

Faith Foundations

God's Revelation Through the Bible

Week One: The God who is

The God who is Real
The God who Reveals
The God who Relates

Key text: **Exodus 3: 13-14**



The God who is Real

- At the very centre of our faith is a God who is real, who exists, who is our Creator and who is not us! Sounds simple but it is fundamental.
- We don't create God in the image we want – God is, and God is the starting point.
- This series is called Faith Foundations – God's revelation through the Bible, so, in the words of Mary Poppins, let's start at the very beginning, it's a very good place to start.
- **Genesis 1:1** *"In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth..."*
- There is the starting point – God. Not us but God. God at the centre of all.
- And this is the reason the Genesis 1 and 2 creation accounts were written; to tell us who God is, who we are, how God relates to us and how we relate to God – there will be more on Genesis next week.
- So, right at the start of the Bible, this tells us something very crucial that we are not God!
- Creator God is totally other in relation to who we are and everything else created is, **Isaiah 46:9**, yet at the same time God is always and will always be totally involved with us and all creation.
- Therefore, because all creation for all time totally depends on God for its existence, its relationship with God is fundamental, **Hebrews 11:3**.

The God who Reveals

- What's the reason we keep reading and taking the Bible seriously?
- The simple answer is because it is an inspired witness, over around 1,100 years, to God's self-revelation.
- It helps us to reflect on and wrestle with the fundamental questions of who God is, what God is like and how can we have a relationship with God.
- Because God is inherently good and inherently relational, God desires to self-reveal to all creation, which of course God made – God always wants to be found by us.
- We don't just learn about God's existence; there is a revelation of God's character.
- So, what is creator God like?
- Well, one of the first things we often think about is that God is unchanging, **Psalms 102:27**, but which is probably best understood as God's character or attributes do not change but, as we relate to God in the world and in our lives how they are experienced can and do change.
- One of the Bible's most important revelations of God's character is **Exodus 34:6**, *"a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, yet by no means clearing the guilty"*.
- What this shows us is that God is unique because it is inherent to God's nature to be loving, merciful, enduringly faithful and forgiving yet at the same time is the God who brings justice.
- As humans this is one of our greatest struggles because at any point in time, we tend to be either/or with these characteristics when God is completely all of them, all of the time.
- For example, this means that God is always love, but God's love always brings justice because love cannot allow evil to persist and it also means that God's justice is always out of love because it is for the purpose of healing and restoration.

The God who Relates

- In the Old Testament, especially early on, God is described as being able to take bodily form like **Genesis 3:8** for example.
- We get an example of this, which reveals God's relational heart and casts forward to what happened in Jesus' incarnation, in **Leviticus 26:11-12**, "*I will place my dwelling [set my tabernacle] in your midst*" (**John 1:14** "*And the Word became flesh and lived [tabernacled] among us*), and *I shall not abhor you. And I will walk among you, and will be your God, and you shall be my people*".
- Throughout the Bible, God is consistently described as Spirit, which is ultimately seen in the incarnation where God is not just revealed to us in Jesus but lives among us, dies for us and in the resurrection shows us the way to new spirit-filled life.
- That God is Spirit is the reason God is with us where we are, but at the same time is everywhere with everyone, **Psalms 139:7**.
- So, how can we have a relationship with God who we cannot see and is spirit?
- Well, **Genesis 1:26-27** gives us a big theological clue as, even though it's light on actual detail, it says that all humans are made in the image and likeness of God.
- That's every single person by the way, without exception, who carries the image of God and this means that when we encounter another human being we encounter something of God.
- Jesus is the closest view of God we can ever get, **Colossians 2:9**, and the teachings of Jesus centre on this same concept that if you can't love your neighbour, who is made in God's image and you can see, how can you love God who you can't see, **Matthew 22:37-40**.
- But also, fundamentally, we experience and have relationship with God through the Holy Spirit of Jesus, **John 14:26**.
- A good example of God's nature and our relationship with God is prayer, which makes a real difference because it is a genuine relational exchange between us and God that changes both.
- This is how we fulfil the purpose of our creation to reflect God, to relate to God and to represent God. More of this next week!

Faith Foundations

God's Revelation Through the Bible

Week Two: Creation and New Creation - Created for Purpose

Relationship Created

Relationship Broken

Relationship Restored

Key text: **Genesis 1: 26-28**



Relationship Created

- Genesis 1 is relational theology with God at the very centre of it all. It was written to tell us who God is, who we are, how God relates to us and how we relate to God.
- It is fundamental that the Bible starts with the original goodness of the relationships God creates because this tells us that inherently only good can come from God.
- Therefore, all that is created is good and when God's human image bearers are created to represent God it is very good.
- This is the reason God deals with the last important '*not good*' in Genesis 2 and it's a very relational '*not good*' because it is not good for humans to be alone, **Genesis 2:18**. Humans are created to exist in relationship and in partnership.
- Crucially, Genesis 1 and 2 also teaches us that we are not the owners of the world, God is, and God created everything, the environment, animals, plants and humans to exist together so it can all flourish and reach its God-given potential.
- God created the heavens and earth and joins them with all the connections and the potential for creational flourishing. Because God created a world that was inherently good it must be worth restoring and healing and preserving rather than destroying.
- There is no temple in either original or new creation because the whole created realm is sacred and experiences the full presence of God. In Genesis, Eden is the temple garden and in Revelation it's a garden city; earthly temples for a fixed place for God to dwell was never the intention.
- God puts all this in place with the intention that God's image bearers spread out from the garden to populate the world in healthy relationship with God, in healthy partnership with other humans, creatures and the planet.
- But note, creation is good and not perfect, which means when talking about new creation in Revelation a return back to the beginning is not in view, rather the fulfilment of all its original good potential in a restored and completed earth, described now as a '*garden city*', joined to a renewed heaven, **Revelation 21:1**.
- So far so good, but what went so wrong? How could the good creation and very good human image bearers made by a good God have produced a world with evil and sin in it? Where did this come from?
- Genesis 3 gives the answer because in order to truly love and worship God and love others we are made with freewill in God's image and therefore, we are created to make our own choices in life.
- Humans were not made to be naïve, but to grow and mature and fulfil their God-given potential.
- Because all humans are created to be in relationship with God, and our very existence depends on God, what we are really talking about is 'right' relationship with God.
- That's what the Bible is trying to teach us through all the different books and genres of literature and characters and their stories it contains.
- Lots of people claim some sort of relationship with God, even if it's denying there is a God, but then lots of people invoke God's name to hurt other humans or use God as their personal lucky charm or only in cases of emergency!
- God though, desires us to be in right relationship, **Romans 5:1-2**, which as Jesus taught, cannot be separated from how we relate to other humans so that we can only be in right relationship with God when we learn how to love all of God's precious image bearers.
- But it's not just people, because God created an environment to sustain us in wholeness and wellness and to give us life if we love and care for it in the way God intended – we should remember the earliest picture of this is Adam and Eve tending a garden.

Relationship Broken

- However, when humans just look to themselves for all the answers, away from relationship with God, their selfishness brings with it negative consequences, **James 3:16**.
- Genesis 4 is the first passage in the Bible that introduces the concept of sin, and notice that God is present and that there is a choice presented.
- In fact, the first question asked of God by a human being, Cain, is *'am I my brother's keeper?'*, **Genesis 4:9**, so that whether I am only responsible for myself and my own actions before God becomes a key theme Genesis seeks to answer.
- Cain's freewill choice is to sin and its consequences for all creation become clear, very quickly, as the Bible story unfolds.
- I understand this to mean that we are not born sinful, after all, we are made in the image of a God who can only produce good, but rather because we are born into a world where sin is so prevalent, as a consequence of our freewill choices, it very quickly becomes a problem for all of us – Eastern Orthodox Christians call this ancestral sin.
- The key question that Cain asked God in chapter 4, is answered by Joseph in the final chapter of Genesis when he chooses not to bear a grudge against his brothers and instead forgives them, **Genesis 50:20**, *'Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people'*.
- This sets up God's grace filled saving act of his people Israel from slavery and their required response, to live with justice as righteousness, which in turn is for the purpose of restoring right relationship with God for all peoples and ultimately all of creation.

Relationship Restored

- This is the vision for new creation; it's not destroyed and re-created, otherwise God would not be faithful to his covenant with Noah (more on that in week 4), but restored and healed and re-joined with the heavens so there are no longer any barriers between God and humans and creation, **Revelation 21:1-2**.
- For this reason, there are specific common features between the very first book of the Bible, Genesis and the very last book, Revelation.
- Original and new creation both involve heaven and earth; the relationship between the two is fundamental because heaven and earth are joined as one so that God is present and in intimate relationship with everything.
- And because of this, there is an absence of mourning, of pain, of crying and of death in both original and new creation.
- In original creation God brings order from the chaos whereas in new creation, the sea, an ancient symbol of chaos and disorder, is no more, **Genesis 1:2; Revelation 21:1**.
- Just as God created original goodness, new creation will see the removal of all that is bad and gets in the way of flourishing so that only God's goodness remains, which means justice and righteousness and shalom are the new experienced reality.
- But what exactly the new heavens and earth will be like is a question we all wrestle with as Christians from time to time.
- It's something that in reality the Bible says very little about, beyond that we will have new bodies appropriate for a new age, and what it does say about the age to come tends to be highly symbolic.
- However, Jesus' parable of the wheat and the weeds paints a helpful picture because here, Jesus describes a world that represents the best of what it means to be human, where all the original goodness that God sowed into original creation remains as the harvest, and all the sin and evil, the weeds, have been removed, **Matthew 13:24-30; 36-43**.
- It suggests that everything that is inherently good remains because after all God, by nature, can only produce good things that are everlasting, and so there is no reason this won't include animals and plants because all creation has been restored to right relationship with God.
- Significantly, this is meant to inspire the way we live now so that we partner with God and follow the example of Jesus, living by the Spirit, to make a reality now as much of this new creation as we possibly can.
- Reflecting God so that in our character and nature we try to be a visible reflection of God's character and nature to our communities.
- This is both spiritual and physical and best reflected when there are no artificial divisions between the two, what is often called a sacred and secular divide.
- This is because we are called to worship God in spirit and in truth or in other words to commune with God through prayer and worship but then put that into practice in how we live our lives, **John 4:23-24**.
- As Spirit-led people in a church that has values to be Spirit-led, we understand that God's Spirit is in us and moves us, often powerfully internally and externally, so God's presence by the Spirit is something we experience as a difference-maker.
- That said, we must never forget that it's God's Spirit that is moving and not ours; that it is not about us, it is all about reflecting God!
- Our purpose is to represent God as faithfully as we can.
- We are made by a good God to do good in the world so God's goodness is replicated.
- In the New Testament parable of the sheep and the goats, **Matthew 25:31-46**, the basis for eternal life is found in 'the sheep' who do good.
- This means that in effect, as Christians, we are saying, look at and listen to us and you will see God!
- Saint Teresa of Avila summed this up in her well-known prayer poem;
*Christ has no body but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks
Compassion on this world,
Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,
Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world.
Yours are the hands, yours are the feet,
Yours are the eyes, you are his body.
Christ has no body now but yours.*
- And, we do this when we follow the way of Jesus, who is the closest revelation of God we will ever get this side of eternity!

Faith Foundations

God's Revelation Through the Bible

Week Three: Covenants Part 1 – The Old

Covenant Relationships

Covenant Blessings

Covenant Values

Key text: **Genesis 12: 1-3**



Covenant Relationships

- God is all about covenant faithfulness and for that reason, it is one of the biggest, if not the biggest theme of the Bible that appears over 300 times including around 35 times in the New Testament.
- The word covenant is first used in Genesis and last used in Revelation and so it is the backdrop to the whole Bible story.
- Covenant is about coming together and how we 'come together' with God or are in communion with God and therefore, it is the Bible's basis for relationship between God and people and the land.
- Crucially, it was the way the ancient world defined social and political relationships, often between the ruler of a dominant nation with another ruler they had conquered or who were looking for protection and so it also has the meaning of '*kinship*' and as a way of extending the family.
- It is also linked to the concept of atonement, which literally means '*at-one-ment*' that is another key theme of the Bible and sits under God's covenant faithfulness.
- In relation to atonement, we tend to assume or have been taught that sacrifices in the Bible were always about sin, but this is far from the case because the Old Testament describes many types of different sacrificial offerings and one of the main ones was the relational meal to seal or ratify a covenant.

Covenant Blessings

- As we saw last week, the Bible begins with God's original covenant with humanity in Genesis, and like all covenants it describes the blessings that flow from covenant faithfulness and the adverse consequences that result from covenant unfaithfulness.
- This whole idea of choosing the way of life over the way of death is interwoven into the whole Biblical narrative, both in the Old Testament, **Deuteronomy 30:19-20**, and picked up by the New Testament, where for example, it is a major part of Paul's theology that underpins the book of Romans.
- This is because the consequences of our poor freewill choices that lead to sin and evil cause so many to suffer and ultimately, it leads to death and not life.
- The cumulative impact of our sinful choices becomes a major barrier to right relationship with God and right flourishing with others and so, whilst sin is not the centre of the story, it is an important reality that has to be addressed and covenant is right at the heart of this.
- The impact of our selfish choices, described in Genesis 6, eventually leads God to conclude that a creation reboot is needed; this time through a righteous man called Noah, who in effect becomes the new Adam (who was created good, remember).
- God's new covenant with Noah is on behalf of all creation, **Genesis 9:9-10**, and God promises to no longer destroy the earth and start all over again, which addresses the question about our planet and God's intention to heal and make it whole rather than to destroy it and start again (God is everlastingly faithful).
- Crucially, God's covenant with Noah defines every subsequent covenant God makes with people.
- So, even when human freewill choices are still an issue and continue to lead to dreadful consequences for all creation, God remains ever faithful to the covenant with humanity and chooses another righteous human, Abraham, to restore blessing to all the families of the earth who have been cursed by the proliferation of sin and evil, **Genesis 12:3**.
- This covenant with Abraham, **Genesis 12 and 15**, is based on the kind of faith in God that responds with righteousness, defined as doing '*righteousness and justice*' in **Genesis 18:19**, which is yet another dominant theme of the Bible.
- It reveals an important Biblical principle because the basis on which God blesses us is so that we can be a blessing to others, in particular by showing righteousness and justice.
- God's faithfulness to his covenant with Abraham is demonstrated to Abraham's descendants when God delivers them from slavery and oppression, described in the book of Exodus.
- Now Israelites, they experience God's saving grace (literally not spiritually), and so crucially, their experience as oppressed refugees who were delivered by God's goodness is meant to be formative to how they are supposed to represent God in the way they treat others.

Covenant Values

- However, in order to develop from a vulnerable people group to a secure nation they need to understand what kind of values God wants them to live by and what obedience to God looks like.
- This forms the basis of the next Biblical covenant that is communicated by God through Moses in what is known as '*the law*' or Torah, which is often misunderstood, especially by Christians.
- The law was not given to Israel so that obedience earned them God's favour because they had already been the free recipients of God's saving grace but rather it was given to shape their appropriate response to God's loving liberation of them.
- This '*law*', is not how we understand law today but was literally teaching and instruction or guidance, out of covenantal love to a people who needed it to form them into a healthy Godly people, and define for them how to live and relate to God and to others in a radically different way to the surrounding nations.
- Contrary to how many Christians have been taught, Israel did not understand that they had to obtain God's favour by following the law and so did not view themselves as inherently legalistic.
- Another misconception Christians tend to have is that it was impossible to fulfil the law, which is strange, if you think about it, because it wouldn't seem good or loving or saving for God to give Israel a law, God knew they couldn't keep.
- Rather, the sacrificial system to deal with the sin arising from breaching the law was an inherent part of the law, inbuilt precisely so that it could be fulfilled and the covenant maintained.
- That is until Israel's unfaithfulness, idolatry and its unjust and unrighteous consequences, cause it to irretrievably break down to the point where sacrifices are no longer sufficient to maintain it, and so, the ultimate consequence was exile from the promised land – ultimately the choice is to follow the way that leads to death rather than life.

Faith Foundations

God's Revelation Through the Bible

Week Four: Covenants Part 2 – The New

New Covenant Promised

New Covenant Fulfilled

New Covenant Values

Key text: **Jeremiah 31:31-34**



New Covenant Promised

- Before we get to the new covenant there's one final part of the old covenant we need to cover as it's crucial to understanding God's purposes for the world.
- Prior to their exile, God made another covenant with one of Israel's kings, David, called the David covenant, that promised an everlasting kingdom, **2 Samuel 7:8-16**.
- This covenant is different to the others in that it points toward a future saving king or messiah and because it has both unconditional promises, like with Noah and Abraham, but also conditional promises so that it is dependent on future kings keeping God's laws.
- However, as we saw at the end of last week Israel's covenant unfaithfulness, tolerated or even led by its kings because they fail to keep God's laws, results in idolatry (following foreign gods) and injustice and unrighteousness in how they mistreat and oppress their own people, despite God's original warning and the persistent warnings of the prophets who spoke out on God's behalf. **Amos 2:4-8** and **Ezekiel 14: 6-8** are two of the very many prophetic warnings given to God's own people!
- The result is that the covenant irretrievably breaks down to the point where sacrifices are no longer able to maintain it and this ultimately results in God's people being exiled from the promised land and with it, they lose access to the Temple and the presence of God.
- From the perspective of the people of God, they experience this as both physical and spiritual death.
- Crucially however, now in exile, Israel's prophets look forward to a future time when God will forgive them and invoke a new covenant promise that will be brought about through a future saving messiah king, **Isaiah 11:1-9; Jeremiah 23:5-6**.
- In this new covenant, the law is still there of course, but now it is going to be written on people's hearts and minds and not on tablets of stone (or scrolls), **Jeremiah 31:31-34**.
- This means it will be more dynamic and relational and it will be mediated directly to each person by the Holy Spirit, **Ezekiel 36:26-27** rather than through priests.
- This will make it easier for all peoples to be included in on its benefits, and crucially including those previously considered outside its reach.

New Covenant Fulfilled

- This new creation covenant that the New Testament reveals is realised through the faithfulness of Jesus' radical self-sacrificial life-example of loving God and others to the point of death, **Philippians 2:6-8; Romans 5:19**.
- This is God's own son, God in human form, whose birth, life and ministry, death, resurrection and ascension initiates the new covenant, forever maintains it and ultimately brings it into all of its fullness.
- Crucially, this means it is God who initiates and fulfils both the divine (unconditional) and the human (conditional) elements of the covenant and so, it can never ever be broken!
- This gives us assurance that the hope and trust we have in following Jesus is well-placed as **Romans 8:38-39** affirms!

New Covenant Values

- This final covenant takes love to a whole new and wider level with Jesus' command, *'As I have loved you, so you must love one another'*, **John 13:34**.
- It is through truly loving God by loving others that we will recognise those who are following the new covenant, *'By this everyone will know that you are my disciples'*, **John 13:35**.
- It is through this love that the law will be fulfilled or completed, **Romans 13:10**.
- It is this love that will bind us all together in perfect unity, **Colossians 3:14**.
- God's love is revealed as the most powerful, transforming life-giving force in creation.
- Therefore, when we follow Jesus, who modelled for us what this love looks like in human form, we are God's covenant partners in helping to bless and restore all things. Amen!

Faith Foundations

God's Revelation Through the Bible

Week Five: God's People

God's people are Communal

God's people are Inclusive

God's people are Contributors

Key text: **1 Corinthians 12: 12-27**



God's People are Communal

- As we have heard a lot in this series so far, we believe God is inherently relational and this is expressed in the fundamental way Christians understand God as what we call the Holy Trinity, the eternal unbreakable communion of God the Father, God the Son and God the Spirit.
- Precisely because God's essential nature is relational this has to be expressed in how God creates everything, the universe and all the connections and relationships within everything God creates.
- However, in our culture today we tend to think of our relationships in more individualistic ways, for example, we think about *'our'* relationship with God that other human relationships exist to support.
- Unfortunately, this can lead to a self-centred and consumerist view of church that exists to serve our needs and to support our particular preferences for doctrine, worship, teaching, prayer, children's work, youth provision and discipleship groups – the list goes on and on!
- What we have ended up doing is to blur the lines between our *'personal'* trust in Jesus and faith in God, which is vital, with our *'individual'* preferences, needs and desires.
- This primarily individual way of thinking however, is completely alien to the societies the Bible authors were writing to because, for them, a personal relationship with God could not exist apart from the whole community of people being in relationship with God. (**1 Corinthians 12:12-13; 27**).
- This means the importance of understanding a people of God, who are Israel in the Old Testament and Jesus' followers in the New Testament and beyond, is foundational to a healthy reading and interpretation of the Bible for how we live day to day.
- God's plans and purposes for humanity of course requires transformed individuals but always as an integral part of a transformed community that has, as its job description, the transformation of all peoples so they too can be a part of God's growing family.
- The individual characters and stories in the Bible are important precisely because of how they work together as testimony to this purpose of God to restore and reconcile all creation, **Colossians 1:19-20**.

God's people are Inclusive

- One thing that is often misunderstood in Christianity is *'chosen-ness'* or what theologians call election.
- This is tied to the idea that God's people are *'set apart'*, what it means to be holy.
- As Jesus followers we are supposed to live in a way and with a set of values that represent God well.
- The whole point of our *'chosen-ness'* is so that people are attracted into right relationship with God through our example, and not repelled, or that it leads us to lock ourselves away when we are supposed to be beacons of light and hope to show people the way to God, **Matthew 5:14-16**.
- Like Abraham, we are called or chosen or are God's elect so that everyone can ultimately be invited to be included in God's family and benefit from its blessing, **Genesis 12:2-3**.
- As the theology of Genesis 1 and 2 indicates to us, we are not supposed to stay safely in our garden with our relationship with God but to go outside and adventure and spread the garden throughout the world.

God's people are Contributors

- At River Church Marlow, we firmly believe the Bible narrative reveals to us that all of God's people are called to priests, not just Israel or our leaders, and that we are all set apart, again, not just an anointed few, **1 Peter 2:9, Revelation 1:6**.
- As a Spirit-led and inclusive church, we believe the Holy Spirit plays the vital role in drawing people to right relationship with God so that our job is to partner with the Holy Spirit in the way we live for God, in the way we talk about God and in the acts of kindness we perform as God's representatives.
- We believe that we represent God and God's kingdom well by being an alternative society within society, not opted out of society, by involving the Holy Spirit in all we say and do as **Galatians 5:22-26** highlights.
- Finally, we want people to know us for what we all about because God wants us individually and collectively to reveal what God is really like and invite people into right relationship with our wonderful loving God.
- Because we believe everyone is made in God's image, we believe that God is for us and with us and through God's Holy Spirit is in us and this is what God desires everyone to know and experience and so is our collective mission as God's people.



Faith Foundations

God's Revelation Through the Bible

Week Six: Six Key Big Ideas that Demonstrate the Presence of God

Justice and Righteousness

Reconciliation & Salvation

Kingdom & Shalom

Key text: **Genesis 18: 19; Matthew 6: 33**



Justice & Righteousness

- The connection between justice and righteousness is a key concept in the Bible.
- They are paired 34 times in the Old Testament and in every type of genre; law, prophetic history, psalms, wisdom and the later prophets.
- The theme of justice is picked up by Matthew, and in particular by Luke, and righteousness is referred to around 71 times in the New Testament.
- Justice and righteousness are an important sign that God's kingdom rule is a present reality because it is a direct reflection of what God is like, **Deuteronomy 32:4**, *'all his ways are just; a faithful God, without deceit, just and upright is he'*.
- The very first-time justice and righteousness are paired together in the Bible is in **Genesis 18:19** when God reveals to Abraham his plan to use him to become a great nation and a blessing to all nations; here God makes it clear that Abraham has been chosen to teach the generations that flow from him the *'way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice'*.
- Therefore, it is clear that we simply cannot say we are representing God well and that the kingdom of God is present unless we teach and practice justice and righteousness.
- So, what does the Bible mean when it talks about righteousness and justice?
- Biblical justice is about acting in ways that ensure fairness, whether it's about how resources and opportunities are distributed, or is about retributive punishment for crimes being proportionate and fair and in restorative justice that seeks healing and repair for victims and the rehabilitation of offenders.
- Righteousness in the Bible is a deeply relational concept about doing the right thing because being right with God means being in right relationship with other people.
- Righteous people love doing the right thing in every area of life, *'Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness'*, **Matthew 5:6**; *'Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness'*, **Matthew 6:33**; *'We wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home'*, **2 Peter 3:13**.

Reconciliation & Salvation

- Christians are not required to follow old covenant Torah but we do still need to know what doing right is under the new covenant because rather than being '*in Torah*' and Torah being '*in us*', we are '*in Christ*' and '*Christ is in us*'.
- This is no longer about static commands but about being in relationship with Jesus and following his example, best summed up in his great commandment to '*love God and love others*'.
- Following the way of Jesus, brings salvation in its fullest sense of being preserved for wholeness, healing and well-being and experiencing the fullness of life.
- When we live in this fullness, it produces the fruit of the Spirit of Jesus and results in peace and reconciliation.
- Therefore, it is significant that Jesus' sacrificial death corresponds to Passover, which is about celebrating freedom from captivity rather than the Day of Atonement, with its focus on dealing with residual sin.
- This links with the understanding that a vital part of what salvation is and what it means for us is directly linked to God's purposes to make things right, not just for us but for all creation, to make things whole and to bring everlasting peace.
- Both concepts are linked though because to make things right God had to free us from the negative impact of sin's hold on the world that gets in the way of all things being reconciled to God.
- This is the reason a popular metaphor for understanding Jesus' death and resurrection is that it represents Jesus' victory over sin and its ultimate consequence of death. In Christian theology, this is known as Christus Victor, which literally means '*Christ, the Victor*'.
- Crucially however, this is a victory of love over power, control and might, which is the reason Jesus commanded us to '*love God, who we cannot see, by loving our neighbours, who we can*'.
- It is the reason Paul affirms that '*love is the fulfilment of the law*' in Romans 13:10 and why he views love as the primary virtue that binds all others '*together in perfect unity*', **Colossians 3:14**.

Kingdom & Shalom

- The Hebrew word for this type of wholeness and wellness in the Bible is shalom, which includes the idea of peace but goes far beyond it.
- Shalom* is the idea that all things are restored to the way they should be when all creation is in right relationship with God so they are complete, healthy and whole.
- This is the reason Revelation's vision of a new heaven and new earth sees an end to '*death, mourning and crying and pain*', **Revelation 21:4** when all the things that cause poverty, need, sickness and suffering have been dealt with.
- It is the reason **2 Timothy 2:22** encourages us to '*pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace*'.
- It is the reason we are made in the image of God so that we reflect the character of God whose nature and character is justice, righteousness and *shalom* and we partner with God to bring in as much of God's kingdom of everlasting peace as we can now.
- It is the basis upon which Jesus taught us to pray, '*Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven*', **Matthew 6:9-10**, because when we do, we are petitioning for God's justice, righteousness and *shalom* to be present in our lives and in the world now whilst holding the real hope it will be ever-present in the new age to come.

Faith Foundations

God's Revelation Through the Bible

Week Seven: What gets in our way and what shows us the Way

The Power of Sin
The Unholy Trinity
Wisdom, Word & Spirit

Key text: **Matthew 6: 12-14; 1 Corinthians 2: 13**



The Power of Sin

- As the Genesis 1 and 2 creation account testifies, Christians understand that God is good and therefore, can only create and generate goodness so that anything not good cannot be created and come from God.
- However, sin and evil are present and are a reality so, how can this be when God only created good; how can sin be possible when we are made in the image of a God who is only good?
- To understand this, Christian theology has tended to assert that as sin cannot be created it must represent a lack of God's goodness or in other words, sin occurs when we act in selfish ways apart from or against God's goodness and evil occurs when we act completely devoid of God's goodness or with selfishness that is completely out of control.
- Put another way, sin happens when our own self-determination leads us to speak and act in ways that take us away from, rather than toward, God's will.
- Rather counter to our western individualism, when Paul talks about sin it's almost always in the sense of sin in the singular as a power or a controlling force over us that is present in the world and acting against God rather than individual '*sins*' in the plural that we individually commit. **Romans 5:21.**
- Paul isn't saying we don't all commit individual sins but rather that the reason we do is because of the presence of sin as a powerful force that has a hold over us.
- Because of this, we have to understand that we all live in a world influenced by sin, that has broken and damaged people and that all of us experience sin as a victim of others selfish choices and as conspiring perpetrators because of our own selfish choices.
- In this way, sin is a vicious and powerful cycle that humans get stuck in and we can see numerous examples of this in our world today!
- This seemingly unending cycle is the reason Jesus died for, or because of, sin (not his but the world's), in solidarity with us in our sin (not his but ours) so that sin no longer has this hold on us because Jesus took on and dealt with sin as a power. **Hebrews 9:28.**
- Jesus' faithful obedience means that as new creation people we can now break free of sin's hold over us, and because its ultimate power, death, has been defeated by Jesus' resurrection, it will never again have the final say. **Romans 8:1-2.**
- This is also the reason Jesus focused his attention on those in political and religious power whose sin was oppressing ordinary people; Jesus had good news for the oppressed but it wasn't good news for the oppressor as the kingdom of God was coming to take away their power and their privilege and the powers behind their power! **Luke 4:18-19.**
- This means that when we place our trust in Jesus and follow the way he showed us to live, we experience God's saving grace.
- Salvation therefore, is this freedom from sin's power and influence over us so we can experience healing and restoration and work toward being human beings who are whole and well in the way we live for ourselves and others.
- Jesus taught us to pray for God's forgiveness and to pray that we will be forgiven by those we have hurt because this is how the cycle of sin's power is broken, **Matthew 6:12-15.**

The Unholy Trinity

- Scripture talks about the world, the flesh and the devil - what is often called the '*unholy trinity*', as things that can get in the way of our right relationship with God.
- But, how do we understand this for us as Christians today?
- The World is a way of describing the pressures from our prevailing culture and society; it's the norms and values that come out of the way we think as societies and are therefore, expected to live our lives.
- The Flesh is a way of understanding our own freewill choices and self-determination or, as Eastern Christian Theology helpfully understands, it is the tension between our gnostic will (self) and our natural will that, because we are made in the image of God, is orientated toward God.
- The Devil represents the presence of evil and evil forces that influence our world, which the New Testament often refers to as the principalities and powers behind oppressive political regimes and particularly in its context empire – today, it is the power behind the forces that seek to control, coerce, deceive, limit and abuse us.
- All of these forces result in sin, which can be understood as anything that works against the good that God creates and so breaks the healthy connections between people and people, people and the natural world and people and God.

Wisdom, Word & Spirit

- So practically, how do we live '*in the world*' that is influenced by sin as new creation people while not being '*of the world*'?
- This is especially in light of the fact that as humans we still sin even though we are trying to follow Jesus as best we can.
- Well, it doesn't mean everything in the world is bad and only Christian things are good and it doesn't mean we can't learn from good people who do good things in the world and it definitely doesn't mean we are meant to try and insulate ourselves in a holy huddle away from the world, after all, how could we then be obedient to Jesus' command to go and make disciples of all peoples?
- Rather, it means that our intentions are no longer orientated toward sin or consumed by our own selfishness.
- This means we need wisdom to understand how Jesus would likely respond, what Godly values are in any given situation and to know what our '*inner peace*' or conscience is telling us, **Colossians 3:15**.
- To help us gain wisdom we need to read and interpret the Bible well to understand how it is pointing to a Jesus-looking God and how we can live this out practically so that we and others flourish.
- And it does need us to be open to God's Spirit to help us; the Holy Spirit is called '*the helper*' in the New Testament, so that we pay attention to the '*still small voice*', **1 Kings 19:12** speaking to our conscience.
- Our focus and the result should be good fruit and so we need to be able to recognise good fruit when we see it, **Galatians 5:22**, which is revealed by love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control, and are things that lead to human flourishing and so, are life-giving.

Faith Foundations

God's Revelation Through the Bible

Week Eight: Christ, the Messiah

The Messiah with a Twist
The Perfect Image-bearer
The Mission Initiator

Key text: **Luke 24: 25-27, 32-34**



A Messiah with a Twist

- It's not Jesus Christ; Christ is not Jesus' surname! Christ is the Greek translation of the Hebrew word that means Messiah. Rather, it is Jesus the Messiah or Jesus the Christ. So, whenever you read Jesus Christ in your Bible add *'the'* so it's Jesus the Christ or for Christ Jesus, *'the'* Christ, Jesus. This is a helpful reminder that *'Christ'* is a title or a role that means *'anointed one'* and not a name.
- Specifically, it is a Jewish concept that relates to one who would fulfil God's promises to Israel after their covenant breaking exile.
- However, in line with all of God's covenants the messiah's ultimate purpose is to bless the whole world so all be included in God's family.
- On this, it is important to be clear that the Gentile world was never expectantly waiting for a messiah and so, it is a reminder that in general neither are our friends, neighbours and work colleagues today.
- Although Jesus does carry both titles, *'messiah'* is not equivalent to *'Son of God'*; first-century Jews were not expecting their *'anointed one'* to be divine in the way we understand Jesus as Christians, and in fact the opposite is true because they were expecting a human king, who were often referred to as *'sons of God'*, in the mould of King David, who would overthrow the Romans, give them their independence and allow them to freely worship at the Temple.
- This is the reason theologians like NT Wright talk of Jesus fulfilling Israel's story but with a surprising twist because Jesus was a very different kind of messiah than they were expecting!
- It is the reason when Jesus rides into Jerusalem being proclaimed by the people as the Son of David, the deliverer king, he rides on a donkey, which was a symbol of a king coming in peace and humility, **Zechariah 9:9**, to show he was going to be a very different king of a counter culture kingdom.
- As the Graham Kendrick worship song powerfully asserts, *'our God is meekness and majesty'*.
- Jesus is the prince of peace of an everlasting kingdom, **Isaiah 9:6-7**, where weapons of violence will be turned into tools to produce food for all because war is forgotten, **Isaiah 2:4**; **Joel 3:10**, **Micah 4:3** and the lion will lie with the lamb, **Isaiah 11:6**; **Isaiah 65:25**.

The perfect Image-bearer

- Where there is continuity between the Old Testament and New Testament expectations of the messiah is that they were intended to be someone who would deliver God's promise to free his people from oppressive rule and put in place a new and everlasting age of peace, prosperity for all (justice and righteousness restored) and healing, not just for people but for the land and in fact all creation.
- This is *shalom*, which is the ultimate Biblical point of salvation that the messiah brings about.
- This is what the Old covenant was supposed to deliver and so it is what the Old Testament prophets were pointing to and what we as Christians understand as being fulfilled by Jesus' faithfulness so that Jesus is the whole 'point' of the Biblical story, **Luke 24:13-35**.
- Jesus is the *'anointed one'* because, through his obedience, he was able to perfectly fulfil his calling as God's servant and representative, despite the sin of the world, even to the point of sacrificing his own life for us.
- It is the reason we understand Jesus as the *'new'* Adam because being made in the image of a good God the *'original'* Adam had all the potential to fulfil God's creation covenant intentions, but could not do it. **Romans 5:15-18**.
- The faithful obedience of Jesus however, did and so as Jesus followers we made in the image of God but being remade in the image of Christ.

The Mission Initiator

- Jesus, the Messiah does not just fulfil the words of the prophets though; he is a prophet himself, as many gospel passages speak to and in fact, as **Revelation 19:10** says, he is the very embodiment of the Spirit of prophecy, **Matthew 21:11; 21:46, Luke 4:24, 7:16, John 4:19, 6:14, John 7:40**.
- What Jesus did for us by sacrificing himself and overcoming death through his resurrection also means Jesus is our eternal high priest or as **1 Timothy 2:5** puts it our '*one mediator between God and humankind*' because Jesus fulfilled what no human priest, even the high priest, was ever able to achieve by being able to permanently represent us before and with God, **Hebrews 2:17; 4:14-15, 7:3, 8:1-6**.
- Paul writes that Jesus' resurrection, by the power of the Spirit of God, finally revealed him as the Son of God that the Biblical prophets were pointing to, **Romans 1:2-5**.
- In conclusion, all this points to a need to embrace a broader vision of the '*Messiah*', because Scripture speaks as much or even more about the mission of the messiah than the person.
- The person, Jesus, is obviously fundamental but his ultimate mission, to '*put things right*' that are currently wrong in creation, to bring in the new age of peace and wholeness and reconciliation of all creation, is the point.
- So yes, we absolutely follow the way of Jesus so that we can be in right relationship with God but in doing this we too are partners in this mission to represent God well, by using our blessedness to be a blessing to others so that we can make this new kingdom as much of a reality now whilst carrying the real hope it will be an ever-present in the future.
- *"It is not so much that God has a mission for his church in the world, as that God has a church for his mission in the world. Mission was not made for the church; the church was made for mission – God's mission."*
Christopher Wright The Mission of God
- This is all made possible as the result of the divine and the human being in right relationship, which can only be achieved when we enter into communion with the eternal divine Father-Son relationship of love revealed through Jesus that is enabled by the presence of the Holy Spirit as the outworking of their union.

Faith Foundations

God's Revelation Through the Bible

Week Nine: The Church and the New Kingdom, *'Now but Not Yet'*

God's Kingdom Mission

God's Kingdom Now

God's Kingdom to Come

Key text: **Matthew 5: 3- 16; Luke 4: 18-19**



God's Kingdom Mission

- River Marlow is a church among many that emphasises the kingdom of God and so, it is a key element of our theology.
- River Marlow is a Spirit-led church who see the Holy Spirit as our guide and power to help us make God's kingdom a reality now.
- River Marlow's mission therefore, can be said to partner with God to help people experience the reality of the kingdom of God.
- When we say at River Marlow that we are non-religious, it is in part because we believe church is about faithfully following the way of Jesus, as the king of God's kingdom, to transform our life and others, rather than being about compliance to a set of fixed doctrines or mere attendance to a religious service in a building.
- Similarly, our values of generosity and inclusion are central to how we believe the kingdom of God is practically made known in our world. **John 10:10**.
- Although the phrase '*kingdom of God*' is not found at all in the Old Testament, compared to the 99 references in the New Testament, it wasn't just a new covenant concept.
- Both John the Baptist and Jesus announced the arrival of the kingdom of God or in Matthew the kingdom of heaven and so, it was clearly something their audiences knew about from their Jewish tradition.
- We see throughout the Old Testament the idea that God is king over everything in heaven and earth and that God is king over a people, Israel.
- However, originally Israel had no human king because God was their King and would lead them successfully in all the ways kings were expected to and more in their ancient near east culture, but was a later concession to their desire to be just like the other nations around them, **1 Samuel 8:5-6, 20**.
- However, earthly kings eventually let God and God's people down, which the Old Testament prophets pick up on by reminding God's people that a king would one day come, as a descendant of King David, to rule on God's behalf forever, **2 Samuel 7:12-13**.
- But it was not just earthly rule because we also get the prophetic anticipation that this coming king will be from heaven and will establish God's rule on earth for all peoples, **Daniel 7:13-14**.
- Finally, Isaiah speaks prophetically about a suffering servant messiah, which also framed the first century context of Jesus because Israel could indeed be thought of as God's suffering servant under oppressive Roman occupation, even though they seemed to prefer the 'conquering hero' version more!
Isaiah 52:13-53:12.

God's Kingdom Now

- It was the early Christian church, when reflecting on Jesus' birth, life and teachings, his death, resurrection and ascension, who joined the dots and came to the understanding that Jesus was the embodiment of all these Old Testament themes and ideas.
- So, Jesus makes multiple references to and teaches about what the kingdom of God is really like in the gospel accounts, including many of his parables.
- And crucially, what you might notice about Jesus' teaching on the kingdom of God is, and this may come as a shock or a surprise, that it is not about going to heaven when we die!
- Jesus describes a kingdom that is close at hand and that we can start to live in now because it is anywhere the rule and reign of God is a reality. **Mark 1:15**.
- This means that 'church' is not another word for '*kingdom*' but it is the reason the church should be all about expressing the kingdom of God now or in other words, if people ask us what the '*kingdom of God*' is like we should be able to point them to us as a church community as the demonstration of it in action!
- So, wherever God is acknowledged as supreme and the Spirit of God is moving so that peace is present, wherever there is healing, both physical and emotional, wherever things are being put right so that justice and righteousness is a reality and where love, joy, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control are the most prevalent qualities, then the kingdom of God is found there.

God's Kingdom to Come

- Fantastic, but we know and so have to recognise that in reality this is not the whole story either in our world after 2,000 years of Christianity and neither sadly, in many of the churches that represent God.
- This is because there is an inherent tension that Jesus speaks about when he teaches that we are to pray for the kingdom to come, **Matthew 6:10**, but that also the kingdom is something we can and should expect to experience now, **Matthew 6:33**.
- Christianity has always recognised and wrestled with this tension and come to understand it as a paradox so, it is not a case of *'either/or'* but *'both/and'*, because both can be true at the same time.
- The kingdom is *'here already'* because of what Jesus has done but it is *'not yet'* present in all of its fullness and will not be until Jesus' return to restore all things to the way they should be.
- This means we are living in the tension of the in-between times, which we have to face up to if we are to going be faithful and credible witnesses to Jesus and his kingdom.
- The reason Jesus taught us to pray for God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven is because God's will is not done all the time; we know that our prayers go unanswered; we know that bad things happen to good people who love God; we know that not everyone we pray for is cured; we know there is still war and violence and that people fall out and hurt one another.
- And, in light of this *'now but not yet'* kingdom experience, it can be all too easy to slip into *'folk theology'* for a quick and easy answer; we didn't have enough faith, everyone praying didn't have enough faith, there was some unconfessed sin that stopped God working, God is mysterious so it must be part of his greater plan that we can't see or God has answered our prayer but we are just not living in the reality of it yet, and so on.
- Authentic faith is not living in denial; it is not refusing to accept the data and the facts and it is not accepting bad as good, but rather authentic faith is embracing the reality of life and yet still choosing to follow Jesus and be in relationship with God and to pray and worship through the tough times as well as the good.
- God never promised to give us everything we think we need whenever we want it but we can be assured of God's presence through the Spirit of Jesus always in everything we face in life and so we can trust God that our prayers and our worship and our acts of kindness do make a difference, and to quote John Calvin do *'make the invisible kingdom visible in our midst'*.
- God came to us in human form to be in solidarity with all that we face and God's love is so complete that it led to the ultimate sacrifice for us for all time and crucially, this sacrifice defeated death so that nothing can now ever *'separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus'*, **Romans 8:37-39**, which means that our relationship with God will continue into the age to come when the new earth and new heavens will come fully together under God's absolute kingdom rule.
Amen!

Faith Foundations

God's Revelation Through the Bible

River Church Marlow acknowledges and thanks Stephen Burnhope (PhD) and his recent book ***Reading the Bible with Its Writers**** that was used as a main source and reference guide for these teaching series notes. We would encourage you to read this book alongside them.

*Reading the Bible with Its Writers, ***What They Were Saying, Why They Said It, How They Said It***, Stephen Burnhope, Cascade Books, 2025