pregnancy outside of marriage with all its attendant risks to her reputation and life. Yet she welcomed God's intervention in her life and saw it as a blessing, for she trusted in him. She was not only given the great responsibility as the mother of God become man, Jesus, but she also endured the suffering of witnessing her son being persecuted, rejected by his people and his excruciating execution. So, we sympathise with and respect her just as we value our mothers and motherhood.

Consequently, in the centuries since, much has been written about Mary. However, those who actually knew Mary wrote about her at the time. We have only to open the pages of the Bible to discover what the original Church knew of what Mary said and did.

Most of Mary's words can be found in Luke Chapter one, where we can read of Mary's conversation with the angel Gabriel and her hymn of praise to God. Luke is the Apostle who begins his Gospel by stating how he aimed to compile the narrative of Jesus' life from the eyewitness testimonies. As a contemporary of Mary, Luke's account likely comes straight from Mary

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herself. As those who love and respect Mary, we will want to hear and honour her words.

Mary Trusts God

In the sixth month, the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man named Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And the angel came to her and said, "Greetings, favoured woman! The Lord is with you." But she was deeply troubled by this statement, wondering what kind of greeting this could be. Then the angel told her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. Now listen: You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give him the throne of his father David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and his kingdom will have no end."

Luke 1:26-33

An angel of God appears before Mary to deliver an incredible message: the long-awaited son of David, the Messiah, is coming to rescue God's people. Astonishingly, Mary is informed that she will give birth to him. Understandably, Mary is "deeply troubled" by the appearance of this supernatural messenger. Yet she has the presence of mind to pose the obvious question:

Mary asked the angel, "How can this be, since I have not had sexual relations with a man?"

Luke 1:34

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To which the angel simply answers:

“For nothing will be impossible with God”

Luke 1:37

From the very beginning, many expressed doubts regarding the parenthood of Jesus. They point out that conception requires both a human mother *and* a human father. Some suggest that the word “virgin” means young girl and not sexually inexperienced. But Mary’s question and the angel’s response make it clear. God does what would otherwise be considered impossible.

God created the entire universe out of nothing with only his word. God manipulated the genetic material of a man (Adam’s rib) to create a genetically distinct woman. God continues to control everything that happens in the universe, from the movement of every subatomic particle to the formation of new galaxies. That includes the conception of human beings, in which he ordinarily uses a man and a woman. On this occasion, God acted within his power and right to cause Jesus to be conceived within Mary as the “Son of God.”

Mary responds as we all should to the promises of God:

“See, I am the Lord’s servant,” said Mary. “May it happen to me as you have said.”

Luke 1:38

Mary understands what is about to occur to her. It is not her choice, but she accepts that God will do this. She does not resist, argue or complain

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about God's plans for her, even though this will happen to her at significant cost.

Mary Serves God Despite the Cost

At this point in her life, Mary was likely a young teenager. As was the custom, she had already been promised in marriage to a man. For her to become pregnant would bring her world crashing down around her.

Mary was betrothed to marry Joseph. A betrothal was more than an engagement: it was a formal contract between a couple, where they already referred to each other as husband and wife. So, learning of Mary's pregnancy and knowing he was not the father, Joseph planned to divorce Mary, for that was how serious the betrothal relationship was considered. Being divorced and having to explain a child would greatly diminish Mary's chances of negotiating another marriage. Only an angelic visit to set Joseph straight alters his plan.

Then there is the disgrace that would come upon Mary's family of this pregnancy outside of marriage. There would also be Mary's loss of reputation within her community and even the risk that they would impose the penalty of stoning her to death for adultery.

This news from God seemed very far from being a blessing. Yet Mary accepted that God had greatly favoured her. Mary exhibited a profound confidence in God's goodness. Even though there is a great cost to anyone who serves God, Mary considered that God knows best and his blessings make it worth it.

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Mary Looks to God for Salvation

Mary had confidence in God because she trusted God's promises that he would rescue his people.

Later in Luke chapter 1, Mary visits her cousin Elizabeth, who is pregnant with John the Baptist. While there, her joy overflows in a song of praise to God.

And Mary said:
My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,
because he has looked with favour
on the humble condition of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations
will call me blessed,
because the Mighty One
has done great things for me,
and his name is holy.

Luke 1:46-49

The humility of Mary is one of her attributes that many admire. Mary recognises that she is one of the powerless in the world: a young, unmarried girl from a backwater of Judea, under foreign occupation, without wealth or position. She does not lay claim to having earned forgiveness. Mary rejoices in God her saviour, for she trusts in him for salvation rather than in herself. This is true humility. In addition, God blesses her further with this special task of bearing the saviour. Mary praises God as she does not deserve this honour, this generosity of God towards her.

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Mary Believes the Scriptures

Mary then reveals the basis for her confidence in God's goodness.

His mercy is from generation to generation
on those who fear him.
He has done a mighty deed with his arm;
he has scattered the proud
because of the thoughts of their hearts;
he has toppled the mighty from their thrones
and exalted the lowly.
He has satisfied the hungry with good things
and sent the rich away empty.

Luke 1:50-53

Mary recognises that God not only calls upon his people to trust him, but he has demonstrated his trustworthiness by his actions throughout history. The Bible records consistently the mercy of God towards his people. His way of acting is not to give them what they deserve, for we always disappoint and rebel against God and that only deserves his condemnation. Mary declares that God instead gives his people *mercy*. Not what they deserve, but what they need. Not a reward they have earned by their goodness, but an expression of God's generosity to them. God has always acted for his people with mercy like this, rescuing them from sin and judgement. That is how he saves, and Mary praises God for being a saviour both to her and to his people.

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He has helped his servant Israel,
remembering his mercy
to Abraham and his descendants forever,
just as he spoke to our ancestors.

Luke 1:54-55

Mary knows her Bible well. For here she remembers God's promise to Abraham: that through his descendants, the Israelites, God would bless the world.⁵ Mary praises God, for she recognises that the fruition of that moment has arrived. God is now sending this long-awaited descendant of Abraham to be born as her son. God has not forgotten his people, Israel, and Mary had been granted the privilege of bearing the saviour of the world!

Mary expresses her confidence in God because she believes in his word in the Bible. It is from there that she knows God's promises and his record of keeping them.

Honouring Mary

So, if we value and respect Mary, we will honour her by following her example. We, too, will come to know God as he reveals himself in the Bible. We, too, will rejoice in God's wonderful promises for us and be confident that he will keep them.

Like Mary, we will recognise that we are powerless to save ourselves and need a saviour. We will follow Mary's example of putting her trust in God, which for Mary meant coming to follow Jesus. Even when the other disciples had fled in fear, Mary and the other women stood at the foot of the cross,

⁵ Genesis 12:1-3

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not deserting Jesus.⁶ The last mention of Mary sees her praying with the other believers after the resurrection of Jesus.⁷ Mary had witnessed the fulfilment of the promise of God to Abraham: Jesus was the saviour sent by God to rescue his people. Mary had joined those who put their trust in Jesus for salvation. How humble she was to go from being the mother who changed his nappies to serving Jesus as saviour and God! This is how we, too, must humble ourselves to recognise that we are powerless in the face of sin, and we need Jesus to rescue us.

“Didn't the Virgin Mary do the will of the Father? I mean, she believed by faith, she conceived by faith, she was chosen to be the one from whom salvation in the very midst of the human race would be born for us, she was created by Christ before Christ was created in her. Yes, of course, holy Mary did the will of the Father. And therefore, it means more for Mary to have been a disciple of Christ than to have been the mother of Christ. It means more for her, an altogether greater blessing, to have been Christ's disciple than to have been Christ's mother. That is why Mary was blessed, because even before she gave him birth, she bore her teacher in her womb.”

Augustine of Hippo (AD 354-430)

Sermon 72/A, 7

Like Mary, we need to recognise that serving this God will come at a cost. For God will not take second place to anyone or anything. He must be served first before all else. Just as for Mary, serving God risks our reputation,

⁶ John 19:25

⁷ Acts 1:14

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our family and even our life. But the great blessings that God gives us outweigh all these.

Consider this incident that Luke records:

As he was saying these things, a woman from the crowd raised her voice and said to him, “Blessed is the womb that bore you and the one who nursed you!”

He said, “Rather, blessed are those who hear the word of God and keep it.”

Luke 11:27-28

Here is an interjection from a woman who highly valued Jesus. It is as if she is saying, “You are such a wonderful man that your mother must be so proud of you!” We might expect Jesus to have agreed. After all, Jesus was a devoted son to Mary. Even as he was dying, he charged the Apostle John to care for Mary as his own mother after Jesus’ death.⁸

Yet Jesus corrects this woman. Salvation does not come by blood relation to Jesus any more than it comes from knowing the right people, or having inside influence, or being born in the right family, or by being in a particular culture or Church. Salvation comes to those who hear the word of God spoken to them in the Bible who place their confidence in God so that they obey his commands. It came to Mary because she recognised that she needed to trust in God to save her. Salvation came to Mary not because she took credit for Jesus, but because she praised and committed herself to God for sending a saviour to his people. Let’s honour Mary by following her example.

⁸ John 19:26-27

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“So that is why Mary, too, is blessed, because she heard the word of God and kept it. She kept truth safe in her mind even better than she kept flesh safe in her womb. Christ is truth, Christ is flesh; Christ as truth was in Mary's mind, Christ as flesh in Mary's womb; that which is in the mind is greater than what is carried in the womb.”

Augustine of Hippo (AD 354-430)

Sermon 72/A, 7

CHAPTER SIX

God Makes Himself Known

Truth matters

Knowing the truth is critically important for living. Truth is not an abstract concept fought over by philosophers. Truth is not a matter of opinion. Truth is more than knowing answers or impressing others with your knowledge. The essence of truth is that it describes reality. Therefore, truth is a practical necessity. Truth is what makes sense of the world. Truth is what works in life, whereas falsehoods ultimately will not.

Truth will help us avoid dangers. Even knowledge of basic things like when to cross the street, what foods or liquids or medicines to consume, whether a chair, ladder or bridge will hold our weight, or a forecast of cyclones, floods or bushfires - true knowledge can be the difference between life and death. If we know the person requesting money from us is a scammer, the truth will protect us from fraud. If we know an animal is dangerous, we won't approach it. If we know the road is unsafe, we will avoid driving on it.

Truth claims are powerful because we act based on the words we believe to be true. A stadium of 100,000 people can be cleared if the words "there is a bomb" are believed. The words "you have the job" can cause someone to

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uproot their life and move across the world if they believe them. Words can convict someone to prison, and words can set someone free. Nations can go to war, and people risk their lives based on words they have heard from their leaders or the media. What we believe changes the way we live.

Truth enables us to know and trust others in our relationship with them. We once contracted an electrician to work on rewiring our house. When he had completed the work and switched on the power, the lights exploded, and the power points caught on fire! He had made a fundamental wiring error and could not even determine or rectify the problem. We had to call in another electrician to make things right. The first electrician had not revealed to us that they were inexperienced at this work. Not knowing the truth, we had misplaced our trust in him with our house (and our money!)

The more important the relationship, the more critical it is that we know the truth. Consider how we need to know the truth about a prospective marriage partner. Knowing they are single and available to marry is a fundamental truth to discover! But we also want to know their character, their past, their present so we actually know the real person. We need to know enough to trust them so we can confidently commit our lives to them.

The most critical area in which we need to know the truth is in our knowledge of God. Knowing God truly is not only more important than knowing both our electrician and even our spouse. For not only does God call us to trust him with our lives now, but also into eternity. So, we really need to be certain we know the truth about him.

So how can we know the truth about God?

God reveals Himself

If God were an inanimate object like a machine or a mountain, then we might be able to examine him. He could be dissected or studied under a microscope. Or he could be a mathematical equation to be solved. If God were the force behind the universe, like in Star Wars, then we might experience him through a deep inner journey. Freeing ourselves of all thought and reasoning, we could close our eyes like Luke Skywalker and feel the “god” who is all around us.

But the God who is there is personal. So how can we know the truth about people?

Well, what do you know of me? You could make some educated guesses based on what you know about other people, but that would never be accurate. You could ask people who say they know me. However, they could only tell you what they know, and they may be mistaken. None of these will reliably provide the truth.

The only way to know a person *is for them to reveal themselves to you*. To know me, you need me to open up and disclose my true self. My relationships, what I value, my loves and dislikes, my desires and inner thoughts and my favourite colour. Those can only be known if I choose to make them known.

So it is with knowing God. We can know him because God reveals himself to us.

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God Speaks

The letter to the Hebrews begins,

Long ago, God spoke to our ancestors by the prophets at different times and in different ways.

Hebrews 1:1

We can know the truth because God himself has spoken about it. God delivered his message through his spokesmen- his prophets. They are those like Noah, Moses, Elijah, Samuel and many others who, through the centuries, transmitted God's words to his people. Once written down, those words of God made up the 39 books that we call the Old Testament.

Additionally, notice that God spoke through them in a variety of ways. Sometimes it was simply by a direct message where a prophet would be given the exact words to say. Other times, they would be shown visions or interpretations of current events or through songs or laws. On one occasion, God spoke through a donkey and on another by writing on a wall.⁹ But it was never the prophet making up the words or making their best guess about what God might think. It was God speaking *through* them.

Above all, you know this: No prophecy of Scripture comes from the prophet's own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by the will of man; instead, men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

2 Peter 1:20-21

⁹ You can see these episodes in Numbers 28:22-34 and Daniel 5

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The Holy Spirit of God is often spoken of in the Bible as its author. The word for Spirit means wind or breath, and it is from this that we get the word “inspiration.” The Bible describes the very breath of God entering the human writers to give them the words. The prophets physically wrote Scripture, but only as those who were “inspired” by God. It was God’s words that they wrote.

Importantly, because they are God’s words, we can know they are true. The Bible tells us the truth about God and us and how we relate to him, for it is God speaking to us, and he does not lie.

God Shows Up

However, God does more than speak to reveal himself to us.

Sometimes, we can make the mistake of adopting the concept of God that is found in Greek philosophy.¹⁰ Plato and others conceived of god as the primary cause for the universe (which they called *the One* [τὸ Ἕν]). As spirit was conceived of as the good and the material as evil, this god could only, in their minds, be pure Spirit. He was therefore entirely disconnected from the pollution of matter. The universe only came into being as “thought” (nous) emanated from this Spirit that, in turn, produced the “cosmic soul”, which finally made the material universe. Each of the stages was of lesser and lesser perfection as they proceeded away from *the One* which was god. The god of Greek philosophy was therefore disconnected from our material universe, separated from it by an uncrossable chasm.

People could not even attempt to know this god. The words and definitions that comprised knowledge belonged to a creation which was

¹⁰ as described by the Neoplatonist Plotinus (204-270 AD)

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entirely separate from where the spiritual realm of *the One*. Their god was beyond knowledge and therefore- *entirely unknowable*.

We might be thinking in the same way if we think of God as distant, unknowable and uninvolved with us. But this philosophical conception bears little relation to the God who actually exists. God does not view the material universe as inferior or impure- after all, he created it and then declared all of it good. Nor does God remain distant. He gets his hands dirty by getting involved with his creatures. God becomes one of us, a man, and he does so to reveal himself to us.

In these last days, he has spoken to us by his Son. God has appointed him heir of all things and made the universe through him. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact expression of his nature, sustaining all things by his powerful word.

Hebrews 1:2-3

In the past, God spoke through the prophets. But now God the Son, Jesus, has appeared. The writer here leaves us in no doubt that Jesus is not just another prophet. He is not just another kind of revelation. Jesus is everything God is- he is the creator, the radiance of God's glory, the exact expression of God's nature, the sustainer of the universe- he is God the Son taking on human flesh. So that when God speaks to us by his Son, God is revealing himself to us *by showing us himself*. The writer to the Hebrews is telling us that previously, through the prophets, we had correspondence from God, but now we have an in-person appearance.

The Apostle John, in his Gospel, expresses the purpose for Jesus' coming in this way,

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No one has ever seen God. The one and only Son, who is himself God and is at the Father's side—he has revealed him.

John 1:18

God is indeed our creator, and we are therefore separated from him by a chasm that not only our selves, but our knowledge cannot cross. We cannot by effort or study or reason or experience discover his character or come to know him. However, by God's *own initiative*, we can know him in the same way we can know any person. Not by us going to him, but because *God came to us*.

God is not hidden in the shadows, nor is he unknowable. God is not a philosophical abstraction about whom you can only say negatives. God revealed himself in Jesus so we can know what he is truly like. Jesus reveals the heart and mind of the Father. That far from being impassive, God is love. That he mourns our lostness in sin, that he has compassion on us and longs to welcome us back, that he has sent Jesus to reconcile us to him, that he will one day restore the universe and invites us to be a part of it eternally.

In Chapter Eight of *Certainty For Life*, I told the story of a friend who spent a weekend as a guest of Queen Elizabeth. When he returned, he could have told us all he had learned about the Queen over those two days- except that he was strictly forbidden to do so! However, Jesus had been and continues to be at the Father's side from and into all eternity. He and the Father and the Holy Spirit are united in Trinity, all equally God, all knowing God's mind intimately. And far from being forbidden to reveal what he knew, Jesus' very purpose was to show by his life and words what God is like.

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For no one can know the Father, unless through the Word of God, that is, unless by the Son revealing him...And his Word knows that his Father is, as far as regards us, invisible and infinite; and since he cannot be declared by anyone else, he does himself declare him to us.

Irenaeus (c. 125-202 AD)

Against Heresies Book IV, Chapter 6, Section 3

The Old Testament is About Jesus

So central is the role of Jesus in showing us the mind of God that he is not a new word from God, distinct from the message of the prophets. In fact, the prophets looked ahead to Jesus.

Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who prophesied about the grace that would come to you, searched and carefully investigated. They inquired into what time or what circumstances the Spirit of Christ within them was indicating when he testified in advance to the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow. It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves but you.

1 Peter 1:10-12

The prophets spoke as God directed them. However, they could not piece together all of God's plans for the future. They recognised that what they wrote awaited a later time before it could be fully understood.

My mother loved Agatha Christie novels. The art and appeal of her writing is to tell a story, dropping clues and hints here and there, but never providing enough information to solve the crime. Only once you get to the

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final few pages and discover that the butler did it, do all the clues fall into place, and it all makes sense.

The Old Testament is like one of those mystery novels. It makes clear the problem of sin, it tells us bits and pieces of the solution at “many times and in various ways.” It reveals that there will be a future King, a prophet, the ruler of the Universe, a sacrifice for the sin of God’s people, and that God himself will live amongst them. But no one, not even the prophets who wrote these words, could synthesise all that information together.

Only when Jesus appeared was the mystery solved. Only then did anyone have that “Aha” moment when they realised how all the seemingly contrasting parts of the Old Testament jigsaw puzzle fitted together. Jesus’ life made clear how he fulfilled all the promises and words of God through the prophets; that he was the human King of God’s people who rules the universe, yet also was God come to live amongst his people; and how Jesus was also the substitutionary sacrifice for their sins.

The prophets were God’s messengers, but Jesus was God’s message.

The New Testament is About Jesus

The same was true of the writings of the apostles in the New Testament, to whom Jesus promised that they would be given the truth about him:

“I still have many things to tell you, but you can’t bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth. For he will not speak on his own, but he will speak whatever he hears. He will also declare to you what is to come.

John 16:12-15

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Jesus tells his apostles that just like the prophets of old, they will be “inspired” by the Holy Spirit to recall the truth. Like the Old Testament prophets, when they write about Jesus and those things to come, they too will be writing the Word of God- a fact the apostles affirm as they write.

Luke provides the purpose for his writing about Jesus to be, “that you may know the certainty of the things about which you have been instructed.”¹¹ In his Gospel biography, Luke sets out an orderly and truthful account of Jesus' life (in Luke's Gospel) and the ongoing work of Jesus through his people (in Acts). However, these are not just historical records. In his letter to Timothy, the apostle Paul quotes the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy and a verse from Luke's Gospel and calls them both *Scripture* - the inspired Word of God.¹²

The same Apostle Paul has this to say about his own teaching:

This is why we constantly thank God, because when you received the word of God that you heard from us, you welcomed it not as a human message, but *as it truly is, the word of God*, which also works effectively in you who believe.

1 Thessalonians 2:13 (italics mine)

Paul is convinced that what he teaches are the very words of God, not least because of the effectiveness of his message in convicting and changing people to follow Jesus.

¹¹ Luke 1:4

¹² 1 Timothy 5:18

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The apostle Peter also confirms that Paul's writings are Scripture.¹³ And Peter, in turn, declares that he writes not only as a true eyewitness of Jesus' life but also as a prophet writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.¹⁴

So, as we read the Bible, we have the words of God, revealing God truly to us, in Jesus.

The Final Word

But there is another crucial point to notice in what the writer to the Hebrews stated that, "In *these last days*, he has spoken to us by his Son."¹⁵ The rulership of King Jesus has ushered in a new age. We recognised that by numbering our years in terms of "the year of our Lord" or *Anno Domini* in Latin, which we shorten to A.D. We live in the last era before the end.

In this time, God has spoken his final word through Jesus. God himself has appeared in human flesh to reveal himself. He has revealed God perfectly. Nothing more needs to be said. No piece of information was left out. Additionally, nothing more needs to be done. Jesus, in his life, death and resurrection, has fulfilled every promise God had made.¹⁶ Jesus has set into motion all that needed to be done to provide a rescue for humanity and to prepare for a new creation.

It means that we do not need any further revelation from God. The writings of Joseph Smith and the Latter-Day Saints of the Mormon religion claim new teachings from God. The writings of the Koran and the Hadiths of Islam present a picture of an entirely different god. These claim to be

¹³ 2 Peter 3:15-16

¹⁴ 2 Peter 1:16-21

¹⁵ Hebrews 1:2

¹⁶ 2 Corinthians 1:20

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additional teachings, supplementing the Biblical account. In reality, what they offer is a contradiction of what God has clearly spoken through Jesus.

However, the revelation of God in Jesus cannot be improved upon. While God could say something new even today, we would have to ask why he would need to when he has spoken so completely in Christ. And why would any new prophets be required when all of God's purposes are fulfilled in Jesus?

Knowing the Truth about God

On one occasion, Jesus' disciples asked him the way to God, to which he answered,

... "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will also know my Father. From now on you do know him and have seen him."

John 14:6-7

This was a bold claim then, and it remains so now. Jesus states that he is the gatekeeper to God, that he provides exclusive access to him. This is why Jesus is the final word from God and nothing more needs to be said. Only by following Jesus can we come to know God.

One of the disciples, Philip, jumped at this offer to know God.

"Lord," said Philip, "show us the Father, and that's enough for us."

John 14:8

Philip hears Jesus offer the way and expresses the desire we all have to know God. It did not matter to Phillip how difficult the journey would be

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or how far he must travel in following Jesus, for he was willing to do whatever it took to see and know God the Father truly.

However, by his question, Philip demonstrated that he did not hear Jesus explain how God could be known.

Jesus said to him, “Have I been among you all this time and you do not know me, Philip? The one who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? Don’t you believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words I speak to you I do not speak on my own. The Father who lives in me does his works.

John 14:9-10

Jesus' response to Philip was, If you want to know the truth about God, then look at me. Jesus and the Father are one. So, the words of Jesus are God's words; the character of Jesus is that of the Father's; the works that Jesus does, his life, death and resurrection are all God's works. Jesus reveals to us what God thinks of humanity, how we are to relate to him, how to be at peace with him, and what the future will hold.

This is why, throughout this book, we have been examining what the Bible has to say. For contained within the Bible's pages are not “cleverly contrived myths” or a “prophet's own interpretation” but the very words of God regarding Jesus Christ.¹⁷ And knowing him, we know the true character and mind of God.

God is not hidden. God is not silent. God is not distant. God speaks to humanity repeatedly and persistently because he desires to be in a relationship with us, and that can only be established through

¹⁷ 2 Peter 1:16,20; 1 Thessalonians 2:13

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communication of the truth. God speaks fully and truthfully through Jesus, his Son.

If you want to know God, then listen to Jesus' words and see what he has done. Read the words about Jesus which God caused to be written about himself in the Bible. Then you can know God truly.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Bible is Clear & Reliable

We saw in the previous chapter that God reveals himself to us through his written word in the Bible. However, three questions come to my mind, the answers to which will give us confidence to read the Bible and to accept it as the Word of God.

Firstly, can we as ordinary people understand the Bible as we read it ourselves, or do we need an expert to interpret it?

Secondly, has the Bible been reliably transmitted down to us so that it is an accurate record of the words and lives of Jesus and the prophets?

Thirdly, how was the New Testament formed?

I The Bible is Clear

We Expect God to Communicate Clearly

We can start to answer this first question by considering God's purpose in creating us. Out of all creatures, God made humans alone in his image. People reflect their maker in two important ways- by being rulers, for we

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were given the responsibility to care for the earth, and in our capacity for relationship. Humans were uniquely made to love and serve God and each other.

God gives us the capacity for speech and comprehension so that we might know one another. God and Adam spoke to one another in the Garden of Eden because words are the foundation of relationships. After sin fractured that relationship, God continued to communicate verbally to offer reconciliation. God wants to make himself known to us, to warn us of the danger of continuing to live in defiance of him, and to welcome us back to him. How could God accomplish this? Indeed, why would he bother speaking at all if his communication were unintelligible to us? Then how would we receive the message God was sending?

Unquestionably, God can and does communicate clearly to us. As the apostle Paul writes,

For we are not proclaiming ourselves but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus's sake. For God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of God's glory in the face of Jesus Christ.

2 Corinthians 4:5-6

God made light itself and the entire universe by his Word. By that same Word, we cannot doubt that he can and does illuminate our hearts with his knowledge, for with that same creative Word God designed and made us. It was he who constructed our larynx and tongue so we could form speech, gave us ears to hear and an enormous part of our brain devoted to the comprehension of language. Of course, our creator God can deliver words to us by which we will understand his truth.

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The Psalmist writes,

Your word is a lamp for my feet
and a light on my path.
The revelation of your words brings light
and gives understanding to the inexperienced.

Psalm 119:105, 130

God is not hiding from us but wants us to know him. His Biblical word shines a light on the path to guide our way so we can find him and follow him. The universal understanding of the Bible across time and culture demonstrates that it does not require study or expertise, for his word is clear even to those who know little of God. The Bible addresses concerns common to all people everywhere using concepts they can comprehend. In his graciousness, God has given us a message we can all understand.

“Is God, therefore, the contriver both of the mind, and of the voice, and of the tongue, unable to speak eloquently? Yes, rather, with the greatest foresight, he wished those things which are divine to be without adornment, that all might understand the things which he himself spoke to all”

Lactantius (AD 240-320)
The Divine Institutes, Book 6, Chapter 21

Jesus and The Apostles Assume the Bible is Clear

When Jesus addresses his hearers, he holds them accountable for disobeying the Bible. When Nicodemus, one of the Jewish leaders, exclaims when he hears Jesus say that to participate in God's Kingdom, "You must be born again," Jesus responds, "Are you a teacher of Israel and don't know these things?"¹⁸ Jesus' criticism assumes not only that any student of the Bible should know this doctrine but also that it could be clearly understood.

Jesus also repeatedly quotes the Old Testament to demonstrate that he comes in fulfilment of prophecy,¹⁹ as the proofs of his teaching,²⁰ and in the correction of the Jewish leadership²¹. He can only do so by assuming that his hearers can understand the Bible.

Like Jesus, the apostles assumed their Jewish audience could comprehend the Old Testament they had grown up reading. The talks recorded in the book of Acts are peppered with Biblical references,²² and the letter to the Hebrews is filled with Biblical quotes. However, they discovered that even those who were new to the Bible responded with understanding and obedience. In Acts 16:25-34, a Gentile (non-Jew) gaoler had only heard Paul and Silas pray and sing hymns for a night. When an earthquake opened the cell doors, the gaoler had understood enough from the words spoken and sung by Paul and Silas to seek out God for salvation. The Gentile Athenians

¹⁸ John 3:10

¹⁹ e.g. Matthew 11:10, 21:12-16, 21:42, 22:36-40, 26:31, 27:45-46; Luke 4:18-19; Mark 12:10-11; Mark 14:27, 61-62; John 13:18, 15:25

²⁰ e.g. Matthew 12:3-8; Mark 10:4-9; John 10:34-35

²¹ e.g. Matthew 19:3-6, 26:64; Mark 7:6-7, 7:10, 12:24-27

²² e.g. Acts 2:14-36

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in Acts 17:34 also heard about Jesus and believed. The Bible can be clearly understood even by those who are strangers to its message.

When the apostle Paul reflects on how he presented the message to the Corinthians, he writes this to them:

When I came to you, brothers and sisters, announcing the mystery of God to you, I did not come with brilliance of speech or wisdom. I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.

1 Corinthians 2:1-2

Paul did not rely on his celebrity, that his presentation was compelling or clever, or that it contained good stories, or that he manipulated a response from them. All he did was clearly describe the Gospel of Christ crucified. He knew that this alone was powerful to convict people of the truth, for he assumed that the Bible was clear to all. The Bible is clear for us to understand as well.

Reading The Bible

In order to understand the Bible, we must approach it like any other piece of literature.

One of my favourite authors is Tolstoy, and his masterpiece is War and Peace. The original is in Russian, which I cannot read, but thankfully, there are several English translations. There are some unfamiliar terms within it, like the different types of horse-drawn carriages, which were well known to 19th-century readers but less so to us. Then there are all the names which are unusual to our ears and not helped by there being six Marias, three Annas and two each of Dmitris, Mikhails, Nikolais, Vasilis and Tikhons!

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Yet I can pick up what some of the unfamiliar words and concepts mean by the way they are use and their context within the story. And while some of the details can be difficult to follow, the quality of the writing means the overall storyline is obvious. Through the text of the story, the author Tolstoy guides the reader to the conclusions he wants you to draw.

By paying this same attention, we can come to an understanding of the Bible. It too was written in ancient languages unfamiliar to most of us. Were you to learn the Greek, Hebrew and Aramaic, you would appreciate the accuracy of the translations available to us. Thankfully, the many English versions have saved us the trouble and are now readily available in print and online.

We can be thankful for those like Cyril Loukaris, archbishop of Constantinople, who commissioned the translation and printing of the first New Testament in modern Greek in 1638. Those who translated did so under enormous opposition from those who wanted to reserve access to the Bible to the experts. But they were driven by the conviction that it could not only be clearly understood by ordinary people but was the powerful way in which God saved - if only people could read it in a language they understood. With the invention of the printing press, which allowed for the mass reproduction and distribution of literature, it was this conviction that resulted in translations of the Bible being by far the most reproduced books.

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The true light of the Church is the Holy Scriptures. Without them, we would be in darkness.

*Cyril Loukaris, Archbishop of Constantinople (1620-1638)*²³

When it comes to unfamiliar words and concepts, the Bible certainly contains them, but these are defined by the way they are used within the text. No-one alive today experienced the Jewish sacrificial system or the Passover in the Temple in Jerusalem. However, the Bible describes all that we need to know. So that when we read John calling Jesus the “Lamb of God”, we can understand the reference to the Passover lamb and that Jesus is the sacrifice for the sin of his people.

We need no external knowledge to understand the division between Jews and Gentiles, for the Biblical text tells us. Even in the book of Revelation, with John’s fantastic vision into heaven of dragons, beasts, horses, and a lamb; of a rainbow, lampstands, and a tree of life; of a variety of numbers and a serpent – none of these symbols are left to our imagination. The vast majority can be understood by looking at their use within the Old Testament. We do not need to import additional information to comprehend what the Bible is saying. The Bible itself sets the context within which it is to be understood.

The central plotline of the Bible is impossible to miss: that God made the universe and us within it, that we rebelled against him, that God promised a rescuer and fulfilled that promise in Jesus and that there is a new creation

²³ “[Loukaris] was possibly the most brilliant man to have held office as Patriarch since the days of Saint Photius” (Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Church* p107). Cyril Loukaris was declared a saint and martyr by the Orthodox Church of Alexandria on 6th October 2009.

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to come. It is clear that we can be completely forgiven through the sacrifice of Christ, who guarantees us peace with God and life to the full now and forever. It is clear that God is good, and his promises can be trusted. It is clear that this is our only hope. What a privilege to be given the opportunity to read this message from God for us- in the Bible.

Read and Examine

We all should strive to be like the Bereans.

The people here were of more noble character than those in Thessalonica, since they received the word with eagerness and examined the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so. Consequently, many of them believed, including a number of the prominent Greek women as well as men.

Acts 17:11-12

Paul and Silas escaped Thessalonica to arrive in Berea, a town in Northern Greece. There, they encountered people who modelled the attitude we should all have towards the Bible. As they heard Paul and Silas speak, the Bereans did not simply accept their teachings, nor did they reject them for not being to their liking. Instead, they eagerly examined the Scriptures. It assumes they had the capacity to read and understand for themselves and assess the teaching of the experts who stood before them, for the final word belongs to God in the Bible. If God's word disagreed with these teachers, they would be right to reject them. But as they read the Bible for themselves and were convicted of the truth of what they had been taught, they had no choice but to believe and turn to follow Jesus.

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For you, do not simply accept what others have said because it has the appearance of authority or is accompanied by a threat or merely is appealing. Read the Bible for yourself to assess and understand what God has said. Do not even believe me because what you have read is in a book, but examine the Bible for yourself. That is why I have provided the Biblical references throughout so you can determine the truth from God's word by reading them yourself.

"The knowledge of our religion and of the truth of things is independently manifest rather than in need of human teachers, for almost day by day it asserts itself by facts and manifests itself brighter than the sun by the doctrine of Christ. . . . The sacred and inspired Scriptures are sufficient to declare the truth"

Athanasius

Against the Heathen, Part 1, Section 1

Pray and ask God for help to know him. Pray like the man who, when challenged by Jesus to believe, pleaded, "I do believe; help my unbelief!"²⁴ For only through God's Spirit given to his people will the truth be revealed.

Now God has revealed these things to us by the Spirit, since the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. For who knows a person's thoughts except his spirit within him? In the same way, no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. Now we have not received the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who comes from God, so that we may understand what has been freely given to us by God.

²⁴ Mark 9:24

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1 Corinthians 2:10-12

The Holy Spirit of God has been united to the Father and Son for all eternity, so he knows the mind of God and reveals it to us through the Bible. God gives his same Spirit to all believers so that, in turn, we may know him. It is through his Spirit that God makes all things clear to us in the Bible. Ask our God for understanding of his word and know that he will not turn you away.

The last words in this section belong to Cyril Loukaris, Archbishop of Constantinople. In his preface to the New Testament in Modern Greek, he stated that the purpose of translating and publishing this work was so the “faithful would be able to read the Bible alone and by themselves.”²⁵

“...the gospel, written in the language which the people speak, is “a sweet message, given to us from heaven.” That the duty of all Christians as regards this message is “to know and be acquainted with all its contents” and that there is no other way of learning about “the things that concern faith correctly . . . save through the divine and sacred Gospel.” He sternly denounces those who forbid the people to study the Bible, as well as those who reject the translation of the original text: “If we speak or read without understanding, it is like throwing our words to the wind.” Now that the Greek people have the New Testament in a language they can understand, they also have the duty to read it.”²⁶

²⁵ Karalis, V 2007. “Greek Christianity after 1453,” in Parry, K (ed.) *The Blackwell Companion to Eastern Christianity*, 156-185. Oxford: Blackwell, p161.

²⁶ Hadjiantoniou, GA 1961. *Protestant Patriarch: The Life of Cyril Lucaris (1572-1638) Patriarch of Constantinople*. Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, p94.

2 The Bible is historically reliable

The second issue on which some of us might need assurance is that of historical reliability. The two questions that come to my mind are these: Did the writers record what actually occurred? And, given the passing of time, do we now possess what they originally wrote?

The Writers were careful to record the Truth.

The work of history is, of course, to describe what has happened in the past. However, it can never record every single event, for that would be both tedious and uninformative. Instead, history will always be selective, describing significant past events and usually to establish how and why events occurred. It is, therefore, always a subjective process as the historian chooses which episodes to recount. For instance, a history of Napoleon will only present the events that, in the opinion of the writer, are the most significant ones. Regardless of whether the historian draws a conclusion, we will be led to one by the information that has been presented.

Therefore, determining historical truth is not like working out the single solution to a mathematical problem. It is more like deciding what happened at a car accident. We would ask eyewitnesses to describe what they saw. We might also consider any video footage, remembering that it, too, will provide a selective version. We could then synthesise this information to establish what happened. More weight would be given to details with multiple witnesses and those closest to the accident.

Of course, all the New Testament writers were convinced followers of Jesus. All of them wrote with the purpose that their readers might be persuaded and grow in their conviction to follow Jesus. Yet that does not mean their accounts are untruthful. Our biographer of Napoleon may

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admire him, but in their account of his life, they can also be objective enough to admit Napoleon's failings and flaws.

Our confidence in the Bible is increased when we recognise that the New Testament has nine writers of its twenty-seven books, each writing from a unique vantage point. Unsurprisingly, some of them consider the same source material. Matthew, Mark and Luke do share some common material, but each introduces episodes unique to their accounts. John is entirely distinct. The result is four quite different biographies of Jesus' life. They each address different audiences and so highlight various events and draw out distinct emphases. But all of them are committed to providing an accurate account of Jesus' life.

As Luke explains,

Many have undertaken to compile a narrative about the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as the original eyewitnesses and servants of the word handed them down to us. So it also seemed good to me, since I have carefully investigated everything from the very first, to write to you in an orderly sequence, most honourable Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things about which you have been instructed.

Luke 1:1-4

Luke had "carefully investigated" all the facts. He had interviewed witnesses and consulted the firsthand evidence to produce an orderly account of Jesus' life in his Gospel. He does the same as he records the history of the early Church in his second book, Acts. Luke's approach is systematic, incorporating places and times, including references to prominent figures in power like Tiberius and Pontius Pilate. And Luke does not hide his purpose but declares it openly – that Theophilus may have

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certainty about the truth. The Biblical accounts bear the same purpose of convincing *us*.

The New Testament also contains the Apostolic letters addressing particular questions or the circumstances faced by congregations or Christian leaders. They, too, are independent witnesses to the life of Christ who provide a different perspective, yet the same picture of Jesus and his people.

In addition, consider the proximity in time between the New Testament and the events it describes. Its books were written between 50 and 90 AD, and Jesus was crucified in AD 30 or 33. That means a mere 17 years between the events and the writing. The closeness in time means the chance for accidental error is minimised. It also means that many were still alive who had seen the events themselves. It is more difficult to “bend the truth” when there are many around who can contradict you.

This is a very short time gap between the events and their re-telling compared to other ancient histories. For instance, the most important source of information about Alexander the Great (died 323 BC) was written in 130AD, four centuries after his death.

Historical Sources outside the Bible

In addition, there are numerous contemporary sources outside the Bible that align with the New Testament accounts. These add to our confidence regarding the historical veracity of the Bible.

Pliny the Younger was the Roman governor of Bithynia in what is now Northern Turkey. Around A.D. 110, he wrote to the Emperor Trajan asking for advice about the troublesome group known as Christians, which had

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spread far and wide in the region. Pliny describes how they meet regularly and consider Jesus to be God, just as the Bible describes. He complained that pagan Temples were deserted including how no one bought the meat from their animal sacrifices. We read about some doing this in 1 Corinthians 8, as well as the threat to the Temple idol makers in Acts 19:24-41.

Pliny had imprisoned many of the troublemakers and disclosed that some claimed to have given up being Christian twenty years earlier. This tells us there were Christians there in 80-90 AD, which matches with the apostle Peter's first letter, written in the 60s AD, addressed in part to Bithynia.

In AD 64, Tacitus, in his *Annals of Imperial Rome*, writes how Nero blamed the hated Christians for a fire that devastated the city of Rome. In his account he confirms Luke's assertion that Jesus taught during the reign of Emperor Tiberius (Luke 3:1) and that Pontius Pilate oversaw his execution (Matthew 27:2; Mark 15:1; Luke 23:1; Acts 3:13) as a criminal (Luke 23:2). He describes Jesus as having "suffered the extreme penalty" which almost certainly refers to crucifixion as it was considered such a vile death that it should not be named in polite Roman society. He also states how, despite Jesus' execution, the "Christian superstition" grew in Judea and spread to Rome, where it multiplied (Acts 1:4, 28:14).

I could also mention Suetonius, who wrote in AD 49 that "since the Jews constantly made disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus [likely referring to Christ], he [Emperor Claudius] expelled them from Rome". Or Josephus, a Jewish historian writing the *Jewish Antiquities* in the early 90s AD, who mentions that Jesus is the Christ who was crucified under Pilate and then returned to life, and how all of this was in fulfilment of the prophets. He

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writes about the Christian movement that spread afterwards and the martyrdom of James, the brother of Jesus.²⁷

All of these are very early extra-Biblical confirmations of some of the historical details contained within the New Testament. They confirm what no serious ancient historian could deny: the existence of Jesus and the seismic impact he had upon the world, starting in Judea and Rome. They corroborate the New Testament regarding the times and places in which Jesus lived, that many came to acknowledge him as the Christ and how early Christianity spread, some of what they believed, and the broad opposition that Christians faced.

So, in summary, we can have confidence that the New Testament writers wrote the truth because

- They act as nine independent witnesses to these events
- They are careful to present the truth
- They are writing close in time to those events
- There are extra-Biblical historical accounts that concur with those in the New Testament
- The fact that Christianity spread far, wide and rapidly, not from military conquest or threat of legal sanction, but despite those things, meaning that people were being convinced that it was true

What we have is what they wrote.

But were the original Gospels and letters accurately copied?

²⁷ Barnett, Paul 2003. *Is the New Testament Reliable?* Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, pp 22-34

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The New Testament documents spread rapidly throughout the Roman Empire as congregations in various places made their own copies. Originally in Greek, they were translated into Latin and various other local languages. It meant that multiple copies were made across the known world. Today, there are about 25,000 fragments and complete copies of the New Testament that have been recovered, which can be compared with one another.

The earliest is a fragment of the Gospel of John from the early 100s AD. Again, the comparison with other texts from the ancient world is stark. The history of Alexander the Great relies on 36 copies from the 15th century. *The Annals of Rome* by Tacitus has only one surviving manuscript for each half of the work and there are nine copies of Josephus' *Jewish Antiquities*. The sheer number and closeness in time of New Testament fragments provide far more evidence that the Biblical documents have been reliably transmitted to us than any other contemporary ancient document.

Furthermore, because the Biblical documents were widely distributed, errors in copying can be identified. For instance, if someone early in the process in Alexandria misheard or misspelled and therefore wrote a wrong word, that will be copied after that. However, the error is revealed once compared with manuscripts from other locations. In addition, the writings of Christian teachers quoted large portions of the New Testament, which provide us with another way to establish what was written in the original documents.

The ultimate result is that while small questions remain, we can be quite sure that what we have in our hands is what the New Testament writers wrote.

3 How the New Testament was formed

The final question to briefly address is this: how did the early Church decide what to include in the New Testament? The answer is that it was by the common opinion of believers that such documents were the word of God.

Paul wrote this to the Corinthian Christians in defence of his teaching:

Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, like some, letters of recommendation to you or from you? You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by everyone. You show that you are Christ's letter, delivered by us, not written with ink but with the Spirit of the living God—not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.

2 Corinthians 3:1-3

Other teachers had visited Corinth and questioned the authenticity of Paul's Gospel. His response is to ask the Corinthians to look to themselves for the evidence. Did Paul's teaching transform them, change them from serving themselves and pagan gods to serving the living God? In that case, Paul is arguing, he did not deliver his own words, but the very Gospel word of God. No clever speech, no celebrity endorsement, no heart-rending story or tears and pleading can change people like that. Only God's Holy Spirit working through his Gospel can.

That is how the word of God was recognised. The Gospels and letters were copied and widely distributed among the early Christians. When they produced genuine faith and transformation amongst people in many places, a consensus was reached that those writings must be- *could only be*- the word of God. It was these that now form the New Testament.

Around 100AD, in their writings, three Christian leaders (Ignatius, Polycarp and Clement) quoted or referred to twenty-five out of the twenty-

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seven books of the New Testament. In other words, these were already in circulation and accepted as authoritative.²⁸

So, when in the 4th Century the councils of Hippo Regius and Carthage formalised the list of New Testament books, they were not imposing something new. They were codifying what was already commonly acknowledged: that these 27 books were the word of God.

Over to You

But as the saying goes, the proof of the pudding is in the tasting. Read the Bible for yourself and discover if it has the ring of historical authenticity to you.

However, as I have only offered brief answers to some of the questions about the historical reliability of the Bible, you may have more. If so, I would suggest the following helpful books.

Barnett, Paul 2003. *Is the New Testament Reliable?* Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press

Dickson, John 2019. *Is Jesus history?* Epsom: The Good Book Company

And a shorter booklet:

Errington, Andrew 2010. *Can we trust what the Gospels say about Jesus?* Kingsford: Matthias Media

²⁸ Ibid, pp39-41

DISCUSSION GUIDE

For this book

Chapter One

Read Luke 9:57-62

Jesus issued these instructions as he was heading towards the destiny of his death in Jerusalem.

1. What are the three situations that Jesus says to ignore and instead follow him?
2. Does anything shock you about Jesus' commands regarding familial obligations?
3. While these conversations occur in unique circumstances, what do they tell you about the priority Jesus puts on following him?

Chapter Two

Read 1 Timothy 6:17-19

1. Why are those who are rich tempted to be arrogant?
2. What is the danger of arrogance when it comes to relating to God?

DISCUSSION GUIDE

3. In contrast to the “uncertainty of wealth” (verse 17), what are the *certainties* in this passage?
4. What constructive ways to use our wealth are outlined here?

Read Ephesians 4:28

5. What does this tell us about the purpose of personal wealth?

Chapter Three

We saw in this chapter that it is right to fear those things which are dangerous. Sometimes our fear is of disapproval by others.

Read what Jesus has to say about this in Luke 12:4-7

1. Whom are we told not to fear?
2. Those who can have us killed certainly sound like they should be feared.
What reason is given here to *not* fear them?
3. Why should God be feared?
4. So, what should our response be to fearing the God who justly condemns people to hell?

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5. Though God is to be feared, why does Jesus say “Don’t be afraid” in verse 7?
6. If God knows even our most minor details, what does it say about his care for us?

Finally:

Do you think you’re in complete control of your life?

What evidence is there for and against you being in control?

Chapter Four

Read Mark 3:11

On many occasions in his earthly ministry, Jesus ordered demons out of people. It appears to have happened so many times that this verse makes a general observation about how demons would react to Jesus.

1. Who did the demons think Jesus was? What was their reaction to Jesus? What does that tell us about who they believe is more powerful?

Read how some religious leaders respond to these exorcisms by challenging Jesus in Mark 3:22-27

2. Who do these religious leaders think Jesus is?
3. Let’s consider Jesus’ response: In driving out demons, is Jesus working in support of Satan or against him?

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4. Who is more powerful - the strong man or the one who can subdue him and tie him up? Who is Satan, and who is Jesus in this picture? What point is Jesus making?
5. So, if Jesus is tying up Satan to rob him, what or who is Jesus stealing from him?

Chapter Five

Mary rejoiced that God was remembering his promise to Abraham.

Read see how Jesus fulfils this promise in Galatians 3:10-14

[Definitions: justified=declared right; Gentiles=non-Jews]

1. What is the problem with trying to earn your salvation by obeying the law? (verses 10-12)
2. What do you think is the curse on those who cannot obey the law?
3. How does Christ rescue people from the “curse of the law”? (verse 13)
4. Rather than trusting in your own obedience to God’s law, where should our trust be placed? (see Galatians 3:6 and 3:9)
5. How does Jesus fulfil God’s promise to Abraham to bless all the people on earth through him?

DISCUSSION GUIDE

Chapter Six

Read 2 Timothy 3:13-17

[rebuke=to criticise; “man of God” could mean a leader like Timothy or simply “any person belonging to God”]

Paul warns Timothy against being deceived away from the truth.

1. How is he to avoid that danger?
2. What reason is Timothy given to have confidence in the Scriptures for salvation? (see verse 16)
3. In verse 16, what other benefits does this inspired Word of God have for believers? What do you think is meant by teach, rebuke, correct, and train in righteousness?
4. By what authority does Scripture do these things?
5. According to verse 17, what else does a believer need to equip them to serve God?

DISCUSSION GUIDE

Chapter Seven

Read 1 John 2:24-27

the anointing=receiving the Holy Spirit (e.g. see Luke 4:18, Acts 10:38)

As we saw in this chapter, God reveals all things to believers by the Spirit.

1. What are the things the anointing of the Holy Spirit reveals to believers in verses 25 and 27?
2. What are believers urged to continue doing in verses 24 and 27?
3. What is the promise for those who continue in the truth?
4. What else does having the truth enable believers to do in verse 26? (see also 1 John 4:1; 1 Thessalonians 5:20-21)
5. Why do you think verse 27 above says “you don’t need anyone to teach you”? What answer does that give to those who insist that individual believers cannot understand Biblical truth, but only experts?

DISCUSSION GUIDE

For Certainty for Life: An Invitation

A Word About Tradition and Authority

In the Bible, we not only see the truth taught in the early Church but also how they struggle with error. It is instructive to us to consider how they discerned between the two.

Read Galatians 1:6-9

Some in the Galatian Church have been misled by false teaching.²⁹

1. What is the writer Paul saying to those who think there are alternative ways to God?
2. In this passage, what does Paul consider to be the “yardstick of truth?”
3. Why would any of us find an angel’s message to be persuasive?
4. Why is Paul warning against accepting a different Gospel even from an angel?

²⁹ The entire letter to the Galatians is a warning from Paul against those who were teaching that it was not just faith in Christ but also obedience that made someone right with God. Galatians 2:15-21 gives you an idea of the problem with that teaching.

DISCUSSION GUIDE

Read Galatians 1:10-12

5. Why should they listen to Paul? What distinguishes Apostolic teachings from others after them?

Chapter Three

1. Do you think you have been ungrateful for the good things God has given to you?
2. Do you think you have shared in making a mess of the world?

Read Romans 1:28-32

3. What is wrong with the world?
4. Who has caused it? (see also Romans 3:9-18)
5. Is God right to be angry with how we have treated his world, his people and ourselves?

DISCUSSION GUIDE

Chapter Four

Read Romans 7:19-23

1. How well does that describe your struggle against sin?
2. Have you won the fight against sin? (read 1 John 1:8,10)
3. What can you do about your sin problem?

Chapter Five

1. Perhaps in the past you engaged in fasting or other practices of self-denial. Did it give you a feeling of peace with God? How long did that feeling last?

Read Colossians 2:18

Those who claim to have spiritual visions and access to the divine are impressive, and their lives can appear attractive to us.

2. What does the apostle Paul assert about seeking out such experiences?
3. Why does Paul describe them as being “inflated by empty notions”? Why would they feel proud of themselves?

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4. What is his assessment of their spiritual state?
5. Are they as super-spiritual as they claim?
6. If God created a good universe, why does our world contain pain, famine and suffering? (Read Genesis 3:16-19)
7. What do you think is the solution to our sin problem?

Chapter Six

1. Throughout Christian history, the commemoration of Jesus' death occurs on the day called "Good Friday". Why would the assassination of the founder of our faith be considered a "good" day?
2. What do these Bible passages tell you about what Jesus accomplished through his death?

John 11:49-52

Revelation 5:9

John 3:16

John 15:13

DISCUSSION GUIDE

Read 1 John 4:10

3. How does this reinforce what we read in Romans above-

That we are enemies of God?

That we have done nothing to deserve forgiveness?

Why Jesus died for us?

4. **Read** the following verses to see God's repeated promise that Jesus' death is a substitute for us, which forgives us completely

Romans 5:8-9

(Justified=made right, declared innocent)

Romans 6:23

2 Corinthians 5:21

Colossians 1:21-22

Romans 3:23-24

Galatians 3:13

DISCUSSION GUIDE

Chapter Seven

Read Romans 3:23

1. Who has sinned?
2. What can we expect when we have to give an account of our lives to God

Now look at **Romans 3:24-25**

(justified=declared right, guilt-free)
(grace=free gift)
(mercy seat=sacrifice)

Jesus offers to purchase his people out of bondage through his sacrifice for them.

3. What can these same sinners expect once Jesus has bought them?
4. What price do they have to pay?
5. What do they have to contribute to earn their forgiveness?

DISCUSSION GUIDE

Chapter Eight

Read 1 John 2:1-2

(An advocate is “one who represents another to plead their cause, like a lawyer”)

1. How is this like the priestly role of mediator we looked at above?
2. What problem do we have with the Father that we need someone to act as our advocate/lawyer?
3. Will Jesus be successful in representing us? Why? What does he offer?
4. Who can benefit from Jesus’ sacrifice before God?

A Word About Justice and Judgement

1. Do you think we can experience certain salvation right now?
What do the following verses say about this?

Romans 3:23-24

Romans 5:1

(justified=made right)
(redemption = the act of paying someone’s debt)
(wrath=anger)

2. When are we justified (made right) with God?

DISCUSSION GUIDE

3. When can we be certain of being at peace with God?
4. On whom or what does this justification depend?
5. Who does the work of ensuring that God's people keep following him?

Read 1 Corinthians 1:8; Philippians 1:6; Jude 24-25; John 6:39

Finally, read 1 Thessalonians 5:9

God's plan (his "appointing" of us) is for his people to avoid judgement and instead be saved.

6. Do you trust God's promise to save us, to always love us now and forever?

Chapter Eleven

In the Old Testament, King David of Israel committed adultery with Bathsheba and then had her husband killed to cover it up. Afterwards, he had a lot to confess to God to seek forgiveness.

Read his confession in Psalm 51:4-10

1. What is David admitting to in verses 4 and 5?
2. What is he acknowledging about God's standards in v6?

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3. What is he asking God to do for him in vv7-10?

Read Psalm 51:14-17

4. Now forgiven, what change does David resolve to make?
5. How would you define “repentance” from David’s actions?

Chapter Thirteen

Read Titus 2:11-14

1. In verses 11-12, what occurs first – do good works produce salvation, or does salvation result in good works?
2. In verse 14, what is the purpose of Jesus' saving a people? From what have they been redeemed (bought)? What is to be their aim in life?
3. In verse 12, what are the ways that saved people are expected to behave?
4. In verse 13, why do you think the return of Jesus should motivate his people to obey him?

DISCUSSION GUIDE

Chapter Fourteen

Read Psalm 1

1. What reasons are given for why the life advice of the Lord is superior to those of others?
2. What is the result of following the instructions of the wicked?
3. What is the result of following God's instructions?
4. Why then, in verse 2, can he conclude that he delights and meditates (contemplates deeply) God's law?
5. Do you think God can be trusted to provide the best guidance for life? Why?

DISCUSSION GUIDE

Chapter Fifteen

1. What is stopping you from accepting God's invitation right now to be welcomed home?

Give this question some thought. Identify your reason and write it down.

2. Is your reason worth missing out on God's blessings for eternity?

This would be a good topic to discuss with a Christian friend.

Life is full of questions Striving to live for Jesus only raises more

This companion volume to *Certainty for Life: An Invitation to those in Eastern Orthodoxy* addresses the pull of family loyalty, the search for security, the reality of fear and anxiety, the influence of fate and superstition, the honour due to Mary, the clarity of God's self-revelation, and the trustworthiness of the Bible.

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Anthony, Delivery Driver



Raised in a Greek Orthodox family, John Diacos writes from a heartfelt desire to share with others the assurance of peace with God. Along with his wife Elizabeth, they have raised five adult children and live in Melbourne, Australia. John currently works as a medical practitioner but still holds out hope of being called up to play for the Socceroos.

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