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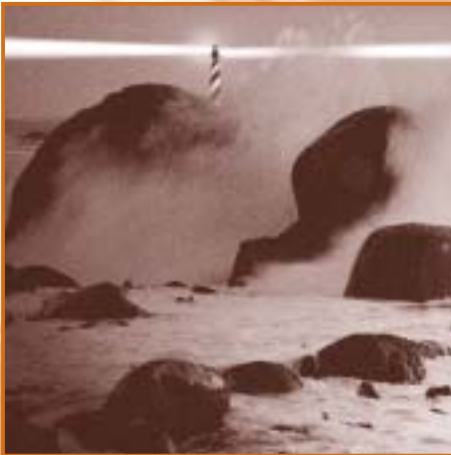
(THE BIBLE EXPLAINED)

START

THE CHURCH / THE LAST THINGS

BIBLE
TRUTH
TREASURY

OPEN HOME:
OPEN BIBLE



RICHARD BEWES / ROBERT HICKS

MAKING THE MOST OF THIS SERIES

PERSONAL STUDY

The Fresh Start series of books is a companion to the Bible. It can be used as reference to aid Bible teaching, and for personal, regular study of the scriptures. Each book is made up of 12 studies. If the whole series is completed, studying one section each week, all the material will be covered in a year.

Each study is contained in two pages.

The main text gives the theological overview. The Key Truth panel text summarises the subject. The Postscript panel text protects from arriving at wrong conclusions.

The Bible Study section, while having a multiple use, is ideal for home study groups, which it was designed for. This gives a passage of the Bible, selected to convey the main emphasis of the main study, with questions that are purposely designed to open up discussion.

GROUP STUDY

Study groups of all ages will benefit from the teaching they discover as they follow the guidelines within the course.

Group leaders should prepare by: becoming familiar with the passages provided, and be ready to support them with cross references; carefully read the study material; be prepared to ask questions as a basis for discussion, and prepare further questions of their own.

CHURCH PROGRAMME

Ministers, pastors and teachers will find this material an invaluable reference source when preparing programmes for the church. The headings have been phrased so that the truth of the Bible is contained within the words of the headings themselves.

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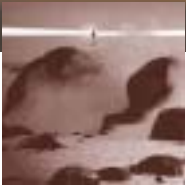
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THE CHURCH

ITS CHARACTERISTICS A

1 It is the Church of Jesus Christ (historical)

Through the centuries it is only the Church that has experienced the presence of Jesus Christ within its membership. This is because it is *Christ's* Church, purchased for himself by his own blood, and cared for as a husband cares for his wife. Jesus declared that where two or three individuals meet in his name there his promised presence would be experienced. No matter how small the group – there is the Church.

BIBLE CHECK Matthew 16:18; Matthew 18:20

2 It is the company of all believers (universal)

This is the Church of *different eras*: past, present and future – together, they form the Church. It is the Church of *different cultures*, found in countries scattered over the earth, but united by its common Lord. It is a Church of *different characteristics*, abilities and temperaments, and it is a Church featuring *different levels of experience*, from elderly Christians to the newest disciples – yet one Church.

BIBLE CHECK Colossians 3:11; Revelation 7:9,10

3 It is a unity of the Spirit (spiritual)

The unity of the Spirit, of which the apostle Paul wrote, is more important than the differences of groups and denominations. The Church can only truly be one, because of the one Spirit who unites it.

Although all Christians are to work for unity and mend divisions, it is not uniformity nor unanimity that they are to seek. Rather, it is a recognition of all who exhibit the family likeness.

BIBLE CHECK Ephesians 4:4-6; John 17:20-23

4 Its authority is God's word (scriptural)

Down the ages the Church has had a vital relationship with the scriptures; it is the scriptural revelation that is the basis of the Church's belief and stability.

The Church has been commissioned to defend this revelation, to proclaim it, and to submit to its authority. The Bible is the Church's authority and tells us all that we need to know about salvation and Christian conduct. On these, the Bible has the final say. On other matters, however, such as church government, there is no clear blueprint – and this no doubt helps to explain the differences existing between churches even in New Testament times.

BIBLE CHECK Jude 3; 2 Timothy 1:13,14

5 Its programme is worldwide (international)

The programme of the Church is the programme of Christ. Jesus said that his task was to bring good news to the poor and liberation to the oppressed.

When Christ's earthly ministry had finished, he commanded the Church to carry out his mission to the world. The Book of Acts shows us the way in which the Church's mission expanded from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria, and then to the whole earth. Our task is one of evangelism and service and to do this, we are empowered by the Holy Spirit.

BIBLE CHECK Luke 4:16-21; John 20:21; Acts 1:8

6 Its destiny is heaven (eternal)

The Church on earth is living between two comings. It looks back to the birth and ministry of Jesus Christ, and it looks forward to his glorious return.

Meanwhile it works in the knowledge that Christ is preparing a future home. On a certain day, known only to God, the trumpet will sound and the Church will be united to Christ.

BIBLE CHECK Matthew 24:30,31; John 14:1-3



THE CHURCH

ITS CHARACTERISTICS B

► BIBLE STUDY EPHESIANS 2:11-22

Paul the apostle recognised Ephesus as a strategic centre for reaching out with the message of Christ into the whole Roman province of 'Asia,' now western Turkey. Ephesus was important as a cultural, commercial, political and religious centre. While in essence it was Gentile and heathen, it also had a sizable Jewish population.

It was this letter to the Ephesian Christians that the New Testament's teaching about the Church as God's new society reached perhaps its richest form – in a society that provided as hostile an environment for church growth as could be found anywhere.

1 In verses 11-13, take up each of the terms that described the spiritual status of the Gentiles. How great was the gulf between them and the Jewish covenant? And what was the one factor that could possibly bring unity between the two alien groupings?

2 Did you notice the 'but' of verse 13? (Compare 2:4.) Continue now with the 'for' of verse 14. What was Christ's purpose? What were his achievements (verse 14-18)?

3 'One new man' (verse 15 ... 'a single new humanity' (New English Bible). Notice that Jews do not become Gentiles, or Gentiles Jews. Here is an altogether new being. What conclusions do you draw from this passage as you view the world Church scene? What corrections may we need to make?

4 Here, in verses 19-22 is described something to rival Ephesus' great temple of Artemis – but with many differences! Describe them.

5 Come back to the cross (verses 13 and 16), and rediscover your unity with the followers of Jesus everywhere.

Reflection

A Read Ephesians 4:1-16. What gives the Church its essential unity (verses 4-6)? How is this preserved? How does this compare with the kind of unity that Christians should seek (verses 11-16). How is this achieved?

B A church leader once said, "The Church is the only institution in the world which exists primarily for the benefit of non-members." How far do you agree with this statement?

C Some Christians strongly emphasise their own church tradition. Others treat denominations as unhealthy. Yet others are indifferent. What is your view?

D Read 1 Timothy 3:15. What can your own circle of Christian friends do to further the truth of God more?

Key Truth

The Church of Christ is the whole company of redeemed people. Christ is present and active in the Church, and uses it for his work in the world.

Postscript

The biblical picture of the Church, as described above, helps the Church to keep the right priorities in its mission and worship. It also serves as an accurate test to show whether movements and sects which claim to be part of the Church are true or false.



THE CHURCH

ITS MAIN DESCRIPTION A

1 A firm building

The New Testament letters take up Christ's theme of 'building' his Church – although this idea is not to be confused in any way with literal buildings for Christian worship.

The apostles Paul and Peter, in particular, saw the Church as a *spiritual building*, composed of 'living stones' – Christians. This picture shows us how Christians depend upon each other and upon Christ as the building's cornerstone.

BIBLE CHECK | Peter 2:4,5; Ephesians 2:20-22

2 A virgin bride

A relationship of deep intimacy is suggested by the New Testament idea of the Church 'married' to Christ. We are told that Christ loves the Church, and has made it pure and faultless by his death.

The apostle John's vision of the new heaven and the new earth describes the Church as Christ's bride, prepared and ready to meet her husband.

BIBLE CHECK Ephesians 5:25-27; Revelation 21:2

3 A functioning body

The picture of the Church as a body, with Christ as its head, emphasises that the Church is a living organism and not an organisation.

As in the picture of the Church as a building, the *dependence* of the Church upon Christ is stressed, but we also learn the important truth that no member of the body is disposable – or of overriding importance.

BIBLE CHECK | Corinthians 12:12-31; Ephesians 1:22,23; 4:15,16

4 A permanent city

The theme of the city of God is usually seen in the Bible as a future hope. God's people live as strangers in the world, and are looking for the city which is to come.

The city of God is mentioned a number of times in the Book of Revelation, where the writer is speaking of the Church. When God's chosen people are finally brought to completion, the city will be a vast community of purpose, life, activity and permanent security.

BIBLE CHECK Hebrews 13:14; Revelation 21:10-27

5 A stable family

The terms 'family' or 'household' of God point again to the relationship that exists in the Church between the members and the head. And God's very fatherhood provides a pattern for family life now.

Great encouragement – particularly to Gentile converts in the early Church – was found in the fact that all shared equally in the privileges of God's household, Jews and Gentiles alike. No longer was the Gentile an outsider or foreigner. This should also be true of the Church today – because barriers spoil the family life God wants the Church to have.

BIBLE CHECK Ephesians 2:19; 3:14,15; 1 Timothy 3:14,15

6 An active army

The references to the Church as an army are not heavily pronounced in scripture. However, the New Testament teaches that the Church is involved in a spiritual warfare.

Intensity, activity and victory are the main ideas conveyed to us by this imagery; the weapons and the victory itself being God's.

BIBLE CHECK Ephesians 6:12; Revelation 12:11



THE CHURCH

ITS MAIN DESCRIPTION **B**

► BIBLE STUDY 1 PETER 2:1-10

This wonderful letter, written by the apostle Peter in AD 63 or 64, came out just in time to prepare the harrassed and scattered Christians of Asia Minor for the great persecution that erupted under the emperor Nero in the summer of 64. Its message is one of hope and confidence despite 'all kinds of trials' (1:6).

Like Paul to the Ephesians, Peter in this passage uses vivid terminology to describe the new society that God has brought into existence through Christ.

Use these questions to assist the study:

- 1** Read verses 1-3. This was no time for believers to turn on each other, but rather develop a healthy spiritual appetite. How much are you praying for yourself and for each other in this respect? 'Make us hungry!'
- 2** In verses 4 and 5 the metaphor changes from babies to ... what?
- 3** In the spiritual and 'invisible' temple of the Church, what place and function does Christ have in verses 4-8? Notice from the Old Testament quotations how Christ is both a source of confidence and a disaster. Why is this so?
- 4** Four descriptions of the Christian community follow in verse 9. How are we to see ourselves in a largely unbelieving society? What are our functions, in verses 9-12?
- 5** 'The people of God' (verse 10). If no other group is classed in this way, what is this saying to us in the Church?
- 6** Animal sacrifices belonged to the past. What is a 'spiritual sacrifice' (verse 5)?

Key Truth

There are a number of different pictures of the Church in the New Testament. Looked at together, these pictures give us a full idea of the nature and character of the Church and its mission.

Postscript

It must be emphasised that the Church is an organism rather than an organisation, a living fellowship rather than mere buildings, a close family rather than a collection of individuals.

Reflection

A Read and think about 1 Peter 2:1-10. A number of figurative expressions are used of Christians in this passage. Try to list them, and consider their implications.

B Which of the various descriptions of the Church have you found most helpful? Why?

C Reflect on how much Christ has done for his Church, as you consider each picture of the Church in turn.

D Look at 1 Corinthians 12:12-31. What do these verses tell us about the jealousy and pride in the Church? How do you regard those in your fellowship who seem more gifted, and those who seem less gifted than yourself?



THE CHURCH

ITS RELATIONSHIP TO CHRIST A

1 Christ died for the Church

Christ's death is related not simply to individuals, but to the people of God, the Church. The announcement to Mary about the impending birth of Jesus was that he would save *his people* from their sins.

It was clear, when Jesus took the cup and gave it to his disciples at the last supper, that he saw his death as bringing a new 'Israel' or people of God into being. Ever since that time, the Church has remembered in the Lord's Supper the cost Christ paid to found the Church.

BIBLE CHECK Matthew 1:21; 26:26-29; Acts 20:28

2 Christ builds the Church

Jesus came to found, not a philosophy, but a community. It was basic to the early Christians' thought that new converts were immediately added to the fellowship; that all who had fellowship with the Father and the Son would be related to one another.

It was more than addition, however. Christ is the very source of the Church's life, and so to be in the Church is to experience Christ's life in a unique way. By his Spirit he directs the Church, gives spiritual gifts to its members and creates unity and love.

BIBLE CHECK Ephesians 4:11-16; Acts 2:46,47

3 Christ protects the Church

In the Old Testament God's people were often protected by God, for example, in the story of the blazing furnace in the book of Daniel.

In the New Testament, we are told that Christ protects his people, the Church. He defends the Church from the attacks of Satan, and preserves it in adversity. More than this, he provides the power for the Church to launch its own attacks against Satan. The Church is not on the *defensive* – it is on the *offensive*.

BIBLE CHECK Daniel 3:19-27; Matthew 16:18,19

4 Christ purifies the Church

In the Old Testament, some of the prophets pictured Israel as a wife who had been unfaithful to her husband. God's people had been unfaithful to the promises they had made in their covenant with him.

The Church is only seen as faithful and pure in the New Testament because of Christ. He has cleansed the Church by his death, and continues to keep her holy. We are told that finally Christ will receive the Church as a perfect bride: faithful and pure.

BIBLE CHECK Jeremiah 3:6,14; Ephesians 5:25-27

5 Christ intercedes for the Church

The word 'intercede' means to act on someone else's behalf as a peacemaker. It is encouraging to know that because of Christ's death on our behalf, he is now in heaven as a man, representing us before the Father.

Because Christ intercedes for us, we are assured of at least three guarantees. First, we are forgiven because of his death. Second, we have free access to God because of his presence in heaven. Third, we are protected against condemnation for our sins by his words spoken in our defence.

BIBLE CHECK Hebrews 7:25-27; 1 John 2:1; Romans 8:34

6 Christ prepares for the Church

Jesus reassured his friends when he warned them of his departure that they need not be anxious about the future, as he would be preparing a home for them. This shows us that Christ loves the Church, and longs to enjoy the company of these who believe in him. His work will not be complete until the Church is in the place he has prepared for it.

BIBLE CHECK John 14:1-4; 1 Thessalonians 4:16,17



THE CHURCH

ITS RELATIONSHIP TO CHRIST **B**

► BIBLE STUDY EPHESIANS 4:1-16

Paul is far from his friends, under house arrest in Rome, awaiting trial under Nero. Yet he is able to remind his readers of the soaring heights to which Christ has lifted the members of God's New Society in Ephesus; men and women who have been *chosen in him*, predestined, *made alive with Christ*, reconciled *through the Cross*, given *access to the Father*, made *fellow-citizens* and built into a *holy temple*.

1 In view of the Ephesian Christians' high calling, how are they now to live (verses 1-3)?

2 When it comes to unity, notice the frequency of the word 'one' (verses 3-6). What does this tell us about certain unchangeable facets of the world-wide Christian Church?

3 Move on to verse 13. If, in verse 3, there is already in existence a spiritual unity to be maintained, there seems to be a second unity that is yet to be attained. Try to establish from verses 13 and 14 the nature of this unity and goal that still lies ahead.

4 If the Church at large – indeed any local fellowship – is travelling from a unity that already exists towards a unity that lies ahead, what lies between? What makes it possible to negotiate this journey? The clue lies in verses 7-12.

5 If oneness was the earlier theme, now the diversity of the gifts given by the incarnate and now ascending Christ (verses 9,10) comes into prominence. What are the gifts for?

6 The Head ... the body (verse 15,16). How do we practice this unique relationship?

Reflection

A Consider the message of Revelation 3:1-6. John is conveying Christ's message to the church in Sardis (in present-day Turkey). How is this passage relevant to the Church in general, and to your fellowship today? List the accusations, the challenges, and the promises of these verses.

B "The Bible knows nothing of solitary religion" (John Wesley). Why should a Christian bother about the Church of Jesus Christ?

C Look at Revelation 1:5,6. What has Jesus done for his Church?

D Read Daniel 3:13-28. What message is there in this story for today's Church?

Key Truth

The life, witness and continuance of the Church is totally dependent upon its relationship to Jesus Christ, its builder and protector.

Postscript

Christ's love for his Church led him to give up his own life for her. The Church is called to do the same – to submit to the interests of her Lord and to fulfil his will.



THE CHURCH

ITS AUTHORITY AND MISSION **A**

1 Guarding the truth

The Church is not to create truth, but guard it. It is described as the pillar of the truth; as contender for the faith that has been entrusted to God's people.

Thus the Church must follow the apostles both in its standard of teaching and quality of mission. It must do more than guard the truth – it must proclaim it. Equally, it must do more than speak – it must speak the truth. The Church is to be scripturally-minded and missionary-hearted.

BIBLE CHECK | Timothy 3:15; Jude 3; | Timothy 6:20

2 Correcting the unruly

The Bible teaches that the authority of church leaders must be held in high regard if there is to be healthy discipline in the fellowship. On the other hand, leaders are to be held accountable for their standard of teaching and personal morality.

Indiscipline, immorality and division in the Church are not to be condoned. However, all disciplinary measures are to be tempered by the desire to build up the offender and by the forgiveness that surrounds the family of Christ.

BIBLE CHECK Hebrews 13:17; | Corinthians 5:9-13

3 Challenging evil

Morally, spiritually and doctrinally, the Church of God has always been surrounded by evil. The Bible teaches that evil can be overcome by the power of good. The Church must challenge evil by its vigilance and by its determination to live and preach the truth.

BIBLE CHECK Romans 12:17-21; Jude 19-21

4 Evangelising the world

Before he ascended, Jesus gave his disciples a specific command that is to be obeyed by the Church in every age. They were to make disciples everywhere, spreading the good news of Christ throughout the world.

We are to announce that Jesus Christ, once crucified for the sins of the world, is alive, and that he is Lord; that forgiveness and the gift of his Spirit are for all who belong to him through repentance and faith. The message is to be proclaimed universally, obediently, relevantly, joyfully and yet urgently. We do it at his command.

BIBLE CHECK Matthew 28:18-20; | Thessalonians 1:5-10

5 Serving the world

Jesus never expected the Church to be a proclaimer of words without being a performer of deeds. Christian service is a partner of evangelism, both activities being a necessary part of the mission of God.

Christ is the example for the service that his Church is commanded to bring to the world. He fed the hungry, he healed the sick and he brought hope to the despairing. He identified with humanity in all its needs.

The same should be true of the fellowship he came to create.

BIBLE CHECK | John 3:17,18; Titus 3:8; Philippians 2:5-7

6 Glorifying God

The Church lives for the glory of God. In all that it does, it should direct attention and praise to God. It fulfils this purpose as it bears fruit in faithful service, and mirrors his love.

More particularly, it glorifies God as, following in the steps of Christ, it suffers with him. Jesus said that the hour of his death was the hour of greatest glory. So the suffering and the glory of God's kingdom are combined in Jesus.

BIBLE CHECK John 12:27,28; | Peter 4:12-14; Revelation 1:9



THE CHURCH

ITS AUTHORITY AND MISSION **B**

► BIBLE STUDY 1 THESSALONIANS 1:1-10

Thessalonica lay right across the Via Egnatia, a great Roman trunk road which ran from western Greece right through to Constantinople and the east. East and west met at Thessalonica. As early as AD 4 Paul came to the city, and had a three-week mission there, before Jewish opposition forced out the evangelists.

The account is written for us in Acts 17:1-9.

But those three weeks were enough; a Church had been started! Some months later Paul wrote to the new Church. Had mission 4 failed? Evidently not, for good news had been brought to him by Timothy (3:2). Paul writes this opening passage with joy:

1 Thessalonica was a test case in heathen Europe. What are the evidences that the mission had not failed? Look at verse 2-5, and list the graces. How typical are these of Christian disciples?

2 Now analyse the experience in verses 6 and 7. To what extent was this new Church a model of New Testament patterns? Compare Acts 14:22. In the world today where do we see these same characteristics?

3 Now absorb the impact of this Church, in verses 8-10. To what extent had the Via Egnatia played a part? What was the reputation of this young energetic Church?

4 Your church could touch the world. The Roman roads have given way to other communication aids, including the Internet. But there are other resources open to Christians across the centuries, chief of which is intercessory prayer. What is your church or fellowship doing to make your faith 'known everywhere'?

5 Look back to the report of Thessalonica's mission in Acts 17. What was the power that explained it all? See Acts 17:7.

Key Truth

The Church is not a passive society in the world. It receives its power and direction from Jesus Christ, who has given it his authority to fulfil his mission.

Postscript

It is repeatedly in the very weakness of the Church that its greatest power is seen.

Reflection

A Read Acts 12:1-19. Consider the Church's situation. What were its problems? Its mood? Its influence? Its surprises?

B Where does the balance lie in practice, for you, between spreading the good news and giving practical service? What adjustments do you need to make?

C How do you react to disagreements in your fellowship? How far do the words of 2 Timothy 2:23-26 apply?

D To what extent are you able to take a positive initiative where you are, in being the 'salt' that improves society (Matthew 5:13)?



THE CHURCH

ITS ORDINANCES **A**

BAPTISM

1 Admission to membership

Ever since Christ's command to make disciples and to baptise them in the name of the Trinity, baptism with water has been the outward distinguishing mark of the Christian.

BIBLE CHECK Acts 2:41

2 More than a symbol

When an Ethiopian official was baptised by Philip the evangelist, he was full of joy, although his knowledge of Jesus was limited. Baptism is a powerful event. Received rightly, it becomes a means of God's grace to the Christian.

BIBLE CHECK Acts 8:38,39

3 Death to the old life

Baptism is a farewell to the old life – it is a baptism into the death of Christ. It signifies that the one baptised has been crucified with him, and that the life of sin and self belongs to the past.

BIBLE CHECK Romans 6: 3,4

4 Rising to the new life

Baptism is the emergence to the new life; it speaks powerfully to Christians of being raised with Christ, of walking in the light, of peace with God.

BIBLE CHECK Colossians 2:12

5 Identification with Christ

In his own baptism, Jesus identified with sinful humanity. In our baptism we are privileged to identify with him, unashamed to be known by his name.

BIBLE CHECK Galatians 3:27

THE LORD'S SUPPER

6 We commemorate

Christ left us no monument or memorial; he never even wrote a book. What he left us was a fellowship 'meal' by which we could draw close to him and remember the sacrifice of his body and his blood given for us in death. *This is the backward look.*

BIBLE CHECK Luke 22:19,20

7 We communicate

It is not a dead Christ who is worshipped in the holy communion, but a risen Saviour. As his people share in the bread and wine, they give thanks and praise, and use the opportunity to renew their fellowship with the risen Lord. *This is the upward look.*

BIBLE CHECK John 6:56

8 We appropriate

Jesus told his disciples to 'take' the bread, as he sat with them. Here is no one-man drama. We are not spectators, but deeply involved; if we come to the Lord's supper with a right attitude, we receive God's grace and strength for Christian living. *This is the inward look.*

BIBLE CHECK Mark 14:22

9 We participate

The disciples all drank from the cup, as it was passed from one to another. It is, indeed, a sharing occasion. Believers do not come together in this way merely as individuals, but as a family. *This is the outward look.*

BIBLE CHECK I Corinthians 10:16,17

10 We anticipate

Christ told his disciples that the Lord's Supper should be observed regularly – until his return. Then our communion with him will be direct, face to face. Thus the service is a pointer ahead. *This is the forward look.*

BIBLE CHECK I Corinthians 11:26



THE CHURCH

ITS ORDINANCES B

► BIBLE STUDY LUKE 22:14-27

Jerusalem was the crossroads for all Judaism. People had flocked to the Holy City to celebrate the event that had propelled their nation into being – the passing-over of the angel of death and the dramatic deliverance from Egypt.

This particular year it was more than routine that brought the extra crowds in. The minds of thousands were occupied with stories of a young Galilean preacher. Would this be the year when political deliverance from Rome would come from him?

1 Jesus himself was wishing the moment nearer. Why? Compare verse 15 with Matthew 26:18.

2 Why did Jesus choose the Passover meal as the occasion to institute what we know now as the Lord's Supper? The clues are all in the passage. Don't miss out on the word covenant. Look up 1 Corinthians 5:7 as a key verse.

3 It sounds strange to modern ears to speak of 'eating the flesh' and 'drinking the blood' of someone. For the meaning of these very Jewish terms take time to look up 1 Chronicles 11:1 and Psalm 27:2 – and we will see that these phrases refer to *taking advantage of the life of someone else*. Apply this now to the Lord's supper for a very clear answer as to what we are doing in the eating and drinking.

4 Discuss the power of 'remembrance' (verse 19) for a believer. What difference would it make to the Church if there was no such event as the Lord's Supper?

5 Is it surprising that in history wrangles and controversy have arisen, even over this holy occasion? What evidence is there of wrong attitudes, even on the founding night?

Reflection

A Read Luke 22:14-27. Why did Jesus connect this event with the Old Testament Passover (see Exodus 12:25-27), and with the new covenant, prophesied by Jeremiah (Jeremiah 31:31-34)?

B Read Acts 16:29-33. In these verses, baptism is shown to be an important event in the Christian's life. Why do you think that baptism is important?

C As you attend the Lord's Supper or holy communion, in what frame of mind should you come – towards Christ himself, yourself, and your neighbour?

D Pick out the encouraging factors about that evening, and also the discouraging elements. What do they tell us about the Gospel and ourselves?

Key Truth

Baptism and the Lord's Supper were both instituted by Jesus Christ as dynamic symbols of the Gospel. The water of baptism signifies cleansing and entry into God's Church. The bread and wine of the holy communion signify the receiving of Christ's body and blood, given for us in death.

Postscript

It is important not to under-emphasise the value of these two ordinances, given by Jesus Christ. Through them we come to a deeper awareness of Christ's death and living presence.



THE CHURCH

ITS MINISTRY AND ORDER A

1 Preaching and teaching

The acceptance of Christianity's revealed truth has never been an optional extra in the Church. We read in the New Testament of the standard or form of teaching required for growth and discipleship.

The issue of false teaching is dealt with on page after page of the New Testament letters. What protected the infant Church was its anchorage in the apostolic teaching, received not merely on an intellectual level, but practised in daily life.

BIBLE CHECK Romans 6:17; 1 Timothy 1:3-7; Acts 2:42

2 Prayer and intercession

Prayer was the power-house of the early Church. It was the unseen weapon that established bridgeheads for the gospel in areas dominated by idolatry and moral darkness.

Prayer is the way in which God's power becomes effective, unhindered by considerations of space, time, culture, or even the prison bars erected by men.

BIBLE CHECK Acts 4:31; Romans 15:30; 1 Timothy 2:1,2

3 Fellowship and caring

It has been pointed out that the early Church was revolutionary. This was not because it roused slaves against their masters, but because it was more revolutionary still – it demolished the old distinctions altogether. The true liberation was freedom in Christ.

People divided by social status, religious background and language now became brothers and sisters in God's household. The apostles taught that widows are of importance in God's family; the sick are to be prayed for, and the hungry fed.

BIBLE CHECK Colossians 3:11; 1 Timothy 5:1,2; James 1:27

4 Worship and praise

Worship is the main purpose of the Church. Jesus promised that even where only two or three met in his name, there he would be present with them. Praise and thanksgiving are the distinctive marks of a living Church.

The worship of the Christian fellowship is not tied to a building or a structured order, although it is possible that 'liturgies' (forms of worship) were developing by the time the New Testament letters were written.

However the New Testament clearly states that it is not only the leaders who worship God, but all God's people. There is a 'priesthood of all believers,' offering spiritual sacrifices.

BIBLE CHECK Colossians 3:16; Hebrews 13:15,16; 1 Peter 2:5-9

5 Leadership and government

In the early Church even the precise patterns and titles of ministry differed a little from church to church. Ephesus had 'elders,' while Philippi had 'bishops' (both presumably describing the same function of pastoral oversight). There were also 'deacons' who served in a helping capacity, while the apostles were in a class of their own.

Those in the pastoral ministry belong to the Church; the Church does not belong to them. They are God's gift to the Church. They are to feed the flock, they are to be blameless in their beliefs and in their conduct and their ministry is to resemble that of Christ, who came to be a servant of all.

BIBLE CHECK Philippians 1:1; 1 Corinthians 3:5; Titus 1:5-9



THE CHURCH

ITS MINISTRY AND ORDER **B**

► BIBLE STUDY TITUS 1:1-16

Crete was the destination of this short but powerful letter, written about AD 62, from Paul to Titus, his trusted colleague. Crete had become a part of the Roman empire in 67 BC; it was a sizeable island, dominating the south Aegean Sea, mountainous, superstitious and tough to handle. The Greek poet Homer said that it had 100 cities. The shaky and inexperienced Church needed a reliable leader, and Paul's letter has much to say about true leadership and service:

- 1** "I left you in Crete" (verse 5). How many of the group know what it is to be left in charge? What were Titus' first tasks?
- 2** 'Straighten out' (verse 5) – the same Greek word is used elsewhere for setting a broken bone. How disordered was the church in Crete? Scan the letter briefly for the give-away clues.
- 3** The appointed elders are to be 'blameless,' though as commentator John Stott states, 'not flawless' – that is, without public blame in a public office. Discuss this insistence on high standards (compare 1 Timothy 3:1-7).
- 4** Examine both the vices and virtues listed here. How should we take similar precautions in public church appointments?
- 5** Notice too the doctrinal purity that is insisted upon (verse 9). The message is 'trustworthy,' for God does not lie (verse 2). What are the two duties required of the faithful teacher (verse 9)?
- 6** What are the chief characteristics of false teachers (verses 10-16)? How are they to be blocked?
- 7** What is the main lesson that you can take from this study for your own fellowship?

Key Truth

The Church is to maintain a presence for God in the world, proclaiming his message and uplifting his name, under the guidance of appointed leaders.

Postscript

It is important neither to create a hierarchy, through undue elevation of the leadership, nor to endanger truth and order in the Church, through devaluation of those with oversight.

Reflection

A Study 1 Peter 5:1-11. List the qualities to be found in one who shepherds God's flock. What was the association in Peter's mind that prompted these terms? Check your answer with John 21:15-17.

B What are the tensions that the Church of Christ inevitably experiences (verses 5-9)?

C Look at 1 Timothy 4:11-16. These are Paul's words to a young church leader, Timothy. What are the responsibilities and rewards of church leadership? In what ways should we pray for our leaders?

D Why is the Church not a 'democracy'? And yet, why is it not a hierarchy?



A THOUGHT FOR EACH DAY

FOCUS ON THE CHURCH

ITS CHARACTERISTICS

It is the Church of Jesus Christ (historical)

Matthew 16:18

It is the company of all believers (universal)

Colossians 3:11

It is a unity of the Spirit (spiritual)

Ephesians 4:4-6

Its authority is God's word (scriptural)

2 Timothy 1:13,14

Its programme is worldwide (international)

Luke 4:16-21

The unity the Church should have

Ephesians 4:1-16

Jesus said, "You must be born again"

John 3:7

AUTHORITY AND MISSION

Guarding the truth

1 Timothy 6:20

Correcting the unruly

1 Corinthians 5:9-13

Challenging evil

Romans 12:17-21

Evangelising the world

Matthew 28:18-20

Serving the world

Titus 3:8

Glorifying God

1 Peter 4:12-14

Jesus said, "What can a man give in exchange for his soul?"

Matthew 16:26

ITS MAIN DESCRIPTION

A firm building

1 Peter 2:4,5

A virgin bride

Revelation 21:2

A functioning body

1 Corinthians 12:12-31

A permanent city

Hebrews 13:14

A stable family

1 Timothy 3:14,15

An active army

Ephesians 6:12

Jesus said, "Love your enemies"

Luke 6:35

ITS ORDINANCES

Baptism – admission to membership

Acts 2:41

Baptism – more than a symbol

Acts 8:38,39

Baptism – death to the old life

Romans 6:3,4

Baptism – rising to the new life

Colossians 2:12

The Lord's Supper – we commemorate

Luke 22:19,20

The Lord's Supper – we anticipate

1 Corinthians 11:26

Jesus said, "God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son"

John 3:16

ITS RELATIONSHIP TO CHRIST

Christ died for the Church

Acts 20:28

Christ builds the Church

Ephesians 4:11-16

Christ protects the Church

Daniel 3:19-27

Christ purifies the Church

Jeremiah 3:6,14

Christ intercedes for the Church

1 John 2:1

Christ prepares for the Church

John 14:1-4

Jesus said, "Be merciful"

Luke 6:36

ITS MINISTRY AND ORDER

Preaching and teaching

Romans 6:17

Prayer and intercession

Romans 15:30

Fellowship and caring

Colossians 3:11

Worship and praise

Colossians 3:16

Leadership and government

Philippians 1:1

Qualities for shepherds of God's flock

1 Peter 5:1-11

Jesus said, "You will be my witnesses"

Acts 1:8



THE LAST THINGS

THE HOPE OF THE CHRISTIAN **A**

OVERVIEW

1 The promises to God's people

God is working in history. The Christian is confident in the righteousness of God, which is working through the events of this world towards the final glory that must eventually follow the ministry and sufferings of Christ. It is his personal return that will usher in the new age.

Resting on the predictions of the Old Testament, the promises of Christ and the conviction of the apostles, the Christian is assured of the sovereign control of God to the end of time.

BIBLE CHECK | Peter 1:10-12; Isaiah 11:1-9

2 The fulfilment of God's purposes

The preaching of the apostles demonstrated the Christian belief that the return of Jesus, to make all things new, would be the ultimate fulfilment of his work of salvation.

For the believer, the appearance of Christ will come as the longed-for conclusion and perfection of the salvation already won through the sacrifice of the cross.

BIBLE CHECK Acts 3:17-21 Romans 8:18-23

3 The defeat of God's enemies

The outcome of the conflict between good and evil is already settled. The death and subsequent resurrection of Jesus has ensured the defeat of sin, death, and all the powers of evil.

But it will not be until Christ's public and powerful return in glory that God's righteousness will be finally upheld. God's victory will then be evident to all.

BIBLE CHECK Philippians 2:9-11; 1 Corinthians 15:24-26

4 A living hope

It is Christ who fills the Christian with the confident expectation the Bible calls 'hope.' All the New Testament passages which describe the last things focus their attention on him.

It is in the resurrection of Jesus that we find particular encouragement. Our living hope is that like him we too shall rise from death to enjoy the new heaven and the new earth from which death and decay are banished. Christ's followers await a new body, incorruptible and powerful. This body will relate to the old existence, but Paul tells us that it will be significantly different.

BIBLE CHECK | Peter 1:3-5; 1 Corinthians 15:20-23,51-55

5 A steadfast hope

The quality of Christian hope is that it imparts courage and patience for the present. It is not a vague desire for better times, nor is it a resigned and passive submission to life's problems while we wait for a new tomorrow.

The hope that is centred in Christ has kept the Church through the ages during persecution and hardship. It is the hope that demolishes fear, and transforms pessimism into godly and practical optimism.

BIBLE CHECK | Thessalonians 1:3; Romans 8:24,25

6 A purifying hope

Our hope in the return of Christ in the future should have a deep effect on the way we live now. Ours is not the hope of the curious who look only for the details of signs and dates while remaining detached and unaffected.

To the Christian, Christ's return is a reality. As a result, priorities, decisions and life-style will inevitably be shaped by the thought of his coming.

BIBLE CHECK | John 3:2,3; Hebrews 10:23-25; Jude 24,25



THE LAST THINGS

THE HOPE OF THE CHRISTIAN B

► BIBLE STUDY 1 PETER 1:1-12

It does not matter which country or century you are from – the description of the Christians to whom the apostle Peter's letter is addressed is all-embracing: *God's elect, strangers in the world, scattered ...* These scattered – and soon to be persecuted – believers had no New Testament; so the opening greeting (verse 2) is packed with helpful reminders that their conversion was no accident. Planned by the Father, achieved by the Son in the sprinkling of his blood and applied by the Spirit in sanctifying power – theirs was a Trinitarian faith.

1 Note the key words in this opening burst of praise (verse 3-8) ... hope ... inheritance ... salvation ... faith. What two great events is this confidence based on – and we must remember that Peter was a first-hand witness!

2 What are the phrases here that point to the believer's eternal security – regardless of the impending suffering mentioned in verse 6 and 7?

3 Identify the words of strong expectation for the future. How does Peter refer to the final culminating point of all our work and witness? How far is this mind set your own?

4 Why do joy and testing go so frequently together in the New Testament? Look up James 1:2; 1 Peter 4:12,13. What should we be teaching new believers about the trials they face?

5 Discuss the wonder of loving someone whom you have never seen with your eyes (verse 8). When did this first begin to happen to you?

6 Why is ours such a privileged era in which to live? Verses 10-12 give us the answer.

Reflection

A Read 1 Peter 1:1-12. What were the circumstances of the readers of this letter? How can a Christian rejoice (verse 8) in the midst of adversity (verse 6)? What is the nature of the Christian hope, and how is it created?

B Christians love someone they have never seen (1 Peter 1:8). How is such love generated and made a reality? Check your answer with Romans 15:4.

C In what ways do you look forward to the future, and to what extent do you fear it?

D How can the Christian's view of the future make a serious contribution to society as it attempts to grapple with the problems of tomorrow?

Key Truth

The Christian's hope is a confidence in the rule and purposes of God, which find their goal in the return of Jesus Christ at the end of the age.

Postscript

Christian history indicates that those who have their eyes on the age to come are the ones who are most effective in this passing age.



THE LAST THINGS

THE PRELUDE TO CHRIST'S RETURN **A**

OVERVIEW

1 In the natural realm

It is extremely important that as we read in the Bible about the famines, earthquakes and plagues that will feature before Christ's return, we should not be too quick to identify such an era with our own.

The Bible's repeated use of the phrase, 'the last times' refers to the entire period between Christ's first and second comings. Therefore, before Christ's return we should not be surprised to see natural and even cosmic disasters.

BIBLE CHECK Luke 21:11,25; Romans 8:22

2 In the social realm

Stress and social disorder are characteristics of the period before Christ's second coming. We are told that people will be arrogant and proud, materialistic and immoral. The Bible says that these will be terrible times when human sin is unchecked.

There will also be those who make a mockery of religion and of any talk of a return by Jesus Christ.

BIBLE CHECK 2 Timothy 3:1-5; Jude 18; 2 Peter 3:3,4

3 In the international realm

Jesus made it plain, as he taught his disciples, that wars, revolutions and political disturbances would characterise the coming age. These events would not mean that the end had come – they would be signs of the presence and advance of the kingdom. They would be the labour pains heralding the birth of the new order.

BIBLE CHECK Mark 13:7,8; Luke 21:9,10

4 In the family realm

Hatred and division, even within families, were predicted by Jesus Christ as being features of the last times.

The family relationship would be endangered, and loyalties would be strained – in certain circumstances to the point of betrayal.

BIBLE CHECK Mark 13:12; Matthew 10:34-36

5 In the personal realm

During the last times, those who have no relationship with God will experience an increase in fear and insecurity.

Jesus predicted that the situation would be similar to that of Noah's generation. There would be aimlessness, with men and women eating and drinking getting married and going about their daily business yet estranged from God and with no real purpose for living.

BIBLE CHECK Luke 21:26; Matthew 24:37-39

6 In the spiritual realm

From descriptions in the book of Revelation we can see that the spiritual realm will be unrestricted in its rebellion. Paul describes the coming of 'the man of lawlessness,' who will declare himself to be God, and will demand worship. Also there will be numerous 'false christs' who will attempt to lead people away from the truth.

The Church, while exercising great influence through its proclamation of the Gospel, will nevertheless face considerable pressure and persecution during the last times.

BIBLE CHECK Matthew 24:4-14; 2 Thessalonians 2:3-10



THE LAST THINGS

THE PRELUDE TO CHRIST'S RETURN **B**

► BIBLE STUDY MATTHEW 24:1-35

Jesus is predicting the End – something that could never be rehearsed – and he needs no rehearsal. But we do, if its reality is ever to sink in. One such rehearsal of future glory occurred in miniature at the Transfiguration (17). Here in this passage Christ starts by rehearsing his disciples with the ‘end’ of something they would be very familiar with – the temple.

1 Verses 1-3: It is vital to observe the nature of the disciples’ questions – two questions in one! What were they assuming?

2 Now scan verses 4-21, as Jesus gives two answers in one. One is on the global and futuristic scale, the other on the local and immediate – with the division occurring at verse 15. Broadly, what are these two predictions about? Why does Jesus telescope them?

3 Rome’s destruction of Jerusalem, and the temple, in AD 70 (verses 15-21) was itself prefigured and ‘rehearsed’ in 169 BC by the desecration of Jerusalem’s temple by the Seleucid king Antiochus Epiphanes – the ‘Abomination that caused desolation’ predicted in Daniel 11:31. What is Jesus emphasising by alluding to this familiar and terrible episode of Jewish history?

4 The teaching is of an approaching catastrophe, the bitter memory of the past – both pointing to the march of history, referred to in verses 4-14 and 22-28. What is the general pattern of events in our own history that believers should be prepared for? Try and list them from these verses.

5 Jesus then speaks of the final end itself (verses 29-35) – of the whole chain of events that would begin to have happened in the lifetime of those present (verse 34). How should Christ’s words affect our lives today?

Key Truth

Before Christ returns, Christians may expect to see varying degrees of disorder in the world. This gives them an opportunity to evangelise and offer hope.

Postscript

In the Gospels, Jesus’ prediction of the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple merges with his description of the last times. Whatever our interpretation, Christ’s prediction about the Temple is a prefigure of his further prediction of the end.

Reflection

A Read Matthew 24:3-14. Try to list the events and patterns foreseen by the Lord as taking place between his departure from earth and his return. In what way do you think they apply to this generation?

B Why was Jesus not more specific? Compare your findings with Matthew 12:38-42 and Matthew 24:36.

C Reflect on the attitude that we should have regarding Jesus’ warnings of world events. How do his words affect our lives today?

D What is faulty in the desire to know the precise details about the Lord’s coming? Compare your answer to Matthew 24:42 and Deuteronomy 29:29.



THE LAST THINGS

THE RETURN OF CHRIST **A**

OVERVIEW

Christ will return ...

1 Prophetically

There are numerous Old Testament passages that refer to the kingly rule of Christ – predictions that plainly will not be fulfilled until his return.

The New Testament prophecies are found throughout the Gospels, Acts, the letters and the book of Revelation. They refer to Christ's return as a *Coming*, as a *Revealing*, as the *Day of the Lord* and as his *Appearing*.

BIBLE CHECK Daniel 7:13,14; 1 Thessalonians 4:16-18

2 Personally

We are not, of course, to think of Jesus as absent from the world and from his people at the present time, for he promised to be with his followers until the end.

But while he is with the Church invisibly at present, by his Spirit, Christ's coming at the end will be visible and personal. The assurance was given to the apostles, at the time of the ascension, that it would be the very same Jesus who returned.

BIBLE CHECK Matthew 28:20; Acts 1:11

3 Visibly

The return of Jesus Christ will be no secret, hidden affair. The Bible teaches that earth's entire population will see the event.

To some, the appearing of Jesus will be a glorious and wonderful sight, but we also learn from the scriptures that many will be dismayed.

BIBLE CHECK Matthew 24:30; Revelation 1:7

4 Suddenly

The Lord spoke of life in this world at the time of his coming as being very similar to life in Noah's day at the time of the flood. Marriage, eating and drinking – life would be continuing as usual.

But then, at a single stroke, everything would be interrupted. The Bible describes Jesus Christ's return as being like a lightning flash, like a thief in the night and like a master paying an unexpected visit on his servants. It is clear that people will be taken unawares, in spite of the many warnings of scripture. All Jesus' parables relating to his coming include this aspect of suddenness.

BIBLE CHECK Matthew 24:27,36-51; 1 Thessalonians 5:2,3

5 Triumphantly

This second coming of Christ will be utterly different from the squalid obscurity in which he first came. The return will be accompanied by great power and splendour. In the face of the victorious majesty and power of Jesus Christ's appearing, every person will be forced to acknowledge that he is truly Lord.

BIBLE CHECK Luke 21:27,28; Philippians 2:9-11

6 Conclusively

The appearing of Jesus Christ will be the final chapter in the human story. His coming will bring governments, nations, authorities and every kind of enemy of God under his rule and judgment.

Death will be destroyed. Satan, and the whole empire of evil will be overthrown for ever. And Christ's people will be united to their Lord in the new creation that he has prepared for them.

BIBLE CHECK 1 Corinthians 15:24; 1 Thessalonians 4:17



THE LAST THINGS

THE RETURN OF CHRIST **B**

► BIBLE STUDY 1 THESSALONIANS 4:13–5:11

This was the church that had begun under the preaching of Paul in a mission of only three weeks (Acts 17:1,2). In that time they had been well taught, before Jewish opposition drove the evangelists out. Now however, that Paul is writing to the Thessalonians some months later, he is aware of a question that is puzzling the young Christians. If one of their members died before the second coming of Christ had taken place, would that person be at a disadvantage, in contrast to those who were still alive? This is the starting point of the passage. Read it now, and use these questions to assist in the study:

- 1** How are we to understand the second coming *in relation to the faithful departed* (verses 13-18)? Would those who were ‘still alive’ (verse 15) have precedence over them? How could the Thessalonians ‘encourage’ (verse 18) the recently bereaved?
- 2** Scan the same verses again and establish the position of the Church on earth, at the time of the Coming. Observe that Paul, naturally, classes himself among such.
- 3** Look more closely at verses 15-17, and consider the Coming *in relation to the Lord himself*. Paul’s teaching is only ‘in accordance to the Lord’s own word.’ Compare these verses with, say, John 14:1-3.
- 4** Look now at 5:1-3, and think through the teaching about the Coming *in relation to time*. Compare Matthew 24:42-44.
- 5** Look at the same verses now, *in relation to the unbelieving world*. Compare these verses with 2 Thessalonians 1:7-9 and Matthew 24:37,38.
- 6** Lastly, consider the Return *in relation to the Christian’s present activities* (5:4-11).

Reflection

- A** Study 1 Thessalonians 4:13–5:11. Why was this passage written? From these words, how may we understand the coming of Christ, in relation to Christians who have died, the Day itself, its timing and our right preparation for it?
- B** Compare John 14:3 with 1 Thessalonians 4:16-18. How does Paul’s teaching relate to Christ’s?
- C** What should be your attitude to readers of the Bible who, while believing in the main fact of Christ’s coming, may not agree with you on every point of interpretation?
- D** What do your non-Christian friends think about the future of the world? How does their view differ from yours?

Key Truth

All Christians look forward to the personal return of Christ at the end of the age, as predicted by the Bible.

Postscript

History is full of examples of false predictions relating to the time of Christ’s return. The Christian is best prepared for this event by being involved in active, obedient service.



THE LAST THINGS

THE JUDGMENT **A**

OVERVIEW

1 God will be declared as just

The final judgment is a definite future event that will take place at the second coming of Christ. The Bible says that it is unavoidable – as unavoidable as death itself.

At the judgment the balances of true justice will be set right for ever. There will be no excuse left to any who come under judgment – for it will be seen by everybody that the dealings of God are completely just and righteous.

BIBLE CHECK Hebrews 9:27; Psalm 96:13; Acts 17:31

2 Christ will be acknowledged as Lord

The judgment will signify the end of world history and the struggle between good and evil. Every power that has stood in opposition to God will be put under Christ's feet, and every tongue will confess that he is Lord.

At the judgment, Jesus Christ will receive the glory and worship that is due to him from his people, for he will have gathered them to himself from the whole earth. Their sins will not be counted against them, for by his death on the cross he has already taken their judgment upon himself.

BIBLE CHECK I Corinthians 15:24-26; John 5:24; Philippians 2:11

3 Christians will be accountable for their service

While no Christian will be judged on the basis of the sins he has committed, it is taught in the Bible that Christ's people will be assessed for the quality of their service.

No Christian will ever be lost, but the coming Day will expose our work, which will be rewarded according to its worth. The faithful Christian is thus challenged to please his returning master throughout life's present opportunity.

BIBLE CHECK Romans 14:12; 2 Corinthians 5:9,10; I Corinthians 3:10-15

4 The disobedient will be rejected for their unbelief

The basis of the judgment will be the response that individuals have made to the light that God has given them. The great sin of the New Testament consists in rejecting the light of Christ. When asked what the vital priority of life was, Jesus replied that it was to believe in himself.

The separation from God to which unbelievers are condemned is therefore no more than an underlining of their own choices regarding God's revelation to them.

BIBLE CHECK John 3:19; 6:28,29; 2 Thessalonians 1:7-9

5 Satan will be destroyed for ever

Satan is not all-powerful. The book of Revelation shows that he is very active in many different ways but he does not occupy the centre – for God never leaves his throne.

Thus, the judgment will bring the victory of the cross to completion. Satan and his allies will be overthrown and destroyed by God.

BIBLE CHECK Revelation 20:10



THE LAST THINGS

THE JUDGMENT B

► BIBLE STUDY 2 PETER 3:1-18

The apostle Peter is nearing the end of his life and he knows it (1:14). His concern is that the next generation of believers would hold on firmly to the apostolic truth.

These were difficult days for the Christian Church, faced as it was by spiritual and cultural pressures that threatened to swallow it up. Use these questions to prompt your study of this passage:

1 What main event is the apostle emphasising in this chapter? Verses 7, 10 and 12 allude to it. Where did Peter get this concept from? Look up Matthew 24:29-31. Observe its finality (verses 10, 12).

2 What authority does Peter want his readers to rely upon for his teaching? Look at verse 2, and compare Ephesians 2:20.

3 Verses 3-5 highlight the viewpoint of the critics with regard to the last times.

How similar is their argument to that of every generation? Compare Jeremiah 17:15.

4 How does the believer resist the propaganda that we are just part of a closed system and that nothing outside the life of this world can affect it? The answer lies in 1:12, 13, 15 and in 3:1, 2, 8.

5 Answering the scoffers, the writer points to three 'outside' and unforeseen events affecting this world, two of which had already happened. What are they (verses 5-7)?

6 How can we practically prepare for the final day? Look for the references to patience, to godliness, to focusing and to 'growing.'

Reflection

A Read Matthew 25:1-13. What is the main thrust of this parable of Jesus? Contrast the two groups of girls. What does this passage teach us about the end times, and about our choices in life?

B At the end, there will be a separation between evil and good. Is the world getting better or worse? Compare your thoughts with Matthew 13:24-30.

C What does 1 Corinthians 3:12-15 teach people about their responsibilities and opportunities?

D What does Christ's teaching about judgment tell us about the nature of man himself?

Key Truth

The final judgment will be the climax of this world's events. It will set right the injustices of history, underline the choices of individuals, and demonstrate the righteousness of God and the victory of Jesus Christ.

Postscript

Judgment is not a popular theme in societies which have become soft and indulgent. However, we must recognise that by the choices individuals make, they sentence themselves.



THE LAST THINGS

THE RESURRECTION **A**

OVERVIEW

1 Christ its guarantee

Christianity presents the resurrection of the body as the final goal of our salvation – a supernatural event coinciding with the return of Jesus Christ.

This resurrection, which is the inheritance of every Christian, derives its pattern from Christ. The Bible says that Christ's resurrection is like the first sheaf of a large harvest, in which all Christians will be gathered. This is what the Bible means when it uses the word 'firstfruits.' Christ's resurrection is the guarantee of this event.

BIBLE CHECK | Corinthians 15:20-23; Philippians 3:20,21

2 Nature its illustration

This expectation of a bodily resurrection is illustrated by Paul in his first letter to the Christians in Corinth.

Paul answers the objection that the resurrection is impossible, by referring to the miracle of sowing and reaping, in which a small seed is transformed into a plant. The resurrection does not mean a mere shadowy existence of the soul, but a glorious and transformed body.

BIBLE CHECK | Corinthians 15:35-38

3 Eternal life its outcome

The resurrection body is designed for a totally different environment than this passing, mortal age. When it is raised, it is a spiritual body, suited for life in the presence of God. There, believers will know an existence unlimited by the effects of the fall.

BIBLE CHECK | Thessalonians 4:16,17; John 5:24-26; 6:40

4 From humiliation to glory

Christians are assured in the Bible that when they finally see Christ, they will have a body like his. We are not given many details about the nature of the resurrection body, beyond that the believer's body is weak and ugly at death, but that when raised, it possesses marvellous beauty and strength.

Probably, the reason why we are only given a limited understanding of the resurrection body is that in this new life the focus will be on Christ himself and not on details of secondary importance. He will be at the centre, and that is what really matters.

BIBLE CHECK | Corinthians 15:43; 1 John 3:2

5 From the natural to the spiritual

At death, the believer's body is physical; at the resurrection it is spiritual.

If Christ's resurrection body is the pattern, then we can understand that this body will be perfect in every way.

It will be a body that has continuity with the old body (and we will recognize one another in the new creation), and yet a body that is suited to that immortal, redeemed creation.

BIBLE CHECK | John 20:19; 1 Corinthians 15:44; Luke 24:36-43

6 From mortality to immortality

All reminders of death, decay and disease will be banished from the new bodies of Christ's people. The apostle Paul seems to indicate that those believers who have died before Christ's return still await their resurrection bodies and for the present are without a body, although truly with Christ. They, like those who are still alive at Christ's return will be raised to live for ever.

BIBLE CHECK | Corinthians 15:42,50-55; Philippians 1:21-24



THE LAST THINGS

THE RESURRECTION **B**

► BIBLE STUDY 1 CORINTHIANS 15:50-58

Key Truth

The Bible teaches that Christians will be raised from death to enjoy eternal life with God.

Postscript

The Christian's hope is not to escape from the body, but to be raised as a new body to live the quality of life God has always intended for us.

“The resurrection of Christ has altered the face of the universe,” writes David Gooding. “Not only is death not an irreversible process; it is not even a permanent institution” (*True to the Faith*, Hodder).

Here in this passage the apostle Paul has arrived at the stirring climax to his classic chapter on the Resurrection. He has covered various difficulties and objections; now he concludes with a ringing declaration:

1 In verse 50, Paul demolishes any idea of a crude return of a dead corpse to what it was before. How does he do this, with his use of terms? What was the difference between the raising of Lazarus and the resurrection of Christ? Compare John 11:44 with John 21:6,7.

2 Look on at verses 51-53. Discuss the nature of the ‘changed’ bodies of Christ’s followers. What clues do we have? See back to verses 42,43 and Philipians 3:21.

3 ‘The last trumpet’ (verse 52). To what does this refer? A parallel is found in Matthew 24:31 and 1 Thessalonians 4:16. How much does this expectation make sense of the present for you?

4 Turn to verses 55-57. “The sting is not in death but in sin,” wrote Leon Morris (*Corinthians*, Tyndale Press). Relate this to the achievements of Christ on our behalf.

5 Apply verse 58 to the various callings and pieces of service represented in the study group.

6 How confident are you that your own body will one day be resurrected?

Reflection

A Read 1 Corinthians 15:20-28. How does Christ’s resurrection affect the future? In what sense do we understand the defeat of death? How is this confidence reflected in Christian living today?

B What difference, in practice, does a Christian faith seem to make to people in the face of death?

C Turn to the Old Testament passage of Ezekiel 37:1-14, which relates to the message of resurrection. Think and pray about situations that need this kind of transformation.

D Because Christ is risen, we too shall be raised from death. In what ways does this give the Easter story extra meaning for you?

THE LAST THINGS

THE NEW ORDER **A**

OVERVIEW

1 The triumph of the Lamb

The Bible ends, in the book of Revelation, with an undisguised theme of victory, centred in Christ. Christ is described as the 'Lamb' (which links him with the Old Testament sacrifices in which lambs were killed to take away sin). He is the Lamb who was killed, but is now worthy of receiving the praise of all creation.

It is through the shedding of his blood that complete victory over evil has been achieved.

BIBLE CHECK Revelation 5:12,13; 7:17;12:11,17:14

2 The new creation

Revelation chapter 21 describes a new heaven and a new earth. The word 'heaven' here means the rest of the universe, with all the stars and planets.

The old universe, with its weakness and decay, is radically redeemed. There are no more heartaches, pains or sicknesses. This new creation is made for God and his people to live in. There is a note of finality and triumph in the words of verse 6 "It is done."

BIBLE CHECK Revelation 21:1-8; 2 Peter 3:10-13; Romans 8:18-23

3 The new Jerusalem

This chapter also describes the final home of those whom God has raised to eternal life. This walled city, the new Jerusalem, has been prepared by God for his people – for it comes from him.

The evil are excluded from the city, and inside it there will be perfect fellowship and worship of God. We are told that there will be no temple in the city, because God is the temple. The sun and moon will not be needed, because God's splendour will illuminate the city. This is the city of God.

BIBLE CHECK Revelation 21:2,3,9-27

4 Paradise restored

In the opening chapters of the Bible, man was placed in the Garden of Eden. At the centre of this garden was the tree of life. However, after man's fall, Adam and Eve were driven out of paradise by God, and barred from the tree of life.

The last chapter of the Bible shows that God will restore man to paradise, and that he will have free access to the tree of life. Thus, at the very end of the story of God's redemption, man is back in fellowship again, in touch at last with the very life of God.

BIBLE CHECK Genesis 2:8-10; 3:22-24; Revelation 22:1-5,14

5 Jesus is coming

As John concludes with his portrayal of Christ as the returning bridegroom, the prophecy of the book of Revelation is witnessed to be true by the angel, by John himself and by Jesus. It is to remain unsealed, for the message is to be obeyed. It is not to be hidden, and it is not to be meddled with.

The concluding message is simple: "*I am coming soon.*" The offer is free – that of the water of life for all who will come and accept it.

The final sentences of the Bible include a prayer for strength, offered on behalf of all God's people who are not yet within the security of the walled city. There is also a prayer of joyful hope and anticipation: "Come, Lord Jesus."

BIBLE CHECK Revelation 22:6-21; Isaiah 40:9,10



THE LAST THINGS

THE NEW ORDER **B**

► BIBLE STUDY REVELATION 21:1-14

Key Truth

Christian people look forward to a new heaven and a new earth, where the dwelling place of God and his Christ are to be found.

Postscript

In the new order, Christians will have new bodies, there will be a new Jerusalem and a new heaven and earth. All these things marred by sin, have to be changed. But we have the confident assurance that God himself, with his love and faithfulness, will not change.

Supposing that there was no book of Revelation? The impression then gained, at the close of the Bible would be of an unresolved conclusion, with God's saints contending valiantly for the faith, but with no apparent final verdict on the conflict between good and evil.

The verdict of this book is inescapable. You cannot read the last pages of this wonderful prophecy and stay in the camp of the pessimists! Let this final vision of the glory of God's kingdom inspire you in everything you are doing.

- 1 Verse 5 seems to be the key thought. What is its link with verses 1,2 and 4?
- 2 We are visualising a scene of glory (verses 10-14). How does this vision of the future make sense of the present turbulence, frailties and evils, mentioned in this passage?
- 3 How does our vision of the *centre* give shape to the whole? For the centre, see verses 3 and 5. How can we best transfer this thought into our own world-view?
- 4 "It is *done*" (verse 6) This is the tense of the 'prophetic past' – it is as good as done already! How does this vision of the certain triumph of God add strength to the task in hand?
- 5 In the light of verses 7 and 8, discuss the statement, 'God's judgment is the *proof* of his goodness.'
- 6 What do the many 'gates' of verses 12-14 speak to us of?
- 7 Why does God not achieve all this *now*, at a stroke?

Reflection

A Read Revelation 21. Try to put into your own words something of what this passage is telling us about God and his people. Would any kind of person feel at home in the new creation?

B "I am coming soon." What does this concept do to your priorities at present? What should you do about it?

C Read Revelation 22:17. What are the different thoughts in this verse? What effect should they have on your praying and witnessing?

D What are the suggestions and hints of a likeness between your own Christian fellowship and the perfection of the new Jerusalem? How can such a likeness be developed?



A THOUGHT FOR EACH DAY

FOCUS ON THE LAST THINGS

THE HOPE OF THE CHRISTIAN

Promises to God's people

- 1 Peter 1:10-12

Fulfillment of God's purposes

- Acts 3:17-21

Defeat of God's enemies

- Philippians 2:9-11

A living hope

- 1 Corinthians 15:20-23,51-55

A steadfast hope

- 1 Thessalonians 1:3

A purifying hope

- Jude 24,25

Jesus said, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you"

- Acts 1:8

THE JUDGMENT

God will judge everyone

- Hebrews 9:27

Christians will not be condemned

- John 5:24

Christians will be accountable for their service

- Romans 14:12

The disobedient will be rejected for their unbelief

- John 3:18-20

Satan will be destroyed forever

- Revelation 20:10

Separation between good and evil

- Matthew 13:24-30

Jesus said, "I know my sheep"

- John 10:14

THE PRELUDE TO CHRIST'S RETURN

BEFORE THE RETURN:

Disorder in the natural realm

- Luke 21:11,25

Disorder in the social realm

- 2 Timothy 3:1-5

Disorder in the international realm

- Mark 13:7,8

Disorder in the family realm

- Mark 13:12

Disorder in the personal realm

- Luke 21:26

Disorder in the spiritual realm

- 2 Thessalonians 2:3-10

Jesus said, "My sheep listen to my voice"

- John 10:27

THE RESURRECTION

Christ, its guarantee

- 1 Corinthians 15:20-23

Nature, its illustration

- 1 Corinthians 15:35-38

Eternal life, its outcome

- 1 Thessalonians 4:16,17

From humiliation to glory

- 1 John 3:1,2

From the natural to the spiritual

- 1 Corinthians 15:44

From mortality to immortality

- Philippians 1:21-24

Jesus said, "My sheep know me"

- John 10:14

THE RETURN OF CHRIST

Christ will return prophetically

- Daniel 7:13,14

Christ will return personally

- Matthew 26:64

Christ will return visibly

- Matthew 24:30

Christ will return suddenly

- Matthew 24:27,36-51

Christ will return triumphantly

- Luke 21:27,28

Christ will return conclusively

- 1 Corinthians 15:24

Jesus said, "I give eternal life"

- John 10:28

THE NEW ORDER

The triumph of the Lamb

- Revelation 5:12,13

The new creation

- Revelation 21:1-8

The new creation

- 2 Peter 3:10-13

The new Jerusalem

- Revelation 21:9-27

Paradise restored

- Revelation 22:1-5

Jesus is coming

- Revelation 22:6-21

Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me"

- Matthew 19:14

FRESH START

(THE BIBLE EXPLAINED)

The **Fresh Start** series of books is a companion to the Bible. It can be used as reference to aid Bible teaching, and for personal, regular study of the scriptures. Each book is made up of 12 studies. If the whole series is completed, studying one section each week, all the material will be covered in a year.

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- The Return of Christ
- The Judgment
- The Resurrection
- The New Order

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