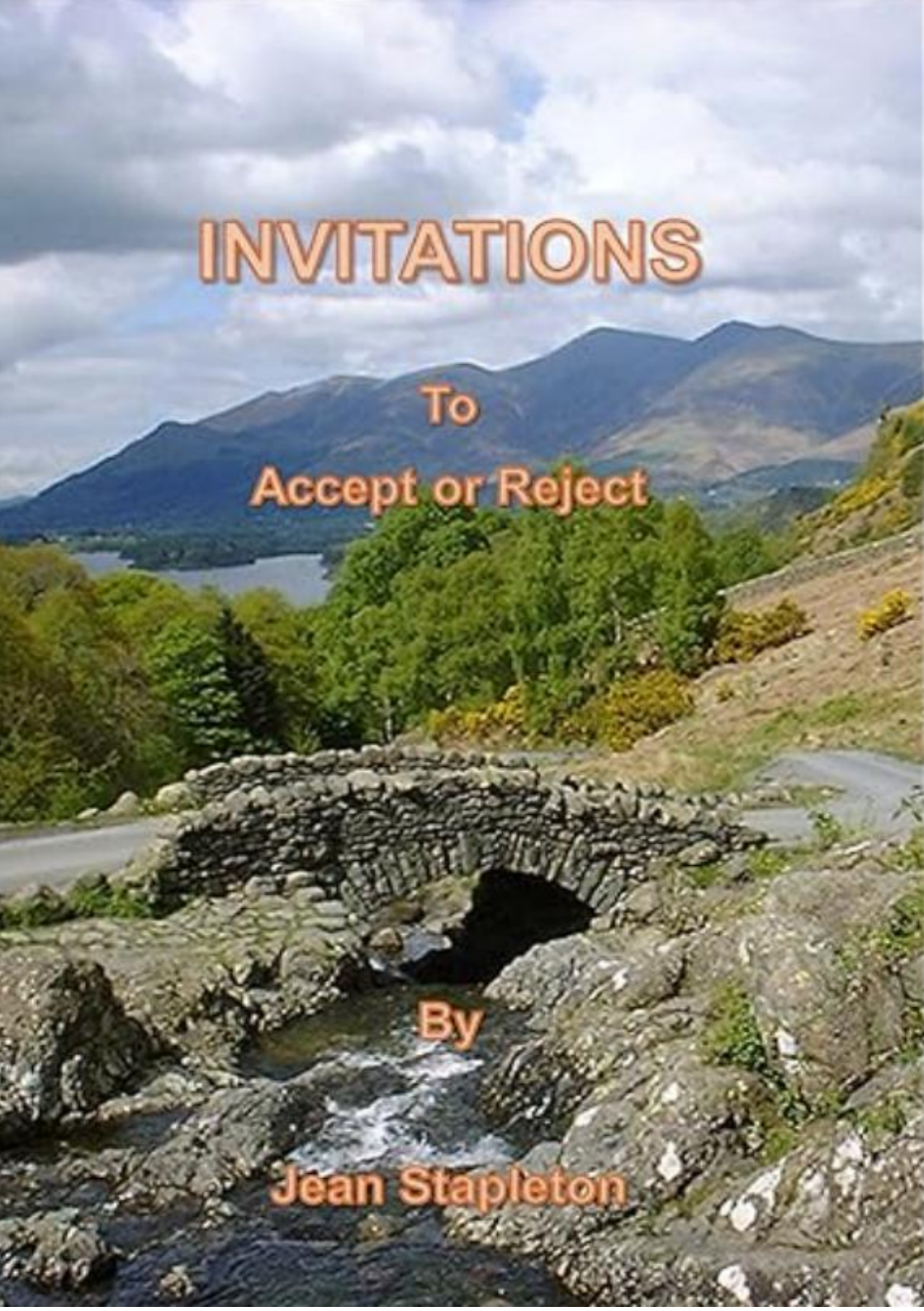




INVITATIONS

To
Accept or Reject

By

Jean Stapleton

**Invitations
to
Accept or Reject**

**By
Jean Stapleton
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INTRODUCTION

Sometimes we receive invitations to share in a friend's special day. It may be a wedding or a birthday party, something we will look forward to.

In this book we look at many of the invitations found in the Bible. Some were kind and generous, others that were invitations to join in wrong-doing. In the New Testament we read of those who were called to come to the Lord Jesus.

The Bible also has invitations for men and women and boys and girls today. The Lord Jesus still calls us to come to Him, and to put our trust in Him, to forgive our sin and to guide us through life.

The contents page at the beginning of your Bible, will help you to find Bible verses. It lists the thirty-nine Old Testament books, that tell us about the time before the Lord Jesus came into the world. It also lists the twenty-seven New Testament books, that tell us about the things that happened when Jesus came and after He went back to heaven.

Chapter 1 - An invitation to safety

Then the LORD said to Noah, "Come into the ark, you and all your household..."
(Genesis 7:1)

The Bible tells us that God was grieved to see the world filled with wickedness and violence. Even people's thoughts were evil. God saw one man who was different from those around him. This was Noah, whose life was different from others because he loved God. God showed grace to Noah: kindness that even Noah did not deserve.

God told Noah about the great flood He would send to destroy all people living at that time. But Noah and his family would be the exceptions. Noah was told to build an ark and God gave him full instructions for how this should be done. The ark was like a very large boat about 140 metres long.

Some of every sort of animals, birds and insects would be kept safe in the ark. God told Noah that they would come to him, a male and female of most animals, seven of certain animals which were known as 'clean animals'.

Through the long years of building the ark, Noah warned the people of what would happen because of their evil ways. The New Testament calls Noah "a preacher of righteousness" (2 Peter 2: 5), so we know that he told them how to put their lives right. No-one took any notice. God's invitation to Noah to enter the only place of safety, the ark, included just

eight people: Noah and his wife, their three sons and their wives.

Noah was obedient to everything God told him. The ark was finished and food for his family and for the animals that were to be saved, was stored. When Noah and his family were safely in the ark, it was God who shut them in. In doing this, God also closed the door to all those who did not believe the warnings that Noah had given them.

The Lord Jesus said that the time of His coming again will be like the days before the flood. People will be carrying on their lives as usual, many not taking notice of the warnings given by Christians, that when He comes He will judge the nations for their wickedness. But for those who love Him, the Lord Jesus is a place of safety, as the ark was for Noah.

Read:

Genesis 6: 5-8 and 7: 13-16

Matthew 24: 36-39

Find outs:

1. How many people went into the ark? (Genesis 6: 10 and 18; 7:7).
2. How many animals went into the ark? (Genesis 6: 19-20; 7: 2 and 9).
3. How many people and animals died? (Genesis 7: 21-23).
4. How many days before the water began to go down? (Genesis 7: 24; 8: 1-3).

Chapter 2 - An Invitation to Rebel

“Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower whose top is in the heavens; let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered abroad over the face of the whole earth.”
(Genesis 11: 4)

After the great flood, God gave a wonderful promise: “While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, winter and summer, and day and night shall not cease.” (Genesis 8: 22). He also said that the rainbow would be the sign of His promise that He would never again send a flood to destroy all living things. God also gave a command, that the people should spread over the earth (Genesis 9:1). This reminds us of God's words to Adam and Eve, that men and women were to take charge of the whole earth (Genesis 1: 26-28).

As we come to Genesis chapter 11, we find that the people at that time all spoke one language and were looking for a good place to settle. They found this in an area the Bible calls the plain of Shinar. This was fertile land near to the rivers Tigris and Euphrates. Their plan was to build a city there which was to include a very high tower. They had reason for this: they wanted to remain together and not to be scattered over the earth. This was, of course, the opposite to what God had said, and so we know that it was planned in a spirit of rebellion.

God did not allow the building work to continue. He caused the people to begin speaking in different languages. Working together became impossible and people began moving away from each other. No doubt groups of people who spoke the same language moved together and grew into different nations living in different parts of the world.

The city and tower that the people tried to build was known as Babel, which means confusion: which describes how their rebellion ended. It is interesting that in the New Testament, we have a time when people from different lands understood one another. This was the day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit was given to those who followed the Lord Jesus (Acts chapter 2). Here we see people together not in rebellion, but to hear about the Lord Jesus.

Read:

Genesis 11: 1-9

Acts 2: 1-12

Find outs:

1. Where did the people we read about in Genesis chapter 11 settle down? (Genesis 11: 2).
2. What did these people plan? (Genesis 11: 4).
3. Why did they plan this? (Genesis 11: 4).
4. How was the building stopped? (Genesis 11: 7).
5. What do we learn from Genesis 9:1 and 11: 8?

Chapter 3 - A Hospitable Invitation

“Come in, O blessed of the Lord! Why do you stand outside?”
(Genesis 24: 31)

Going to someone's home for the first time, when we don't really know them, can make us feel very uncertain about the welcome we will receive. Abraham's servant was hundreds of miles from his master's home, and he was about to meet people who he had never seen before. How did it happen that he heard such words of welcome?

Abraham had given his servant a very important task. This was to travel to the place where Abraham's relatives lived and bring back from there a wife for Isaac, Abraham's son. The servant travelled hundreds of miles north to Haran and arriving there he stood by the well and prayed to the God who he knew his master trusted in. His prayer was wonderfully and swiftly answered when Rebekah, Abraham's brother's granddaughter, came to the well. And so it was that this man and his travelling companions received a very warm welcome at Rebekah's home.

When the servant told of how he had prayed at the well, and of how his prayer was answered, Rebekah's father Bethuel, and his brother Laban, realised that God had guided in the whole situation. They were willing for Rebekah to go with the servant and to become Isaac's wife. Of course, an

arranged marriage would not have been unusual as is still the case in some cultures.

It was of importance to Abraham, that his son Isaac did not marry a Canaanite woman, who would have been an idol-worshipper. He had received a promise from God that a great nation would come from his family (Genesis 12: 1-2). In fact, in the days ahead, Isaac's son Jacob was given the name Israel by God and from his twelve sons came the twelve tribes of Israel. How important the servant's task was, and how important the welcome he received in Rebekah's home.

Read:

Genesis 24: 1-27

Find outs:

1. What was the servant's task? (verses 3-4).
2. What was his prayer? (verses 12-14).
3. How was his prayer answered? (verses 15-21).
4. How did the servant respond to the answer to his prayer? (verses 26-27).
5. What was the happy ending? (verse 67).



Chapter 4 - A Father's Invitation

Then Isaac said to Jacob, "Please come near..."
(Genesis 27: 21)

Isaac was growing old and his sight was failing. He had one important thing on his mind: he must give his blessing to the son who would succeed him. This was particularly important in this family, where the head of the family would inherit God's promises to Abraham.

Esau, the firstborn of Isaac's twin sons, loved hunting. One day his father asked him to hunt game and make a tasty meal for him. Then he would be ready to bless him. Esau took his hunting weapons and set off as his father had requested.

Rebekah, the mother of the twins, had heard the conversation. She knew that God had said, even before the twins were born, that it would be the youngest who would succeed Isaac (Genesis 25: 23). How could she prevent Isaac giving the blessing to Esau? She made her plans and spoke to Jacob.

Rebekah's plan involved dressing Jacob in Esau's clothes and placing some goat's skins on his hands and neck (Esau was a hairy man, Jacob was smooth skinned). Rebekah also cooked a meal for Jacob to take to his father. And so it was that with his failing sight, Isaac was deceived and gave his blessing to Jacob.

When Esau arrived on the scene and learned what had happened, he was very angry. Rebekah

told Jacob that he must go away until his brother's anger was eased. She did not know that Jacob would be away for twenty years and that she would never see him again.

Jacob was not a child when all this took place. He knew that his mother wanted to make sure that what God had said would happen, but he could have talked with her about how wrong it was to deceive Isaac. They could have prayed and waited for God to deal with the situation.

Sometimes, like Rebekah, we think we can sort things out our way. We can learn from what the Bible tells us about this family, to be honest with one another and above all to ask God's help when difficult situations arise.

Read:

Genesis 27: 1-30; 28: 1-4

Find outs:

1. What did Rebekah remember? (Genesis 25: 23).
2. What did Rebekah hear? (Genesis 27: 3-5).
3. What did Jacob tell his father? (Genesis 27: 19).
4. What did Rebekah hear about Esau? (Genesis 27: 41-42).

Chapter 5 - A Reassuring Invitation

And Joseph said to his brothers, "Please come near to me... I am Joseph your brother, whom you sold into Egypt."
(Genesis 45: 4)

Eleven frightened men stood before the second most important man in all the land of Egypt. How their brother Joseph had risen to such a powerful position they did not know. But they did know that he had power to punish them in any way he chose. All except Benjamin, the youngest, had been guilty of treating Joseph cruelly when he was just seventeen years old.

Joseph had satisfied himself that there was a change in his brothers. He saw that they would never treat Benjamin as they had treated him. He had no intention of punishing them. In fact, he spoke kindly to them. He explained that although they meant to harm him, it was God who had sent him to Egypt, so that he could provide for them at a time of famine. Joseph told his brothers to go back to Canaan and then bring their father and their wives and children to Egypt.

Joseph's kindness which his brothers did not deserve, is a picture of God's kindness to us. How have we treated God? Have we thanked Him for giving us life and so many good things? Have we really thought of Him at all? What about God's commandments, His rules for life? Have we

understood that God has the right to tell us how we ought to live? Or have we chosen to live as we like, to go on our own way.

God has shown us kindness that we do not deserve. The Bible calls this “grace”. He sent His Son, Jesus, to take the punishment for the sin of everyone who trusts in Him. God asks us to repent: to be sorry for our sinful ways and to have a real desire to change and also to believe that, through the death of the Lord Jesus, we can have forgiveness.

Read:

Genesis 37: 23-28; 45: 3-11

Find outs:

1. What did Joseph say to his brothers? (Genesis 45:5).
2. What did Joseph send to transport the whole family? (Genesis 45: 19-21).
3. How many donkeys were needed to carry all that Joseph sent? (Genesis 45: 23).

Chapter 6 - An Unexpected Invitation

Thus says your son Joseph: “God has made me lord of all Egypt; come down to me, do not tarry.”
(Genesis 45: 9)

Jacob was an old man. He had lived for nearly one hundred and thirty years. For the last fifteen years he had carried a great sorrow. Joseph, the eleventh of his twelve sons, had been killed by a wild animal. This was what Jacob believed, because there seemed to be no other explanation for Joseph’s sudden disappearance. This was the son he had a special love for, the one he could rely on.

That day, fifteen years ago, when Jacob had sent Joseph to see how his brothers were getting on, had ended with the brothers bringing home Joseph’s blood-stained coat (Genesis 37: 31 – 35). Jacob could not know that those brothers had actually sold Joseph to traders, who sold him as a slave in Egypt.

Now Jacob’s eleven sons, who had been in Egypt to buy grain, were telling him that Joseph was alive and held an important position in that land. Jacob could not believe what he heard: he had lived with the sorrow of Joseph’s death for so long. The invitation, “come down to me, do not tarry” seemed impossible. But when he saw the provision for his journey, he believed he would see the son that he thought he had lost.

Jacob did travel to Egypt and was re-united with Joseph. He was then 130 years old. For the remaining years of his life (17 years) Joseph made sure that he had all that he needed.

Jacob was the grandson of Abraham who God had instructed to leave his home. Abraham had travelled to the land of Canaan and God promised that that land would be given to his descendants. But why is so much of the Old Testament about the descendants of Abraham? From his family would come the nation of Israel. From that nation would come the Saviour who God promised to send. All of the Old Testament looks forward to His coming. All of the New Testament tells of His coming and what followed.

God provided a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, so that sinful men and women and boys and girls could be forgiven. Those who are forgiven, then know the help of God's Holy Spirit, to grow more like the people God wants them to be.

Read:

Genesis 12: 1-4

Genesis 45: 25-28

Genesis 46: 29-30

Find outs:

1. What was Jacob's great sorrow? (Genesis 37: 32-35).
2. What was Jacob's great news? (Genesis 45: 26).
3. What was Jacob's great decision? (Genesis 45: 28).



Chapter 7 - An Invitation to a difficult task

“Come now, therefore, and I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring My people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt.”
(Exodus 3: 10)

Years had passed since about seventy members of Jacob’s family had moved to Egypt. New generations were born and older ones were no longer living. There was a new Pharaoh, who had not known Joseph and how he had saved Egypt during seven years of famine.

As the new Pharaoh considered his country, he was alarmed at the number of Israelites (Jacob’s descendants) living there. He decided he must take action, in case the Israelites should join Egypt’s enemies and fight against Egypt. He decided that he must do all he could to prevent their numbers increasing further. Firstly, they must be treated harshly and made to carry out the hardest physical work. Secondly, the male babies must be destroyed.

Moses was born at this time and rescued from death by Pharaoh’s daughter. He had all the privileges of wealth and education, but he knew that he belonged to the Israelites. He believed that he could be their leader, but they did not understand. He left Egypt and settled in the land of Midian. He married and had two sons.

As Moses looked after his father-in-law's flocks, he led them near Mount Horeb (also known as Mount Sinai). It was here that God spoke to him. God told Moses that He saw the ill-treatment of His people, and He was going to deliver them. Then came the words which were both an invitation and a command, "Come now, therefore, and I will send you to Pharaoh...." Moses had many reasons why he could not do this, but God answered them all. Moses was God's chosen man for this task and he did go up to Pharaoh many times and he did lead the Israelites out of Egypt.

God had promised Abraham that his descendants would live in the land of Canaan (Genesis 15:18 and 17: 8). The inhabitants of Canaan worshipped idols and did many evil things. God gave them a long time to change their ways, but they did not repent. God promised to help His people to overcome the Canaanites and take over their land.

Read:

Exodus chapter 3: 1-10

Find outs:

1. What did Moses see while looking after his father-in-law's sheep? (Exodus 3: 2-3).
2. Whose voice did Moses hear? (Exodus 3: 4).
3. What had God seen? (Exodus 3: 7).
4. What had God heard? (Exodus 3: 7).

Chapter 8 - An Invitation that should have been refused

“Come, make us gods that shall go before us; for as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.”
(Exodus 32: 1)

The Israelites were camped near to Mount Sinai. They remained there for almost a year. During this time, Moses was on Mount Sinai for forty days while God gave him the ten commandments written on two stone tablets. God also gave very detailed instructions for making the tabernacle. This would be a very special tent, the place where sinful men and women learned how they could come to God who is holy.

Whilst Moses was on the mountain, his brother Aaron was responsible for the people. But the people became impatient, because Moses was away so long. They invited Aaron to do something that God had told them they must never do: “Come, make us gods that shall go before us...” (Exodus 32: 1). God had told his people that they must not make idols (Exodus 20: 4-6 and 23) and they had promised that they would obey all God’s commands (Exodus 19: 8). Sadly, Aaron agreed to the people’s request, instead of reminding them of their promise.

Aaron told the people to bring their golden earrings to him. From these he made a golden calf and the people said, “this is your god, O Israel, that

brought you out of the land of Egypt” (Exodus 32: 4). Aaron said that the next day would be a feast to God, but it actually was a feast to their new idol.

God knew all that the people had done, and He told Moses to go down to them. Moses pleaded for the people, that God would not be angry with them. When Moses returned to the people, he broke the two stone tablets on which God had written the ten commandments. The people had already broken God’s law (Exodus 20: 4-6).

The sin of idolatry, putting something in the place of God, is very serious. The Israelites had seen many wonderful things that God had done, and yet they wanted a “god” that they could see, even though that god was unable to hear or help them.

It is important for us to be sure that we do not put anything in our lives in the place of God.

Read:

Exodus 32: 1-8

Psalms 115: 4-8

Find outs:

1. How did Aaron make the golden calf? (Exodus 32: 3-4).
2. How did Aaron say the golden calf was made? (Exodus 32: 24).
3. Find seven things that idols cannot do (Psalms 115: 5-7).

Chapter 9 - A Kind Invitation for a stranger

“Come here, and eat of the bread...”
(Ruth 2: 14)

Ruth was a widow in a strange land. She had made the journey from Moab to Israel with her mother-in-law, Naomi, who was also a widow. They had no-one to support them and so Ruth did what poor people in Israel were allowed to do. She went to the fields to glean at the time of harvest. Gleaning was collecting grain from the corners of fields.

Ruth set about her task, not expecting any special kindness to be shown her. But on that very first day of gleaning, it was the unexpected that happened. Boaz, who owned the field where Ruth was working, had heard about her kindness to Naomi. He spoke kindly to Ruth, telling her not to go elsewhere, but to continue in his field. When mealtime came for the reapers, Boaz invited Ruth to join them, “Come here, and eat of the bread...” She was able to share the food prepared for the reapers and was even able to save some for Naomi.

When Naomi saw the grain that Ruth had been able to bring home, she realised that someone had been kind to her. She gave thanks to God that Ruth had gleaned in Boaz’s field because Boaz was a near relation of her husband Elimelech.

How good that simple invitation to a meal must have sounded to Ruth. She had come to trust in the true God, instead of the idols of Moab. Now she was learning what it meant to have God as her guide. God knew all about her needs and was providing for her. Better days lay ahead for both Ruth and Naomi.

Our lives may be very different from Ruth's life, but God who provided for Ruth, promises to supply all our need (Philippians 4: 19). This does not mean we will have all that we ask God to give us. It does mean that we have a wise heavenly Father, who knows what we need and what it will be good for us to have.

Today's Bible reading:

The Book of Ruth tells a very lovely (and true) story in just 4 chapters. It would be good if you could find time to read it through. If you do not feel able to do this –

Read:

Ruth chapter 2; Philippians 4: 19

Find outs:

1. How do we know that Ruth trusted in the true God? (Ruth 1: 16 and 2: 12).
2. How do we know poor people in Israel were allowed to glean in the fields? (Leviticus 19: 9-10 and 23: 22).
3. How do we know that better days came for Ruth and Naomi? (Ruth 4: 9-10).

Chapter 10 - An invitation with a purpose

“Then invite Jesse to the sacrifice, and I will
show you what you shall do...”
(1 Samuel 16: 3)

Samuel was sad. Saul, Israel's first king, had begun his reign well. But as time went by, he was not fully obedient to God. Now God had a message for Samuel. He was to go to Bethlehem and anoint the one God had chosen to succeed Saul.

This was a dangerous mission. What if Saul found out what Samuel was about to do? God said that the chosen man was among the sons of a man named Jesse who lived in Bethlehem. He said that Samuel should go to Bethlehem to offer a sacrifice and he must invite Jesse and his sons.

Samuel was obedient to all that God had told him. Jesse and seven of his sons came to the sacrifice. When Samuel saw the first of Jesse's sons, he thought he was looking at God's chosen man. But God told him this was not so: man looks at the outward appearance but God looks at the heart (1 Samuel 16: 7). Six more of Jesse's sons came before Samuel, but he knew that none was God's choice.

When Samuel asked Jesse whether these were all his children, Jesse explained that the youngest, David, was looking after the sheep. He was sent for, and God told Samuel to anoint him. So, there,

among his brothers, David was anointed, showing that he was chosen by God to be Israel's next king.

The invitation given to Jesse and his sons was very important. Some years passed before Saul's reign ended and David became king. But David did become Israel's greatest king. Among the descendants of Abraham, David's family was the one through which the Lord Jesus was born (see Matthew 1: 1).

Read:

1 Samuel 16: 1-13

Matthew 1: 1-6 and 16

Find outs:

1. When we meet someone, what do we look at? (1 Samuel 16: 7).
2. What does God look at (1 Samuel 16: 7).
3. Put this verse (7) into your own words.



Chapter 11 - An Invitation that was not understood

And with Absalom went two hundred men invited from Jerusalem, and they went along innocently and did not know anything.

(2 Samuel 15: 11)

Absalom was one of King David's sons. He was a very handsome man, much admired because he was good-looking. He formed a plan, to make himself more popular than his father.

At that time, the king acted as judge, so that anyone who had a case against another person, could go to the king. Absalom positioned himself, so that he met the people before they reached the king. He spoke to them of how he would help them, if he could be their judge. This continued for several years, and he gained the trust of the people.

Absalom's plan was not just to be a popular figure in the land. He planned to replace his father as king. This was rebellion. The conspiracy against king David grew strong, until at last David was told what was happening.

King David led his family and his servants away from Jerusalem. Many people who were loyal to him joined him, including the priests and the Levites. David's chief advisor, Ahithophel, joined the conspiracy with Absalom. But David had a loyal friend named Hushai who agreed to stay in Jerusalem and give advice which would actually help the king.

Ahithophel's advice would have helped Absalom, but he listened to Hushai and was defeated and killed in the battle that followed.

Those two hundred men who were invited to join Absalom, did not understand what he was planning. How careful we must be, not to be influenced by people who have no thought of God. It is not always easy to see what others are planning, but God promises to give wisdom to those who ask (James 1: 5).

Read:

2 Samuel 15: 1-6; 18: 31-32

Find outs:

1. What did Absalom say to the people who were on their way to see David? (2 Samuel 15: 4).
2. What did Absalom do? (2 Samuel 15: 5).
3. What did Absalom steal (2 Samuel 15: 6).

Chapter 12 - A Daring Invitation

Adonijah... invited all his brothers, the king's sons, and all the men of Judah, the king's servants.
(1 Kings 1: 9)

God had told King David, that of all his sons, it would be Solomon who would reign after him. But another son, name Adonijah, had other plans. Like Absalom he was good-looking and like Absalom he acted in a way that made it appear that he should be Israel's next king. Joab, David's military commander, and Abiathar the priest, helped Adonijah.

Adonijah invited all his brothers, except Solomon, to a sacrifice. Whilst they were eating together, they said, "Long live King Adonijah" (1 Kings 1: 25). King David knew nothing of this.

Nathan the prophet spoke to Bathsheba, the mother of Solomon. He advised her to speak to David about Adonijah and about his promise that her son Solomon would be king. Nathan promised to come and support her.

Bathsheba followed Nathan's advice and while she was speaking to David, Nathan came in. He explained what had happened and he asked the king whether this had been done on his instructions. David renewed his promise to Bathsheba that her son Solomon would follow him as king.

King David gave the order that Solomon should be anointed and this was done by Zadok the priest.

There was great rejoicing, so that Joab asked what the noise from the city could mean. He did not wait long for an answer. Abiathar the priest's son brought news of Solomon's anointing. Adonijah's guests were afraid and quickly left and returned to their homes. They had responded to an invitation without considering the consequences. They seem to have forgotten that there were men faithful to King David such as Nathan the prophet and Zadok the priest. They should have realised that although the king was old and frail, he would make sure that God's instruction, that Solomon would be the next king of Israel, was carried out.

Read:

1 Kings 1: 5-14 and 32-33

Find outs:

1. Who did Adonijah invite? (1 Kings 1:9).
2. Who did he not invite? (1 Kings 1: 10).
3. Who did King David trust to help him? (1 Kings 1: 32).

Chapter 13 - An Invitation to work

“Come and let us build the wall of Jerusalem...”
(Nehemiah 2: 17)

Nehemiah was a Jewish exile, living in Persia. He was made cupbearer to King Artaxerxes, responsible for the king's wine. When news reached him that the wall of Jerusalem was broken down and its gates burned, Nehemiah was distressed. For some months he prayed and waited for an opportunity to act.

A day came when King Artaxerxes noticed that his cupbearer looked sad. It was not usual for a servant to show personal feelings in the presence of this powerful king. But on this occasion, Artaxerxes wanted to know the reason for Nehemiah's sadness. Even as Nehemiah answered the king, he prayed for help from God. The king realised that Nehemiah had a request to make and when he understood the circumstances, he was willing to allow him to go to Jerusalem for a set time.

After he arrived in Jerusalem, Nehemiah surveyed the wall, without telling anyone his intentions. Once he had seen for himself what the situation was, he gave his invitation: a call to work. Many people responded and worked on different parts of the wall and of the city gates. There was great opposition to their work, as some people did not want to see Jerusalem restored. A plan was made to attack the builders, even to kill them, so

that the work would have to stop. But Nehemiah heard about the plan and set people on watch. He also armed the builders, so that the work was completed in just 52 days.

Nehemiah is an example to us of a man of prayer who was also a man who worked. He did not rush into the work until he had prayed and was sure of what God wanted him to do. This meant that he could face difficulty and opposition, because he was sure that this was a work that God had called him to do.

Read:

Nehemiah 1: 1-6; 2: 1-6

Find outs:

1. What news did Nehemiah hear? (Nehemiah 1: 2-3).
2. What did Nehemiah do about this news? (Nehemiah 1: 4).
3. What did King Artaxerxes notice? (Nehemiah 2: 1-2).
4. What was Nehemiah's request? (Nehemiah 2:5).

Chapter 14 - Invitations refused

“Come, let us meet together among the villages
in the plain of Ono.”
(Nehemiah 6: 2)

Sanballat and Geshem were enemies of the Jews. When they heard that the building of the wall of Jerusalem was progressing well, they tried to stop the work, by calling Nehemiah to meet them. They sent an invitation for him to meet with them, but Nehemiah refused to leave the work, even though the invitation was sent four times.

Finally, Sanballat sent his servant with a letter. In the letter, Sanballat said that it had been reported that the Jews planned to rebel and make Nehemiah their king. When he had read the letter, Nehemiah told Sanballat that the report was untrue and still he would not meet with him.

A further invitation was given to Nehemiah. This time it was from a man named Shemaiah, who spoke as if he was concerned for Nehemiah's safety. He said that if he met with him in the temple and they closed the doors, Nehemiah would be safe from those who planned to kill him. Nehemiah was not interested in such an idea of hiding away to save his life. He also discovered that Shemaiah had been hired by the Jews' enemies, Sanballat and Tobiah.

Nehemiah believed that God had given him a work to do and he refused to be drawn away from it. He trusted in God to protect him and those who

helped in the work. When the wall of Jerusalem was completed in just fifty-two days, even the enemies of the Jews could see that God had given success to the builders, in spite of all the difficulties.

Many Christians have persevered in a work that God called them to. We can think of examples such as, William Carey taking the Gospel to India and Hudson Taylor to China. In England George Muller fed and clothed thousands of needy children, never once asking anyone, expect God, for financial help.

Read:

Nehemiah 6:1-9 and 15-16

Find outs:

1. Why did Nehemiah refuse invitations? (Nehemiah 6: 3) .
2. What did Nehemiah know? (Nehemiah 6: 8).
3. What was it that Nehemiah refused to do? (Nehemiah 6: 11).



Chapter 15 - An Invitation that was not what it seemed

“... let the king and Haman come today to the banquet that I have prepared for him.”

(Esther 5: 4)

“...Queen Esther invited no-one but me to come in with the king to the banquet...” (Esther 5: 12)

Haman was a happy man. He had already been promoted to the highest office in the land of Persia and now he had received an invitation from Queen Esther to accompany the king to a banquet. He was filled with pride when the Queen's invitation was extended to a second day. Only one thing spoiled his happiness: Mordecai, who refused to bow down to him, was still to be seen at the palace gate.

Haman had a special gallows made on which he intended to have Mordecai put to death. However, that night between the two days of Esther's banquet, something unexpected happened. It began with King Ahasuerus being unable to sleep. The king commanded someone to read to him from the royal records of events. It was recorded that there had been a time when Mordecai had saved the king's life. The next day, the king made sure that great honour was shown to Mordecai.

The second day's banquet was not at all as Haman anticipated. Esther made her request to the king, that her people would be saved from destruction. Haman was named as the enemy who

had planned this. He was terrified and pleaded with the Queen to ensure that his life was spared. In fact, at the king's command, Haman was hanged on the gallows he had prepared for Mordecai.

Haman had planned the destruction of the Jewish people, causing great fear. But God had said that it would be through that nation, that the promised Saviour would come into the world. God always does what He has promised. No plan to destroy the Jewish nation could succeed. The name of God is not mentioned in the Book of Esther, but His protecting care of His people is clearly seen. How good to know that this God who always keeps His word, is the God that we trust in.

Read:

Esther 3: 8-11; 7: 1-6

Find outs:

1. What did Esther plan so that she could make her request to the king? (Esther 5: 4).
2. When did Haman make for Mordecai? (Esther 5: 13-14).
3. Who had saved the king's life? (Esther 6: 1-2).
4. What happened to Haman, the enemy of the Jews? (Esther 7: 10).

Chapter 16 - King David responds to God's Invitation

When You said, "Seek my face," my heart said to You, "Your face, LORD, I will seek."
(Psalm 27: 8)

King David had a very varied life. As a young man, he was a shepherd. The prophet Samuel was sent by God to anoint him, showing that God had chosen David to be Israel's next king. After this, we read of how David killed Goliath, the Philistines' champion and enemy of Israel. King Saul became jealous of David and threatened to kill him. Because of this, for some years David had to move from place to place. During this time he gathered men around him who became loyal to him. Their number grew to about six hundred men.

After the death of King Saul, the people living in the southern part of Israel made David their king. Seven years later, he became king over the whole country.

David wrote many Psalms in which he often expressed something from his own experiences. He wrote the beautiful and well-known "Shepherd psalm" (Psalm 23), a Psalm which has brought comfort to many people. He wrote several Psalms expressing sorrow over his sin, such as Psalm 51, which has given hope to many people that, like David, they could find forgiveness.

Psalm 27 speaks to us of David's confidence in God and His willingness to be taught and guided by

God. When he tells us that God called him to seek His face, he is telling us that he knew that God was inviting him to know Him and to know Him better. All through many ups and downs of his life, David was faithful to God. We need to ask ourselves whether we have the same desire to know God, that David had. It would seem very natural that we would want to know the God who created the world and gave us life. But because we have sinful hearts, we often prefer to go our own way, with no thought of God at all. We need to pray, like David, “Teach me Your way, O LORD” (Psalm 27: 11) because it is His way, not our own, that will lead us to true and lasting happiness.

Read:

Psalm 27

Find outs:

1. Find three things that David said about God in the first verse of this Psalm.
2. What did David desire? (Psalm 27: 4).
3. What was David’s response to God’s invitation? (Psalm 27: 8).
4. What advice does God give us? (Psalm 27: 14).

Chapter 17 - An Invitation to sinful people

“Come now, and let us reason together,” says the LORD, “Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall be as wool...”
(Isaiah 1: 18)

God had chosen the nation of Israel to be His special people. He had given them His laws which were for their own good. He had taught them how sin could be forgiven if His law was broken. They should have been an example to other nations, of how God blesses people who are obedient to Him.

When the prophet Isaiah brought God's message to Israel, it was not a message they wanted to hear. The people made sacrifices and kept certain feast days, but this was just a show. They had made idols and bowed down to them as other nations did. They had stopped caring for the poor, for orphans or widows, as God had taught them.

To these sinful and rebellious people, God gives a gracious invitation: an invitation they have done nothing to deserve. If they will leave their sinful ways and learn to do good, God will forgive their sin and once again they can enjoy His blessing.

God never “turns a blind eye” to sin: He never says it does not matter. The only way that sin can be forgiven is by trusting in the Lord Jesus, who died to take sin's punishment for everyone who

trusts in Him. So, how could people in the Old Testament times be forgiven? They could be forgiven if they offered the animal sacrifices as God had instructed, looking forward to the Saviour who God had promised to send.

In the nation of Israel, there were always some people who brought their sacrifices, sincerely seeking God's forgiveness. But sadly, many in the nation ignored God's kind invitations and warnings, until they were taken into exile, away from the land God had given them.

God still invites us to trust in the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ. The invitation of Isaiah 1: 18 is still there for those who know they need God's forgiveness.

Read:

Isaiah 1: 4 and 16-20

Find outs:

1. What had Israel done? (Isaiah 1: 4).
2. What should Israel do? (Isaiah 1: 16-17).
3. What did God invite Israel to do? (Isaiah 1: 18).

Chapter 18 - An Invitation to come and an Invitation to seek

“Ho! Everyone who thirsts, come to the
waters...”

(Isaiah 55: 1)

“Seek the LORD while He may be found...”

(Isaiah 55: 6)

Isaiah chapter 55 has two invitations. The first one is for people who can never be satisfied with what their money can buy. There are still many people today who are just like that. They are always looking for something that will make them happy, but every new possession fails and they must always look for something more. God says that He gives His gifts freely: His blessing and His promises which truly satisfy.

Every day we feed our bodies and yet we know that one day our bodies will die. Often, we neglect our souls which will continue after our life in this world ends. Jesus said that He is the bread of life (John 6: 35): He can feed our souls, so that we can be with Him for ever.

The second invitation in Isaiah chapter 55 calls sinful people to return to God. People who realise that they are sinners, are told to seek God and to call upon Him. But they must really mean it: they must be willing to give up their sinful ways and their sinful way of thinking. The good news for these people is that God is very willing to forgive them. They may have spent years living just to please

themselves, with no thought of God or thankfulness to Him for His goodness. But still God is ready to forgive and to change the selfish person into one who loves God and has a loving concern for other people.

Imagine if you were invited by the owner of a “stately home” to stay in his house, where everything you needed would be provided for you and the beautiful grounds were there for you to enjoy. How strange it would be if you accepted his invitation but never thanked the owner or even thought of him. Yet many people live in this beautiful world, with never a thought of the Creator who gives us life and all the good things we enjoy. However, this great God we often ignore, is willing to forgive us and to care for us.

Read:

Isaiah 55: 1-7

John 6: 35

Find outs:

1. What do we not need, to receive God’s gifts? (Isaiah 55:1).
2. What do the things we buy not do? things (Isaiah 55:2).
3. What do sinful people need to do? (Isaiah 55:7).
4. What two things will God do for those who seek Him? (Isaiah 55:7).

Chapter 19 - An Invitation to idolatry

King Nebuchadnezzar sent word... to come to
the dedication of the image which King
Nebuchadnezzar had set up.
(Daniel 3: 2)

Nebuchadnezzar was the ruler of the Babylonian Empire. He set up a golden image about 28 metres high and then said that all the important officials throughout the empire should come to the dedication of the image. No doubt this was an invitation that all were expected to accept. This was to be a grand occasion.

No-one was left in any doubt of what was expected of them. When the music played, all must bow down and worship the golden image. Nebuchadnezzar was accustomed to being obeyed, so to ensure obedience, there was an immediate punishment for anyone not bowing down: to be thrown into a burning furnace. Unsurprisingly, people were quick to bow to the image.

It was reported to the king, that three Jews had not worshipped the image. The three men, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were brought to the angry king. He gave them another opportunity to show their obedience when the music played. The three explained that their God was able to deliver them from the furnace. But even if He did not do so, they would not worship the image.

The heat of the furnace was so great, that the men who threw Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego

into it, were burnt to death. But the three men who were faithful to God, came out of the furnace unhurt by the fire. The proud king recognised that only the true God could have saved the men from being killed. He immediately made a law that no-one must speak against the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego.

We do not face the sort of threat that these three men faced. But we may face hostility or being laughed at for our faith in God. The Lord Jesus warned His followers that they would face persecution. This is true of Christians in many countries today, but those who trust in the Lord Jesus, have His promise to be with them always, whatever happens (Matthew 28: 19-20; Hebrews 13: 5).

Read:

Daniel 3: 1-2, 8-28

John 15: 18-21

Find outs:

1. What would Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego not do? (Daniel 3: 12).
2. What did these three men say that God could do? (Daniel 3: 17).
3. What did Nebuchadnezzar see in the furnace? (Daniel 3: 25).
4. What did Nebuchadnezzar say that God had done? (Daniel 3: 25).

Chapter 20 - An Invitation in troubled time

For thus says the LORD to the house of Israel:
“Seek Me and live...”
(Amos 5: 4)

Amos had no ambition to become a prophet: to bring God's message to His people. He was accustomed to working with sheep and may well have expected to continue in the work he was used to. But one day, he knew that God was telling him to prophecy to the people of Israel.

The life of a prophet could never be easy. There was always going to be the difficult task of speaking the truths that people did not want to hear. After Solomon's reign, the nation of Israel had split into two kingdoms. Judah in the south, Israel, also known as Samaria, in the north. Amos was sent mainly to prophecy to the Northern Kingdom, at the time of King Jeroboam the second.

The first king of the Northern Kingdom, Jeroboam the first, had set up idols at Dan in the north and Bethel in the south. He did this to prevent the people going back to the temple at Jerusalem. He appointed his own priests to offer sacrifices. When Amos came on the scene about two centuries later, idolatry continued, with much religious ritual.

The people's religion had no good effect on their lives. The rich lived their lives of ease while the poor were exploited. Bribery ensured that if you

were poor, you could not get justice. God speaks, through Amos, of the people's "mighty sins."

God saw so much that was wrong in the life of the nation He had done so much for. In spite of that, He still invites the people to seek Him. In Amos chapter 5 we find it in verse 4, verse 6, and repeated in a slightly different way in verse 14. Sadly, the people did not heed the warnings that Amos brought, or God's gracious invitations. They were taken captive by the Assyrians, because God would not continue to bless them in their sin and idolatry.

We still live among people today, who are "religious", but whose lives show no evidence of true faith in God. Like Amos, we should be courageous to warn people that they need a real change in their lives, that can only come through trust in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Read:

Amos 5: 4-5 and 12-15

Find outs:

1. What job did Amos do before he became a prophet? (Amos 7: 14).
2. Why did Amos become a prophet? (Amos 7: 15).
3. What did Amos tell the people to do? (Amos 5: 4, 6, 14).
4. What did God think about the feast days and offerings? (Amos 5: 21-22).

Chapter 21 - An Invitation to follow Jesus

“Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men.”
(Matthew 4: 19)

Peter and his brother Andrew lived near the Sea of Galilee and they were fishermen. One day, the Lord Jesus was walking by the sea and when He saw the two brothers, He called them to follow Him. His words “I will make you fishers of men”, may seem strange to us. But Jesus was speaking about a more important work He had for them, helping people to know Him. Peter and Andrew left what they were doing and followed Jesus.

There were another two brothers by the sea that day. James and John were in a boat with their father, mending their fishing nets. The Lord Jesus called them and straightaway they left the boat and went with Him.

Mark's Gospel tells us that the Lord Jesus chose twelve men to be with Him. They would hear how He taught the people and they would see the miracles that He performed. Then Jesus would be able to send them to teach others (Mark 3: 14).

These four fishermen who responded to Jesus' call to follow Him, could not know what experiences would be theirs in the future. They would see many people healed and the wonderful miracles of the feeding of the five thousand and the stilling of the storm. They would see great crowds of people coming to hear Jesus' teaching. But when Jesus

spoke to them of His death and resurrection, they did not understand.

There came the day when the Lord Jesus was arrested, given a false trial and crucified. What sadness and fear for their own lives, came to those who had left everything to follow Jesus. But after all their fear and sorrow, came the wonderful day of resurrection. Jesus had conquered death for everyone who trusts in Him (Hebrews 2: 14-15).

In the Book of Acts we read of how the followers of Jesus took the Gospel message to many places. The word Gospel means good news. The Lord Jesus still calls those who trust in Him to tell others this good news about Him.

Read:

Matthew 4: 18-25

Mark 3: 13-14

Find outs:

1. What were Peter and Andrew doing when the Lord Jesus called them to follow Him? (Matthew 4: 18).
2. What were James and John doing? (Matthew 4: 21).
3. What did the Lord Jesus say to Peter and Andrew? (Matthew 4: 19).
4. What two things did Jesus say the twelve men He chose would be? (Mark 3: 14).

Chapter 22 - An Invitation to bring our requests to God

“Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you.”
(Matthew 7: 7)

These words of the Lord Jesus invite us to pray: to ask God for all that we need. We all have basic needs: food, clothing, and a place to live. God knows our needs, but He wants us to tell Him about them, just as a child would speak to his parents. We have other needs: needs for friendship and a loving family. These too, can be prayed about.

If we are Christians, trusting in the Lord Jesus, we will have other requests to bring. We will ask God to help us to understand the Bible, as we read it day by day. We will ask Him to help us to know Him better and to love Him more. We will also ask Him to be our guide through life: to help us to make right decisions and also to help us to speak to other people who need to know the Saviour.

The Lord Jesus said that if parents give good things to their children, God, who is our heavenly Father, will give good things to those who ask.

We notice in our verse, that we are to do more than ask: we are to seek. If we want to know God better, we must use what He has given to us. We seek to know Him from the Bible, which has so much to teach us about God. If we want to make wise decisions, we must not only pray, but we must

look for the answer to the question “what does the Bible say about this?”

When we want to see someone, we go to their home and knock at their door. Seeking and knocking are actions that shew that we really mean what we pray for. God has given us His word, the Bible and He has also given to churches, men who can preach and teach from the Bible to help us.

God hears our prayers and He answers them. But we show that our prayers are sincere, as we use those things that God has given to us.

Read:

Matthew 7: 7-11

Philippians 4: 6-7

Find outs:

1. What three things does the Lord Jesus tell us to do? (Matthew 7:7).
2. What would our parents never do? (Matthew 7: 9).
3. What can we be sure that God will do? (Matthew 7: 11).
4. Instead of being anxious, what should we do? (Philippians 4:6).



Chapter 23 - Sinful people Invited to come to the Lord Jesus

(Jesus said) "For I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance."
(Matthew 9: 13)

The Pharisees were very religious. They liked to be seen doing good deeds: praying, putting money in the temple collecting box, keeping God's law very carefully. Sadly, they had added all sorts of things to God's law, which made life very difficult for people. The Lord Jesus spoke very sternly to them at times, because He knew that they were too concerned with how they appeared to others. They were not concerned about their own proud, unloving hearts.

One day Jesus called a tax-collector named Matthew, to follow Him. After this, Jesus sat down to a meal in Matthew's house. A lot of other tax-collectors and people who were looked on as particularly sinful, joined Jesus and His disciples at the meal. Tax-collectors were looked down on because they worked for the Roman government and also cheated the people and took too much money from them.

The Pharisees grumbled to the disciples about the Lord Jesus eating with the sort of people who had gathered at Matthew's house. When He heard what they said, Jesus explained that people who are well do not need a doctor: it is people who know they are ill who need a doctor. In the same way, He

had come for people who knew that they were sinful. Such people would understand that they needed to repent: to change, leaving their sinful ways. The proud Pharisees were so sure of their own “goodness”, that they saw no need to repent.

The Bible says that we are all sinners (Romans 3: 23) and we all need a Saviour to forgive our sin. This is important, because sin cuts us off from God, who is the source of life (Romans 6: 23). Those who, like the Pharisees, think that they are good enough to please God, are blind to the pride and hypocrisy of their lives. A hypocrite is someone acting a part: good on the outside, but sinful in their hearts.

Read:

Matthew 9: 9-13

Find outs:

1. What work did Matthew do? (Matthew 9: 9).
2. What did the Lord Jesus say to Matthew? (Matthew 9: 9).
3. What did the Pharisees ask? (Matthew 9: 11).
4. Who does the Lord Jesus call and what does He call them to do? (Matthew 9: 13).

Chapter 24 - An Invitation for the weary

“Come to Me, all you who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.”
(Matthew 11: 28)

There are different sorts of weariness. There is physical weariness caused by prolonged, heavy work. A lady in a country where water had to be carried every day from the well, heard this verse and said, “that’s me with my waterpots”. But there is also a weariness from striving to make yourself good enough for God to accept you.

In many religions, there are various things which must be done to please the god that is being worshipped. This may be fasting, praying, pilgrimages or trying to wash away sin in a “sacred” river. The effort to ‘do enough’ is never ending.

Only the Lord Jesus can say, “Come to Me” to find rest from continual effort. Romans 6: 23 tells us that eternal life is a gift, not something to be earned by doing certain good deeds. The Gospel is about what the Lord Jesus has done, not what we do. He alone has lived a perfect life and then offered that life on the cross, for the sin of everyone who trusts in Him.

The Gospel is about grace: kindness to those who do not deserve it. Does this mean that it does not matter what we do? No, of course not. The Gospel is for people who repent: people who are sorry for their sinful ways and know that they need

God's help to change their lives. That is why people who knew that their lives were sinful, were glad to listen to Jesus. It was proud, religious people, who did not want to hear Him. This has not changed. There are many people today, who are convinced that they will go to heaven because they have led "good lives". The Lord Jesus spoke of this subject in one of His parables (Luke 18: 9-14).

God's standard is perfection and no-one has ever lived a perfect life except the Lord Jesus. He offered that perfect life as a perfect sacrifice, when He died on the cross. In this way He took the punishment for the sins of every man or woman or any boy or girl who trusts in Him for forgiveness.

Read:

Matthew 11: 28-30

Luke 18: 9-14

Find outs:

1. What did the Pharisee think of himself? (Luke 18: 11-12).
2. What did the tax-collector say? (Luke 18: 13).
3. Who did the Lord Jesus invite to come to Him? (Matthew 11: 28).
4. What does He give to those who come to Him? (Matthew 11: 29).

Chapter 25 - An Invitation to meet the bridegroom

“Behold, the bridegroom is coming; go out to meet him.”
(Matthew 25: 6)

The Lord Jesus had been talking to His disciples about the time when He would come back to this world. He then told two parables, to teach them something of how His followers should live, while they waited for that day. The first parable is about being prepared for His coming (Matthew 25: 1-13). The second parable is about being occupied until He comes (Matthew 25: 14-30).

To teach His disciples about being ready for His return, He spoke about a wedding. One important part of the wedding day usually happened in the evening. In the evening, the bridegroom would lead a procession from the bride's home to the couple's new home. Guests would carry oil lamps with them to light up the dark road. In the story Jesus told, ten young ladies were to carry the lamps.

For some reason, the bridegroom was delayed and it was midnight when someone called out that he was coming, and they must go out to meet him. By this time, all the young ladies had fallen asleep, but when they heard the call, they all got up and made sure that their lamps shone brightly.

At this point in the story, it became clear that the young ladies were not all the same. Five of them were wise and had brought flasks of oil with them.

Five were foolish and had not brought any spare oil: their lamps were going out and they begged those who had been wise, to give them some of their oil. They would not do this, as there was not enough to go round. They advised the foolish young ladies to buy some oil for themselves.

The bridegroom arrived and the five wise young ladies went into the wedding, and the door was shut. When the foolish young ladies asked to be allowed in, the door remained closed: they were shut out.

The Lord Jesus said that we do not know when He will return, so we must be ready to meet Him. This means that we will live in a way that pleases Him, always making sure that we are not involved with things that would make us ashamed if He should come.

Read:

Matthew 25: 1-13

Find outs:

1. What did the five wise young ladies do? (Matthew 25: 4).
2. What did the five foolish young ladies do? (Matthew 25: 3).
3. What did all ten do? (Matthew 25: 5).
4. What did they all hear at midnight? (Matthew 25: 6).
5. Why did the Lord Jesus tell this story? (Matthew 25: 13). ('Son of Man' is a name Jesus sometimes used.)

Chapter 26 - Jesus gives an honest Invitation

“Whoever desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me.”
(Mark 8: 34)

There used to be advertisements to join the army or the navy to “see the world”. The idea of travelling and seeing different countries was attractive, but it was not the whole story. Life in the army or navy was not going to be easy, but the advertisement said nothing about hard training, battles, or storms at sea. The invitation to follow the Lord Jesus was not like that. He was honest about the self-denial (not always doing or having what you want) and the possible suffering involved.

Before His trial and crucifixion, the Lord Jesus talked with His disciples after they had eaten the Passover meal together. He explained to them, that if they were hated, they should remember that He had been hated. Those who follow the Lord Jesus are concerned about others and show kindness and forgiveness to those who wrong them. So, why can they expect hatred and even persecution in return?

Jesus answers this by saying that the world loves its own but His followers are not “of the world”. When someone becomes a Christian, God not only forgives their sin, but changes their disposition so that they are no longer the selfish, pleasure-seekers that they were before. But those who are not Christians, do not like anyone to be

different from them. The Christian's life is a reminder to them that their own lives need to be put right.

The Christian is called to be a light in a dark world. But Jesus said that "... men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil" (John 3: 19). Of course there are many people, leading lives that appear good: caring for their family, kind to their neighbours, giving to charity. Sadly, these are often the people who reject the Gospel, because they cannot admit that they are sinners who need a Saviour.

Read:

Mark 8: 34-38

John 3: 16-21

Find outs:

1. What three things must a follower of the Lord Jesus do? (Mark 8: 34).
2. What is more valuable than the whole world? (Mark 8: 36-37).
3. Why do many people not want the Gospel message? (John 3: 19).

Chapter 27 - Children Invited to come to Jesus

“Let the little children come to Me, and do not
forbid them....”
(Mark 10: 14)

Many people came to the Lord Jesus. Sick people came for healing and so did some who were blind or deaf or lame. Great crowds gathered to hear the words of the Lord Jesus: His teaching was so different from that of the religious leaders. The Pharisees came to criticize and to ask difficult questions. Sometimes it was hard for the Lord Jesus and His disciples to even find time for meals.

One day some people brought their little children to Jesus. They wanted Him to touch them. The disciples were displeased, probably thinking that Jesus had more important things to do. They were telling the people to go away but found that the Lord Jesus was displeased with them. He did have time for the children. He took them in His arms, and He blessed them. He said that children should not be prevented from coming to Him.

Jesus also had something to say to the people about God's kingdom, which may have surprised them. He told them that those who want to enter that kingdom, must become like little children. A small child depends on its parents, trusts them and is obedient to them, knowing that they know best. In the same way, we come to God, trusting Him knowing that we depend upon Him for all that we

need. We all have many needs and God knows all about them. But our greatest need is to have our sins forgiven so that we can know God as our heavenly Father.

Many people, like the Pharisees, are proud of what they think of as their own goodness. They do not come to God with childlike trust in His forgiveness, because they are blind to the sinful pride of their own hearts.

Read:

Mark 9: 36-37; 10: 13 - 16

Find outs:

1. What did the disciples do when people brought small children to the Jesus? (Mark 10: 13).
2. What did the Lord Jesus say about children coming to Him? (Mark 10: 14).
3. What must people who want to enter into God's Kingdom do? (Mark 10: 15).
4. How did the Lord Jesus welcome the children? (Mark 10: 16).



Chapter 28 - A Rejected Invitation

“...come, take up the cross, and follow Me.”
(Mark 10: 21)

One day a man came running to Jesus and knelt before Him. He came with an important question to ask: “Good Teacher, what shall I do that I may inherit eternal life?” His question showed that he had a real concern to know what would happen to him, after his life in this world came to an end. It also showed that he thought that eternal life was something he could earn. The Lord Jesus reminded him of God’s commandments and the man replied that he had kept the commandments since he was young.

Jesus understood that this man had not realised that God’s law was not just about actions, but about what we are in our hearts. He saw that there was something more important to him than whether he truly loved God.

The Lord Jesus explained that there was something missing in the man’s life. He needed to sell his possessions and give to the poor. Then he should follow the Lord Jesus. The man was rich, his riches meant a lot to him. He turned away feeling very sorrowful. He wanted eternal life on his own terms. He thought that he had led a good life but wanted to be sure he had done enough to earn eternal life. In fact he had broken the first commandment, to love God, for he had an idol in his life.

An idol does not have to be something made of wood or stone, gold or silver, that we bow down to. An idol is anything in our lives that takes the place of God. Jesus knew that in the case of this rich man, his riches were his idol.

Talking to His disciples about this, the Lord Jesus explained that it was not just being rich that was the problem. The real problem was trusting in riches instead of trusting in God.

There have been Christians who have given away a fortune, so that they became free to serve God. Others have used money wisely, to help people in need. We all need to search our own hearts to see whether anything in our life is an idol, taking God's place. The Lord Jesus gives much more than anything we might give up for Him (Mark 10: 29-30).

Read:

Mark 10: 17-22 and 29-31

Matthew 6: 19-21

Deuteronomy 6: 5

Find outs:

1. What did this rich man want? (Mark 10:17).
2. What did the rich man say about God's commandments? (Mark 10: 20).
3. What did the Lord Jesus him he should do? (Mark 10:21).
4. Where is the safest place to have our treasure? (Matthew 6: 19-20).
5. Who should have first place in our lives? (Deuteronomy 6: 5).

Chapter 29 - An Invitation for a blind man

“Be of good cheer. Rise, He is calling you.”
(Mark 10: 49)

Bartimaeus was blind and he was a beggar. At that time, there was no work for a blind man to do. Bartimaeus had to sit by the roadside, hoping that passers-by would be kind, so that he would have money to buy food.

One day, Bartimaeus heard that Jesus was coming near to where he sat. He must have heard about the wonderful things that Jesus did, because he began calling out, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me”. A great crowd was following Jesus that day, and some of the people told Bartimaeus to be quiet. This only made him call out all the more.

Jesus stopped and said that Bartimaeus was to be called to come to Him. Bartimaeus lost no time in coming to Jesus. Jesus asked him, “What do you want me to do for you?” Bartimaeus did not ask for money to be put into his begging bowl. He addressed Jesus as Rabboni (which means My Great One), and asked for his sight. In this, Bartimaeus showed his understanding that Jesus was no ordinary man: he believed that the Lord Jesus could give him sight. Immediately, he was able to see to follow Jesus along the road.

The Lord Jesus gave Bartimaeus the opportunity to express his faith. He told him that it was because of that faith, that his request was granted. Do we

have the understanding that Bartimaeus had, to recognise who Jesus is? If not, we need to ask Him to make us see with our understanding, so that we can know Him as Saviour and Friend (Ephesians 1: 18).

Read:

Mark 10: 46-52

Ephesians 1: 18

Find outs:

1. What would Bartimaeus not do? (Mark 10: 48).
2. What did Bartimaeus ask for? (Mark 10: 51).
3. What sort of sight do we all need? (Ephesians 1: 18).



Chapter 30 – The Angel's Invitation

“Do not be alarmed. You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He is risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid Him.”
(Mark 16: 6)

For those who loved the Lord Jesus, it had been a sad Sabbath Day. The day before, Jesus had been crucified and His body placed in a garden tomb (like a small cave), belonging to Joseph of Arimathea. Some of the women, including Mary Magdalene, planned to take spices and fragrant oils to the grave, as would have been done in that country. But they kept the commandment to rest on the Sabbath day and set off for the garden very early on the first day of the week.

A large stone had been placed across the entrance to the tomb and the women were anxious about who would move it for them. However, when they arrived, they found that the stone had already been moved. They became afraid when they saw an angel sitting in the tomb: the angel appeared to them as a young man clothed in white. The angel told them not to be afraid: Jesus had risen from the dead. The angel invited the women to look at the place where Jesus' body had been. They became the first witnesses to the fact that Jesus had risen.

The angel then told the women to go and tell the disciples that they would see the Lord Jesus in Galilee. Still trembling and afraid, the women did as

they were instructed. The disciples did not believe what the women were saying. Peter and John ran to the tomb and found it empty, except for the linen that Jesus' body had been wrapped in. The disciples had never understood when Jesus spoke to them about dying and rising again, but now at last John understood and believed (John 20: 8).

For forty days after His resurrection, the Lord Jesus was at times seen by His followers. On the last occasion, the disciples saw the Lord Jesus ascend until He disappeared from their view into a cloud. He had returned to heaven, having told His disciples to wait at Jerusalem for the coming of the Holy Spirit.

Read:

Mark 16: 1-11

Find outs:

1. What were the women anxious about? (Mark 16: 3).
2. What did the women see that made them afraid? (Mark 16:5).
3. What was the message they were to give to the disciples? (Mark 16:7).
4. What was the disciples reaction to the message? (Mark 16: 11).

Chapter 31 - The Pharisees' Invitation

Then one of the Pharisees asked Him to
eat with him.
(Luke 7: 36)

This was a meal with an uninvited guest. We all have sinful hearts, but some people live in such an openly sinful way, that others point them out as sinners. Such a woman came to see Jesus when she heard where He was. She did not come empty-handed. She brought with her a flask of beautiful perfume. Standing behind the Lord Jesus, the woman wept and her tears washed Jesus' feet. She also poured her perfumed oil over His feet (Luke 15: 2).

The Pharisee saw what happened: he never had allowed such a sinful woman to come near him. Surely, if Jesus was a true prophet, He would know what sort of woman this was. Knowing the Pharisee's thoughts, Jesus spoke a parable. The story was about two people who owed money: one ten times as much as the other. Neither of the debtors could pay, but the man they owed money to, forgave them both, so that their debts were cancelled. Which forgiven debtor would love the one they had owed money to, the most? This was the question that Jesus asked the Pharisee. The Pharisee gave the right answer: the one who had been forgiven most.

The Pharisee had not even shown the normal courtesy of bringing water for foot washing, usually brought to guests who had walked the hot, dusty roads. He had shown no kindness or affection in his welcome. The woman knew that she had many sins to be forgiven. But she loved the Lord Jesus and showed her love quite openly. Her sin was forgiven and like the forgiven debtor in the story, she loved the One who had forgiven her.

So many times in the New Testament, we see the great difference between the Lord Jesus and the religious leaders of the day. The Pharisees were so sure of their own goodness and would have nothing to do with sinful people. It never occurred to them to tell people how to find forgiveness. In complete contrast, it was said of the Lord Jesus, "This Man receives sinners...." (Luke 15: 2).

Read:

Luke 7: 36 – 50

Luke 15: 1-2

Find outs:

1. What did the Pharisee not do? (Luke 7: 44-45).
2. What did the woman do? (Luke 7: 44-46).
3. What did the Pharisees say about the Lord Jesus? (Luke 15: 2).

(If you have time, read all of Luke chapter 15 and think about how the father welcomed his son.)

Chapter 32 - A Sick woman called to come to Jesus

But when Jesus saw her, He called her to Him...
(Luke 13: 12)

It was a sabbath day and the Lord Jesus was teaching in the synagogue. Among the people in the synagogue that day, was a woman who for eighteen years, had been unable to straighten her back. How difficult life must have been for her. Even the smallest tasks like putting on her clothes, or cooking a meal, presented problems for her. Walking around the street, she could not look up at passers-by and must have felt very conscious of her appearance.

The Lord Jesus saw this poor woman and called her to come to Him. He told her that she was free from her weakness and as He laid His hands on her, immediately she was able to straighten her back. She gave thanks to God for such a wonderful healing.

Do you think everyone present in the synagogue that day would be glad to see the woman restored to normal after so long? The man in charge of the synagogue was not pleased. He said that healing was work and should not be done on the sabbath day. Jesus told this man that he was a hypocrite: he would take care of one of his own animals on the sabbath. How much more should this woman be healed after eighteen years of suffering.

Read:

Luke 13: 10-17

Hebrews 13: 8

Find outs:

1. What was wrong with the woman in the synagogue? (Luke 13: 11).
2. Why did the Lord Jesus say that the ruler of the synagogue was a hypocrite? (Luke 13: 14-16).
3. How can we know that the Lord Jesus still sees our need of His help? (Hebrews 13: 8).



Chapter 33 - An Invitation to a meal

“A certain man gave a great supper
and invited many.”
(Luke 14: 16)

Sometimes the Lord Jesus taught people by telling a parable: a story with a meaning. One day, when the Lord Jesus was having a meal at the house of one of the chief Pharisees, He noticed how they chose the best places for themselves. Jesus spoke about this, explaining that it was better to take a low place and be invited to a better one, than to be moved from a higher to a lower one. Hearing this, one man commented on how blessed someone would be to eat a meal in the kingdom of God.

The Lord Jesus then began a parable about a man who gave a great supper and invited many guests. But when the time came to tell his guests that everything was ready, they all made excuses. One had bought some land and had to go and see it. Another had bought some oxen and needed to try them out. A third one said he had been married and could not come.

The servant who called on the guests to come, reported all the excuses they made, to his master. The master of the house was angry. He told the servant to go through the streets of the city and bring in poor people, blind people and people who were crippled. When this was done, there was still room, so the servant was sent out again to bring in

anyone found at the roadside, so that there would be a full house. None of those first invited, would enjoy the wonderful meal.

The Lord Jesus knew that the Pharisees rejected Him: they refused to believe Him even though they heard His words and saw the miracles that He did. They were privileged people. They belonged to the nation that God had chosen, that He had sent the prophets to and had given His laws. When He sent His Son to them, they rejected Him and so lost their opportunity to see His glory in heaven and spend eternity there. In heaven there would be sinful people who had come to the Lord Jesus for forgiveness and people from other nations who responded to the Gospel invitation: the very people who the Pharisees despised.

Read:

Luke 14:15-24

Find outs:

1. What excuses did those who had been invited make? (Luke 14: 18-20).
2. Who was the servant to invite? (Luke 14: 21).
3. What would happen to the people who had been invited first of all? (Luke 14: 24).

Chapter 34 - An Invitation to have a very special visitor

“Zacchaeus, make haste and come down, for today I must stay at your house.”
(Luke 19: 5)

Zacchaeus was a rich man, but he was not a very popular man. He was a tax-collector, which meant that there were two things about him that people did not like. He worked for the Roman government and he cheated, by taking money for himself, as well as the tax that he had to collect.

One day Zacchaeus heard that Jesus had come to his town. He wanted to see Him, but he was not tall enough to see over the crowd. He had an idea: he would run on ahead where there was a sycamore tree. If he climbed the tree, he would have a very good view as Jesus passed down the road.

Probably thinking that he would be well hidden in the branches, Zacchaeus must have been surprised when Jesus stopped and spoke to him. He was filled with joy when Jesus said He would come to his house. He hurried down as quickly as he could.

The crowd was not at all joyful, in fact they grumbled that Jesus would choose to visit such a sinful man. But meeting with the Lord Jesus made a great change in Zacchaeus' life. He promised to give half of his money to the poor and also to pay

back four times as much money as he had taken wrongly. Zacchaeus knew that he had done wrong things but he showed how much he was willing to change, by the promise he made. The Bible calls this change of mind “repentance”.

We have not all done the sort of wrong things that Zacchaeus had done, but we all have sinful hearts and need to repent just as much as he did. The Bible promises forgiveness to those who confess their sin to God.

Read:

Luke 19: 1-10

1 John 1: 9

Find outs:

1. Who was Zacchaeus' unexpected guest? (Luke 19:5).
2. Why did the crowd complain about? (Luke 19:7).
3. What did Zacchaeus show his repentance? (Luke 19:8).
4. What did the Lord Jesus say He had come for? (Luke 19: 10). (He sometimes called Himself the 'Son of Man'.)
5. Who does God promise to those who confess their sins? (1 John 1:9).

Chapter 35 - The Lord Jesus receives an Invitation

“Abide with us, for it is toward evening, and the
day is far spent.”
(Luke 24: 29)

Two followers of the Lord Jesus were walking the seven miles from Jerusalem to Emmaus. One was named Cleopas, but we do not know the name of his companion. As they walked, they talked with sadness of all that had happened when the Lord Jesus was crucified. They did not know that He had risen from the dead and had been seen that morning by Mary Magdalene.

As they continued on their way, a Stranger joined them and asked them why they were so sad. They were surprised by his question, thinking that everyone must know about the recent events in Jerusalem. They told him about the crucifixion and about their own hope that Jesus was the Saviour God had promised to send. They went on to tell the Stranger about the women who said that an angel had told them that Jesus was alive.

Maybe it surprised the two walkers that the Man who had joined them told them that they had been slow to understand what the Old Testament prophets had written. He then explained to them all that was written in the Old Testament about the promised One. When they came to Emmaus, it seemed that the Stranger was going further, but

they invited Him to stay with them as it was getting late.

When they sat down for a meal, it was their Guest who blessed the bread, broke it and gave it to them. Immediately they recognised Him, but at that moment He was gone. They had been walking with the risen Jesus. Now they knew why His words to them had, as they put it, 'made their hearts burn'.

Cleopas and his companion went straight back to Jerusalem, where they joined the eleven disciples and others who were with them. They were told, "the Lord is risen indeed...". They then told of what had happened to them as they went to Emmaus.

Read:

Luke 24: 13-35

Find outs:

1. What did the Stranger see about ask the two walkers? (Luke 24: 17).
2. What had Cleopas and his companion been hoping? (Luke 24: 21).
3. What did the Stranger explain to the two walkers? (Luke 24: 27).
4. When did they recognise the Lord Jesus? (Luke 24: 30-31).

Chapter 36 - An Invitation to meet Jesus

Philip said to him (Nathanael), "Come and see."
(John 1: 46)

In the first chapter of John's Gospel, we read about Peter, Andrew and Philip meeting the Lord Jesus. This followed John the Baptist's pointing Him out as "the Lamb of God". Philip told Nathanael they had found the One who Moses and the prophets had said would come into the world: Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph. Nathanael was not at all convinced that any such person would come from Nazareth. So, Philip, wanting Nathanael to find out for himself, said, "Come and see".

As Nathanael approached Jesus, he had a surprise. It seemed that the Lord Jesus knew him already. He described Nathanael as an Israelite without any deceit: a lovely way of describing an honest and open character. Nathanael was impressed and wanted to know how Jesus knew him. He was even more impressed when Jesus said He had seen him before Philip called him.

During the time the Lord Jesus lived on earth, there were many people who refused to believe that He was the Son of God: those who would see many miracles performed and the wonderful teaching that Jesus gave to the people. But Nathanael, knowing only that Jesus could tell him what sort of person he was and where he had just come from, immediately said that Jesus was the Son of God. He recognised

in the Lord Jesus, knowledge that he could not explain: knowledge that no ordinary man would have.

In our Bible we have a trustworthy, reliable account of the life of the Lord Jesus. We know it is true because, just as the Holy Spirit helped those who wrote the books of the Old Testament, in the same way He helped the writers of the books which make up the New Testament. We know so much more than Nathanael did when he first saw the Lord Jesus. Have we believed that Jesus is the Son of God, the Saviour of all who trust in Him?

Read:

John 1: 29-51

Exodus 29: 28-29

Find outs:

1. What did John the Baptist about the Lord Jesus? (John 1: 29 and 36).
2. What would this remind the people of? (Exodus 29: 28-29).
3. What did the Lord Jesus tell Nathanael? (John 1: 48).
4. What did Nathanael say about all that Jesus knew about him? (John 1: 49).
(Rabbi means teacher)

Chapter 37 - A Wedding Invitation

Now both Jesus and His disciples were
invited to the wedding.
(John 2: 2)

Mary, the mother of Jesus, was at a wedding in the village of Cana in Galilee. She may have been asked to help with the meal that was to be served, but we are not told this. We do know that she was aware that there was not enough wine: in fact the supply of wine had run out.

Jesus and His disciples had been invited to the wedding and Mary told Jesus about the lack of wine. Although He did not say what He would do, Mary told the servants to do whatever He told them to.

Six large waterpots stood ready for use. Jesus told the servants to fill them with water. Then He said they should take some to the man in charge of the feast. He was surprised and called for the bridegroom. He told him that it was unusual to keep the best wine until people had already drunk some that was not as good. Usually, the best wine would be served first. Of course, the man in charge of the feast did not know that the pots had been filled with water: only the servants knew that.

This was the first miracle that Jesus performed: it showed His power to create without the usual process of how wine is made. In John's Gospel the miracles recorded there are called "signs". This means that they were not only things that helped

people at the time. They were also signs of who Jesus is, so that all who hear of them will believe that He is the Son of God.

Read:

John 2: 1-11

John 20: 30-31

Find outs:

1. What did Mary tell the servants? (John 2: 5).
2. What did the man in charge of the feast say about the wine that had been water? (John 2:10).
3. What effect did this miracle have on the disciples? (John 2: 11).
4. Why did John say he had written about the miracles the Lord Jesus did? (John 20: 30-31).



Chapter 38 - A Vision that brought an Invitation

“Come over to Macedonia and help us.”
(Acts 16: 9)

Paul had once been a persecutor of Christians, but when the Lord Jesus spoke to him on the road to Damascus, his whole life was changed. His one aim became to take the Gospel to others. With this always in view, he travelled from place to place, firstly in Asia. Then came a time when he felt that the Lord Jesus was not willing for him to continue in the way he had planned. He had a vision in the night of a man calling him to go to Macedonia, a country north of Greece.

Paul was convinced that God had sent the vision and so he and his companions set sail for Neapolis, the seaport nearest to the important city of Philippi (in present day Greece). This was how the Gospel passed from Asia into Europe.

The first people that Paul met in Philippi, were a group of women who met beside a river to pray. One of the women, whose name was Lydia, believed Paul's message about the Lord Jesus, and was baptized. She then kindly invited Paul and his companions to stay at her house.

In Philippi there was a slave girl who was a fortune-teller and so made a lot of money for her owners. As she followed Paul and Silas about, Paul was able to free her from an evil spirit, in the name of Lord Jesus. The slave's owners were angry at

the loss they would have, and they accused Paul and Silas of stirring up trouble. A crowd gathered, and the magistrates had Paul and Silas beaten and thrown into prison.

We read in the Book of Acts chapter 16, how Paul and Silas' imprisonment led to the jailor becoming a Christian. First Lydia, then the jailor: this was how the church in Philippi began (in the Bible, the word 'church' always means people, not a building).

Paul's obedience to God's guidance led to the Christian message reaching Europe. This is a challenge to us, as we remember that great things can follow even small acts of obedience.

Read:

Acts 16: 9-15, 25-34

Questions:

1. Why did Paul believe he should change his plans and travel to Macedonia? (Acts 16: 9-10).
2. Who was the first person in Philippi to become a Christian? (Acts 16: 13-15).
3. What was the jailor's question? (Acts 16: 30-31).
4. What reply did Paul and Silas give to the jailor? (Acts 16: 31).

Chapter 39 - An Invitation to teach about the Lord Jesus

“May we know what this new doctrine is of which you speak?”
(Acts 17: 19)

Paul spent some time at Athens, waiting there for Silas and Timothy to join him. As he looked around the city, he was sorry to see so many idols. There was even an altar to “the unknown god”. He could not keep silent: he spoke of Jesus in their synagogue and to others in the marketplace.

People living in Athens were constantly wanting to hear new ideas and philosophies. Hearing the things Paul was saying, they took him to the Areopagus (Mars Hill) so that he could explain his teaching. Inviting him to speak to them, was for Paul an opportunity to explain the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul began by speaking of God as the Creator, and how wrong it was to represent God as something made of gold, silver or stone. He then spoke of the coming judgement to be carried out by the One who God had raised from the dead.

The very idea of resurrection was laughed at by some, although others said they would listen to Paul speak of these things, on another occasion. But even in idolatrous Athens, some people did believe the message that Paul brought.

We do not usually see idols in our cities, but we know that people have idols in their lives – money,

possessions, ambitions - all can become idols, when they take the place of God in our lives. Many people at the present time, say that they do not believe there is a God. They try to convince themselves that all the variety and complexity of life, came about without any designer or creator. So, we need to begin where Paul began, speaking to people about the God who is the Creator of the vastness of space and of the tiny, but complex, cell. This is the God who sent His own beloved Son to die for sinful people and then to rise again, defeating death.

Read:

Acts 17: 15-34

Find outs:

1. What did Paul say about the people of Athens? (Acts 17: 22).
2. What did one altar in Athens have written on it? (Acts 17: 23).
3. What did Paul say was wrong about how the Athenians thought of God? (Acts 17: 29).
4. Who did Paul say would be the judge of the world? (Acts 17: 31).
5. What were the three different responses to Paul's words? (Acts 17: 32-34).

Chapter 40 - An Invitation to those who are thirsty

“... let him who thirsts come. Whoever desires,
let him take the water of life freely.”
(Revelation 22: 17)

When we receive an invitation, the first thing we want to know is, who is giving this invitation? This could make the difference between accepting or rejecting it. We are told that this last invitation in the Bible, is given by the Spirit and the bride. It is the Holy Spirit who uses words from the Bible, to invite people to come to the Lord Jesus. In the New Testament, all those who belong to the Lord Jesus are described as His bride. These are the people who Jesus loved and gave His life for. They also give the invitation to come to Him.

Our verse not only tells us who gives the invitation, it tells us who it is for: anyone who is thirsty. We know from the experience of people who have travelled through the hot, dry desert, that thirst is a terrible thing. No-one survives long in the desert, without having sufficient water. But this verse is not about the water we drink every day, it is about the “water of life”.

When God created Adam, the first man, He gave him one command, so that he could shew loving obedience to the God who had given him life and everything that he needed. If Adam disobeyed that command, he would die. Adam and his wife Eve were disobedient and their bodies began to grow

older and eventually they died (we read about this in Genesis chapters 2 and 3). But something else happened: that part of them that could know God, died as soon as they disobeyed Him. Sin had entered God's perfect world, bringing sickness, sorrow, and death. Our verse tells us that "the water of life" is available to any man or woman, boy or girl, who thirst for it: the true life of knowing God who is the source of life. To take the water of life is to believe the gospel: that we are sinners who need a Saviour. That Saviour is the Lord Jesus Christ, who said He had come to give abundant life (John 10: 10).

Read:

John 10: 1-10

Revelation 22: 12-17

Find outs:

1. What was the one command God gave to Adam? (Genesis 2: 16-17).
2. What would the result of disobedience be? (Genesis 2: 17).
3. What did the Lord Jesus say that He gives? (John 10: 10).
4. Who is the last invitation in the Bible for? (Revelation 22: 17).

FURTHER INFORMATION

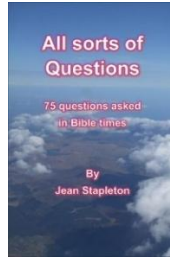
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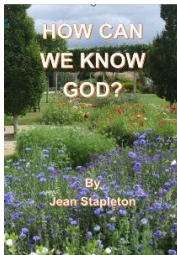
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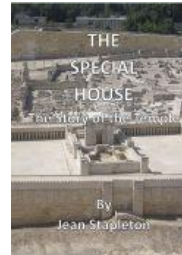
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