

What is Church?

CALL	reminds us we are	CHOSEN
CONFESSION	renews us as God's	REDEEMED
CONSECRATION	grows us as	HOLY DISCIPLES
COMMUNION	unites us as	JOYFUL FAMILY
COMMISSION	sends us as	SERVANT MISSIONARIES

PART TWO: REDEEMED

JESUS IS GOOD NEWS

One of Jesus' first followers, a fisherman named Simon Peter, experienced a miraculous catch of fish. His reaction to Jesus may strike you as unusual: "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!" (Luke 5:8). The purity of God's presence is dangerous for those polluted by sin. God is often described as *Holy*. Part of God's *holiness* is his moral perfection. He defines what is good, and loves it. He defines what is evil, and hates it. If you see beauty destroyed by ugliness, a community wrecked by gossip, or a family broken by unfaithfulness, you may have experienced something of the anger that is a right response to evil.

God's commandments and law reveal good and evil to us, but also exposes us. We discover selfishness that taints our actions. We recognise that we often enjoy doing what God says is wrong. God's law reveals that we stand guilty before a perfect and pure Judge. God is angered by evil. His anger is not like ours – which is so often mixed with hurt pride or out-of-control rage. God's holiness and anger is his determination to oppose all that brings harm and corruption into his world.

One of the most famous verses in the Bible is John 3:16. "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." Our natural, sin-corrupted state is that we are perishing. As the following verses show (read John 3:17-21) we are already condemned because of humanity's love for darkness rather than light, and because of our rejection of Jesus, God's life-giving Son. The good news is that Jesus came to save sinners.

He comes to forgive; we confess our sins to God and he removes our guilt. He no longer counts our sin against us, because when Jesus died on the cross he carried our sin and was judged in our place. We deserve to perish, but Jesus died for us. The anger of God burned against Jesus, who died as a sacrifice and substitute. This is God's love – that he sent his Son to be our Saviour.

When we come into the light by confessing our sin to God, the blood of Jesus purifies us from all sin. Our guilt is washed away. We no longer stand condemned before God. Jesus lived the perfect life, fulfilling God's law completely. He died the cursed death we deserve but then, on the third day, God raised him from the dead. Jesus was declared to be the only perfect, obedient, law-keeping, love-filled man who has ever lived. He was declared to be *righteous*. United to Jesus, our guilt is removed and we are given that same status. We do nothing to achieve this – Jesus has done it all. We simply trust and receive. This is called *justification by grace alone through faith alone*. It is the good news that sinners can approach a Holy God, not because they have improved, but because they are cleansed. It is the good news that hell-bound perishing people are given eternal life through Jesus Christ.

PREPARATION: LUKE CHAPTER 23

As you read the passage, consider these questions:

- Pay attention to the words spoken about Jesus. What do we learn about his identity?
- Think about Barabbas and the second criminal next to Jesus. How does Jesus change their situations?
- How do their stories show us the reason why Jesus died for us?

WHO ARE WE: GOD'S REDEEMED PEOPLE

Ephesians 2:1-10

- These verses give us a 'before' and 'after'. What are we told about the natural state of humanity?
- What has God done to turn our situation around?
- What are we told about the 'after' – about our new situation?

WORSHIP AND IDENTITY: CONFESSION – God cleanses us

We confess our sins, trusting in the death of Jesus for our cleansing, then hear God's word of forgiveness. With humility we are open about our failings and sins, but with faith we receive the truth that we are *justified* – declared righteous in Christ.

We look to:

- the Father who **DEFINES** right and wrong
- the Son in whom we are **DECLARED** righteous
- the Spirit who makes us **DESIRE** good and hate evil

BIBLE MEDITATION AND PRAYER: PSALM 51

Meditating on the Bible is about careful reading and reflection on a Bible passage, chewing it in your mind, then responding with prayer to your heavenly Father.

First: Read the Psalm a few times. Think about what the Psalm is saying – what it teaches about God, about the LORD Jesus, about the world, about the church.

Second: Pray with thanksgiving to God. Praise him. Marvel at what he has revealed, acknowledge the wonder that God has spoken to you in this passage of the Bible.

Third: Confess your sins to God. The passage may reveal your sin and failure, or expose the shortcomings of the church (local, denominational, national, etc).

Fourth: Make your requests to God. What do you need to ask for? How do you need to change? Perhaps the passage prompts you to pray for other people or churches.

This Psalm is a model of confessing sin to God, then asking for forgiveness and transformation. Think about the depth and honesty of the confession. What lessons do you learn about confessing sin to God? What are we told about the actions of someone who knows the joy of forgiveness?

THE LORD'S PRAYER

The flow of the Lord's Prayer takes us through the shape of the Worship service.

"Your kingdom come"

- Jesus' first message was "The kingdom of God has come. Repent [turn] and believe the good news."
- When we confess our sin we turn away from what is wrong, and turn to the King – Jesus – who forgives us, cleanses us and renews us. This theme of forgiveness appears again in the Lord's Prayer (see part 4).
- Jesus' Kingdom is one in which sin, death, hell and Satan have been overcome. In his kingdom we find forgiveness, purity, life, hope and freedom.

TRUTH IN PRACTICE

There are many implications of the wonderful reality that we are REDEEMED. We are focusing on these three areas (Family, Money, Mission) because these are parts of church life that need strengthening at this time.

FAMILY AND CHILDREN

Children need Jesus because every human needs Jesus as Saviour. If Jesus was simply a teacher, a religious guide, then you might understand why people think of Jesus as optional (even though no religious teacher has ever spoken such truth and wisdom as Jesus did). But the name “Jesus” means “The Lord Saves” and we all need to be rescued and redeemed. Children need the forgiveness that comes from the death of Jesus. So they need to be at church, because the ordinary way by which God gives us the benefits of Jesus (forgiveness, new life, hope, direction and more) is through the gathering of his baptised people to hear his word and come to the Lord’s table.

Gathering with the church must be a priority. It is more important than sports or homework, more important than clubs and hobbies. Jesus is the only Way, the supreme Truth, the real Life. The choices made by parents show their children whether they believe this or not.

When we confess our sin we acknowledge that the Father defines right and wrong. Parents must teach right and wrong as something real that comes from God. Discipline at home is an act of love. Children thrive in a home that is filled with love and given clear, simple, consistent boundaries. We want children not only to know God’s standards, but to love them as well. Here parents set the example. Pray that parents will believe, love and seek to follow Jesus’ teaching and commandments.

Confession tells us that we have a Saviour who is rich in mercy and quick to forgive. Parents need to model the same. Children need to experience their parents forgiving them. Forgiveness means the past is past. God does not keep reminding people of their forgiven sins, neither should parents.

Parents are sinners who need forgiveness. Often they will sin against their children (losing their temper, for example) so they will often need to say “Sorry” to their children and ask their forgiveness. Home is meant to be like church: a family filled with forgiveness, mercy and frequent fresh starts! God’s mercy is “new every morning” and this is a model for life within Christian families.

MONEY

Jesus taught more about money than he did about prayer. Does that surprise you? Money – and the love of money – is powerful and deceptive. Money makes us bend the rules, or even break them completely. Money captures our hearts. It makes us think that Jesus' teaching about generosity is for someone else, or it is not really true, or that we can only think about obeying him once our own finances are secure – which is always when we have a little bit more!

Confession reminds us that God defines right and wrong, and that includes the right and wrong use of money. If we are not confessing the sin of greed, envy, grumbling or discontentment, we have not yet realised the grip that money has on us.

Confession reminds us of God's extraordinary, lavish and generous love! We remember that Jesus gave up the riches of glory, becoming poor for us, so that through his death we might be given spiritual blessing beyond measure. We need to pray that the sacrificial generosity of God moves us to be sacrificially generous as well. But even here Jesus' teaching catches us out. He does not tell us to wait until our heart *wants* to be generous. He tells us to be generous, because our heart follows our treasure: read Matthew 6:19-34.

MISSION

Many religious people hated Jesus because he kept on spending time with "sinners". But Jesus said he is a doctor for the spiritually ill. The church has a mission: to tell spiritually ill people that the doctor has come! Using a different metaphor, Jesus said that people are lost (see Luke 15). They are like sheep that have wandered away. We are like children who have taken God's good gifts, misused them and are now far away. Jesus came "to seek and to save the lost" (Luke 19:10).

Humanity is lost and needs saving. Everyone will one day be called to account; we will all face the judgment of Christ. Sin and guilt shuts us out from God's presence and if someone dies without forgiveness and cleansing, they will be shut out from God's presence for ever. This is what Jesus called 'hell' (Luke 12:4-5).

If we take this seriously we will pray for opportunities to share the message of Jesus with the people around us. Our message must also be backed up by lives that show a) our sense of right and wrong comes from God, and b) we are the humble and joyful receivers of lavish forgiveness.

UNDERSTANDING WORSHIP: THE PATTERN OF SACRIFICE

In the Old Testament (that part of the Bible that comes before Jesus was born), the people of Israel were given many rituals and systems, symbolic ways to understand why Jesus came and what he would do.

There were a number of sacrifices and offerings, rituals that symbolised how people could come near to a holy God. Within this sacrificial system were three central offerings:

The **Sin Offering** (or Purification Offering) deals with the guilt and spiritual-pollution caused by sin. Evil is an unclean mess that could cause God to leave his people, so the Lord provides a sacrifice. The animal was a substitute for the unclean people and it died in their place. Symbolically the blood then purified and cleansed the people.

The **Ascension Offering** (or Burnt Offering) represents coming to God and rising upwards to be taken into the presence of God. A pure animal died, then was cut up, rearranged and placed on the fire. The fire turned the animal into smoke, to ascend into heaven and enter the glory of God.

The **Peace Offering** (or Fellowship Offering) was a meal. The sacrificial animal became the food for a joyful feast as the people shared a meal in God's presence, enjoying fellowship with him.

The logic is this:

1. We approach God but realise we are unclean, yet there is purification through the blood of a sacrifice.
2. We are transformed and ascend into God's presence, through the perfect life of a representative sacrifice.
3. In God's presence we enjoy a meal that expresses our communion with God, by eating the flesh of a sacrifice.

This is the logic of worship. Add a gathering to the start (CALL), and a sending at the end (COMMISSION), and the offerings relate to the three central parts of worship:

1. In CONFESSIOIN we are purified through the blood of Jesus.
2. In CONSECRATION we ascend into God's presence, to become more like Jesus (consecrated) as God's word rearranges and transforms our lives.
3. In COMMUNION we share a joyful meal with God, receiving his life through the body and blood of Jesus.

The shape of Christian worship comes from the symbols and sacrifices of the Old Testament, as they point us to Jesus our Saviour, Teacher and Life-Giver.