

Editorial

Welcome to the first issue of *The Message of the Bible*. It is our intention, if God enables us, to produce this magazine every three months. We also hope, God willing, to produce a Swahili translation of this magazine every three months. We trust and pray that as you read this magazine the Lord will bless you, and that He will use this magazine to teach you from His word and to lead you in His ways.

We have called this magazine *The Message of the Bible* because this is the most important message that we human beings have ever received. The Bible is the word of God, every word in it was written by God Himself. This is why we need to read and understand what the Bible has to say to us today.

The message of the Bible can be summarised in four statements:

1. The Bible teaches us about God. It tells us that God is holy and just and pure. It tells us that He hates sin and that He must punish sin, otherwise He would not be God. The Bible also teaches us that God is gracious, kind and merciful. It teaches us that He cares about His creation and that He has provided a way for sinful man to be saved from his sin.
2. The Bible teaches us about man. It teaches us that man was created perfect and sinless by God, but that he has fallen into sin and is now guilty and unclean before God. It teaches us that man is completely unable to do anything to save himself: he is unable to do those things which would be pleasing and acceptable to God. It teaches us that unless God Himself saves a person, that person is completely unable to save himself.
3. The Bible teaches us about Christ and about the way of salvation. It teaches us that the Lord Jesus Christ, who is fully God and fully man, came to earth to save sinners by His death and His resurrection. It teaches us that the only way to be saved from our sins is to repent and to believe in Christ alone for our salvation.
4. The Bible teaches us about the Christian life. It teaches us that those who are saved in Christ have the Holy Spirit living in them and that they are expected to live a life of devotion and service to God and to bring Him glory and honour.

These are the things you will find taught in more detail in this magazine. May the Lord bless you as you read it and study it.

Come, for Everything is now Ready

“Come, for everything is now ready”-Luke 14:17.

When the Lord Jesus spoke these words, He was addressing the Jewish people of His day. But these words are of great importance to us today. The parable in which these words are found speaks about a great feast. The Bible tells us that there is another great feast that is going to happen when the Lord returns: the marriage feast of the Lamb (Rev. 19:9). This is the reason why we need to understand the meaning of these words. Just as the people in this parable were being invited to a great feast, so we too are invited to the marriage feast of the Lamb.

The words of the Lord Jesus, “Come, for everything is now ready,” have a very powerful application for us today. On the day of Pentecost the Holy Spirit came and has begun to build Christ’s kingdom here on earth. God has made all things ready for sinners to come to Him and be saved and today He is inviting you to come to Him and be saved. I urge you: do not begin to make excuses, but come to Christ today, because He invites you to come. Notice carefully the words of the Lord Jesus. He says very plainly, “Come.” And then He gives the reason why you must come: “For everything is now ready.” It is God who has prepared all things and it is God who invites us. This is the matter that I want to teach you today in this sermon.

1. It is God’s way that He makes all things ready.

It is always the way with God that He plans and prepares everything very carefully. When the guests come, they will not find Him running here and there getting everything ready at the last minute. They will find that all things are perfectly ready.

This is what we find when we read of how God created the heavens and the earth. God first prepared the earth carefully for plant life, then He created plant life. Then God prepared all things for the animals, and then He created the animals. Finally, God made sure all things were prepared perfectly for man; and then He created man. When He finished His work of creation, everything was very good. The animals were not going hungry, man was not without food or water or air. Everything had been prepared carefully first.

We find the same thing with the flood. Before God brought the flood upon the earth, He instructed Noah to build an ark. Then all the animals came to the ark and fitted in perfectly. Finally God said to Noah, “Go into the ark, you and your family” (Gen. 7:1). All things had been perfectly prepared for Noah and his family to be saved from the flood and for life to begin again on the earth.

In the same way, we read that it was God’s plan that the people of Israel should live in Egypt (Gen. 15:13). So God arranged things in such a way that Joseph went there first and became a very powerful ruler in the land. Then, when the famine came

upon the land of Canaan, Jacob and his sons were able to go to Egypt and live there in safety and comfort. God prepared the way for them to go there and live there.

In the same way, the people of Israel did not enter the Promised Land until all things were ready. God had said to Abraham, “The sins of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure” (Gen. 15:16). This means that the people who lived in the Promised Land were not ready to be judged until Joshua led the children of Israel into the land. In His mercy, God was patient with the Amorites until the time of their judgement came. Then when the time of judgement came, God went before the Israelites and fought their wars for them so that they lived in houses they had not built and ate food they had not planted. They came into a land at the time when it was flowing with milk and honey

We see this same truth in God’s plan of salvation. God planned our salvation before He created the heavens and the earth. Before the foundation of the world He decided who would get saved and the way by which salvation would come to us. He had planned the way of grace before creation. He had set His love upon His people before He even created them.

“Come, for everything is now ready.” Not only has God planned our salvation, but God has made all things ready for us. The Lord Jesus, who gave up His life for His people, has died on the cross of Calvary. He has shed His blood so that we can be cleansed from our sins. We have been given the word of God, and the Holy Spirit has come to earth to teach us the word of God. The message of the gospel is that God promises us a great salvation and that God has already prepared for us a great salvation. If you are not saved, there is great encouragement for you here to come to Christ today. He is not asking you to do anything to save yourself, He has done it all. All you have to do is to come to Him in faith and accept His free gift of salvation.

The fact that God has prepared all things and made all things ready for salvation shows that all who come to Him will be received and welcomed. Imagine that a friend invites you to his house, but when you get there, you find that he is not ready for you. You find that he was sleeping and there are no chairs in the house, and no tea and bread has been prepared for you. In fact you realise that he was not really expecting you and your visit is something of a problem to him. Then you know that he was not really serious when he invited you: he was just saying, “Come and see me tomorrow.”

But when God says, “Come,” He really means it: all things have been made ready for your salvation and He is expecting you to come to Him. He has prepared salvation for your soul and a place of eternal rest for you in heaven, and so His invitation to you is serious.

This, then, is the first thing we learn, that it is God’s way that He prepares all things carefully beforehand.

2. Because all things are ready, the children of God should come to God continually.

If you are a saved person, a child of God, then I want to apply this point to you in particular. You know that when the Lord Jesus invites His saved people to come to Him it is because all things are ready.

In Jn. 21:1-14 we read of how the disciples had been hard at work all night trying to catch fish. In the morning they saw the Lord Jesus on the beach and He said to them, “Come and have breakfast” (Jn. 21:12). When they landed on the shore they saw that everything was ready: “They saw a fire of burning coals there with fish on it, and some bread” (Jn. 21:9). How the coal and the fish and bread got there we are not told. But we do know that the Lord Jesus would not have invited them if He had not prepared everything first.

In the Bible the Lord Jesus invites us to come to God in prayer (Lk. 18:1). He gives us this invitation because all things are ready for us. Are you in spiritual poverty? Come to Him in prayer and ask Him to give you all the spiritual help you need. Are you in need of spiritual strength to live the Christian life? Then listen to this promise from God: “Your strength will equal your days” (Deut. 33:25). Are you in need of comfort and encouragement? Remember that God is the God of all comfort, and that if you come to Him in prayer, He will comfort and encourage you. All things are ready. Come, therefore, to the mercy seat of God in prayer.

Remember that the Lord Jesus has by His death opened the way to God. When He died, the curtain in the temple was torn in two. Anyone who believes and is saved can come into His presence and make his needs known. You do not need to bring anything with you when you come to God in prayer; just come as you are and seek Him.

This truth that God has made all things ready for us should be of great encouragement to us in our day to day lives. When we wake up in the morning, we have no idea what the day will bring, but we can be sure that God has prepared all things for us for that day. If we go out with a heart to live for God and to serve God wherever we are, then we may be sure that God has prepared all things for us so that we can serve him effectively. If you go out each day praying for an opportunity to speak to someone about Christ or praying for an opportunity to encourage someone from the word of God, you will find that He has already made that opportunity ready for you. All things are ready for His people.

3. Because all things are ready, those who are not saved should come to God today for salvation.

Are you an unsaved person who wants eternal life? Do you have a hunger in your heart for those things that will satisfy your soul and give you an eternal hope of heaven? Then listen to the words of the Lord Jesus: “Come, for everything is now

ready.” Everything that you need in order to be saved has been made ready in the Person and work of Christ: eternal life, the forgiveness of your sins, cleansing from the filth of sin, eternal joy in the presence of God, all these are found in Christ alone and all are ready for you.

You cannot say, “I cannot come because I do not have this, or I do not have that.” God is inviting you to a feast that He has prepared. He is not asking you to prepare the feast, He is not asking you to provide anything for the feast. He Himself has provided everything that you need for salvation; all you need to do is to come to Him. It would be an insult to God if you tried to bring your good works with you when you come to Him. If a person has invited you to his house for food, it is an insult to arrive with your own food! It is saying to him that his food is not good enough. God says to you that all things are ready and you are to come as you are, and He will save you.

4. Because everything is ready, you have no excuse to stay away from Christ.

In this parable, we read that when the servant was sent out to inform the guests that everything was ready, they began to make excuses and did not come to the feast. But all their excuses were foolish: everything was ready for them. They could not say, “I want to come but the food is not ready.” This is why the master of the house was furious with them: he had made everything ready and still they did not come.

Notice that there were some who did not come to the feast because they cared more about their worldly possessions. One man said, “I have just bought a field, and I must go and see it” (Lk. 14:18); another man said, “I have just bought five yoke of oxen, and I’m on my way to try them out” (Lk. 14:19). Their love for the things of this world kept them from going to the feast. There are many today who make excuses because they love the things of this world. They know that if they come to Christ they must give up their love for the things of this world, and this they are not willing to do. Love for the things of this world frequently prevents people from coming to Christ. Very often it is those who have nothing in this world who come to Christ for salvation. The possessions of the rich often hinder them from coming to Christ.

Notice also that there was a man who would not come to the feast because he had married a wife. How often it is that fear of family and fear of friends stops us from coming to Christ. A woman desires to get saved but she fears her husband and so she makes excuses. A man wants to get saved but he fears that his worldly friends will laugh at him and reject him so he makes excuses. A school boy wants to get saved but he fears that his school friends will tease him and mock him, so he remains unsaved.

This parable teaches very clearly that those who remain unsaved will have no excuses at all on the Day of Judgement. God has prepared all things and is inviting you to come. You have no reason to remain in your sins.

Jesus Christ is the Shepherd of His people

This is a study of Psalm 23. Please read the Psalm before you read this article.

This Psalm is well known to those who are saved and to those who are not saved. Many people use it many times when they want to express their confidence in God. Let’s study it and see what teaching is found in this Psalm.

1. The Lord Jesus Christ is the shepherd of His people.

The Psalm begins, “The Lord is my shepherd” (v1). Jesus said, “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep” (Jn. 10:11). Who are the sheep and what did the shepherd do to secure the life of the sheep? The answer is, He laid down His life for them. He died so that His sheep may have life.

All true Christians were once sinners who followed their own ways. Like sheep they had all gone astray (Isaiah 53:6). We were all lost in our sins and destined for hell. But as a good shepherd of sheep who goes around looking for his lost animals until he gets them, so is Jesus Christ the Son of God. He came from heaven to die a shameful death on the cross so that His people may be redeemed from their sins and be reconciled to a holy and a just God. Jesus said, “Greater love has no-one than this, that he lay down His life for His friends” (John 15:13). In Luke 15, Jesus speaks of a parable of the lost sheep and how the shepherd reacted towards the lost sheep. After saving us from our sins, as a shepherd who finds his lost, Jesus never leaves us but all throughout our lives, He is with us always. The sheep represents the lost sinner and the shepherd is Christ himself.

No one could do what Christ did for us as His people. All those who do not trust in Christ, they are not His sheep but they are the goats which will be separated from the sheep by the Lord Jesus Christ when He comes back and be thrown into hell fire (Mathew 25:45-46). I urge you, you who are not saved to come to Him today because as a shepherd He is looking out for you ready to save you from your sins. Come to him today, don’t wait!

2. Because Jesus Christ is the Lord of His people, He provides for all their needs.

The Psalm says, “I shall not be in want” (v2). Christ Jesus has provided us with all that we need. Above all, He has given us free salvation through His death at the cross. The people of God will never lack anything that they need: “I shall not be in want.” Jesus provides His sheep with the following things.

(i) He has forgiven them their sins and so given them peace with God. “He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters. He restores my soul” (v2-3a). The Bible makes it clear to us that Jesus Christ has power to forgive

the sins of His people (Mark 1:1-12). The greatest barrier between man and God is sin. All human beings have been born sinners and rebels against God. Because of their sins, they have been cut off from God eternally. We are born without hope and without God and our destiny is hell because of our sin. Christ Jesus came from heaven to make things right between man and God. To do this, He had to die a shameful death on the cross. He had to be persecuted and mocked, all because of our sins: “While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8). But Jesus knew that He was going to die for the sins of His people. He said “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6).

Because Jesus died on the cross we who trust in Him are justified by faith and have peace with God through Him (Romans 5:1). Now because Jesus has died and rose again, all saved people have eternal peace with God.

(ii) *He guides and protects His people throughout their lives so that they may bring glory to Him.* “He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me” (v3b-4).

In which way does the Lord guide His people? The answer is in the ways of righteousness. Why does He guide them in these ways? The answer is that, so that they may bring glory to His name. Jesus is always with His people everywhere. He protects them, provides for their spiritual and physical needs, defends them from their enemies and teaches them His word. The heart of God is always upon His people. Their needs are His business. That is why He encourages them to “Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well” (Mathew 6:33).

God has given us His word the Bible so that we may understand His ways and hold on to His promises. God guides us by using His word; “All scripture is God breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

(iii) *He gives His people victory over their enemies.* “You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows” (v5).

This is the victory of the Lord’s people over their enemies. We as saved people have enemies who are strong. The world and its pleasures are a great enemy to us; the very bodies we have can ensnare us; the devil himself does not rest. In all his plans he wants to bring us down. How can we win this great battle without the Lord Jesus Christ? But thanks to Jesus Christ for in all these things, we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us (Romans 8:37). There is no one who can win against the saved people of God since Christ Himself, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, is their shield. Glory be to God that the victory is ours in Christ Jesus.

(iv) *He gives His people eternal rest.* “Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever” (v6).

Jesus has saved us, and He guides and protects us. Jesus is coming back to take us home where we will live with Him eternally. Every Christian, has a home in heaven with the Lord (John 14:1-4). All God's people one day will be brought into eternal rest by Christ Jesus. This rest is preserved only for the saved people of God (Mathew 25:34). Those who are not saved will not enjoy this rest but will be thrown into hell fire eternally.

The people of God will rest from the presence of sin, from the snares of the world and its pleasures and from the snares of the body which is corrupted by sin. They will have new bodies which are not corrupted with sin. Come to Christ today and you will have hope for eternal rest with Him.

Unbelief is an amazing thing.

“He was amazed at their lack of faith” (Mark 6:6).

This verse reminds us that the Lord Jesus Christ was fully human. He was fully God and at the same time He was fully human. That is why He was amazed. As God He knew all things and nothing could surprise Him. But as a human being, He was just like us and there were things that amazed Him. This is why, when He went to His home town and found that the people did not believe in Him, He was astonished.

In this sermon I want to speak about unbelief. Unbelief is an amazing thing: even the Lord Jesus was amazed when He came across it. Also unbelief is an important thing: there is a lot of unbelief in our world today. In this sermon I want to do two things:

1. In the first place, I want to explain what unbelief is.
2. In the second place, I want to explain why unbelief is such an amazing thing.

I. What is unbelief?

Unbelief is when a person refuses to believe something that God has said. It is when a person refuses to believe a warning that God has given or a promise that God has made. It is when he refuses to accept some advice that God has given him or to believe some threat that God has made or some message that God has sent to him. In short, unbelief is when a person refuses to accept the things that are written in the

Bible, the word of God. It is when a person does not believe that the Bible is the word of God and that every word of it is true; it is when he believes that the Bible is not important or relevant to him, it is when he thinks that it has nothing of importance to say to him. This is unbelief.

Unbelief is one of the oldest sins in the Bible. Unbelief began when Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden and brought sin into the world. God had told them that in the day that they would eat the fruit they would die; but they did not believe God. They did not think that He was serious when He said He would punish them for disobedience. It was unbelief that caused the death of millions in the flood. Noah, who was a preacher of righteousness told them for 120 years that the flood was coming and that they needed to get into the ark, but the people of the world refused to believe him. It was unbelief which caused the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. When Lot told his sons-in-law that the cities were going to be destroyed, they thought he was joking and refused to believe him (Gen. 19:14). It was unbelief that kept the people of Israel wandering in the desert for 40 years. The Bible tells us, “They were not able to enter because of unbelief” (Heb. 3:19). It was unbelief that brought about the destruction of the Jewish nation some 50 years after Christ left the world. They refused to believe in Him and to receive Him as the Saviour sent from God. Instead, they crucified Him and killed Him. It was their unbelief that caused the destruction of Jerusalem.

Unbelief is the great reason why most people in the world today who call themselves Christians are not actually saved. The reason why millions today are not truly saved and are not on their way to heaven is because of their unbelief. “Whoever does not believe stands condemned already; Whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God’s wrath remains on him; Whoever does not believe will be condemned; If you do not believe that I am the one I claim to be, you will indeed die in your sins” (Jn. 3:18;36; Mark 16:16; Jn. 8:24). Reader, whoever you are, remember this one great truth: it is not sin that sends a person to hell, it is unbelief: “Every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men; The blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin; Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow” (Matt. 12:31; 1 Jn. 1:7; Isaiah 1:18). God is willing to receive and forgive all who come to Him, but many refuse to put their faith in Christ, and so they put themselves beyond the mercies of God. I believe that if Judas Iscariot had repented and believed in Christ after he betrayed Him, he would have been forgiven and saved. The reason why people remain in their sins and go into hell for eternity is found in these words of Christ, “You refuse to come to me to have life” (Jn. 5:40).

Unbelief is a very common spiritual disease today. Wherever we look in the world today we find those who do not believe the Bible. This spiritual disease is in every

home and family and there seems no way of keeping it out. It is found among those who are rich and among those who are poor, it is found in towns and cities, and it is found in small villages. Wherever you go in this world you will find someone who is not a believer. There are people who believe that because they are now educated and clever they cannot believe the Bible: that the Bible is for the simple peasants.

With some people, their unbelief is in their heads. They refuse to accept that the Bible is the word of God because they cannot understand it or explain it. They cannot see how Jonah could have been in the belly of the fish three days or how the Lord Jesus could heal the sick and raise the dead. So they say that it is a book full of interesting stories but it is not true.

With some people, their unbelief is in their hearts. They know that the Bible is the word of God, but they love their sins and are determined not to give up their sins. They know that the Bible condemns their lifestyle so they refuse to accept the Bible and its teaching.

With other people, their unbelief is in their will. They know that the Bible is the word of God but they are too lazy to read it, study it and obey it. They find the Christian life too much effort. The thought of fighting sin and the world and following after holiness demands a lot of effort from them and they do not want to make the effort. So they remain in their unbelief.

Let us not be surprised when we meet with unbelief in the world. Let us not be shocked when people in our place of work or study, and people in our neighbourhood simply do not believe the Bible and therefore live lives of sin. This is nothing new. The apostle Peter wrote, “You must understand that in the last days scoffers will come” (2 Pet. 3:3). Remember that many times a person may appear on the outside not to care at all what the Bible says, but deep in his heart he may have a conscience about it.

II. Why is unbelief so amazing?

There are several reasons why unbelief is such an amazing thing.

1. Unbelief is amazing because it is found here on earth only and nowhere else. The angels in heaven and the fallen angels in hell, the saints in heaven awaiting the resurrection and the lost sinners in hell awaiting the final judgement all have one thing in common: they all believe! In the parable of the Lazarus and the rich man (Lk. 16:19-31), when the rich man went into hell, he wanted his five brothers who were unbelievers here on earth to see the dead rise and to believe. The Bible tells us that even the demons believe in God – and shudder (James 2:19). When Jesus was

here on earth, the demons said to Him, “What do you want with us, Son of God?” (Matt. 8:29). It is only people who are still here on earth who do not believe.

2. Unbelief is amazing because it is such an arrogant thing. The most clever man here on earth knows so little. The cleverest doctor, for example, really has very little idea how the human body was created and how it functions. He knows a few things here and there but he does not even know how his own body functions! And yet millions here on earth do not believe the Bible. They do not know how the earth came to be here, but they reject the Bible’s teaching on creation. They do not know what sin is and how sin can be removed from us, but they do not believe in Christ and His death. Unbelief is an arrogant thing.

3. Unbelief is amazing because it is so unfair. When you talk to a person who does not believe the Bible, he will talk to you about the ark and the crossing of the Red Sea and Balaam’s donkey and Jonah in the belly of the fish. He will ask you, “Surely you don’t believe these things, do you?” But they choose to ignore those things which prove beyond question that the Bible really is the word of God. They choose to ignore the Person of Christ and His life and works and miracles and how He proves the Bible to be true. They choose to ignore the fact that the Bible has had a remarkable effect upon whole nations and has turned the world upside down. They choose to ignore the fact that true Christianity has been here on earth for two thousand years despite the fact that many have tried to fight it and get rid of it, and that Christians have had a huge influence upon this world. These are facts that are plain to them, but they choose to ignore them.

4. Unbelief is amazing because it is so obvious that it brings no eternal comfort. Many people have friends and relatives who have died unbelievers, and they know that to live a life of unbelief brings no comfort when a person dies. They have seen their friend or relative die without any joy or hope or comfort; they have seen them die a terrible death. They know that unbelief brings no eternal comfort. And yet these people, even after understanding that unbelief brings no joy or hope on the death-bed, continue in their unbelief. They do not seek God after the death of their friend or relative, they continue in their unbelief and die in their unbelief.

Reader, unbelief is a wicked thing and a harmful thing. It is a sin against God when we refuse to believe His word and it is the sure way to spend hell in eternity. Guard your heart against the sin of unbelief.

Jesus Christ should be the Role Model for Church Leaders

Every Kenyan, depending on age, education and to a large extent their religious beliefs, has something to say about the political debates in this country. In particular church leaders must be doubly careful because the position they take in such debates represents or misrepresents the head of the church, Jesus Christ, who during his earthly existence, was willing to submit to the wicked imperial rule of Romans. The Roman governor later tried and unjustly condemned him to death through a compromised judicial system. We read, “Pilate wanting to satisfy the crowd released Barabbas, a criminal, and handed Jesus to be crucified” (Mk 15:15), but we do not read in Jesus’ speech or action any indication of a rebellious attitude towards such a perverse generation that rightly deserved His condemnation. Instead He was so heavenly minded that He saw their wicked actions as divinely ordered by the God of providence and graciously corrected Pilate, the governor ,who thought it was in his powers to decide the fate of the Son of God. He informed Pilate “You would have no power over me if it were not given from above” (John 19:11).

This must be the attitude that should consume those who claim to follow after his footsteps as bearers of his saving message. Church leaders in Kenya must view the governing institutions in Kenya from such a perspective and not engage in activities and utterances likely to sow seeds of discord and rebellion towards public institutions and those who lead them, otherwise they are no different from the political class we all tend to condemn wholesale. Jesus said and did all this to demonstrate in the gaze of all that his mission was not the political liberation of his oppressed countrymen but that he had a higher goal of dealing a mortal blow to sin and its effects in the heart of sinners through His death on the cross. He understood sin to be the root cause that makes all people everywhere not only rebels against God Himself but also against what He has established such as human governments. He stated this truth when he told a bewildered Pilate “My kingdom is not of this world, if it were of this world, my servants would fight” (John 18:36). His servants also should not fight with governments or its agents.

Church leaders should therefore rediscover their mission in the light of what Christ said. They should seek to correct the damage already done to the Kenyan people by taking up the awesome task of preaching repentance and forgiveness of sins in Christ’s name (Luke 24:47). If they are not willing to do this, then they should leave the ministry. And know for sure any other view you may hold contrary to what I have earnestly brought to your attention will not alter God’s standard revealed in Bible for us to obey and practice.

Paul's letter to the Philippians

Background: how the church in Philippi came into existence.

The Church of Philippi was started by the preaching of the word of God by Paul, Silas and Timothy (Acts 16:11-40). These three men went on a journey preaching the gospel until they reached the city of Philippi in Macedonia. When these men were in this city and a Sabbath day came, they made their way to the riverside, to look for a place of prayer (verse 13). It seems that the majority of those who attended these prayers were women.

Among those who attended the meeting, there was a woman named Lydia who came from Thytira in Asia. When these three brethren taught the word of God, the Lord opened the heart of Lydia and she believed in the Lord, along with others of her household (verses 14-15) and after she was converted she persuaded the four men to stay at her house during their time in Philippi and so they stayed.

Also in Philippi, there was a slave girl who kept following Paul and his friends and shouting, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved" (verse 17). Finally Paul became troubled by this slave girl shouting, and he commanded the evil spirit to come out of her. This action landed Paul and Silas in prison. While in prison they continued praying and singing hymns to God till suddenly there was a great earthquake which tore the chains off all the prisoners and opened all the prison gates. This resulted in the prison guard and his family believing in Jesus Christ, and in them being baptised (Acts 16:31-32).

So this church in Philippi began with two families, the family of Lydia and the family of the jailer. The members of this church did not forget Paul even after he left their city but they continued to fellowship with him in the gospel (Philippians 1:5). They shared with him even in their material blessing (Philippians 4:16).

Paul's aim in writing the letter to the Philippians.

We can see some reasons why Paul wrote this letter to this church.

1. To express his love to the church (1:5,7).
2. To show Christians how to live a joyful life (4:4).
3. To teach the church the importance of unity (4:2).

All Christians are Saints (Phil. 1:1).

This letter is addressed to the saints in Philippi. A Christian is a saint. This is how everyone who has believed in the Lord Jesus Christ is identified. A saint is not a person who is more holy than other people. The Bible calls all those who have

trusted in the Lord Jesus as the saints, they are saints here on earth and they will be saints in heaven. This means they are holy ones. This is how Christians are addressed in many letters. For example in Romans 1:7, this is how the apostle Paul addressed them: "To all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints." In 1 Corinthians 1:1, Paul says "To the church of God in Corinth to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy." In Ephesians 1:1, Paul says, "To the saints in Ephesus, the faithful in Christ Jesus."

Holiness means separation from the world. In Leviticus 11:44 the Lord tells the Israelites to isolate themselves from the world and serve him alone. This means their life style is different from those who do not belong to Him.

Holiness also means purity. Again in Leviticus 11:44 the Lord commands His people not to defile themselves. So a Christian should not live a life of sin, but instead live a godly life because he has been set apart for the Lords service.

Jesus Christ is the Lord of Christians (Phil. 1:2).

Paul addresses this letter to all the saints in Christ. He is here showing us our union with Christ. This means a Christian is a property of the Lord Jesus and he belongs to him fully and all the blessings of God to Christians pass through Jesus Christ.

In verse 2 Paul says, "Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."

In this verse we see our salvation is a gift from God and so those who are saved have peace with God.

We also see here that our salvation comes from God the Father through Jesus Christ. It is only when a person comes to Jesus Christ, confesses his sin and trusts in him, that he receives salvation.

A Christian is a servant of Jesus Christ. Paul starts this letter by calling himself and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus. When a person is saved he is a servant of Jesus. Those who are not saved serve sin and sin is their master.

The place of the Church in the world (Phil. 1:2).

The church to whom Paul wrote was in Philippi. Paul also wrote letters to other churches which were in different areas e.g. Corinth, Ephesus and others. This shows the Church is living and serving Christ in this world. The way a Christian lives matters a lot because he is a servant and a representative of Christ in this world. Christians should remember that they are in the world but not of the world. The Lord has put them in this earth to serve him and glorify him always.

The Book of Haggai: an Introduction.

The History behind this book.

The Bible tells us that when God brought the people of Israel out of Egypt, He took them into the land of Canaan, the Promised Land and settled them there. The people, however, were not faithful to the Lord. They fell into the sin of idolatry and offended the Lord who had redeemed them from slavery in Egypt.

Because of their sin, God punished them. First, the people of Israel were divided into two nations; Israel in the north and Judah in the south. Then, when the sins of the people continued, God removed the people from the land. The northern kingdom, Israel, were removed by a nation called the Assyrians, and then later, under God's direction, the people of Babylon came to Jerusalem and destroyed the city and the temple and took the people of Judah into exile. For seventy years the people of Judah remained in Babylon as strangers in the land. After seventy years, the king of the land, Cyrus, issued a decree to allow the people of Judah to return to Jerusalem.

When the people returned, the temple was in ruins. Under the leadership of Zerubbabel, they began the work of restoring the temple. However, by this time there were other people living in Jerusalem who had moved there while the Jews were in Babylon. These people opposed the rebuilding of the temple and eventually managed to stop the work (see Ezra chapter 4). For some 16 years the work of rebuilding the temple stopped. During this time the people lost their vision for the temple. Instead they built beautiful houses for themselves and began to pursue the things of this world.

This was the time that God raised up Haggai as a prophet to the people. Haggai was raised up to encourage the people not to forget the work of the Lord and to live lives of luxury while the temple of God was in ruins. Haggai told the people that the people may try to find happiness in this world by pursuing the things of this world, but as long as they left the work of building the temple unfinished, they will never have satisfaction in the things of this world.

The contents of the book of Haggai

The book of Haggai consists of four sermons that Haggai preached over a period of four months.

In Haggai's first message (Hag. 1:2-11), God tells the people of Israel that they have neglected His temple and instead live in nice wood-panelled houses. They have

neglected the work of the Lord and instead are pursuing worldly wealth. The result is that they do not harvest according to what they planted; and although they have a lot of the world's possessions, they do not get any satisfaction from these things.

Haggai's second message (Hag. 2:1-9) is delivered to Zerubbabel and to those Israelites who were faithful to the Lord and cared about the temple. In this message, the Lord encourages them to be strong. The reason for this exhortation is that they realised that the new temple was not at all as glorious and wonderful as the one that Solomon had built and which had been destroyed by the Babylonians, and so the people had got discouraged.

Haggai's third message (Hag. 2:10-19) was delivered on the day that the temple was completed. The prophet exhorts the people to give careful thought to their ways. He tells them in this message that if the people do not devote themselves to God and worship Him wholeheartedly then the sacrifices they offer at the temple will defile the temple.

Haggai's fourth message (Hag. 2:20-23) was also delivered on the day that the temple was completed. This one was for Zerubbabel the leader of the Jewish people and it stated clearly that God's plan to send a Saviour through this people had not changed: the Saviour of the world would come through the Jewish people.

What the book of Haggai teaches us.

The book of Haggai is about the people of Israel re-building their temple, but it is not about the people of God today putting up a church building. Any preacher who uses this book to make people give money for a building is not interpreting the book correctly. This book was written to teach two very important lessons.

1. In the first place, it was written to remind the people of God that the kingdom of God must be their priority at all times and not the things of this world. The temple in this book does not represent a church building but the kingdom of God, and just as the people of Israel lost their focus, so we too can become very worldly and neglect the kingdom of God.

2. In the second place, it was written to remind us that God is gracious to His people at all times. The people of Judah had fallen into great sin and had gone into exile because of it. Then when they returned, they neglected the work of building the temple for many years. Yet despite all this, God was gracious to them in sending Haggai to preach to them and to revive them.

How the Bible Describes the Man who is Blessed by God

“Therefore let everyone who is godly pray to you” (Ps. 32:6).

In Psalm 32 David describes for us the man who has been blessed by God. The people of the world will tell us that the person who is attractive and charming, the person who has honour and respect from his fellow men and the person who has wealth is the person who has been blessed by God. This is how the world sees blessings from God: beauty, honour and riches. But in this Psalm David does not mention beauty, honour or riches. He does not say, “Blessed is he who is attractive and charming, and he who has respect and honour from others and he who has wealth.” Instead David writes, “Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered” (Ps. 32:1). David says the man whose sins have been forgiven by God is the man who has received blessings from God, not the man who has charm and honour and wealth.

When the Old Testament says a person has been forgiven his sins, it means that his sins have been taken away and they are no longer in sight: God has removed them completely. This is why Jeremiah wrote, “In those days, at that time’ declares the Lord, ‘search will be made for Israel’s guilt, but there will be none.” (Jer. 50:20). The blessing we receive when our sins are forgiven is the greatest blessing a person can receive. I want to teach you five things about the forgiveness of sins.

1. Forgiveness of sin is an act of God's free grace.

We do not receive forgiveness because we are good or because we have done good things to deserve it; we receive forgiveness because of the free grace of God. God says to us, “I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions, for my own sake, and remembers your sins no more” (Isaiah 43:25). He does not forgive us for the sake of things we have done to deserve His forgiveness, but for His own sake, meaning out of His own free grace. This is why Paul says, “I was shown mercy” (1 Tim. 1:13). He was a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man but he was shown mercy by God. When God forgives a sinner, He not only pardons him all his sins, but he brings that person into His kingdom and gives him an inheritance!

2. When God forgives a person, He makes sure that the penalty for that person’s sin is paid.

God is a just God, He must punish sin. He cannot just overlook sin and forget about our sin; He must deal with it in a just manner. When Adam ate the apple in the Garden of Eden, he was punished and saw the flaming sword of God. The person who sins must pay the penalty of his sin. Now when God forgives a person, He does so by making sure that the penalty has been paid. He Himself takes care of our penalty when we come to Him for forgiveness.

3. Forgiveness of sin is through the blood of Christ.

The reason why God forgives us is because He is a God of grace; the means by which God forgives us is the blood of Jesus Christ. The Bible says, “Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness” (Heb. 9:22). The justice of God demands that our sins must be paid for, otherwise there is no forgiveness for us. Either we pay for our sins, or the Lord Jesus pays for them. We receive forgiveness because Christ paid the price for it.

4. The only way to be forgiven of your sins is to repent.

In the teaching of Jesus repentance and forgiveness are linked together: “Repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name” (Luke 24:47). God will not forgive us until we repent and turn away from our sins. The person who repents shows that he has understood how serious sin is and how much God hates it. He will understand that forgiveness is a precious gift from God (Luke 7:38-47).

5. Once God forgives us our sins, He does not remember them again (Jer. 31:34).

God does not keep a record of our sins once He has forgiven us; He will “Hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea” (Mic. 7:19). Once our sins have been removed from the presence of God, they shall never be seen again. This is why we need to seek God diligently for the forgiveness of our sins; it is a great blessing of God to us.

Application.

1. It is a most serious thing to live without the forgiveness of our sins.

You will never have true joy and true happiness in your life if your sins are still upon you. Remember also that all the curses of God are upon every unsaved person. In fact the Bible says that God will even curse his blessings (Malachi 2:2). No one can be happy here on earth while they are unsaved because they know that the Day of Judgement is coming and they must face Christ on that day.

2. It is a most blessed thing to have forgiveness for our sins.

The person who has had his sins forgiven does not fear when Satan accuses him: he knows his sins have been dealt with (Rom. 8:33). Also, the person who is forgiven will go to God in prayer with boldness. The person who is still in his sins is so weighed down with guilt that he cannot pray correctly. But the one who is forgiven looks up to God with confidence.

David sinned greatly before the Lord. But he was a blessed man because he was a forgiven man: “You forgave the guilt of my sin” (Ps. 32:5). He found out that God is “a forgiving God, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love” (Neh. 9:17), and so he encouraged others to seek after God: “Therefore let everyone who is godly pray to you” (Ps. 32:6).