

What We Believe

**A Plain English Guide
to Foundational
Christian Teaching in
31 Days**

By Allan Davis

What We Believe

Introduction

This short series attempts to introduce foundational Christian teaching over 31 days. That translates to one page a day over a period of one month. Every attempt has been made to be faithful to important themes but avoid so much of the jargon contain in most Christian literature. New Christians, those who have been believers for some time but need a short introductory journey around teaching themes in the Bible, or those who are still on the journey of discovery will find that it covers all the basics. At the end is a brief selection of Biblical references you can check out.

If you want something more theological, with all the necessary Biblical underpinnings, go to any Christian bookstore, or check out www.Relevant-Christianity.com and follow the links under "Introduction to Theology". The site has many other articles that deal with these topics (and more) in greater detail, from a practical viewpoint.

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Day 1 - God

Before the dawn of history, before the solar system existed, God was. He has always been. He stands outside of time. He is the source of everything. Without Him, nothing could exist. Christians believe that this God, who is everywhere, is all-knowing and all-powerful, is the only true God and is ultimately in charge.

At some point God created the world and all that is in it. People have different opinions about how what we see around us actually came about, but here we are, in time and space, on a unique planet that is ideally suited to our needs.

Have you ever looked around you and wondered how everything came about, what life means, what happens when we die and whether there is a pattern that computes, a meaning that is real, in this life and beyond. Only humans have the sense that there is “something more” to mere existence, that being alive has more substance to it than being an animal, vegetable or mineral that functions briefly and then decomposes. This extra dimension is relationship with our Creator.

Everything around us shows us something about God: the universe, the complexity of nature, the miracle of birth, the human conscience that mirrors a higher power, the sense that there has to be more than the material world.

Throughout human history, men and women everywhere have realised this deep down and have made up systems to try to connect to God and to please Him. Most of these miss the mark completely. Some societies focus on created things, around which they build religious systems. All over the world I have seen what happens when people try to make God look like them, or to reduce Him to their way of thinking. Religious practices fall into hierarchies, over-emphasise external form and custom for its own sake, and often produce conflict with others, usually over power relations and differences of opinion. Some communities recognise literally millions of gods, friendly gods, scary gods, that play with their lives and are to blame for bad things that occur, like sickness, drought, war, infertility and death. Others reject the idea of a literal God in any form; their philosophies lead to emptiness.

Is everything in the universe part of God? Is there deity in all of us? Can we become like Him or Her? (This series describes God in the masculine sense, as reflected in the Bible, bearing in mind that the Bible also clearly teaches that “God is not a man”.)

Without God we are incomplete and will always be searching. As God showed Himself in history, we gradually learned more about who He is, what His character is like, and the fact that He made us with the capacity to relate to Him. God is not a formula, a force or a dynamic; He is real and He has personality. God is love. God is just. God is good. He sets standards. He has a plan. What’s more, He wants us to know Him. That’s pretty amazing. Human foibles and quirks have complicated the process, but God still reaches out to all people, like a father.

As we have looked into our hearts and reached out to space and down into the atom, we have realised that God cannot be known on our terms alone. But if He is real, there has to be a way of bridging the gap. Conversely, if He cares about us, it stands to reason that He will not remain at a distance, unknowable, a mysterious entity. He will make a way to communicate with His creation.

Christians believe these questions find their answer in God coming to us in Jesus Christ, in a form we could understand, to make us complete in Him.

Day 2 – Who is Jesus Christ?

He is the most important person who ever lived, and He influenced human history more than anyone else, but the debate continues: who was Jesus? Was He a teacher, a miracle worker, a prophet, a revolutionary? Was He an imposter, deluded, a charlatan? Christians believe that He was the Son of God, who came into the world to live and die to bring the human race back to God.

In fact, the story of Jesus goes back past the beginning of time. He has always been part of what Christians call the Trinity, jointly with God the Father and the Holy Spirit. The Bible teaches us that when God created the universe out of nothing, He did so through Christ, who continues to uphold everything by His powerful word. He is the head of all creation.

At Christmas, we celebrate the fact that Jesus came into our world as a baby, born to the Virgin Mary. His human name was Jesus, meaning “Saviour”. Christ, or Messiah, was His title. The Bible teaches us that He emptied Himself of the glory that He had with God when He came into human existence. He was God, but He was man, at the same time. He experienced human life as a child, teenager and young adult; He faced every conceivable temptation and pressure, but without sinning, not even once.

For three years Jesus ministered to the sick, the oppressed, the downtrodden, and the dispossessed, whom He taught about the love of God. He attracted people by a new style of teaching about a “Kingdom of God”. When He died on the cross, a perfect man, a perfect substitute for our sin, He forgave those who had pursued him to death because He had posed a threat to their entrenched power structures. Three days later He rose from the dead, spent six weeks with his immediate followers, and then returned to the right hand of God. All the angels of God worship Him. He is our representative with God. He is able to save for eternity all who come to Him. He will come again. The Christian church is His body of representatives on the earth.

Some of the above is a matter of history; some is the core of Christian teaching outlined in the New Testament. The next obvious step is to explore what He means to us on a personal level.

Christians believe that Jesus Christ, as God, is the only way we can relate to God and be ready to face this life and the one to come, whilst not falling into the traps of denial, self-delusion or escapism. Jesus faced life head on, and so can we, knowing that He lives in us, and that He will never leave us. He has been given ultimate authority in the cosmos.

All of this is important, because without it the world Christian movement is simply not the same. Jesus did not come to foster a new religion – there are too many religions in the world. Acknowledge that He is the resurrected, living Son of God and everything assumes a new dimension. Deny his deity, and all you have left is (yet another) belief system, a framework that does not hold much appeal because He calls those who follow Him to sacrifice everything and put Him first. There is no middle path. The entire meaning of Christianity, including His teaching, is based on the belief that He is God; take that away and Christianity becomes a shambolic fraud and a waste of time.

The above barely scratches the surface but it is the core of Christianity. If Jesus Christ is just another teacher, prophet or good man, you can take Him or leave Him. But if He *is* the Son of God, the Saviour of the world, the Lord of creation, the beginning and the end, the sum of all things, you owe Him your total allegiance. He is everything! If you have not yet asked Him to come into your life, do so, today. Not religion, but a real relationship with God, who loves you more than you imagine.

Day 3 – Who is the Holy Spirit?

The Holy Spirit (or *Holy Ghost*, an old expression) is God. He is the third member of what Christians call the Trinity, together with God the Father and Jesus Christ the Son, three members of One God.

The Holy Spirit has always been. He was involved in the process of creation. He was active through the Old Testament, appointing, equipping and empowering leaders and enabling prophets to declare God's word for the times and for the future, including the coming birth and life of Jesus Christ. In the New Testament, He was directly involved in the birth of Jesus, anointed Him for ministry, and was active in His death and resurrection. He was instrumental in the birth of the early church and empowered the first Christians to take the Gospel to the then-known world. He led people to record what we know as the Bible. He is active in the church now (effectively its overall administrator) and will be the main player in the end times. It stands to reason that Christians should know who He is and what He does, in particular in our lives as God's people in the 21st Century. Let's unpack that.

No one can be a Christian without the agency of the Holy Spirit. Becoming a follower of Jesus Christ involves a miracle and a profound change in our thinking and our external lives. We are "born of the Spirit". Unless that happens, all we are is religious. He is like a "midwife" in the life of every new believer.

The Holy Spirit is involved in the life of the church, appointing and "anointing" (giving a special enabling) to its leaders, for the task for guiding the Christian community into maturity and leading its effort in reaching the world with the Good News (or Gospel) about Jesus Christ.

In our individual lives, He provides personal guidance and correction, helps us in our prayer life, enables us to "see" what the Bible teaches and apply it to our circumstances and life plans, and works with us to bring about the kind of character that pleases God. One of the ways He does this is by shaping our thinking and bringing about change through what we call the "fruit" of the Spirit (love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control). It is impossible for us to understand what we need to, and why, and to experience this character change without the personal intervention of the Holy Spirit. We cannot see Him; He does not speak with an audible voice, but we can clearly see the results in our lives.

Other dimensions of the Holy Spirit's work, to give us power in our lives are what the Bible calls the "Baptism in the Holy Spirit" and the "Gifts of the Holy Spirit", in evidence in churches around the world. There are many gifts He gives the church; all are intended to build up the Christian community; some speak directly to non-Christians who see or hear them. The gifts of the Spirit involve the power of God; they are necessary in many cultures where the power of false religion and the work of Satan are in evidence; only He can break such power and set people free.

You can, and should, experience the work of the Holy Spirit in your life. When you pray and read the Bible, ask Him to speak to you. As you go about your busy daily schedule, ask Him to give you ideas, solutions and advice. Ask Him about the decisions you need to make; He will find a way to answer you. When you feel an inner prompting about actions you are involved in, it could be Him talking to you. When you sense an inner urge to quit lifestyle choices you know would not please God, it may well be the Holy Spirit. Every time you respond positively to His urgings, you will find it easier to know when it is God communicating with you. We are not talking about self-talk, paranormal voices or psycho-babble, but a real God speaking to His people in a materialistic century. He has not changed. He will lead you, give you strength and help you to grow as a Christian.

Day 4 – What is Sin?

“Sin.” Seems such an old-fashioned word. A bit passé in a post-modern world? Not if you understand the implications. Some people think of the Ten Commandments when the word “sin” comes up (even if they cannot recall the ten), but sin is much more than that. Surveys of young people indicate that many consider notions of sin as culturally irrelevant. It is time to get back to basics and explain what we mean, in terms everyone can understand.

The central theme of the Bible is the goodness of God. Over against this is a world out of sync, out of relationship with Him, because our first parents decided to rebel and go their own way instead of choosing obedience to Him. What makes the Christian message different from every other religion is that it declares that sin is now in our nature and we are powerless to save ourselves, but that God loves us so much that He persisted in making a way to pay the price for sin and a way back to Him.

On one level, sin simply means breaking God’s laws (by thoughts, words or actions), choosing wrong over right, and putting ego ahead of obedience to Him. It means violating divine standards and preferring our way instead of God’s will. It can also mean failure to do what is right. Sin involves an act of the will, a free choice; after all, we are not robots programmed by a galactic super-chip to carry out predestined instructions. For many years church authorities have debated whether the disposition to sin is inherited and beyond our control; however none of us would assert that we are not ultimately responsible for our actions, even if heredity or environment did play a part.

We own our choices. As a result of those choices, we fall a long way short of God’s perfect plan; we miss the mark as it were. Even when we try to make up with good intentions and deeds the past cannot be changed. There is no such thing as a new leaf. People who compare themselves favourably with others and seek to excuse their own lifestyles only fool themselves. There is no hierarchy of sins. We have all broken God’s laws. The whole world is guilty before Him.

The tragedy of sin is that it separates us from a meaningful relationship with God. We are cut off, the link is effectively dead. As a result, we act completely out of character with God’s purpose for our lives, and end up on a self-destructive path that is evidenced by dysfunction all around us, including personal moral alienation, divisions in families and communities, loss of hope for the future, moral decay, international conflict, the pollution of the planet, sickness and death.

Sin and habits enslave us; we are powerless to break out of their grip. Sin leads to death and separation from God. No amount of resolve or good intention can ever change that. Our past sits like a stain that good works and regret alone can never remove. The answer is beyond our capabilities. Try as hard as we may, we cannot lift ourselves out of the predicament.

This is the context in which the Bible teaches us that Jesus came into the world. The same holy God whom we have offended by our sinful practices was born as a human being, to live among us, share our weakness and experience temptation on every level (but without sinning). He then went one step further, voluntarily dying on the cross to pay the price for our guilt and bring us back into right relationship with God. He secured forgiveness for all who believe in Him. If we are willing to accept that and make it our own, in an attitude of genuine regret for all that we have done, He is willing to forgive us, wash us clean as it were, and blot out the record entirely. He is able to break the power of sin and its guilt within, restore broken lives, heal damaged relationships, and give us the strength and the capacity to start all over again and live a brand new life.

Day 5 – Becoming a Christian - Conversion

Jesus said that we must be “converted” to enter the kingdom of God, that place where He is in charge of our lives and eternal destiny. What does conversion mean, in contemporary terms?

Put simply, conversion suggests a change of direction. I am headed one way, and I turn around and start going in the other direction. I have grown up with one set of values that determine what I believe and the way I live. I give my life to Jesus Christ and he brings about such a radical change in my heart that I turn away from those values, commit myself to Him and begin a new life, with a new focus and goals. That is conversion. Becoming a Christian is life-changing, it is transformative.

In the New Testament the word is similar in intent to another: “repentance”, meaning a change of mind, producing a metamorphosis (like what a caterpillar goes through before becoming a butterfly). Without a change of heart there can be no real or lasting lifestyle change. Another idea in the New Testament is that of being “born again”; the change that occurs when we become Christians feels like that. When we give ourselves to Jesus Christ, it is like starting life all over again.

Conversion changes our values. It alters our outlook and priorities. We come to see things from a different perspective. For some people, this may happen in an instant; for others the change may be gradual. But change there is! It is the work of God in us.

Conversion is a miracle. People don’t spontaneously change direction. Why should they? They don’t walk away from the way they have grown up and what they have believed without a reason and some kind of intervention. Sometimes we can be persuaded to change our opinion, for example our political views, or product lines we purchase (we may be “converted” from one brand to another), but not our entire life direction.

Conversion is more than changing churches (if we have one), becoming religious, or signing up as a member of a particular faith community. These are no more effective in bringing about durable change than signing up to a coffee club or an airline loyalty program. Real conversion starts inside.

Let’s face it, without God, our way of life is characterised by underlying self-centredness and pride. We find it hard to admit when we make mistakes. We become defensive. This leads to denial. Three of the most difficult words to say are “I have sinned”.

That’s why we need both the conviction and the power of the Holy Spirit to start a new life. Without being convinced, we see no reason for change. Without seeing the consequences of sin we see nothing wrong with it and no compelling argument to give it up. Without the power of the Holy Spirit we fail in our efforts, because we are unable (and usually unwilling) to turn our lives around; even if we go through the efforts of trying to conform to set of standards part of us will keep looking backwards, wanting to go there, and that will never work.

The Bible says that only God can make us new (like a brand new creation). The starting point is willingly (and honestly) acknowledging that we have sinned, that we are alienated from God, heading in the wrong direction and that we need Jesus Christ.

If you have started out in the Christian life, be prepared for challenges and personal renewal. At first it may feel threatening, but if you are obedient to the voice of the Holy Spirit in your life and draw on the encouragement of Christian friends, you will get there. Even if the work of conversion only feels incremental, you will experience real break-throughs in your life. Never give up.

Day 6 – What Happens When Someone Becomes a Christian?

The single most important thing a man, woman or child can do is to give their heart and life to Jesus Christ and trust in Him for their future (in this life and the next). This step may be the culmination of a long search. It may happen spontaneously in a church meeting, when the message appeals to the one listening and he or she makes a decision there and then to follow Christ. Some make the decision when the Gospel is explained to them by a friend. Or, the decision may come about privately, through listening to a recording or reading a book.

What actually happens when a person becomes a Christian? The message and the decision can be accepted with a great deal of emotion. Or without any emotion whatsoever. The primary driver is not emotion, but the exercise of “faith”, or belief, that Jesus died for them and offers forgiveness of sins because they trust in Him. Many people know next to nothing about Christian teaching (that is simply a matter of growth and coaching over time by an experienced fellow-Christian). But they respond because they are broadly aware that they need God in their life and that the moment to open up to Him purposefully has arrived.

Without being overly technical, when a person becomes a Christian they are accepted into God’s family; He becomes their heavenly father and they enter a family of Christian believers (the church). The Holy Spirit switches on that part of their make-up that we believe God made for Himself; they become “spiritually alive”, with a new awareness of God, a capacity to relate to Him, and an interest in spiritual things. Many go on to report a sense of “fulfilment” that they have never experienced before, or a moment of understanding, just like a light going on.

The Bible teaches that when someone trusts in Christ, God forgives their past sins, completely. He no longer remembers them. The person stands before Him just as if he or she had never sinned. With that, and with good teaching, reading the Bible, prayer and participation in a good church, comes an awareness that a new life has started, with the power and the capacity to resist temptation and to say “No” to sin. This does not mean they will no longer sin, but the indwelling Holy Spirit commences a process of change. He will continue to work with them, bringing conviction where necessary, re-shaping their attitudes, giving them wisdom, developing the characteristics of Jesus in their lives as time goes on (the Bible calls this the “fruit of the Spirit”); this is all an important part of His role.

Every new Christian needs a mentor. When we start out on the Christian life, we are like babies in a maternity ward. Everything is new. We are vulnerable. We do not understand the language or the process. But others do. They can come alongside and offer advice and guidance, based on their own experiences. They can help explain what the Bible actually means, how to read it, how it is relevant to their daily lives, how to talk to God and listen to Him, hand over to Him problems they are facing, what baptism and communion and other elements of church life mean, in terms they can understand. They can explain all the technical terms.

Becoming a Christian is a life-long decision, with a future and a hope after that. Christians believe that the free gift of God is eternal life, in the presence of God. Death is not the end, but a doorway. We have been created to live forever; trusting in Christ is the key to beginning that relationship.

If you have recently become a Christian, never let go of simple faith in Jesus. He will never walk away from you. He will never let you down. He is with you at all times. It is not your goodness, hard work or persistence that will get you through, but His faithfulness and His love for you.

Day 7 – My Purpose in Life

Three of the most important questions people ask are: Who am I? Why am I here? Where am I going? In an age in which global population is over seven billion people, numbers are replacing names and identity fraud is rife around the world, the search for meaning continues. Sociologists talk of “anomie”, a lack of purpose, leading to a sense of futility, despair and emotional emptiness. This is the experience of many. Surely there must be more. Everyone needs identity.

God has a purpose for your life. Followers of Jesus have a very clear perspective on this.

Who are you? The Bible says that you were made in the image of God. God knows who you are, He loves you, and He wants to have a relationship with you. The Bible reminds us again and again that He knows us intimately and that we rely on Him for life, even the air that we breathe. Nothing is hidden from His sight. Your existence is a gift from God; so what you do with it matters to Him. When you pray, His ears are open to you; He is interested in your hopes, the things you go through. When everything else is stripped away, your purpose is to know Him, to love Him and to love others as a result. You need never feel alone again, or in search of ultimate meaning.

God is a father, and He loves every member of His family. Nothing you do can make Him love you any more, or any less. It is His love and kindness that have drawn you to the cross of Jesus, to find forgiveness and eternal life. He has placed you in His family, the Christian community, to make sure you are supported and grow in your faith and in strong relationships. Get involved in your church.

You have been made with interests and abilities that are unique to you. Naturally, as you have grown up you have added to these with education and experience, but there is no one else quite like you. No one else has your DNA. Every person is wired differently. There are things that you can do, contributions that you can make, better than just about anyone else. In relationship with a supportive and practical Christian community, you can discover and use those skills, and benefit others. Start with what you have, not what you don't have.

Every Christian has, in a sense, a mission from God to fulfil. Who you are and where you are today are not accidents or coincidences. Pray and ask the Holy Spirit to show you what purpose you have, and how to begin to live it. Make a point of listening for His answers. The Bible teaches us that God opens doors that no one can shut, and shuts doors that no one can open; this begs the question: what open doors has He given you? One of the keys to being fulfilled in life is doing what you are called to do. Many people find themselves incredibly frustrated because they strive to be someone else. One of the secrets of fulfilment is being happy with yourself.

Ask God to lead you and give you wisdom in your decision making. Ask Him to show you what skills and opportunities are before you, and what additional training would be useful. That will give you confidence to get through difficult tasks, face disappointments, and determination to press on when others are giving up. Ask Him to guide you in your personal relationships, including marriage.

Before we leave this subject, there is one ultimate sense of purpose that you need to know: God's work in your life, as a Christian has as a goal making you more like His Son. If you want to know how He wants you to live, also take a long look at Jesus. He is your example. With the help of the Holy Spirit, producing His characteristics (“fruit”) in your life, and your obedience, He will accomplish this purpose a little more each day. Get into gear with God's purpose and your life will be full.

Day 8 – Counting the Cost of Following Jesus

Twenty centuries have now passed since Jesus Christ called his first disciples to leave everything and follow Him. Those who did so ended up at the foot of a cross watching him suffer and die at the hands of those for whom His radical message of loving God and loving people was such a threat that they had to get rid of Him. Most of those first followers ended up dying for their faith. The call to discipleship was a call to take up their own crosses and follow Him. The 20th century saw more martyrs worldwide than any previous one.

The world Christian movement today seems roughly divided between societies in which being a Christian is either respectable, or at least tolerated, and those in which genuine followers of Christ are persecuted, imprisoned, alienated and even killed. In the former, the cost of discipleship is about lifestyle choices; in the latter it is about life itself.

Jesus said that we must sit down and count the cost of following Him, not as a disincentive, but a warning about what will happen if we take Him at His word and do not think about the consequences. There are many for whom the Christian message is a threat; others hate the church, and all that it implies, because their own worldviews or religious systems teach intolerance. If you live in a community where there is no law against being a Christian, where people are free to comfortably go to church on Sunday mornings and tick “Christian” on the census form out of habit, it is easy to forget that true discipleship costs.

Think about it... how far are you willing to go in giving Jesus first priority in your life? In your marriage and family, friendships, career choices, finances, reputation? How much of your time and effort is actually spent on anything to do with being a Christian? How do you choose when conflict arises between living the Christian life and compromising your values?

For millions of people, the answer is that their faith is something that is shoe-horned in between other commitments and is largely governed by convenience and social acceptability at the time. The notion of counting the cost, taking up a cross and actually following Jesus goes further than many think about. They love the great ideas of Christianity: the Sermon on the Mount; the parables; the stories of Jesus healing people and raising others from the dead; the picture of Jesus as a gentle shepherd rescuing lost sheep, walking on water in a storm, multiplying fish and bread to feed thousands and going from village to village bringing hope. But they don't like the cross; it is too confronting, too messy, too final. The commands and standards of Jesus are too black and white, with no room for compromise in between.

Being a Christian means putting Jesus first in our lives, where we are, right now, and seeing where this takes us. It means reading the Bible and being open to put into practice what we read there. It means taking time out to pray and to obey the leading of the Holy Spirit in our lives. It means embracing a willingness to go above and beyond if this is what God wants us to do. Not being irresponsible in terms of the important commitments we have to people around us, but being willing to put God first, to give Christ our primary allegiance. It starts out with having the right attitude. If our hearts are in the right place, the rest will follow.

Every Christian is a disciple. The call to discipleship is a call to get out of our comfort zones and follow Him. Easier said than done? It all comes down to choice. The road often becomes narrow and we walk in single file, without the support or approval of others, but He is still there. He may not make it easier, but He will give you strength. Count the cost. Take up your cross. Follow Him.

Day 9 – Growing as a Christian

Everyone loves a new born baby. But if the baby does not develop and grow there is a problem. Likewise, it is important to keep growing as a Christian, to develop the gifts that God has given you and to experience the work of the Holy Spirit in making you more like Jesus Christ.

Growth occurs in a number of inter-related ways. Consider the following and become stronger as a Christian each passing day.

Every baby needs the security, tender love and care that come from family. God has given you Christian brothers and sisters and parent figures, to help look after you, provide company and support (sometimes correction), share their experiences and be there for you. Find a church that teaches God's word, encourages prayer and strong relationships and reaches out to the community, and get involved. Christian friends can often see things that are going on, so be open to their suggestions and mutual care. Then you, in turn, can help others going through things of their own.

Just as we need food and water to develop, we also need to "feed" on God's word. Get into the habit of reading some of the Bible each day. Memorize some key verses. Let the Holy Spirit speak to you as you read, make a note of what you believe He is saying and apply it to your life. As you do so, your spiritual bones and muscles will become stronger.

Develop a life of prayer and worship. Talking with God is a key to your growing relationship with Him. Learn to listen to His voice and distinguish it from other voices that compete for your attention. Worship is recognising God for who He is; focusing your life on His purposes and developing an attitude of appreciation will help you get through tough times. When you believe God is telling you to do something, put it into practice straight away. The more you listen and obey Him the easier it will be to recognise His leading and hand in your circumstances next time.

Don't allow small temptations to grow and overwhelm you. If you do something wrong, ask for forgiveness straight away, along with the power to say "No" the next time. Push back when Satan tries to trip you up or lead you down a wrong path. Don't hold onto bad attitudes or grudges, but practice forgiveness, so that the actions of others (or stubbornness) do not tie you up in knots.

Develop a helping attitude toward other people. It takes courage to break through the barriers of selfishness we all construct from time to time and reach into the lives of others. As God has given you grace (He has!), show an attitude of generosity. If you see a need, get involved. If you see someone down, help them up. If you see someone alone, get alongside them. If you see material need, do what you can out of your own pocket. Generous people always become strong.

Hand each day and situation over to the Lord. You may sometimes feel alone, but your Heavenly Father is always there, beside you. He does not expect you to carry your load unassisted.

Share your faith. Doing so will help sort out in your own mind what you have experienced and believe. Don't underestimate the positive impact you can have in the lives of people around you.

Finally, never lose sight of the simplicity of your faith. We tend to over-complicate things, but the most profound truth (regardless of how long you have been a Christian) is "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so". Keep it simple. Keep your feet on the ground. Don't lose sight of what is really important. Each passing day you will grow a little more in line with God's perfect plan.

Day 10 –Can I Be Sure About What I Believe?

Someone once described Christian “faith” as “Forsaking All I Trust Him”. That’s a good definition. Being a Christian is not opting in with “blind” faith or reckless abandon, but with eyes that are wide open, trusting in Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord of our lives.

But sometimes doubts arise. Every Christian experiences them. Don’t become discouraged if you have doubts. They can actually help cement your faith, including by sorting out God’s word from peoples’ opinions. There are things we don’t quite understand. Circumstances change and difficulties come up. We pray about something but don’t seem to get an answer, or the one we really want. Family members and friends question why we are Christians at all. In secular societies, Christians are targeted by cynics who don’t want to believe anything apart from the physical world and what benefits them. How can we be sure about the truth and durability of what we believe?

The reality is, there will always be questions. With the best will in the world, things can be unclear and occasionally go wrong. There is no sense sugar-coating problems, or denying they occur. At such times, what we can do is say to God, “I trust you”. Seem simple? Perhaps, but it works.

The Christian life is a walk of faith, believing God for what He has said, even when we can’t see the proof in front of us. Unlike most of the world’s religions, where the god or ritual is always there, we trust in a God who is invisible and who does not live in temples made with human hands. When you read the Bible, histories of well-known Christians and mix with believers in your own circle it will be clear that the only way to grow as a Christian is to trust in God’s absolute goodness, the fact that He is ultimately in charge, and the reality of the message you first believed when you accepted Christ.

There are lots of things in your life that you cannot see, but you know they exist. You cannot see electricity, but you trust that when you turn on the plug it will flow; you see the evidence. You cannot see love or hate, but you see the evidence. God is the same. He has said that when we come to Him we must believe that He exists and that He rewards those who trust in Him.

It takes trust in God and the integrity of the Bible to believe that all your past sins have been forgiven. It takes trust to believe that He has given you eternal life. It takes trust to believe that He has a purpose for you now and that He will guide you the right way. And it takes trust to step out in obedience to what God leads to do when you cannot see around the corner.

However, when we do trust in God, the Holy Spirit comes into our hearts and conveys the assurance we need. It is hard to explain how this happens. It is not a matter of “convincing ourselves”, but a deep work of God. Christians sense God at work in their lives, speaking to them, leading them by an inner voice, depositing His love in them and giving them an assurance that they are His children and have a hope and a future. The Bible says that this is part of His role.

So, it is not just up to us, to have “faith in faith”, thinking positive thoughts and hoping for the best. Our faith is in the character and trustworthiness of God, and the assurance that He will never leave us. We believe that the Bible is true and His promises are certain.

In the mix of what you believe as a Christian, there are things you can explore further, such as the record of the Bible; its explanation of what you have as a believer and its wisdom for living in a complex non-Christian world. The more you read it, the better your grasp of what it teaches (and the context in which it was written) will become. Trust God. Trust His Word. He will never fail you.

Day 11 - Why Belong to a Church?

One of the most important steps that a new Christian can take is to get established in a local church where he or she can find friends, listen to good teaching, become an active part of Christ's community and grow in faith and the practice of Christian living.

"Church" often gets a bad rap, because people, buildings and worship styles in them can be old-fashioned. Some of those observations are true. But "church" means people, not buildings. There is a great diversity across the Christian landscape. If you don't belong to a local church group yet, find one that works for you and put down roots there. Let me explain why.

The Bible teaches that it is God's plan for Christians to grow in the context of the broader Christian community. The majority of active Christians meet somewhere on Sundays, and many also meet in smaller groups in homes during the week (closer to their work or homes). It is difficult to grow as a Christian "loner" in a cynical non-Christian society; few who try to do so actually make it.

We need time together; Christians call this "fellowship". As part of the church community we can safely explore what we are going through and be supported, in relationships of trust. Sometimes, more experienced Christian believers can provide correction and guidance, and their knowledge and insight into what the Bible teaches can be invaluable. It is important to be open to such experience.

Churches are also a good place for Christian groups to worship God together. Few people in our society sing as much as believers worshipping God every Sunday at church. It is good to praise the Lord, to recognise His greatness and goodness, and thank Him for what He has done. Doing so together is mutually encouraging. When we are alone, we don't experience the benefits of worshipping as a larger body of believers. Getting together also provides opportunities for special celebrations, such as Communion, or the Lord's Supper, where the congregation take time to remember the death of Jesus in a more formal way. Participating in a church where people pray together will give you opportunities to learn how to pray.

Many churches have interest or age-based groups, where common pursuits draw people together in satisfying ways. This is particularly useful in large congregations, where it may not always be possible to spend a lot of time with the pastoral team.

Church can be a great place to receive reliable teaching in what the Bible says and how to read it correctly and apply it in life. A good church will focus on teaching and provide courses in practical Christianity. Some make teaching notes or CDs available, or post material to their web sites.

Church can be a "safe" place to recover from mistakes that we all make from time to time. Many groups have members with experience in coping with difficulties people go through; they can be skilled helpers. By participating in a local church you can seek them out and talk about your situation in a non-threatening way. You will also find others going through struggles – you can comfort and support them. If one falls over, the rest can help them up again. Together, the Christian community can be supported and each can find out what God wants them to do with their lives.

How to start? If you have a Christian friend, go with them. They can explain what is going on and introduce you to others. Otherwise, visit a church near you. You will normally find a warm welcome. You may need to visit a couple to find one you like, but don't give up.

Day 12 – How to Pray

Jesus once told his disciples a parable to show them that they should “always pray and not give up”. The New Testament repeats this idea again and again. But what is prayer? Where do we draw the line between asking with a right attitude and being demanding? Why should God listen, and how can we know He has heard us?

The disciples asked Jesus to teach them how to pray. To many people, the concept of prayer seems complicated, but in its simplest form, prayer is simply talking to God. It does not need to be formal or use a particular style of language. After all, God knows your heart. He understands you better than anyone else does. Jesus lived as a man, so He can personally identify with what you need and feel. God knows how what you are praying for fits into His will for your life.

Prayer can mean talking to God about your needs: financial, family, study, marriage, work, health, and so on. To some people prayer is like a hot-line to God; however it is more than that. When you pray, you acknowledge that you are limited, that God is all-powerful and all-knowing and that He is able to supply what you need. The Bible tells us that we are to pray for one another, so talk to Him about the needs people you know (this is called “intercessory prayer”). Pray for your leaders – they need it. Pray for God to direct you in your decision-making. Prayer is a good time to hand your anxieties and all the issues you are facing over to God and ask Him to help you carry them.

Prayer includes thanking God for providing for our needs, guiding us, opening doors and giving us answers to difficult questions. It is good to thank the Lord for His faithfulness and continual supply. If He should fail us on a physical level, there would be no harvest, no rain, no clean air to breathe or water to drink. That’s very basic, but true.

There is no set formula for when and where you should pray. Just do it. God is with you wherever you go. Talk to Him when you start your day, when you are in the car going to work or university, or when you are out for a walk. You can talk to God standing in line at a shopping centre, or in a meeting needing an urgent answer to a problem. Pray in your heart, freely, spontaneously and in your own words. You can pray with your eyes opened or closed, quietly or out loud—however you are most comfortable and least distracted, and however the circumstances permit.

Prayer is a two-way relationship, a conversation between two people. When you set aside time for prayer, come with an open mind, and allow God to speak to you. Through prayer you can get to know Him better, experience more of His love, and see His work in your life. Talking to God without listening doesn’t build a relationship. Communicating with Him does, so speak and listen.

If you pray for a need, person or situation and there does not seem to be an immediate answer, don’t give up. Waiting develops trust. God can respond in different ways. Sometimes He says “No”. Don’t be discouraged. He understands your situation clearly and wants what is best for you.

When and where should you pray? That’s up to you. The important thing is to set aside time to pray regularly, without it becoming a chore, or an obligation. If you still struggle with knowing how to pray, ask God to teach you; ask a Christian friend to pray with you, and learn.

What a privilege we have in being able to come to God in prayer, just as we are, no strings attached, no one else getting in the road, building a two-way relationship with Him that we can make a central feature of our lives as Christians. Remember to talk with Him each day.

Day 13 – Who Wrote the Bible?

Christians believe that the Bible is God’s Word, and that it has authority in the church and personal life. But how was it communicated, who wrote it and how did we receive it in its present form?

The Bible was written by forty different authors over a period of 1,600 years, in three languages (Hebrew, Greek and Aramaic). Its writers were diverse, and included political leaders, shepherds, prophets, priests, a doctor, a civil servant and a religious leader from the time of Jesus. In numerous cases, all we know about the writer is their name, and perhaps occupation. The oldest book was written 500 years before the earliest Hindu scriptures. The book of Genesis was written two thousand years before Mohammed dictated the Koran. In spite of this diversity, there is a single underlying theme: that of man’s descent into sin, the consequences of that and God’s loving plan to restore Him.

The accuracy of records in the Bible has long been tested, by friends and opponents. Its history has been held up to (and passed) critical scrutiny, although it is not primarily a scientific or historical book. Much of the Bible is prophecy (foretelling the future), some related to the history of the Jews, some to the life of Jesus, the Messiah, and some for the future. There are parts of the Bible that still contain an element of mystery. These facts should not stop us delving into the Bible and seeing what it has to say for itself – and for us.

Originally written down on lengthy scrolls or parchment, the first thirty-nine the books of the Bible were drawn together by scholars in the centuries before the coming of Jesus. What they agreed was most reliably held to have been received from God, through his servants, was assembled into what we know as the Old Testament. Jesus accepted the validity of the Old Testament record. (Judaism continues to accept the Old Testament, or the Torah.) During the early Christian era, a similar process occurred, sorting out various accounts of the life of Jesus and the first church, checking dates and facts; we have the New Testament (the remaining twenty-seven books) as a result.

Christians believe that the Bible was inspired by God and that men of God wrote what they did because they were moved along by the Holy Spirit. The Bible is not just a book about history and philosophy. It is not just a collection of religious poems and traditional wisdom. It is God’s revelation to the world, His Word. Its truths are eternal. At the same time, it is a standard for us to live by, a roadmap filled with practical teaching that we can apply. It is alive. When we read it thoughtfully and purposefully, it goes down deep inside of us, and changes us.

A key difference between Christianity and other religions is that the Bible teaches that the “Word” of God is not just pages, paragraphs and verses, but is an expression of who God is. In time, the “Word” became flesh, in the person of Jesus. We worship Him, not the book. And what is written in the book only makes sense as it refers back to Him. Christ is the key to unlocking what the Bible teaches.

Today, there are various English-language versions of the Bible, and this is sometimes held to be a stumbling block. However, as older manuscripts are being discovered, the text is being refined. Some newer versions convey the same thing as the older ones, but expressed in contemporary terminology. (Language keeps changing, with new words being added to speech all the time, and older ones disappearing or acquiring different interpretations). The message is the same. The important thing is to get a version you can understand, read it regularly, and ask the Holy Spirit (the ultimate author) to help you understand it and apply it to your life.

Day 14 – Making the Most of Reading the Bible

If you have not grown up exposed to the Bible it can be a bit daunting to start using it.

For a start, it is so large. Sixty-six “books”. Over a thousand pages in length, with small type. Nearly every book is split into chapters and verses; this initiative makes it a bit easier to navigate, but where to start? How can anyone grasp so much material, written two to three thousand years ago (some earlier) for other cultures? It is not even arranged thematically.

What’s more, some versions are very old and use vocabulary that is not in common usage today.

What has worked for me has been having a plan. Rather than picking up the Bible every day and wondering where to go, I use a *One Year Bible*, with daily readings from the Old Testament, New Testament, Psalms and Proverbs that match the calendar. I often split the readings into two, tackling one portion in the morning and the other at night. The key is not how, or where, you schedule your readings, but actually doing it. You will be surprised how much progress you make this way. If you take public transport to work, you could do your readings sitting in a bus or train.

That said, it is one thing to read chunks of text, and quite another to take it all in. With lots of distractions and busy lives, it is all too easy to walk away and completely forget what we have read. I find it useful (as I go through) to think about one verse that stands out (maybe underline the words, or put a mark in the margin), what truth God might be teaching me, and how I might put one thing into practice today. If you have time, you could write down your thoughts in a notebook. It even pays to memorize a key verse that means something to you; let the words swirl around in your head; the Holy Spirit can bring back to your thinking what you have deposited in your memory.

Another approach could be to read the New Testament through, at your own pace. If you don’t make sense of a section the first time you read it, go over it again, read it as a prayer, then move on. Ask yourself, “What is the obvious meaning, and what could this mean for *my* life? Is there a lesson that I can put into practice? Is the Holy Spirit (the Author) possibly saying something to me?” Insert your name as you read. After all, the Bible is one of the ways God can speak to you personally.

Another tip is to take note of a passage used in your church or home group and look it up later on. (If you don’t participate in a home group, considering doing so; it is easier to learn as a group, as people encourage one another; talking with like-minded people will open up new meanings.)

How you read is also important. What does the text say to you? Read the words around it, to ensure you understand the context and any seemingly ambiguous parts. Try not to interpret out of context. Some Bibles have footnotes that provide additional information. If you are still unsure, talk to a friend. You could even Google the text; there is a lot of useful comment on virtually the whole Bible on the Internet (along with some material that is of dubious value; not every interpretation is correct). But don’t stop reading because there are passages that are hard to understand.

Christian bookshops sell vast numbers of books explaining the Bible, usually written by experts in the original language and culture, who explain what the words meant at the time they were written and add practical applications for modern living. Ask the retailer for a suggestion.

Reading the Word of God regularly is essential if you want to grow as a Christian. Like a jig saw, it will become clearer over time. Make a plan to start, and then stick to it.

Day 15 – What is Baptism?

Baptism in water is one of the oldest Christian traditions. In fact, it had its origins in Old Testament times, as a symbol of washing and ritual cleanliness before God. Carried forward to the New Testament era, but in a slightly different context, baptism continues to be observed by the majority of believers around the world, although the format and meaning differ slightly across the spectrum of Christian groups. The model practiced in the Bible (and implicit in the literal meaning of the word) is full immersion, in water.

When Jesus Christ rose from the dead and gave his disciples final instructions about taking His message into the world, He included a command that new disciples be baptised. Jesus modernised the meaning and significance of baptism. The New Testament indicates baptism was practiced everywhere by the early Christians; it also explains what it is all about.

Baptism is, first of all, a physical symbol that teaches us about Jesus' death and resurrection. When the person being baptised goes into the water, we are reminded of Jesus going into death and the grave; when he or she comes up out of the water, we recall Jesus rising from the grave and embarking on a new life. Powerful stuff. The Bible teaches that this is, in a sense, what happens to us when we follow Christ. We have died and been buried, as it were, to our old way of life and thinking, and begun a brand new life in Christ, by his transformative resurrection power.

Baptism is also a vivid reminder that our sins have been washed away and that we have been called to live clean in God's sight.

Baptism is symbolic of belonging to the Body of Christ, not as an initiation, or a rite of entry, but a mark that we belong to Him. It is a public and visible sign of something that has already taken place in our hearts. It is not to be pursued in a mechanistic way, but meaningfully and voluntarily.

Baptism is intended for genuine followers of Christ. In the context in which Jesus gave instructions about baptism, the event in and of itself does not make us Christians, but it stands to reason that, if we desire to be obedient to Him, we will submit to baptism, as a reminder of His lordship in our lives. For this reason, we also believe that baptism is a very personal decision, and reserved for people who are old enough to grasp its meaning and implications. Sprinkling of babies and toddlers does not fit anywhere in this model.

The act of baptism is a public declaration of our commitment to a new way of life. You can rest assured that your commitment to Christ will be tested. The Bible records that, when Jesus was baptised in water, He endured his very first series of temptations at the hand of Satan, who sought to derail His life and ministry. In some non-Christian communities family and friends of people who embrace the Christian message only take action against them when they are baptised; this step is seen as a point of no return.

Are you committed to the Lordship of Jesus in your life? Have you been baptised? If not, prayerfully consider taking this step. In the Bible, the time lapse between people becoming Christians and being baptised was usually quite short. If you *have* been baptised, never lose sight of both the symbolism and the reality of the new life that is yours in Christ. There is no going back. The challenge that faces each of us who have taken this step in obedience to Jesus' command is to live out the new "resurrection" life He promised.

Day 16 – Communion, or the Lord’s Supper

Yesterday’s theme was baptism, one of the oldest customs of the Christian community. Another is Communion, sometimes called the Lord’s Supper, or (in more traditional churches) the Eucharist (meaning “thanksgiving”).

The event that led to celebration of Communion in churches around the world had its roots in a special meal that Jesus ate with his disciples the night before He was crucified. (The ancient Jewish feast of “Passover” had its own origins in Israel’s departure from slavery in Egypt, led by Moses. Read about it in Exodus, in the Old Testament).

Taking a piece of broken bread and a cup at the end of the meal, Jesus likened them to His body, that would soon be broken on behalf of a sinful, broken world; and His blood that would be spilled for the forgiveness of sin. There is much more to it, but that is the essence. Encouraging the disciples to continue celebrating this way, as a type of ongoing memorial feast, until the day of his return, Jesus twice encouraged them to “Do this in remembrance of me”.

As the early Christian church fanned out across the Middle East and up into Europe, the practice of Communion followed. In some places, it was misunderstood, leading to further teaching about its significance, by the Apostle Paul. Most churches today continue to celebrate Communion, some more often than others, and with varying degrees of ritual, regulation and mysticism. It is important that ritual not overshadow the obvious intention of what was designed as a simple remembrance.

When we take the bread in our hands, we are encouraged to remember that Jesus, though He was perfect in every way, took the brokenness of the human race on Himself when He went to the cross. By sharing the bread, we share in commemoration that Jesus did it for us. He took all of our weaknesses and limits, our sickness and our physical and mental brokenness. Only He can make what is broken whole again. Only Jesus can restore hope and the integrity of the human spirit. We deserved the hopelessness we brought on ourselves through rebellion against God, but He opened up a way for us to come back into a right relationship. By sharing the bread, we are reminded that we are all part of one another. He lives in each of us. Make sense?

When we take the cup, or drink from a shared one (some churches use grape juice, others use wine - the distinction is not important), we remember that His blood was shed for us, the sinless for the guilty, taking our punishment. Sin leads to death. Jesus died for us, in our place. So while physical death remains, there is no more separation from God. He has washed our sins away; there is no more record of it in God’s sight.

When we eat and drink the “emblems”, or components, of Communion, it is as though we are taking the life of Christ into us. The symbolism is powerful. A few churches teach that the bread and wine actually become the body and blood of Christ; however, this is a misunderstanding.

Communion is not just a re-enactment. We need to approach it seriously and think about what it means when we participate. We need to “remember” what each part stands for.

Communion is also forward-looking. “Do this until I come”. Jesus’ cross and grave were not the end, but just the beginning. Each of us has a hope that we will see Him, when He comes. Communion is therefore both a remembrance and an encouragement to serve Him all our lives. Keep this in mind next time you hold the bread and cup in your hand.

Day 17 –Why Praise and Worship?

Praise God!! It is good to give thanks to Him, for who He is and for His wonderful gifts. While most religions have rituals focused on celebrating (or appeasing) their founders, gods, or philosophies, Christianity emphasises thanking God for His unconditional love, His kindness, all that He does, His blessings, and recognising Him as the Almighty, only God, Creator and Saviour.

Praise (giving thanks) and worship (adoration) are important because they remind us of our total dependence on God. Without Him we would not exist. Without the work of Jesus Christ, we would not have forgiveness and eternal life. Without the Holy Spirit, we would not have relationship with Him. There is a variety of terms used in the original languages, but they all essentially boil down to these central themes.

God is good. He is holy. He is all powerful, all-knowing and present everywhere. He created everything and keeps it going. In spite of mankind's foibles, struggles and sin, God's overarching character and purpose still prevail. There is no one greater than Him. He can never be defeated. He will never let us down. We will spend eternity with Him. What a privilege it is to be a Christian. These are all amazing reasons to worship.

Christians sometimes get hung up on individual praise and worship styles. Some church groups like to be quiet and still, others are very loud and demonstrative. There are cultural differences and sometimes divergences on points of teaching. Each group can find an example or two of their preferred style in the Bible; this sometimes leads to comparisons and criticism of those who are not doing it "the right way". However, God is bigger than culture, language, or temperament. What He looks at is your heart and motivation, not the style, repetition or words alone. It takes time to grow as a Christian, to learn the detail of what the Bible teaches and to develop the gifts and talents God has given us, but we can begin a life practice of praise and worship straight away. The precise vocabulary is not critical, the expression of gratitude is. Praising God is part of being a Christian.

Jesus said that God is looking for people who will worship Him. We should do so regardless of what we may be going through. Not in a sense of denial or escapism, but of recognition of His central role in our lives and circumstances. Placing our attention on Him takes it off ourselves (a good thing, given the innate selfishness of most people) and the busy lifestyles in which we are caught up. It serves to re-focus our thinking. It makes our relationship with Him more intensely personal. It takes our relationship outside of church on Sunday (He is too big to be confined to a building) to the places we occupy during the rest of the week. It fulfils, because we are all created with the capacity to worship and not doing so leaves part of our lives dormant.

There are seasons in our lives when the last thing we "feel" like doing is praising and worshipping God. Feelings are powerful; they are a natural part of human life, but (unchecked) they can paralyse our thinking, get in the road of objectivity and make negativity or defeatism seem real. But God is good. In moments like these, something extraordinary happens; faith breaks through and lifts us up out of the depths to a point where we can again start to praise God. He is faithful. He has not abandoned us. He was with us when we felt nothing at all.

Give God thanks each day for the hope and purpose that you have in Christ and for His interventions in your life (write them down). Spend time with others who have developed a similar sense of gratitude. As you glorify God together your faith will become stronger. His power in you is greater the world around you. Make praise and worship an active part of your Christian experience.

Day 18 – Pitfalls that Christians Face

It is a wonderful thing when a person becomes a Christian. As we have seen, their sins are forgiven, they pass from spiritual death to life and gain an eternal hope. God becomes their heavenly Father. They enter a world-wide community of fellow-Christians on the same path. The Holy Spirit enters their life with power and capacity to transform them into the image of Jesus. But there are pitfalls along the way; too many to enumerate here. So, we will identify just a few key areas, with hints for dealing with them, and others like them, and building solid foundations.

First, it is not how high the road is, but how long. Every road has ups and downs, likewise the Christian life. Sickness, career change, unemployment, study pressures, loneliness, breakdowns in relationships, unmet expectations, sexual pressures, financial stresses and similar problems can play their part in raising doubts about God's faithfulness and the worthwhileness of continuing to be a Christian. "If He has promised not to leave me, why do I feel alone?" There may be times like this, but He will not abandon you, not even on the darkest days you face. Get into healthy habits of prayer and Bible reading and make solid Christian friends. Don't drop them when you are too busy.

Second, if you look to people for happiness, they will disappoint you. "No one loves me." Non-Christians will ridicule your faith. Christians may misunderstand you, not have time for you, their priorities and pressures may not fit you in, and it may feel as though they have not kept promises. People will certainly let you down from time to time, even people of good character. There is often more to it, but, regardless, your focus should be on God, not them. Identify a small group you can open up to. Don't judge or compare yourself with others. Reject false inferiority. Don't allow pride to make you feel better (or more genuinely Christian) than others. And remember, they may need your friendship as much as you want theirs. Encouraging others brings encouragement of its own.

Third, it may take time for you to overcome habits and moral weaknesses you take with you into this new life. Just because you are now a Christian does not mean you are no longer exposed to the cultural value system of our non-Christian society. So you try all the harder to be "good", hoping to please God with your Christian morality and beat the habits, only to discover that you cave in next time the same temptation presents itself, then start to beat yourself up. What you need to do is deliberately hand these areas over to God every day, see His lordship in them and ask for help before they overwhelm you. If you fall over, ask God for forgiveness and keep going. Never give up.

Fourth, having started out with a simple faith in Christ, many Christians complicate their lives and end up replacing faith with hard work, human effort, resolve, (tedious) programs, activity ("the more the better"), and masks, leading to disappointment, doubt and an inclination to quit. The Bible encourages us not to lose sight of the "simplicity" that is in Christ. Don't keep adding obligation and effort for their own sake. Keep it simple. Jesus Christ is a person, not a process or a system.

Fifth, Satan will try to discourage you along the way. Self-condemnation, false guilt for things you have already asked God's forgiveness for, doubts as to whether you are "good enough". Jesus said that Satan is a habitual liar. Get involved in a strong Christian community, make friends and grow.

All of the above are things that Christians typically encounter along the way. You are not alone. All of them existed in Jesus' day too. The good news is that they can be beaten. God is faithful. He is much bigger than your circumstances. He will give you strength to do what you need to. He will not abandon you at the first sign of turbulence, or ever, for that matter. Trust Him.

Day 19 –How Can I Beat Temptation?

The word “temptation” sounds old-fashioned, so let’s clarify it from the start. Put simply, temptation is an “invitation to sin”. Every person is tempted, every single day. Each of us is different; so what tempts one person may have little or no appeal to someone else. But we should never fall into the trap of saying that “it would never happen to me”; when we do that we are setting ourselves up for a fall. If we are keen to beat habits, overcome sin and live clean in God’s sight, we need to know how temptation works on a personal basis.

The Bible says that temptation operates in three main areas: what the sinful self desires; what people see and want for themselves, and everything in this world that they are proud of.

Temptation is not about “things”, but what is going on in our hearts. For example, there is nothing wrong with possessions, but when they become so important we will say or do anything to get them, this leads into temptation and sin. There is nothing wrong with position, but when who we are and what others think of us (our reputation) overtakes things that matter, then pride and ambition can lead to sin. Sin is putting ourselves first. It is disobeying God’s commands. It is substituting our desires and will for His. Anything that takes His place in our priorities becomes a stumbling block.

Temptation is not sin. Sin is what happens when we accept the invitation. The Bible teaches that sin starts out like conception. A tiny seed enters and grows. By the time it is fully developed, it leads to actions or words that cross the barrier into the realm of sin, leading to spiritual death. Temptation can be cut off at any time (best when it is still only a tiny seed), but it can also grow unchecked until it is too late. Temptation leads to sin when we dwell on it. If we keep thinking about temptation, it is only a small step to actually carrying it out. First the temptation, then a “little” sin, but little sins become big sins.

We face temptations every single day. The choice is ours; we are under no obligation to surrender. How can we beat sin and live in a way that pleases God? By saying “No”.

A good place to start is not to be in a position that makes temptation easy. The way we live, the company we keep, what we watch on television, the conversations we get involved in, how far we allow ourselves to go are all important. Keep company with people of integrity. If you don’t want to fall off a cliff, stay as far as you can from the edge. Don’t put yourself in harm’s way. Ask the Holy Spirit to help you see the danger signals and get out of there. The Bible tells men to “run” from sexual sin. If we pick up a burning stick, we will burn ourselves. It is the same with sexual sin.

Jesus taught us to pray that we would not be led into temptation. He was a man and He faced all kinds of temptation, as a boy, an adolescent, a young adult. He was tempted in every way that we are, although He did not sin. His priority was to honour God; if that is your priority it will act like a brake on runaway thoughts. Jesus faced down Satan’s temptation by insisting that His first priority was to obey God. Seek God’s honour and will in your life. Jesus quoted the Bible. Get to know God’s Word, what its standards, requirements and promises are, and you will know how to respond. The Bible promises that if we (like Jesus) resist the devil he will flee from us.

If all temptation operates in the area of our thinking, we need to surrender our thought life to Christ’s Lordship. Ask the Holy Spirit to speak to you as you go through your day. If you feel Him pulling back in some area, pay attention, because He could be warning you about a danger zone. He will help you gain the victory, so that temptation turns into an opportunity to beat sin.

Day 20 – Overcoming Old Habits

There is no question that when a man or woman makes a genuine commitment of their heart and life to Jesus Christ radical change begins. The old life is just that; Christ makes us new. No human institution or great idea can bring about such a transformation; it is the power of God that enables people to be “born again”, just like a brand new life starting up.

Some change occurs very quickly, however some old habits, thought or speech patterns, or attitudes, are harder to shake off. We are not robots, and changing established ways can be limited by entrenched practices the new Christian wants to hold onto for a bit longer. This baggage does not invalidate their conversion; it just makes the process of change a bit more complicated. It also makes it a bit easier for false guilt to enter and weaken their faith and resolve.

How can you overcome those old habits? It is true that we are all on a pathway that will only be complete when we either go to meet the Lord after death or He comes again, whichever occurs first. But that does not mean we should be indifferent about the need for ongoing change. After all, it is God’s purpose to make us more like Jesus each day. Don’t surrender to inertia.

The Holy Spirit will bring to your attention those areas of your life that need further work. Sometimes family members and friends will do likewise. You may have blind spots in your character. You may argue that it is easier to keep up what you are doing than to try and change. In fact, it is easier to change when you are convinced of the need to do so, but by yourself you lack the power. Gritty determination alone is usually not enough for permanent lifestyle change. If you keep trying to change by your own effort, you will become discouraged. Consider how many millions of people make solemn New Year resolutions, only to break them almost immediately, shrug their shoulders and move on pragmatically, knowing that resolutions alone do not normally transform lives. On the other hand, the power of the Holy Spirit is sufficient. He can change you. What He needs is your willing cooperation. Ask Him to help you, and then commit that part of your life to God each day.

In order to break the power of habits and sin, it is necessary to want to change, repent of sin, and ask for God’s forgiveness. Naming the sin is a key to breaking its authority. You may need to ask forgiveness from others, if you have hurt them. Forgive yourself for falling over from time to time.

It is also helpful to work with someone else, who has either been there, can be a mentor, or act as a point of accountability. Ask your pastor, priest or counsellor to suggest someone. That may involve a large dose of humility, but two are better than one. If the matter is private, you can still ask a trusted friend to pray with you, without going into all the details – God knows your need and He will always respond to a prayer of faith.

Someone has said that, “old habits die hard”, but that is not necessarily the case, particularly if you follow the Christian route, which involves drawing on the strength of God that is available to you. This is practical Christianity at its best. When you feel weak, Christ can make you strong; He is greater than any force you will ever face.

Once you have overcome those habits, try to keep off the road of temptation. If you can, stay away from the causes. Replace old habits with constructive ones. Read the Bible and pray every day. Go to church. Hang out with people who will lift you up. Take on things that will make you strong. Keep your attitude in check. Speak positively. Press on with confidence, with your eyes on the goal and your heart focused on Christ. God will give you power and encouragement to succeed.

Day 21 – Power to Live the Christian Life

The Bible describes the Christian life as a battle, not waged against people, but spiritual opponents. The Scriptures explain that Satan and his forces hate God and are diametrically opposed to the entire Christian church and all that it stands for. Since the time of Jesus, social, political and spiritual warfare has been waged, to compromise the church's message and credibility, destroy it physically and cripple it spiritually. These attacks have been levelled against the Christian movement corporately and individually. You may not realise it, and it may come as a complete surprise, but you are personally involved.

God has promised you "dynamic" power to confront every enemy and experience personal victory as a Christian, so that you will never give up, even in the face of sustained pressure. A spiritual battle cannot be fought by human effort alone. The Holy Spirit will give you the assurance you need, help you understand what is going on in your life and add that spiritual dimension to your struggles and victories. He (not your personality, experience or knowledge) will enable you to be an effective Christian and a witness to the Gospel in your life and community.

What are the ingredients outlined in the Bible? The obvious one is your faith in Jesus Christ and your trust in the truth of God's Word. When you feel like quitting, something rises up within you and you know that you don't have to give up. Jesus lives in you. He is greater than those who oppose you. It may not feel like it, when you try to work it out in your head, and you don't have the stamina to keep going, but God will give you the strength you need. Whatever you do, don't lose sight of faith in Christ alone (not faith in faith, but in Him), because He has already overcome Satan, sin and death and lives in you, to continue that victory in the modern era.

Prayer is another way of letting go and handing over to God areas in which you feel under attack. Roll your burdens onto His shoulders; He will take the weight. As you talk to Him, let the Holy Spirit speak back to you. He will give you insight into what is going on in your life. Nothing is too small to pray about. Pray in the name of Jesus, in your own words, and you will experience His presence and enabling, whether you "feel it" or not. This is what makes a Christian in such a situation so much stronger than a non-Christian; believers who are committed to Christ and His purposes have the authority of God backing up their lives.

Another key is your friendship with fellow Christians, who can provide examples, encouragement and stand with you. There is no situation you face that has not already been the experience of other believers. They may be able to help you find the practical answers you need. Two are always better than one. After all, the Christian community is strong, and they are your spiritual family. Share the burden. Pray and believe together. In turn, you will be able to come alongside others and help them in their situations.

It is also important that you get to know relevant parts of God's Word. Fear, loneliness, discouragement, disappointment and a host of other natural feelings are common to all of us, but God's powerful Word not only has encouraging words to speak into your situation; He will empower the words as they enter your head and touch your thinking and your emotions. Knowing what God has said will sort out facts from assumptions and keep you on the right path.

Knowing what we do about the spiritual battle we are all engaged in, you must realise that you can never live the Christian life in your own strength; if you could, you would not need God or other Christians. Let's face it ... we all need the power of the Holy Spirit. Ask Him to fill you today.

Day 22 – Sharing Your Christian Experience with Others

Now that you are a Christian, friends and family who are not Christians will take an interest in what you believe, why, and how your life has been affected. (They may not tell you, but they will observe; after all, you may be the only real Christian they know.) Being able to share the simplicity of the Christian message and the love of God with others is a great way to influence their lives for good and to consolidate your own faith. But where to start?

First of all, it is really important that you know what you believe and how it all fits together. Can you express it in your own words? You may not have all the answers – that’s OK. (We are all still learning.) A good way to prepare is to write your story down first and see if it makes sense to you. People who are not really sure about Christianity may be cautious (even defensive) at first, but if they see that it is meaningful to you they will usually be more inclined to listen. Some may be sceptical and quote stereotypes about God, the church and Christians; be polite, but don’t allow yourself to be side-tracked. Focus on what being a Christian means to you personally. Don’t be discouraged if they disagree; they will still take on board the sincerity with which you share your account. If they tell you it is not for them, relax and let God use the discussion in His way to bring to their remembrance what you have shared. After all, only the Holy Spirit can truly convince people.

Next, avoid jargon. Tell your own story, in your own words. What happened in your life? People want to see that Christianity is relevant to them and that you are authentic. Churches have cultures of their own, which may not be easily understood by others; the language Christians use often comes across as alien. Use simple language. Be honest. The Holy Spirit can speak through you, and He can use your personality and individual traits to communicate the message effectively.

Sometimes, the moment just seems right; at other times this may not be the case; be ready for opportunities that come up. Put yourself in the other person’s shoes; if you can see their perspective, how they receive what you share with them will make more sense.

Relax and let God do the work. You may find that the Holy Spirit drops ideas and impressions into your mind, to help guide the conversation. It may be that the person with whom you are speaking has needs and will let you pray with them. The important thing is to be sensitive. This is especially true in work or family situations, where they see you all the time, and will watch you (and take note of contradictions). Most people are good at spotting phonies, so be authentic, don’t try to be someone you are not. The best Christian witness is someone who faces the same daily pressures and challenges as those around them, but exhibits the reality of Christ in their life.

You may feel inadequate to do any of the above. That’s also OK. It is not about you. God can still use you to get through with a message that is coherent. People in the West in the new millennium are not necessarily comfortable talking about spiritual things; on the other hand many experiment with alternative faiths, so they may be open. Jesus said that the Holy Spirit would give us power and authority to be His “witnesses” in the world around us. Ask Him to fill you, empower you and give you the words to share. Then be patient and let Him do the work

Finally, remember that the end results are the work of God. The Holy Spirit is the one who draws people to faith in Jesus. Only He can get behind their defences, change their thinking and convince them, deep down inside, of their spiritual needs. Only He can help them step out make a personal commitment to Christ that will last. Pray for them, be available, live the life, open your mouth when appropriate, and trust God to do the rest.

Day 23 – What About Other Religions?

A famous Swiss psychologist once remarked that “man is incurably religious”. The vast array of church groups and non-Christian religions around the world suggest he may have been right. Some people claim to be atheists (they do not believe in God) or agnostics (they are not sure), but the majority of the human race seem to be involved in following one religion or another.

Anthropologists have found religious forms in just about every known remote tribe.

Who is right? Do all paths lead to the one God? Does it really matter which system we follow?

When Jesus Christ came into the world, his mission was to make a way for people to come back to God, and obtain forgiveness for their sins and the promise of eternal life. The world Christian movement has, over the centuries, been fractured along different fault lines; however for most (if we strip away all the denominational idiosyncrasies) the central message is consistent. Underlying the Christian faith is the centrality of Jesus Christ, His death on the cross on our behalf, and His resurrection, and the commitment of our lives to follow Him.

There are more than one billion Muslims in the world today, along with hundreds of millions (each) of Hindus and Buddhists (Buddhism is often portrayed as a philosophy, but most adherents venerate the Buddha), scores of millions of Jews, Sikhs, Baha’i, Taoists, Jains, Parsees, followers of traditional folk religions, and many more. Some religions (Christianity, along with Islam and Judaism) are “monotheistic”, believing there is only one God; others are pluralistic, having literally millions of gods. In the West, large numbers also follow cults, witchcraft and boutique religious practices.

Against this multifaceted background, Christianity claims exclusivity. What the Bible teaches is different from all the rest. The Bible (emphatically) makes it clear that the only channel to relationship with God and hope for eternity is faith in Christ. He is *the way, the truth and the life*. Christianity asserts that Jesus was God in human flesh and that God’s message to the world culminated in Him. For Christians, the way to God is through Christ alone.

The claim that all religions lead to God is not true; in fact, it is misleading. So also is the idea that it does not matter which religion we follow, as long as we are sincere (it is possible to be sincerely wrong). Just about all religions acknowledge the impoverished condition of the human race, but all are not the same in their responses; for the greater part they are contradictory. They cannot all be correct. If religions lead in different directions, they cannot possibly all lead to God.

Most non-Christian religions emphasise human effort, sincerity and good works in order to please God and get to Him (or an ultimate state of nothingness) at the end of this life, or a cycle of lives. None has the sense of personal assurance that Christians have, that God accepts them, not because of who they are, how well they perform, or how many rules they keep, but on the basis of His love and forgiveness. The Gospel insists that we cannot make it on our own; Christ came to rescue us.

What about those who do not hear the Gospel about Jesus? God knows every heart and will do what is right. We must accept this as a matter of faith and leave it to Him.

How should Christians approach people from other religions? Not critically, nor with pride, but with humility, reaching out and sharing the Good News in words non-Christians can grasp. This requires patience, courage, respect and understanding, while not abandoning the message. Get to know about the religions of those around you, but focus on Jesus Christ as the hope for all people.

Day 24 –A Christian Approach to Work

The Bible teaches a very sound approach to work: we should tackle it as though we are serving not just our employer, but also serving Jesus Christ. This perspective means that Christians ought to be the most committed, energised people on the shop floor, in the office, at the factory, or wherever else we work. Being human, it doesn't always seem as smooth as that, but there are principles we can take to our jobs that will make a difference to the environment in which we are engaged (including those who are self-employed).

A bit of background first. At the very beginning, Adam was appointed by God as a steward to manage the Garden of Eden. Work and responsibilities were considered to be good things. As a result of his subsequent choice to disobey God, Adam's work was compromised; he now faced major obstacles, sweat and disappointment. But work still remained a good thing.

Like our Maker, who worked to get the world going, we all have creative gifts, abilities and interests. We are not designed to remain idle or bored or feel like we are wasting our lives. And we need to earn a living, to put food on the table, clothes on our backs and a roof over our heads.

What is your study or occupation? You can discover part of God's purpose there. Far too many people limit "ministry" (or "service") to working full-time in a church; that is a view unsupported by the Bible; some are called to serve this way, but every Christian is called to serve Him and others, irrespective of where they are located.

Christians can influence the atmosphere of the work place around them. If you work in a secular environment, as most Christians do, you have an opportunity to be an example of Christ (perhaps the only one) in your work world. There will be ways in which you can impact your colleagues, without alienating them. The important thing is to be yourself and be a person of integrity and transparency, as well as being known as a committed work colleague.

It may be that you are not in a paid position (you may be a student, parent at home, retrenched or retired), but you can still get satisfaction out of whatever you put your hand to. Sometimes your work will change; doors will close, new ones will open up; as you gain skills, you may end up moving from one job to another. What matters is your attitude to what you are doing. If you like your work (or are determined to like it), you will get a lot out of it; if you decide that you hate your job, you will feel that you are wasting your life and opportunities. Job satisfaction has a lot to do with the way we think. The Bible says that we should be fully committed to whatever we are doing.

One of the keys to enabling employment, purpose and satisfaction to come together meaningfully is to do our work as though we were serving Jesus. If He were your boss, or your client at the counter, how would you work? You would put in all the effort necessary to get the job done. You would be reliable. You would be ethical. You would be motivated and have a positive attitude. You would want to please Him and achieve His goals. The Bible tells us that this should be our approach in any case. See your work as a privilege and a calling from God, and look at the difference it makes.

Finally, the Bible also says that there is a time to work and a time to rest. God rested from his work of creation on the seventh day. The people of the Bible were commanded to rest at least one day a week. We all need periods of leisure, to recuperate and get ready for the ongoing challenge. Western societies pay workers beyond a certain age to rest at home, following a lifetime of work. Start to see your position as an opportunity to serve Him and see what a difference it makes.

Day 25 - Our Lifestyle and Ethics

How should we live as Christians in the 21st century, with its particular standards, social expectations and values? We sense that the non-Christian world would like to squeeze us into its mould, so that we reflect its thinking and behaviour. But that would gut our faith completely. It is important that we have a clear view of the way we should approach beliefs and ethics, and that it be based on more than the (variable) opinions of others.

The subject of “ethics” (often described as moral principles) is very topical. In some societies, corruption is endemic, a way of life. The ordinary citizen cannot operate without having to bribe somebody, or be related to a person of influence. In other societies, when scandals emerge members of the media wring their hands, judicial enquiries are set up and ethics branches are established in government departments and police forces. Postmodernists teach that morality is subjective and flexible, based on common values. Citizens who dispose of traditional religion because they do not believe it is relevant to their lives (and should not tell them what to do) discover that people are left to their own devices have no guiding principles to live by. This is inevitable.

The Bible shows us how we should live. The life of Jesus demonstrated that godly choices can be implemented in life, although there is often a cost. It ought to be said of Christians that, if society is looking for model citizens, there are plenty in our churches. The Scriptures speak to us about honesty in business, just industrial relations, being good employers or workers, paying taxes, ethical political and social leadership, human rights, treatment of the poor, marriage and family, the environment and cultural diversity. If we want to know how to live, it is all written in the Book. Christians can lead the way in service to others, peacemaking, addressing poverty, looking after the marginalised and actively promoting social justice.

Western societies have become atomised and the individual and his or her “rights” seem to have priority over social conscience and the collective good. The Bible says that, where there is no godly vision, people cast off restraint. They do. Survival becomes a matter of everyone living for themselves. In this environment, Christians must be distinct from the world, but influence it for good.

The Bible does not describe every situation that can emerge and it does not approach ethics with a list of “dos” and “don’ts”. It does show us how to live. It teaches us that our bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit, so we should not abuse it with drugs. It insists that we honour our leaders and pay taxes, so we should not engage in a race to the bottom with others who live to exploit loopholes and pursue dishonest business dealings. It shows us that God absolutely loves every individual, so we should never allow a gulag mentality or ethnic division to grow incrementally among us, or tolerate the abuse of women or children (including the unborn). We know that God created the world, so we should stand up for protection of the environment. The Bible teaches God’s holiness, so we should not allow our standards to sway with the opinions of others and allow telling the truth to become optional. There are situations in which we must go against the trend and seek to impose our views.

Christian ethics are not based on your conscience, your ideas, or your virtue, but on God’s character. Get to know His Word and the underlying principles it teaches. Live by God’s rules. Look at the life of Jesus and His approach to thorny issues. Ask the Holy Spirit to help you with your decision making. Make friends of solid Christians who are people of principle and integrity. You will find a very clear course on how to live. The more you allow God to shape your thinking the easier it will be to know what to do in each given situation. When it comes to ethics, men and women of Christian faith must step up and lead.

Day 26 – The Power of Forgiveness

When Jesus taught his disciples how to pray He emphasised the importance of forgiveness. He underscored this in a number of other places, warning that refusal to forgive raises questions as to whether we, in turn, should expect to be forgiven. That has potential long-term consequences.

God forgives us totally when we trust in Jesus Christ, and He expects us to forgive others for what they do to us. Nothing that they are able to do even comes close to the love and mercy that led Jesus to the cross and beyond, taking on Himself our sins and the just judgement of a holy God. We are commanded to love mercy, and so reflect the compassionate nature of our heavenly father.

Refusal to forgive is corrosive. Bitterness, anger and resentment eat away the inner life of the person who holds a grudge. If the one who causes the offence is close, it can lead to a breakdown of the relationship, leading to loss of friendships, disillusion of marriages, parents and children being estranged from one another, businesses being bankrupted and communities disintegrating. Tragically, it can happen in church environments. It can even arise through misunderstanding and lack of communication.

We do not have the luxury (or the right) to nurse hurts and bitterness; if we do, they will grow in our hearts and become virtually unstoppable. The longer we hold onto grudges, the deeper they will burrow and the harder it will be to get rid of them. Nations go to war when offences grow out of all proportion and no one knows (or cares) how to defuse them.

Genuine forgiveness is final. It does not rake over old memories. It does not bring up past hurts when things go wrong. The kind of forgiveness that comes from God is such that, even though He is all knowing, our offences vanish from His record. His forgiveness is limitless. He does not condemn us. If God should hold onto our past mistakes and poor choices, we would be in serious trouble. If we are willing to forgive, it is a sign that the work of God has been effective in our personal experiences, liberating our thinking and touching our emotions. Genuine forgiveness in the face of real hurts, or refusal of the guilty party to acknowledge any wrong, needs super-human strength and the grace of God. Genuine forgiveness means building a bridge and going out of our way to restore the other party, if possible. That can be a tough call.

I have heard people say they do not feel like forgiving others who have hurt them, especially if the offence is not recognised. But forgiveness is not a feeling, or an emotion, it is a decision. Ironically, refusal to forgive is also a decision. It is a sobering thought, but non-Christians do not have access to the grace of God that can give them the capacity to forgive unconditionally or repeatedly. Christians do have access to prayer and the Holy Spirit (the source of God's love at work in our lives) to help bridge the gap. It is better to cultivate a spirit of reconciliation than a root of unforgiveness.

Offences will come. But what if we are the ones who cause the offence? If this is the case, we need to be prepared to humble ourselves, look at the situation from the perspective of the other person and do what we can to cover the ground that separates us and go to them. Re-building trust can be hard, but storing up bad feelings and being consumed by anger is worse.

Forgiveness is powerful. It cuts cords that tie people up in knots. It breaks down walls of separation. It restores relationships. It promotes and leads to peace. It turns enemies into friends. It triumphs over hatred. It heals hurt and takes the poison out of the sting. Forgiveness liberates.

Day 27 – Christians and Possessions

Jesus lived a very simple life and warned that we should never allow possessions to replace God as the centre of our lives. What works today? Some Christians are good at making and using money. What role should possessions occupy in the Christian life? How can your money and “things” contribute to His purpose?

God does not need your money. After all, He created the universe. Bank notes, coins, bonds, stocks, debentures – they are only metal, paper and computer entries, whose values are determined by human economies. But without money most societies would not function. In some parts of the world, bartering remains common, but not in most of our lives. The real question is: what is the role of money in our thinking and what does God expect of us in relation to His work in the world?

In terms of priorities, possessions should never be what define us. We may have money, but money should never have us. The Bible says the love of money is the root of all evil; we need money, but it should not take our hearts hostage; we need to be content with what we have. We should not allow ourselves to become slaves to possessions. Importantly, money (or the desire for more of it) should never become an idol at the centre of our lives. In a couple of celebrated cases in the Bible, Jesus challenged people to give up everything and follow Him – their responses indicated who was really in charge. Touch someone’s wallet and you will quickly see what their obsessions are.

Finances are essential in our personal lives, to support us and our families in a cash-driven economy. Living in the West costs a lot. The Bible says that we should work hard. Governments need taxes to supply what those who are less well-off need (let us never be grudging or play a blame game about supporting those who would otherwise not have enough to get by). If you are part of a church community they will also need meaningful input from everyone to function well. Get involved in regular giving at your church. Talk to your pastor about tithing and offerings and what additional resources may be needed. Many churches support missions activities in other parts of the world that need ongoing financial assistance.

(I get tired of hearing people say that the church is always after peoples’ money. I don’t hear complaints that shopping centres, casinos or holiday resorts are after their money.)

If you have it, share it. Work out what you need and what you can afford to give, then dig a little deeper. That’s called sacrifice. God knows you have bills to pay, mouths to feed, but most of us can afford to go just a little bit further than we normally do. Open up your home for Christian work – that may be as simple as hosting a group, where friends can get together for a couple of hours each week. Develop a spirit of gratitude for what you have and generosity (the antidote to miserliness) towards others. Don’t fall into the traps of people who use possessions to manipulate and judge those who have less than them. Don’t get drawn in by teaching that ties your level of ownership of physical things and obvious wealth with God’s love and blessing on your life – after all, most of the world’s Christians live in poorer communities than ours.

It all gets back to where your heart is. The Bible teaches us that our ultimate destination is in heaven. We are encouraged to build up treasure there, where inflation, thieves, scams and super-taxes will not diminish them. If your disposition is to God first, you will be able to see that what He generously puts into your hand is a means to benefit you, your family, your community and the world around you. You can grasp or give. Jesus (as God) was rich, but He became poor for our sakes; His life is our ultimate benchmark as we invest for eternity.

Day 28 – A Christian View of Sexuality and Marriage

There is an enormous amount of debate today about marriage and sexuality and whose values should prevail: traditional religion, social averages, the individual. What does the Bible teach and what represents a “Christian” view in a secular society?

God created sex. And all that He created He proclaimed to be “good”. At the very beginning, He created our first parents, male and female, with the capacity (and encouragement) to enjoy an active sexual relationship. The Bible celebrates sex (for enjoyment, not just to produce children). There is no sense that sexuality should not be discussed openly. Schools of thought that suggest Christians frown on talking about sex are out of touch.

That said, there does seem to be a heightened focus on sexual sin. There are reasons for this, including escalating divorce rates citing sexual betrayal and increasing evidence of violation of trust by some clergy over recent decades. Discussions about the nature of marriage, homosexuality and abortion generate a lot of heat, including in politics and the traditional church framework.

Marriage and the family are vital parts of the bedrock of our society. When a man and woman come together in a life-long exclusive relationship that is built on commitment and trust, and raise children born of their physical union in an atmosphere of love and support, they are continuing to build on a solid foundation that will weather just about any storm. There is no closer set of bonds. There will be disagreements, friction, re-shaping of their individualities (every relationship has its ups and downs), opportunities to grow and mature, but this is all good. (“Compatibility” is only part of the story, and a bit of a red herring; incompatible people can make greater marriages.) The Christian view is that sex may be practiced only within the boundaries of marriage – on this the Bible and Christian teaching are very clear. Married men and women are required by God not to betray one another’s trust and engage in sexual activity with anyone else, regardless of the circumstances.

Some marriages conclude early, either because of divorce or the death of a spouse. Both circumstances are tragic for those involved. To ask men and women who have enjoyed sex no longer to do while they are not married so may appear hard, but it reflects what the Bible teaches.

Some men and women remain single. They refrain from marriage out of personal choice; for career reasons; because of events in their early years; or because they never seem to find the right mate to settle down with. In some respects the choices they make about sexuality are harder, because if they are Christians they will choose to abstain from sex outside of marriage.

Men and women who do not subscribe to marriage often live together, usually exclusively, and many for life. While they are not willing to seek a civil or religious blessing on their relationship, nevertheless governments (to varying degrees) confer the responsibilities of marriage on their de facto relationships (including property law, entitlements and rights of children born to them). Christian leaders do well to encourage them to marry. A piece of paper does not guarantee a marriage, but the commitment involved in such a step gives the relationship added strength.

Abstaining from sex outside of marriage is a challenge, and the temptations to give in are constant. Every church community should actively encourage singles to meet, to form friendships, to make commitments to wait until they are married before they have sex.

Churches everywhere need to provide solid teaching about marriage, sex and family values, along with God’s good promises to those who choose His way and seek His strength in their relationships.

Day 29 – How Can I Make Sense of the World Around Me?

Have you ever tried to make sense of the world? There never seems to be much good news on the television. Interstate conflict. Recession. Skilled people losing their jobs. Teenagers killed in senseless car accidents. Good people struck down by terminal illness. Increasing levels of youth suicide. How do we make sense of what is going on when we hear stories such as these? What is the meaning of life, in such a pessimistic context? How does it all fit? We feel small, and powerless to change much. Philosophers have wrestled with these questions for centuries.

According to the Bible, there is a Christian “big picture” view of the ultimate meaning and current affairs. It doesn’t necessarily reflect that of the major news agencies, but it is useful to take into account when you are putting the jigsaw together. Then there is the personal application.

Christians believe that all the problems that exist in the world are ultimately due to mankind’s free-will rebellion against God. The perfect world that He created has been fractured ever since. Shut God out of the picture and all that is left is a spiritual and moral vacuum. God has not abandoned us, but there are consequences that stem from sin. The final consequence is death. There are many human tragedies, and this one is the greatest. But there is, in fact, good news.

The Bible teaches us that, when Jesus Christ came into the world, He did so as God’s answer, reaching out to humanity with an offer of forgiveness and a way back to Him. He did this because He loved us, not because we did anything to deserve it. Nothing you can do can make God love you any more or any less. The Bible calls this “grace”; some people have defined grace as “God’s Riches At Christ’s Expense”, because He paid the price for us.

When we become Christians, we enter into a new level of relationship with God, and His family, the world-wide community of Christian believers. Instead of a broken relationship and fractured hope, He makes us new. That affects our thinking in a major way.

From this point on, we have two sets of linked priorities. One is to live for Him in the world. Functioning as God’s people in the community means that we have opportunities to touch the lives of others (family members, friends, work colleagues, neighbours, and so on) with our own experience. We can be part of God’s plan to bring them to Himself.

The second priority is to deepen our personal commitment to Christ and rest in the assurance that we will spend eternity in His presence. Our hope for the future radically impacts the way we live in the present, and how we react to what is going on.

So, there are two ways to understand the world around us: the effects of sin and the impact of the work of Jesus. It is important that what informs us, as Christians, are not the CNN or BBC interpretations of world news, but the true truth of what God has said. That is not escapism, but being able to face the daily realities and the future with confidence. Life is not totally random. The pieces can come together into a meaningful picture.

When things occur in our own lives, that do not seem to make sense, it requires a leap of faith to take what we know on one level (as outlined above) and apply it personally. We may not get the answers we want. We may be troubled or saddened by events that we feel we cannot control. Someone close to us dies, tragedy strikes, we feel puny, exposed and disappointed. It is precisely at this point that we must come to God, just as we are, and surrender everything to Him afresh, to work out in His way. The promises of God in our lives are designed to give us a future and a hope.

Day 30 – Hang in There

Have you ever felt like giving up? Everything too much of a hassle? Many people feel this way when external pressures seem excessive, friends let them down, they go through sickness or loss, or disappointment about decisions they make are too much to handle. Maybe you have been tempted to quit. The good news is that in the Christian life, there are things you can do to keep going.

The most important is not to stop trusting God with your life and your future. When you cannot feel Him there, He is still by your side. When all you can see are storm clouds, He is a shelter. Jesus said that He will be with us, “even to the end of the age”. In the New Testament, His first followers stood by perplexed when they saw Him return to God the Father, but He sent the Holy Spirit, to be with each of them, wherever they went, rather than being limited to one place (always the case when Jesus was among them). The same Holy Spirit is at work in the world today, in the church, in your life. He will not let you down. So look at your problem and say to God, “I still trust you”.

Second, don't give up on your friends. Even the best-intentioned friends will disappoint you from time to time. Don't walk away from them. Friends can be like anchors in our lives. They can come along side and encourage you. Good friends have listening ears, even if they do not have all the answers. They stick closer than your own flesh and blood. Hang around positive people, who will lift you up and help you keep going. Christian friendship gives us a level of mutual support and encouragement we don't find in many other places. When things are tough, seek them out and share the burden. In turn, when you feel strong, look out for those who are weak and help them.

Hang in there, because God has a plan for your life that He is rolling out with each passing day. The Christian life is not a sprint; it is a long distance run. Many runners start out with a burst but give up in the middle of the race. The Bible says that as we run we must keep our eyes fixed firmly on Jesus, who has gone before us. (You will never have to go through what He did.) If we do this, we will not give up, but will get to the finishing line. Marathon runners talk about getting a “second wind” in the middle of the race; as you keep going, you will discover new strength. And as time goes on, you will be surprised as you look back and see how far you have come.

Hang in there, because God is still in control. He never changes. Even though your circumstances seem to dominate from time to time, they are not in charge.

Hang in there, because tests and trials are designed to strengthen you. As the Bible says, these things are never pleasant when we are in the middle of them. No one wants a trial, or correction. But in the end they help make us stronger. They help us sort out our personal priorities and confirm the values that are important to us. Ask God to give you his peace when things get tough.

Hang in there, because God is patient and full of grace. If you fall over because you make a wrong choice, you say something you shouldn't, or you let your emotions get the better of you, He is willing to forgive and continue the work of changing you and making you more like Jesus. Stay with Him.

Being a Christian doesn't depend on how you feel at any given moment, or what is convenient for today. We all get frustrated. We all occasionally feel let down by others. We all feel misunderstood. We all get into moods. But these don't have to dominate our lives.

Hang in there. Think of the alternatives (both now and for eternity). Hang in there, because as you get through you will be able to help others in similar situations. Hang in there, because you will get to the other side with a stronger faith and assurance of the presence and work of God in your life.

Day 31 – What Does the Bible Say About the Future?

Life is short. Death is certain. So, what lies beyond? A graveyard? A vacuum? Since the beginning of time people have asked, “What happens next?”

The Bible has a lot to say about the future. In fact, a quarter of the book is prophecy, much of which remains unfulfilled so far (pointing to the end of the age). Jesus Christ spoke in detail about the end and promised that He would come again for His people. He taught more about His second coming than He did about just about any other topic. The New Testament contains lengthy passages discussing the future. The early church lived and expanded by this hope. There is debate about specifically what will happen, in what order, and how to interpret some of what has been written, but key events are clear. These give Christians a level of confidence not found in any other faith.

If the present generation of Christians passes away before Jesus comes again, their spirits will go to be with Him, as an interim step. The grave is not the end. At the appointed time, Jesus will return to the earth. Christians who have died will then be resurrected. Those who have not died will be transformed by the power of God and (with the resurrected) given new bodies, like His, and a new, eternal era will commence.

Satan and his forces will be dealt with once and for all.

According to the Bible, those who are outside of the Christian faith will be judged and consigned to an eternity separated from God. This warning is all the more reason for Christians to share their faith with the world, to ensure that family, friends, neighbours and others also benefit from the gift of salvation God has promised to those who trust in the sacrificial death of Jesus.

There are clear implications for all of us in this. For a start, we have a sure hope that no one can take away. Political leaders do not determine our future security or happiness. The global economy, and those who play in it, are not in charge either. God is still in control. Our ultimate hope is not in science and technology, good leadership or a Utopian view of prosperity, but in Him. We should sensibly plan as though we have the rest of our lives to serve God, but be watchful and live as though Christ could return today. This ought to lead us to say “No” to temptation and sin. If we believe He is coming again, we should live in a way that pleases Him. We should look into our hearts and reprioritise our lives in line with His purposes. Some things will no longer seem so important. Instead of investing all we have and are in the present life, we will start to invest in eternity, doing things that will have long-term consequences. This includes making the most of opportunities to share our faith with those we love. A church that genuinely believes in the second coming of Jesus Christ will urgently reach out to the world with His saving message.

A word of caution: looking to the future should not take our minds off the present. Christians should not be escapist, hoping for a convenient exit from the world as we know it. In fact, Christians ought to be model citizens, at the forefront of using knowledge and resources to improve the lot of the human race and show the Kingdom of God and the compassion of Jesus Christ in practical terms. Churches everywhere should be following His message about feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, taking in those in need, clothing the naked and visiting those who are sick and in prison.

We do not know exactly what the future holds, but we know *who* holds the future. The return of Jesus Christ for the church is our ongoing hope and promise. Compared with this, everything else is of secondary importance. He will reign over creation as sovereign forever.

Some Biblical References

I trust you have enjoyed this short, plain English, foundational series. Given that it can be covered in just one a month, you may wish to pick it up again some time and re-read each article (or go back to individual topics).

As Christians, it is really important that we be able to back up what we believe from the Bible; however the approach of this month-long series has been to be simple and foundational. The next step is to build on the foundation. Check out the following sample references. If you would like more, go to the website. Remember, it is www.Relevant-Christianity.com

Dig deeper, walk with the Lord and grow as a dynamic Christian – God knows, our world needs it.

God	Genesis 1:1; John 4:24; 1 Corinthians 8:6
Who is Jesus Christ?	Matthew 1:23; Luke 1:35; Isaiah 9:6; Luke 4:18; 1 John 1:1-4
Who is the Holy Spirit	John 14:16, 17; 16:13, 14; Acts 2:32, 33
What is Sin	Romans 3:23; 6:23; 1 John 3:4, 5
Becoming a Christian – Conversion	John 3:1-7, 16; Matthew 18:3; John 1:12, 13
What Happens When Someone Becomes a Christian?	Romans 8:1; Romans 8:14-17
My Purpose in Life	Romans 8:28; 12:2; Jeremiah 29:11; Proverbs 3:5, 6
Counting the Cost of Following Jesus	Matthew 16:24-26; John 12:20
Growing as a Christian	1 Peter 2:2; 2 Peter 1:3-11; 1 Timothy 6:11, 12
Can I Be Sure About What I Believe?	Romans 8:38, 39; 2 Timothy 1:12
Why Belong to a Church?	Hebrews 10:25; 13:17; Acts 2:44-46
How to Pray	Matthew 6:9-13; 21:22
Who Wrote the Bible?	2 Peter 1:21; 2 Timothy 3:16
Making the Most of Reading the Bible	2 Timothy 3:14-17; Romans 10:17; Hebrew 4:12
What is Baptism	Matthew 28:19; Romans 6:3-7
Communion, or the Lord's Supper	Matthew 26:26-29, 1 Corinthians 11:23-34
Why Praise and Worship?	Psalms 100; 103; 150; Matthew 4:10;
Pitfalls that Christians Face	Luke 22:31, 32; Galatians 6:1-9
How Can I Beat Temptation?	Luke 4:1-13; Hebrews 4:14-16; 1 John 2:15-17
Overcoming Old Habits	2 Corinthians 5:17; Ephesians 2:1-10
Power to Live the Christian Life	Galatians 2:20; Galatians 5:22, 23
Sharing Your Christian Experience with Others	Matthew 8:18-20; John 4:29; Acts 1:8
What About Other Religions?	John 14:1-12; Acts 4:12; 1 Timothy 2:5; Acts 17:22-31
A Christian Approach to Work	Colossians 3:22-4:1; 2 Thessalonians 3:10
Our Lifestyle and Ethics	Matthew 5:16; 1 Corinthians 6:19, 20; Romans 13:1
The Power of Forgiveness	Matthew 6:14, 15; 18:21-35
Christians and Possessions	Matthew 6:19-34; 1 Timothy 6:6-10; Philippians 4:19
A Christian View of Sexuality and Marriage	Matthew 19:4-6; Hebrews 13:4
How Can I Make Sense of the World Around Me?	Romans 3:10-19; John 17:11; 1 John 5:19; John 3:16
Hang in There	Matthew 11:28-30; Isaiah 40:31; Hebrews 11:1, 2
What Does the Bible Say About the Future?	John 14:1-3; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; Acts 1:10; 1 John 3:2, 3