Fellowship with God

"And our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son, Jesus Christ." 1 John 1:3

Five aspects of our fellowship with God:

1. Enjoying God's presence
2. Deepening our friendship with God
3. Sharing in a supernatural life with God
4. Living free
5. Going on to maturity with God

1. Enjoying God's presence: 1 John 1:1-4

"Our fellowship is with God and with His Son Jesus Christ."

One of John's purposes in writing this letter was to encourage and strengthen our fellowship with the Father and His Son. As we do this, ***"Our joy will be complete."***

Enjoying God's presence should be the major factor in our lives. Fellowship with God and with His people is the source of our joy. It is also one of our greatest needs. Most of our activity is related to strengthening our fellow believers and seeking to extend God's Kingdom as well as all the mundane tasks of just living. **We need a fresh discovery of the true joy of fellowship with God**.

We need to go back to the essentials and re-discover what fellowship with God is intended to be like and what we receive when we are in fellowship with the Father and the Son. Essentially fellowship with God is **enjoyment of His presence**.

Two reasons why we don't enjoy God's presence:

1. Disobedience: Gen. 3:7-13 Adam and Eve in the garden

We can't abide the presence of God when we are out of fellowship with Him. Adam and Eve disobeyed God's instructions – they broke the covenant. Now they hid themselves from the presence of God. Before they were "covered" by the covenant; now they are naked. Fellowship with God gives a sense of "covering".

For example: You meet a friend and have a heated argument with him. Since he is a believer, you "agree to differ", but in practice there is a sharp division. A wall has been put in place like that between Israel and Palestine. Later you meet this 'friend' in another friend's house. You feel very uncomfortable. He sits on the couch and you mumble "Hi" and sit as far away from him as possible. There is no fellowship!

Mutual forgiveness restores fellowship. Now he hugs you when you meet and you are comfortable again in each other's presence.

For Adam and Eve the "cool of the day" was probably the best part of the day – an evening talking with God in warm fellowship. But now Adam was very uncomfortable. Fellowship was broken. Adam was afraid of God and ***"they hid from the presence of the Lord"***. That is what disobedience does to us.

2. Rebellion: Jonah 1:1-3

God gave Jonah a clear command: ***"Go to Nineveh …***." Jonah refused to go and ***"fled from the presence of the Lord"***.

Rebellious believers don't like going to worship meetings. They get agitated and hostile when they hear anointed preaching. Sometimes they walk out. More often they just switch off inwardly. They don't want God to speak to them. They don't want to know His will.

For example: You have a children's party. At the end the visiting children leave and your children have to help clean up. There is usually a lot of groaning and they come up with inventive excuses! In fact they are just trying to get away from the task and their parents! Often they quietly sneak away.

That is just what Jonah did! We often do the same. We run away from the presence of the Lord.

I sometimes ask people, *"Are you enjoying the presence of God?"* Clearly they are struggling, but real issues aren't disclosed. I wonder if the problem is disobedience or rebellion.

Positive aspects of fellowship with God

Do you have a hunger for the presence of God? Don't rely too much on your feelings. They are arbitrary. Do you long for a fresh consciousness of the presence of God in your life?

Some Examples

Abraham: Gen. 18:1-5

"Abraham ran … to meet them. He said, '….. do not pass by your servant'."

There was a hunger in Abraham's heart for the presence of God.

The purpose of retreats is primarily so that you can have time to run into God's presence.

David: Ps. 42:1-2

"As a deer pants for flowing streams so my soul pants for you O God. My soul thirsts for God – the Living God."

Fellowship in God's presence is not necessarily a geographic presence. We don't need to see God but rather have an inner consciousness that God is with us. This is deeply satisfying and allows us inner communication with Him.

Moses: Ex. 33:14-17

This is one of the most amazing passages in Scripture. Moses is interceding for God's people in the Tent of Meeting. In v. 13 Moses pleads, ***"Please show me now your ways that I may know you….."***. God's answer was, ***"My presence will go with you and I will give you rest."***

This is the "rest" of Hebrews 4 and of the Lord Jesus, ***"Come unto Me all you who are heavy-laden and I will give you rest"***.

Then in v. 16 Moses says, ***"Is it not in Your going with us so that we are distinct, I and Your people, from every other people on the face of the earth?"***

What makes us, the People of God, distinct from everyone else? ***"My presence"***! We are not so different from anyone else in outward appearance if there is good cultural adaptation. We are not distinct in external things – dress, looks, language and behaviour. There are no rules that, if kept, can mark us out as the People of God. What marks us out is that God says to us, ***"I am your God"***.

It is God's presence with us that makes us unique.

My prayer is that we sense God's presence among us. If we can't say, **"God is with us"** when we leave then I will be very disappointed! So my prayer is: **"Please let us know Your Presence O God."**

I find I am often preaching here and there and my prayer is, "Please let us know Your presence, for Your presence with us will make up for all my deficiencies as a speaker!"

This is true of all of us. God's presence makes up for all our weaknesses, all our inadequacies and failures. His presence covers our mistakes – **"God with us"** If you love Him and walk in His presence He will graciously show you how to do better!

The difference the presence of God makes in our lives

- **It is the practical answer to our problems, stresses and fears.**

2 Chron. 20:6-9 – King Jehoshophat's prayer

He was afraid. His problems were disaster, sword, judgement, pestilence and famine.

God had entered into a covenant with His People to deal with all these problems. How? By **His presence** among them, ***"Do not be afraid and do not be dismayed … for the Lord will be with you."*** (v. 17) There was an amazing conclusion! The enemies destroyed each other!

God's presence is the practical answer to all our problems and distresses. We feel pressure. We are at our wits end. At that time we need to go into God's presence and worship (v. 18) and then stand up in praise (v. 21 and 22).

"And when they began to sing and praise the Lord set an ambush" (and their enemies fought each other to total destruction).

But usually this is the last place we go when we have problems! I ask myself, 'What can **I** do?' As I mull over it, the problem gets worse. It builds up horribly and there are no solutions in sight!

Like the Old Testament People of God, we turn to other 'gods' (other authorities) or powers (Syria, Egypt) for help, but things only get worse.

The Answer: ***"Come into My presence. Call on Me! Turn away from any other solution."***

God's presence is the **practical answer** to every problem and need. You get a **practical** response from God.

- **God's presence with us provides: refuge, shelter, a hiding place, a "covering".**

Ps. 27:5 ***"For He will hide me in His shelter in the day of trouble. He will conceal me under the cover of His tent."***

v. 1 ***"The Lord is the stronghold/refuge of my life, of whom shall I be afraid?"***

v. 4 ***"One thing have I asked of the Lord; that will I seek after, that I may*** (paraphrase) ***dwell in the presence of the Lord … all the days of my life, to gaze on the beauty of the Lord."***

God's presence, God's shelter, God's hiding place, God's covering and God's tent will protect us completely! David's enemies would have found it impossible to break into God's tent and kill him!

Remember Job! Satan was forbidden to take Job's life. Job's life was under God's cover! Satan can't get to you because he can't break through the covering of God.

Ps. 33:20 ***"Our soul waits for the Lord; He is our life and our shelter."***

Read Ps. 91:1-7 Why are we so protected? Because God's presence is our covering!

Ps. 139:13 (a verse that warms the hearts of all expectant parents)

"For you formed my inward parts. You knit me together in my mother's womb …."

Commentaries point out that the Hebrew word 'knit together' is only used once in the Bible, but in other texts it carries the meaning of 'to hedge about'. God's purposes and protection started for us right at the beginning – before we were saved.

Ps. 140:7 ***"O Lord My Lord, the strength of my salvation; you have covered my head in the day of battle."***

In the day of battle, when we need it most, God's presence is there protecting us! There will never be a conflict when God isn't protecting you.

An Example: Playing with my 4-year-old grandson, having a battle with Star Wars light sabres. I tried to hit him. He joyfully said, *"You missed!"* I asked, *"How come?"* His answer was, *"My invisible ray gun protected me!"*

God's invisible covering protects us. Satan cannot break through! When under attack you can shout to Satan, *"You missed!!"*

- **The presence of the Lord brings times of refreshing**

Acts 3:19: Peter's sermon on the day when the lame man was healed in the temple

"Repent therefore and turn again that your sins may be blotted out, that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord ….."

Why do we seek the presence of the Lord? Not only because it is the answer to our need, not only because it is our protection, but also because God's presence brings **great refreshment**. So often we are weary and we feel we can't go on. We are so exhausted! Our batteries are dead! We are mentally washed out! The problem is not external enemies, problems etc. It is inside us! We can't pray or do anything much.

We **feel** the presence of God by the action of the Holy Spirit. It is such a relief! We breathe a quiet 'Hallelujah' and quietly refreshment comes! It is a re-energising of our whole being. The tautness of our nerves and our muddled thinking subsides. Palpitations cease as God refreshes us. Holidays may be OK, but the real secret of refreshment is God's presence. As you go into God's 'intensive care unit', God's love embraces you. The result is joy!

Ps. 16:11 ***"You make known to me the path of life. In Your presence there is fullness of joy!"***

If something is full it can't take any more! Take time to enjoy God. Sometimes this may make you do something slightly embarrassing! Don't be afraid of being a fanatic!

A definition of a fanatic: **A person who loves Jesus more than you!**

There is no fullness of joy in being out of fellowship with God. In Britain the Humanist Society sponsored advertisements on London buses that read:

"There is probably no God so go out and enjoy yourself!"

What a lie! Fullness of joy only comes in God's presence!

Ps. 95:2 "***Let us come into His presence with thanksgiving. Let us make a joyful noise to Him with songs of praise! For the Lord is a great God and a great King above all gods."***

My grandchildren remind me of things about my own children. When children are happy because they have received a special present they usually make a great deal of noise! A present they are disappointed with is received in silence!

In God's presence we should rejoice with thanksgiving and with joyful songs of praise. We are to rejoice in God's presence. God is delighted when we are delighted! At times, I just long to gate crash the great angelic choirs and the solemn chant of the seraphim.

Rev. 8:1 "***When the Lamb opened the seventh seal there was silence in heaven for about half an hour."***

This silence was because of three terrible woes. Usually heaven is full of noise and activity for heaven is the presence of God. So let your heart express what you feel in the presence of God.

- **God delights in our presence**

Mk. 3: 13-14 - Jesus' appointment of the twelve

"And He went up on the mountain and called to Him those whom He desired and they came to Him and He appointed twelve, so that they might work with Him …"

God enjoys being with us! He doesn't only call us to serve Him and serve others in His name. He enjoys being with us as a Father enjoys being with his children.

Remember God's friendship with his friend Abraham. In the context of the imminent destruction of the four cities, Gen. 18:17 says that God had to share the news with his friend Abraham.

In Gen. 5:24 we read the amazing account of Enoch. God was evidently so enjoying the company of His friend Enoch that He took him straight to heaven.

But we are New Covenant people and so are much more privileged.

"You are My friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for the servant doesn't know what his master is doing. But I have called you friends …. Jn. 15:14-15

As friends of God, God gives us an amazing promise:

"Whatever you ask the Father in My name, He will give it to you." v. 16

God wants each of us to be His friend! As friends He wants us to spend time with Him.

An Example: Ex. 24: 9-11

"Then Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu and seventy of the elders went up and they saw the God of Israel. They beheld God and ate and drank!"

What an amazing experience! They saw God and they didn't fall down dead! They ate and drank with God! Do a study of God's presence with His friends in a meal – Abraham here and also:

The great covenant meal that Jesus held – Lk 22:15

"I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer."

Retreats are where we eat and drink together in the presence of God. For this is the symbol of our covenant relationship with God – we are friends.

The Emmaus Road – Lk. 24:30

"When He was at the table with them He took bread and blessed it and broke it and gave it to them. And their eyes were opened and they recognised Him."

Could you eat after that? There was no supper! With burning hearts they journeyed back the two-hour trip eager to tell the others!

The breakfast on the beach – Jn. 21

This included the re-commissioning of Peter. Jesus met him where he had failed and restored him. There was no condemnation, but rather communion. I want the coming year to be a year marked by God's presence among you. I want you to delight yourself in God.

"My presence will go with you and I will give you rest."

"Be not afraid and do not be dismayed for the Lord will be with you."

"You have covered my head in the day of battle."

"That times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord."

"In your presence there is fullness of joy."

"So that they might be with Him."

He will protect us and give us fullness of joy! Delight yourself in the presence of God.

2. Deepening our friendship with God

Now we want to focus on deepening our friendship with God. There are five men in Scripture who appear to have this deep friendship with God. We will look briefly at four of them and then concentrate on the fifth – Enoch.

We will look at what these five men had in common as friends of God – having a special place in the heart of God.

1. Abraham the friend of God

James 2:23: ***"Abraham believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness and he was called the friend of God."***

Abraham had a special friendship with God and with this came a special purpose for Abraham in the mind of God:

- God gave Abraham the first great promise of world mission – Gen. 12:2-3:

  "And I will make of you a great nation and I will bless you and make your name great so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you … and in you all the families/clans of the earth will be blessed."

- Abraham was called to be, ***"The Father of those who are full of faith"***.

2. Moses

Ex. 33:11 ***"Thus the Lord used to speak to Moses face to face as a man speaks to his friend."***

- Moses was unique. When God spoke to him it was unlike the way He spoke to anyone else. In Sinai the People of God knew when God spoke, ***"And the Lord spoke to Moses, 'Behold I am coming to you in a thick cloud that the people may hear when I speak with you ……' ".***

  God spoke accompanied by thunder and lightening and a very loud trumpet blast! The mountain trembled and shook. The people knew that God was speaking! But this was not how God spoke to Moses. To Moses God spoke face to face as a man would to his friend.

- God gave Moses a unique task. Because of this crucial dimension of friendship, Moses was to receive the law from God and to teach it to the people – the Old Covenant with all its teaching about the nature of God and the conditions for maintaining a relationship with God.

3. David

Acts 13:22: ***"And when He had removed him*** (King Saul)***, He raised up David to be their king of whom He testified and said, 'I have found in David the son of Jesse a man after My heart who will do all My will.' "***

Paul was preaching in the synagogue in Antioch (now called Konya in the middle of Turkey) when he said, ***"David, a man after God's own heart"***. This is a very rare commendation in Scripture. To put it into colloquial English, God said *"David is just like Me!"*

- To David a very special role and promise was given. One of his descendants would rule on his throne forever. The Lord Jesus, the son of David, is doing that just now. So in some measure God gave to His friend, David, a vision and a promise of the descendant of His who would rule from the Throne of God!

So to Abraham – world-wide blessing
to Moses – the revelation of the Law, the sacrificial systems and the prophecies
to David – the revelation of his part in God's Throne

4. John

John was different. He doesn't stand out as they do in the great flow of historic revelation of God and His purposes. But several times in Scripture John is called 'the one who Jesus loved'.

John 13:23: ***"One of His disciples whom Jesus loved was reclining at table close to Jesus."***

Some translations imply that his head rested on Jesus' chest.

Jesus loved each of His disciples so why does it say this about John? Jesus appeared to have a deep and special love for John. Why? Because John wanted to be close to Him – leaning his head on the heart of Jesus.

In the heart of John, Jesus found a very ready response to His teaching and His actions and, above all, to Himself. There are several indications of this. John watched Jesus die on the Cross and it was there that Jesus charged John to care for His mother.

It is clear that after Pentecost Peter liked to be with John. Peter probably found friendship with John very fulfilling knowing that John was very close to Jesus. In Acts 3 the two of them went to the temple. It appears that Peter had a greater healing gift than John. Peter preached. Both were arrested and it was said of their accusers, ***"But when they saw the boldness of Peter and John … "***. John doesn't seem to say anything but in his presence Peter emphasizes, ***"Look as US"***. He knew that what he said was also what John would say and that it would reflect the heart of Jesus.

5. Enoch

Gen. 5:21-24 ***"When Enoch had lived 65 years he fathered Methuselah. Enoch walked with God after he fathered Methuselah 300 years. Thus all the days of Enoch were 365 years. Enoch walked with God and he was not for God took him."***

Enoch was very special, but not much is said about him! [Other references include Heb. 11:5-6 and Jude 14.] Much is said about Abraham in Genesis and other Scriptures. Four whole books are written about Moses. The events he was involved in are crucial to revelation history – the Passover – the Exodus – the mighty words and miracles during the life of the People of God in the desert – great leadership principles and so much more. David rose out of obscurity to the throne of the People of God and gave God's people a model and standard by which all future kings were judged. David also gave us wonderful expressions of worship in so many of the Psalms.

Enoch is marked out by the almost total absence of what went on between God and himself. The whole story is more or less told in one sentence (v. 24), ***"Enoch walked with God and he was not for God took him."*** Clearly he was a special friend of God. In Scripture he is almost like an 'extra' in the movies. He comes on to the stage, says a sentence, leaves and never re-appears.

We read in Heb. 11:5-6: ***"By faith Enoch was taken up that he should not see death and he was not found because God had taken him. Now before he was taken he was commended as having pleased God. And without faith it is impossible to please Him. For whoever would draw near to God must believe that He exists and that He rewards those who seek Him."***

Enoch represents to us a life that God wants us to enjoy – a deep friendship with God. This was not for any special purpose that relates to revelation or world mission, but for what it can give to the heart of God. This was so much so that God took him home permanently.

Friendship with God is a way that we can give to God. So the focus in Scripture is on "***Enoch walked with God"***. Commentators on the Hebrew text say there is more than one word used for 'walk'. The word used in the Hebrew here is a strolling kind of walk.

After this meeting I may say to someone, *"Let's take a breath of fresh air"*. Together we would go for a stroll. We are not going anywhere. We are just walking together for friendship's sake. The scenery may be nice but that is not the point of the stroll. So it was with Enoch. He often went strolling with God just to enjoy his friendship with Him. He wasn't particularly concerned with what was going on around him. He was going for a walk to maintain the friendship he had with God.

After Methuselah, Enoch spent 300 years strolling with God. We don't know what happened or what they shared together. That was kept between God and Enoch. But Scripture gives us this picture of Enoch's life as an intimate stroll along the pathway of life with an ever-deepening friendship between God and Enoch.

I think an ever-deepening friendship with God and God's appreciation of this relationship is based on four principles:

- A growing shared life with God
- A growing compatibility with God – resulting in:
- Increased productivity and fruitfulness
- An ability to hold confidences with God

A growing shared life with God

Enoch's relationship with God was not **'needs based'**. He wasn't going to God with a shopping list of prayer requests. He didn't run out of food and then go to God and ask for His help. Certainly God does answer that type of prayer for he told us, ***"Ask and you will receive …."***. Enoch viewed his life as union with God. Every part of his day was lived out as a shared experience with God. We have a friend – now in her 80s – who worked with my parents in India. She is well known in mission circles as she has written books on stress. She walks with God. She talks to Him as she walks around London, *"O look Lord at the strange hat that lady is wearing!"* She and the Lord have a chuckle together.

Enoch lived his life walking intimately with God. All his experiences in life were shared with God. He didn't have to go to God with a problem because he knew God was with him. He shared his feelings with God, *"Look at that Lord, terrible fighting again in Palestine! Children are being killed and houses destroyed"*. He brought to God his groans and pains concerning the peoples of the world in a very natural way. He knew God was listening. This was real prayer.

So often we show our lack of a shared life by the flowery 'Victorian' language of our prayers. It might impress others but I think it grieves the heart of God. Prayer can sometimes reveal to us the depth of our relationship with God. Formal prayers sometimes have almost a sense of panic in the hope that then God will listen to us. We should pray in great confidence that God understands because God is with us. He is our dear Friend and He cares.

An Example: Our house is a bit of a mess; the grandchildren are visiting and the toys are all over the place. We have just been shopping and things are not yet put away. The phone rings. It is surprise visitors asking if they can come over right away. Do my wife and I have a long discussion about what we should do? No! We are both thinking the same thing! Without a word we work together on a 'clean up operation'!

Prayer should be something like that. We don't have to convince God about a problem because He knows all about it. If Enoch had a problem, he went for a stroll with God. He knew that God would be thinking much the same as him about the problem. This leads to great confidence in prayer. **This doesn't come easily**. I still tend to panic at a time of need where my friendship with God is not at the level of my concerns and I fail to have faith that **my** deep concerns are also the deep concerns of God and that taking care of everything in my life is as much God's concern as mine.

As we grow in the school of faith and as our friendship with God deepens, so faith grows. It is no longer a case of trying to convince God to help. It is rather moving to a place of quiet confidence in God based on trust.

Whenever Enoch wanted to thank God for something it was with genuine warmth. It was never a case of 'I must thank God in case He might never do anything for me again' attitude. We know that God knows everything about our lives and that they are as much His concern as ours.

"Enoch walked with God after he fathered Methuselah …." Growing sons and daughters cause parents many concerns. Perhaps this deepened Enoch's friendship with God. It isn't hard to imagine a worry or anxiety in Enoch's mind that he shares with God. God would have responded, *"There is no need to worry about that. I will take care of Methuselah."* God really has all things under His control.

To a certain extent this sort of friendship depends on secrecy. Nearly always the deep things of God are only shared with a few friends. It is very upsetting when you have told something to a friend in confidence and it comes back to you through an acquaintance. Often a friendship is over – broken by lack of trust. Most of us long for a friendship in life where we can share our deepest concerns. Most of us have lots of friends but very few deep friendships – people with whom we can fully share our hearts.

Jesus was the friend of sinners, but we read in Jn. 2:24, ***"Jesus on His part did not entrust Himself to them, because He knew all people … and He Himself knew what was in man."*** But Jesus did share openly – especially with Peter, James and John.

So as Enoch walked with God there was a growing trust/faith in that deepening friendship. Such a friendship must have been very satisfying and enormously stimulating to Enoch. All such friendships are. Do you wish you had such a friendship with God? Enoch's life teaches us that we can have such a friendship with God. Such a friendship is really amazing! Even if you are stranded on an isolated Island, as John was on Patmos, God is with you and you can be ***"in the Spirit"*** as John was.

A growing compatibility with God

A deepening friendship with God requires a growing compatibility with God. Amos 3:3: ***"Do two walk together unless they are agreed?"*** Enoch walked with God and as the years went by there was a growing convergence of feelings, intellect and will between God and Enoch. So he was in total agreement with all that God revealed to him – total agreement in his thoughts and plans and God's.

This body is not the real me for it is mortal! The real me is inside this body – my emotions, my mind and my will. The real me is immortal. We all have emotions, a mind/intellect and a will. In all these areas there needs to be a growing situation of complete agreement with God.

So Enoch's emotions about things matched God's. Enoch had learned to think as God thought and Enoch's will pushed him into action in the same way and for the same purposes for which God exerts His sovereign power. So Enoch's thoughts and feelings increasingly matched God's and he had a will to do exactly as God did. God was thrilled that here was a man in tune with God – ***"He pleased God"***.

This was a deepening process over 300 years! Enoch lived in an increasingly pagan world. Adam and Seth were still alive in Enoch's time, but their influence was increasingly diluted as the population grew rapidly. God began to share with Enoch what He was about to do. And Enoch agreed with God! Why did God take him? Possibly it was because Enoch was becoming too like God to live on the earth among men who were increasingly so unlike God.

God cannot relate to angels as He can to men. The angels were created to be the servants of God. We are created for a relationship with God as children of God. We are made in the image of God with the capacity to be in some way compatible with God. This was the relationship Adam and Eve had with God before the Fall. Now Enoch had this relationship. In Enoch God had found a man – not sinless – but a man of faith with a great desire to be compatible with God.

Paul called the body He was in ***"this tent"*** (2 Cor. 5:1). As a tentmaker he would have been very familiar with the temporary nature and use of tents. Paul wrote to the Philippians concerning Timothy (2:19-22), ***"I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon so that I too may be cheered by news of you. For I have no one else like him who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare. They all seek their own interests. Not those of Jesus Christ"***.

Timothy wasn't seeking his own interests. Others were pursuing their particular interests, but Timothy was different. He would convey the emotions and the mind of Paul to the Philippians because he had the mind and heart of Paul. Why? It was because he had spent many hours walking with Paul.

Are we totally absorbed with God's interests? One of the saddest stories Jesus told is the story of the Sower – some of the seeds started to grow but they were choked by the weeds and died. What hinders our deepening friendship with God? It isn't usually gross sin in our lives, but rather that we increasingly pursue our own interests and have no time to walk with God.

In the Parable of the Sower (Mt. 13:1-23) the seed that fell among thorns began to grow and began to bear fruit but, ***"the cares of this life and the deceitfulness of riches"*** choked the plants and they were unfruitful and died. Many people start well and are clearly filled with great potential. When you meet them decades later they haven't fallen into sin. Rather the lustre has gone out of their lives. They are still in the Kingdom but they have flagged in the race. Why? They haven't let their hearts be captured by the interests of God. They have become absorbed with secondary interests that are now first in their lives.

The most important thing in your life is to develop and deepen your friendship with God. Don't let your job, your security or even your ministry become your primary interest. So often material things – money, a job, a home etc. are our primary interest and the thought of losing them or losing a visa etc. is a major cause of fear. If these things are lower down on your list of importance and you lose them, it isn't so serious because you still have God and He is in control of your life.

I think this is what sustained Abraham at the thought of having to kill his son, Isaac. Abraham could conceive of a life without Isaac, but he couldn't contemplate a life without God! If the choice was either Isaac or God, he was going to choose God! Was this so terrible? No! God had given great

promises concerning Isaac. Because Abraham knew God, he knew that if Isaac died God would raise him to life again.

Please note: God is not interested in being the **only** interest in your life. But He **must** be the **first** interest. Family, the Muslim World – even Rugby and any other interests – must be placed in relationship to your great primary interest – God.

"Seek first the Kingdom of God." (Mt. 6:33) It is not the only thing, but it is the **first** thing. One of the Devil's lies is: *"If it is God, then it is nothing else – not family – not calling etc…."* **This is not true!** Another sort of lie is, *"If you submit to Jesus you will have to give up football etc."* It is a lie! Everything in your life will find its proper place if God is in **first** place. Jesus said, ***"And all these things will be added to you."*** (Mt. 6:33) Psalm 37:4 says, ***"Delight yourself in the Lord and He will give you the desires of your heart."***

I am delighted with my wife, my 3 children, 2 daughters-in-law and my son-in-law. I am delighted with my 7 grandchildren. They are all good gifts from God. I am delighted that so much is happening in the Arab World – better than all I hoped for 50 years ago. These are some of my 'added things'.

Compatibility between God and Enoch was like this. Their feelings, their minds and their actions were increasingly becoming as one. There was no great struggle. Deep friendship results in oneness of mind.

In the early church in Jerusalem (Acts 2:44) it says, ***"All with one mind had all things in common."*** Their oneness with one another was a product of their oneness with God.

Why do relationships break down? It is impossible to have "togetherness" unless there is oneness of heart and mind and will. This is impossible unless each person has oneness of heart and mind and will with God. Don't struggle to get your relationships together. You will never get unity. We will have great unity only if each one has a deepening friendship with God. Our vertical relationship must be progressing if horizontal relationships are to be strengthened. It is hopeless to strive with some people. Accept that until God works in their lives so they are right with Him, good fellowship and great unity will not be possible.

Increased productivity and fruitfulness

This will be the result of a deepening friendship with God. Enoch must have been very fruitful as well as having a very fulfilling life. He must have been one of the most interesting men of his day. But there is no record of what he did! What did he do? Was he a potter or a painter or a builder/engineer? In the year his son died Noah finished the Ark. I think Enoch would have been a superb research scientist! Why? The closer you get to our Creator God, the greater the creative activities that are stimulated in you. The first thing we are told about God is that God is a Creator. Gen. 1:26 says that we were created in God's likeness.

Adam was clearly very intelligent and very creative. One of the tasks Adam accomplished was the naming of all the animals. It has taken two or three hundred years and thousands of zoologists and botanists to attempt to do the same and they are still finding new species. Naming animals requires great powers of observation for it depends not just on the outward signs, but on a need to know their nature and in these days their genetic code in order to distinguish one species from another.

Enoch must have been creative, for how could he help being so as he grew in his friendship with God the Creator. Perhaps he was more creative than any man until the Lord Jesus. As your friendship with God deepens all your mental capabilities will be sharpened – your capacity to empathize with people will be enhanced and your ability to be fruitful in the task assigned to you will increase.

Enoch must have enjoyed his friendship with God enormously. I think one of the marks of a deepening friendship with God is that backsliding never dawns on you! Without God you would be undone. Life would have no meaning for all our lives are wrapped up in God Himself. Would Enoch have gone to a seminar entitled, 'Maintaining your relationship with God'? I don't think so! Maintenance is a mechanical concept and his relationship with God was not like a car that had to be maintained!

A deep and abiding relationship with God is even more possible for us because the Holy Spirit abides in us. We have more potential to live like this than Enoch did.

A couple of illustrations:

1. A widower lost his wife after many years of deep love and intimacy together. Now she is gone. What is he to do? He can hire a cook, a cleaner, a secretary and personal assistant but all these together would never equal his dear wife. Yes, they do the same jobs but it is not the same thing! He has lost his best friend.

2. *"Enoch, what does God mean to you?"*

"He is my friend."

"I will give you twenty good friends."

"He loves me."

"I will give you thirty friends to love you."

"He meets all my needs."

"I will give you everything you need."

In the end Enoch would say, *"I would much rather have God!"*

I read of a church that had quite a few older people in it. The leadership assumed that older people would be good prayer warriors since they could not do much else! But in a survey they found that very few had a ministry of intercessory prayer. They called all the older people together and asked them what they would really like to do now that they had more time.

Some wanted to learn to paint. Some wanted to learn to play a musical instrument. Others wanted to get into various crafts. There was a host of things they wanted to discover if they could do. The church put them in groups of similar interest and they started. In time an orchestra was formed that played both in the church and in the community. None of the members had ever played an instrument before the age of 65! They had an arts and crafts shop making money for the church. It was a great blossoming of creativity. We can only reach our full potential in a deep friendship with God.

An ability to hold confidences with God

This is a product of our deepening friendship with God. The only thing we are told about Enoch besides the fact that he walked with God is the name that he gave to his eldest son – Methuselah. This means, 'When he is dead it shall be sent'. According to one commentary this probably means the Flood. [Others have other meanings.] 969 years later – the year that Methuselah died – the Flood came.

So as Enoch walked with God, God shared with him the judgement that was to come and perhaps the saving of the life of one godly family. In Jude 14-15 we read that Enoch prophesied the Lord would come with 10,000 angels to bring His judgement on the earth.

So Enoch clearly knows something that others don't know. He prophesied to others but they took no notice. It is interesting that Enoch began this deep friendship with God after his son was born. Was it the secret of the coming judgement that sealed their friendship? Psalm 25:14 says, ***"The friendship of the Lord is for those who fear Him and He makes known to them His covenant."***

The friendship of God involves holding the secrets of God that He has whispered to your heart. Learn to hold those secrets. This is at the root of our concerns about security. Security is a big subject but this is at the root of a Biblical understanding.

<u>Two examples</u>:

- **Paul's secret**: 2 Cor. 12:2-4

  There were things he saw and heard that he wasn't allowed to tell. If he had shared them it would have been a breach of trust.

- **Abraham**: Gen. 18:17

  "The Lord said, 'Shall I hide from Abraham what I am to do … ?' " (v. 22)

  "….. Abraham still stood before the Lord" and he began to plead for those five cities. God knew that Abraham had an interest in those cities because of Lot and his family. Abraham didn't break trust with God and run down to warn Lot. Instead he began to plead with God. (Compare the culture of bargaining in the Middle East.) Sadly, in the end only three of the people in the cities were rescued. God's actions were a secret between Himself and Abraham.

Conclusion

So ***"Our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son, Jesus Christ."*** 1 John 1:3

This fellowship is characterised by a deepening friendship in our walk with Him. It is:

- **A shared life with God** – everything so intricately involved with God that we can't conceive life without Him.
- **Compatibility with God** in your feelings, in your thinking and in your will. There is a deepening agreement together as to the actions to take place.

- **A new measure of fruitfulness in life** – new strategies are birthed. There are new plans and a prophetic vision of the future. There is a new understanding of discipling those new in the faith and germinating Kingdom Communities.

May each one of us delight in this deepening friendship in our walk with God.

3. Sharing in a supernatural life with God

Introduction

I am convinced that while we live here on the earth, most people will just recognise that there may be a sort of metaphysical abstract God in heaven until they **see** something very strange in us – God and us in indivisible union rather similar to a husband and his wife. During the 40 years of desert wanderings the surrounding tribes/peoples could easily see that these people had a mighty God not only in the sky but they knew God was right there on the earth with them. They could see that when they moved there was an indivisible union with their God – God leading them.

God wants people to see our union with God – God with us – in our midst.

Read Mt. 8:18-27

This is an account of Jesus' life of ministry. People would say to Him, *"May I follow You – i.e. become Your disciple?"* There was something compelling about the life of Jesus that caused people to leave whatever they were doing and become His disciples. After the calming of the storm the disciples asked, ***"What sort of man is this?"***

I am sharing with you something of the nature of our fellowship with God the Father and His Son the Lord Jesus. We have seen that it involves:

- An enjoyment of His presence
- A deepening of friendship with Him

Now I want you to see that fellowship with God is **living a supernatural life**. The problem the disciples had with Jesus was that He sometimes seemed to be perfectly 'normal'. He grew tired and went to sleep like they did. He got hungry just as they did. He withdrew from crowds when He needed rest from the pressure of the demands of the people. So they were aware that He was an utterly natural person. Yet there was another aspect of His life among them that made Him completely different from anyone else. Who else could say to the winds and waves, ***"Be still!"*** and nature would obey Him? No natural man could do that! He had an authority that took Him far above anyone else. Jesus was a supernatural man! What kind of man is this? He represented a whole new order of mankind. The Lord Jesus was the first in a whole new order of people. Jesus is described as the Second Adam/man. (***"The second man is from Heaven."*** 2. Cor. 15:47) The first man was Adam and all the people from Adam to Jesus were – in a sense – 'subnormal'. Adam was 'normal' until he fell and lost so much of his humanity that he was 'subnormal'. This is how we are in our sin. We are below what God desired us to be. Then Jesus – the Second Man – came and the disciples were right to ask, ***"What sort of man is this?"*** Jesus demonstrates to us what God expects us to be who have been 'born again'.

What is apparent about Jesus is that though He lived in this time-space world of ours, He wasn't confined to it. Here is an example of His statements about this in Jn. 3:13:
"No-one has ascended into heaven except He who descended from heaven – the Son of Man – who is in heaven." This seems to say, ***"No-one has ascended into heaven except the One who has come down, who is still in heaven."***

Clearly Jesus was at home in both worlds at the same time! Jesus was a Man of two worlds combined in one Man. He was wholly in harmony in heaven and wholly in harmony with earth both at the same time. He was perfectly at ease in the mind of His Father and perfectly in control in the circumstances of the life of men. So the two spheres meet perfectly in the Lord Jesus. This makes Him supernatural. All other people are at home on the earth, but completely out of harmony with heaven. So Jesus spoke of One they did not know and said that He was going to a place where they could not come because mankind is confined to this time-space world of this age – in disharmony with God.

But we who have been born again by the Spirit of God have come into a new dimension of life. We too have broken out of a time-space world. We are no longer confined to the limitations of being a 'sub-normal' human being. We have been elevated to become 'sons of God' – the sons of men and the children of God! We too can begin to have the harmonising of a relationship between heaven and earth.

We get hungry and tired and have to work like everyone else, but we have a whole life that they know nothing about! We find ourselves concerned with the plans of God in heaven as well as with the mundane things on earth. **If there is any imbalance in us, it is a pull towards heaven.** Paul says that it is better to go to his heavenly home but he is willing to stay to help people. And we know that we are like that. We'd love to escape this world and go to the Father, but we also know that we have been given a task right here. But the pull of heaven is in our hearts. In worship we sometimes seem to break out of the earth-bound nature and rise in freedom to a life in the Spirit. We realise that this is what we are meant to be! There is a very deep satisfaction that nothing else produces. Why? Well, we are enjoying a supernatural life.

Jesus said, ***"My Kingdom is not of this world"*** (Jn. 18:36). He also said, ***"The Kingdom of God is within you"*** (Lk. 17:21). God's Kingdom is both completely separate from this world and yet in it at the same time.

Abraham was given a name by others around him. They called him a Hebrew (Gen. 14:13). This means 'one from beyond'. The people worshipped idols (usually little models), very visible objects – stone, metal or clay depending on your wealth. Their gods were confined by the material and the natural – as indeed their own hearts were.

They found Abraham to be very odd. When he prayed he built an altar, offered up a sacrifice, but not to any idol. Abraham looked up. They asked themselves, *"I wonder where his god is?"* Abraham certainly worshipped God, but not in any direction. Where was his God? They gave him a nickname 'the one from beyond'. He was a man not confined to this world – a man who communicated to another world – a world they couldn't see or understand. Abraham lived a supernatural life in this way. [Note: some commentators say, 'one from beyond the Euphrates'.]

Our fellowship with God enables us to live a divinely supernatural experience every day on the earth. We should expect supernatural experiences to happen. The supernatural life given to us is not under our whim and fancy. It is under the direction and oversight of the Holy Spirit. The Lord Jesus didn't do miracles casually. Everything He did was purposeful and directional. Jesus went to the Pool of Siloam. Many sick people were waiting for the waters to shake. One man was raised up and walked away and the rest had to wait – a purposeful miracle. John calls these 'signs'.

Three areas of living a supernatural life

1. The supernatural authority that is ours in the Lord Jesus

This is a life of dominion. Too many believers have a life dominated by fear, by suspicion, by shame and guilt. Too often it is a life dominated by other people. In the Bible life in fellowship with God the Father and His Son the Lord Jesus is **a life of dominion over all these things.**

Firstly – dominion over our circumstances

We are not to live with everything getting on top of us! So often I say to myself, *"Things like all this paperwork are getting on top of me"!* I need to learn to live in the supernatural where I live on top of 'things'.

Example: Acts 12:1-11 **Peter in Prison**

Peter was arrested and was about to be killed in order to please the Jewish hierarchy. The very night before his execution Peter was sleeping peacefully. Herod probably had a sleepless night! Peter was not dominated by his circumstances. He wasn't worried about what was going to happen. He wasn't praying in desperation. There was no anxiety, just a deep sleep because the supernatural peace of God was ruling in his heart. Jesus had spoken to him (Jn. 14:27) ***"Peace I leave with you; My peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid."***

I think part of this peace lay in the words of Jesus to Peter at the breakfast on the beach, (Jn. 21) ***"But when you are old …"***. In effect, Jesus told him he would be crucified. But Peter was still a young man. It was 35+ years later that he was killed in Rome. So if he had died the next day Jesus would not have told the truth. This is impossible! So he knew he was not going to die and he got a good night's sleep. You know what happens. He is led to freedom by an angel and God locks up all the doors. Why did He do that? So that it was obvious that there was no break in from the outside.

Read Acts 12:18, ***"Now when day came, there was no little disturbance among the soldiers over what had become of Peter."***

Example: Mark 6:48 **The Disciples** [read v. 45-51]

The disciples were rowing over the lake. They started in the early evening. By now it was the fourth watch – i.e. between 3-6 am and they were struggling to cross the lake because of the storm. They were straining at the oars. It was hard work for the natural man. The wind was against them. Everything was going wrong.

Then Jesus came to them walking on the water and He meant to pass them by! Jesus made it look so easy! *"Praise God, Jesus is coming. Oh no! He is going past!"* Why was He passing by? I think He was saying to them, *"There is a better way of getting across than rowing in this weather. Just get out and walk over the water like Me!"*

But they had not understood the supernatural life of God demonstrated in the feeding of the 5,000. In the parallel version in Mt. 14:22-33 Peter calls to Him, ***"Lord, if it is You command me to come to You on the water."*** Jesus says, ***"Come"*** and you know the rest of the story. But if Peter could walk on the water, so could all of them.

Many of us ask God to come into our circumstances. *"Please come and help us Lord."* God says, *"No! come on top of it with Me."* We cry, *"Lord I'm having such a hard time. I need to feel You with me in it."*

Do you really want God to get into a hard time? Is it not much better to learn what Jesus is exhorting us to do – **how to live in the middle of a hard time but not having one!**

This is what Paul and Silas were experiencing when in the stocks with bleeding backs in the jail in Philippi. Of course they were in pain but they were having a great singsong – the tremendous joy of worship. How? Well, they are in the midst of a hard time but they won't let that dominate them. If you had asked them how they were, the answer would have been, *"O terrific! God is wonderful!"*

It is impossible to react that way naturally, but you can do so supernaturally. You can learn how to get out of the natural feeling of everything getting on top of you so that you are on top of 'things'. Rather than struggling with 'oars', you are walking on water!

There are many examples of this. We could think of Daniel, of the 3 men thrown into the fire or perhaps of Joseph. Joseph had a dreadful time. His brothers sold him as a slave. He was betrayed by Potiphar's wife, thrown in prison etc. But eventually his brothers stood before him and he said, ***"God sent me before you into Egypt."*** They had sold him but there was no revenge. Why? It was because he knew that God was in control and that he had been sent into Egypt to keep the family alive. Joseph was a man who learned to control his circumstances rather than letting them control him.

If circumstances begin to control you there will be bitterness, resentment, being jealous of the provisions and ministry of others etc. If you are in control of circumstances then you know how to be content when abased. You know how to be content in all circumstances.

Secondly – dominion over demonic forces of all kinds

The weakest, lowliest child of God is stronger than the strongest demon or power because the child of God is **in Christ Jesus** even if he/she is just a very new believer. The Lord Jesus doesn't base His level of authority given to a believer on the newness of that believer. A senior leader in the church has no more spiritual authority than the newest believer. The Lord Jesus is always **Lord of all** and He disarmed the principalities and powers on the Cross (Col. 2:15). The Lord Jesus is the supreme authority in the seen and unseen created worlds.

Example: **Paul and Silas at Philippi** – Acts 16:16-18

What the slave girl said sounds very good; ***"These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation".*** (v. 17) Paul was annoyed because he didn't need the Evil One to enhance his ministry! It was a spirit saying the right things but not the **right** spirit saying the right things. Worship **can** be like that – empowered by a 'religious spirit'!

There is **dominion in the spirit realm** – a dominion God wants every one of His children to know about. Dominion over evil spirits has nothing to do with how loudly you can shout or how loudly you can pray! I sometimes think that loud shouting has more to do with unbelief in the heart than with a holy anger and the control of demonic forces in a person who should be made free.

Jesus arrived at the shores of Gadara (Mk. 5:1-20 and Mt. 8: 28-34) and a demonised man rushed down to attack Him. The disciples were probably getting back in the boat! Scripture says that Jesus ordered the unclean spirit out of the man. The evil spirit did not want to obey; it said he was being tormented! Distance has nothing to do with authority. You can take authority over evil spirits who are oppressing

people even when you are far away. The Lord Jesus was in complete control, ***"Come out you unclean spirit"***.

Many believers fear the demonic world, but we are told, ***"Do not fear"***. The disciples lived in fear. Remember, ***"It's a ghost"*** when they were in the boat and they were scared. There is nothing to fear about an evil spirit because in Christ you have a stronger/greater authority.

Look at some of the things Satan does to train believers to fear him:

- ✓ "Do you know that the man you just shook hands with is a powerful practitioner of the occult?" Fear comes on you.
- ✓ You happen into a Sufi meeting where some very weird and demonically inspired things are going on. Who should be scared? You or them? God is with you and evil has no chance!
- ✓ "Do you know that amulet you have been given is really to protect you from the Evil Eye?" You say, "Well I won't wear it any more!" Is that fear? Are you scared of Satan's power?

People go to strange lengths in their fear of demons! Here is a funny but sad story:

A man came to a pastor and told him that there was a bad atmosphere in his house. He said, *"We think it is because the people who lived here before us were Free Masons."* The pastor responded, "*Tell me more about this atmosphere."* The man said, *"Well we have already tried to deal with this 'thing'." "What have you done?" "My wife and I prayed and a friend told us that there was a demon in the house and it was in the armchair. So we burned the armchair. But the demon came back and went into the wardrobe, so we burned that too. But the demon came back into the house and went into the cat. So we baptised the cat and gave it a new name, but nothing has worked! The atmosphere is still there!"*

These people were believers but they were far from living in dominion over Satan. They were so fearful that they were very easy to deceive.

If you are told things that cause you to fear spirits, then I urge you to believe God's words, ***"Greater is He that is in you than he that is in the world!"*** 1 Jn. 4:4. Never lose a moment's sleep when you encounter evil spirits and the occult.

Thirdly – learn how to have dominion over people

How often does the fear of men paralyse us believers? We are afraid of some people and ***"The fear of man lays a snare, but whoever trusts in the Lord is safe"***. (Prov. 29:25)

Humanly speaking, Jesus was a man from a lowly background – a village carpenter's son, but He wasn't intimidated before rulers of synagogues or cities, before Herod, the high priest or the Roman Governor. The Lord Jesus had authority over all the wicked designs that were in the hearts and minds of men.

Example: Lk. 4:28-30

I smile whenever I read this passage and ask myself whatever the crowd must have thought after it had happened. The Lord Jesus was preaching in his home village. He had healed a man in the synagogue. He had expounded the Scriptures to them and ***"all in the synagogue were filled with rage"***. They rose up and drove Jesus out of the village and led Him to the brow of a hill in order to throw Him down the cliff. ***"But passing through the midst, He went His way!"*** What an anti-climax! He just turned around and walked away. At all times He was completely in control of all people.

Your neighbours, your colleagues at work, your employees, all those who are against you or even those you think are against you – you are in control! **Never succumb to the fear of man**. No-one can do anything to you. You are in control!

Look at Acts 7: 54-55 – **the stoning of Stephen**

The people were enraged! Stephen saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God! In the end he fell asleep – i.e. he died. Who was in control? The people were so out of their minds with insane anger that they murdered this man. But Stephen is in perfect control – calm and in prayer to the Lord Jesus – asking forgiveness for the murderers. This is an example of a man in fellowship with God who knows how to take control.

Who was in control at the Cross? Wicked men? ***"Jesus delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God – you crucified….and killed."*** (Acts 2:23) The Lord Jesus was always in control and will always be in control. We never need to fear men.

2. Fellowship with God gives us a supernatural communication line – prayer and God's teaching

My mind and thoughts are not only bound by what I learn in an ordinary way – reading, listening watching etc. God can communicate to us without the limitations of the natural mind. The Holy Spirit can show you invisible realities – His plans and purposes for the future – what is in the minds of people.

Some Examples

David's sin and Nathan's story – 2 Sam. 12:1-15

The Lord sent Nathan to David and he told David a story. David got very angry and thought the man in the story deserved to die. Then Nathan said, ***"You are the man!"*** Who told Nathan about David, Bathsheba and Uriah? God did.

Elisha at Dothan – 2 Kings 6:8-23

The King of Syria was fed up with Elisha because God told his entire secret military plans to Elisha and Elisha told the King of the Northern Kingdom. So there was a secret plan to capture Elisha at Dothan. A great army surrounded the small town. Elisha's servant was very afraid. Elisha said to him, ***"Do not be afraid, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them …. O Lord Open his eyes that he may see."*** What he saw was the whole area full of horses and chariots of fire – the mighty armies of the Living God! Elisha knew they were there and he didn't need to see them. Elisha had a new communication line. He saw things as they really are. There is an 'eye' within us that isn't confined to what we can see physically.

Ananias, Sapphira and Peter – Acts 5:1-11

Peter sees the hidden bag of money as well as the money Ananias has brought to him. He says, ***"Who put it in your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit? You lied to God."*** Ananias dies. Peter was not living in a dimension where what he knew was naturally learned. There was a supernatural communication line.

There are other examples like Agabus. (Acts 11:28; 21:10) All of us can live in this dimension. So you are no longer confined to natural knowledge. There is a communication system with God that enables God to prepare you beforehand for coming events in your life.

What did Nathanael understand when Jesus said to him, ***"When you were under the fig tree, I saw you."*** How did the Holy Spirit communicate to Philip and tell him to go down to Gaza? And how did he get carried away? – Acts 8:39

If only we would stop seeing ourselves as only natural! We are a supernatural people!

3. The realm of supernatural provision

Learn to live beyond your means and abilities. The natural man knows that if he lives beyond his income he will get into debt. But life lived in fellowship with God means constantly living beyond your means. You are living on **God's resources**. You are living by His provision.

The example of Elisha and the widow's oil – 2 Kings 4:1-7

The problem was death, debt and despair!

The solution came through answering two questions:

- What shall I do for you?
- What do you have in your house?

This story shows us the importance of going public with your faith as well as going in and shutting the door. What was the result? All her needs were met – critical, constant and collective.

We must live in this world in fellowship with God, not dependent on the natural life of support or natural means of supply. The widow's faith is at an all-time low. Elisha probably had no means to pay her creditors. He asked her, ***"What have you got?"*** He was teaching her to reach into the provision of God for herself. She learned that she was to live on supernatural provision.

You need to learn how to reach into God's provision for the needs of others. We are to learn to receive in order to give to others. We usually only think of reaching into God's provision when **we** have run out. It is a double joy being provided for supernaturally and being able supernaturally to provide for others beyond your abilities/means. Paul said of the church in Corinth, ***"They gave as much as they were able and even beyond their ability – entirely on their own. They urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints."*** (2 Cor. 8:3)

How could they do this? They were giving in God's ability. They were receiving supernaturally in order to give more than they could naturally. Our Father loves to give to us so that we have the joy of giving to others! This applies not only to money, but also to wisdom and other things.

This is the principle lying behind the feeding of the 5,000. In effect, the disciples were saying to Jesus, *"You feed them. We can't. We have nothing."* They then had a lesson in expanding very little until it was more than adequate! Never say in your mind, *"I wish I could help",* for you can! Learn how to live by faith in drawing on God's supplies to minister to others.

Elijah is another example – 1 Kings 17:1-7

There were no shops in Cherith! The ravens would provide two meals a day. Ravens are 'ravenous' scavengers. They love meat! God instructed birds that would naturally eat meat not to eat it but to take it to Elijah. God is showing His authority to provide very unusually. We assume God is going to provide through brothers and sisters – prayer partners etc. But God can provide by any means. God is the source of your visa, your job – all that you need – all your security.

The example of Jesus – Jn. 4:31-34

Elisha learned to have faith for supernatural provision for others.

Elijah received supernatural provision for himself from unlikely sources.

Jesus did not receive food supernaturally yet He was full because He was doing the will of His Father. [See Jn. 4:32-34.]

God may not give you something you 'need' and you think you will still be hungry. But if God doesn't immediately provide for your need you will find that you can very easily do without because God has met the need in another way.

We need to live in the overlap of the natural and the supernatural – great supernatural authority – great supernatural communication and great supernatural provision.

Don't go home from here and just live in the natural world. In your fellowship with God the Father and His Son the Lord Jesus Christ begin to live in the supernatural world as well.

4. Living Free

The Death of Lazarus John 11:1-7, 17-44

Introduction

"Take off the grave clothes and let him go!"

About 1300 years earlier Moses had carried a message to Pharaoh that was, in effect, ***"Let My people go!"***

It is always God's desire for His people to be a free people with nothing binding them, nothing restricting them or holding them down.

We have been focussing on what it is to have fellowship with God the Father and His Son the Lord Jesus.

Fellowship with God is:

- Enjoyment of His presence
- A deepening friendship with Him
- A supernatural life
- Living as free men and women

"Whom the Son sets free is free indeed." Jn. 8:33

There are mental chains and chains of sin – chains of wrong attitudes. There is release and freedom by believing God's Word. Hope is birthed that you **can** live free. Things aren't going to be as before.

Elephants are often tethered to a post when they are young. They can only move within the constraints of the tether. Once they are used to this, they won't wander away even if the tether is removed. They will stay within the original confines. It is important not only to be free but also to know we are free and understand what this means!

We are going to look at the steps outlined in this passage of how to live free! The story is a very well known one.

Jesus appeared to use this home in Bethany with the brother and his two sisters as His 'home from home'. He was warmly welcomed into this family.

Lazarus was a very generous and warm-hearted man who was given to hospitality. He must have had a large home. Martha was a very kind woman. She was very practical and down-to-earth. When Jesus stepped over the threshold she served Him. She didn't allow Him to do anything. Every need of His was her personal concern – a good meal – a clean bed. Everything possible was made available.

Mary loved His presence. She would sit at His feet and hear His words. She ministered to Jesus in worship and adoration. Remember the occasion when she broke that box of perfume! The whole house was blessed by her spiritual service.

Jesus loved them all. They were all dear to His heart

The sequence of events:

- Lazarus gets very ill and a message is sent to Jesus.
- After getting the message Jesus stays where He is two more days.
- Jesus sends a message back to the sisters, ***"It is not for death but for the glory of God."***
- Two days later Jesus arrives in Bethany. Lazarus has already been dead for four days.
- The wake was in full swing – professional mourners were there and those who were genuinely grieving, for Lazarus was much loved.
- When Martha hears Jesus is at the edge of the village she runs. Her first words were, "… ***if only you had been here Lazarus wouldn't have died"***.
- Martha sends word to Mary. She also comes to the edge of the village and says much the same as Martha.
- All the mourners are there and it was probably the professional mourners who said, ***"Could not He who opened the eyes of the blind have kept this man from dying?"***

Steps to remaining free from all bondage

Step One: Accept God's love for you

At the scene Jesus was deeply moved and grieved in His spirit – a groaning spirit. The Lord Jesus was physically upset. He wept. This is the root of compassion and compassion always leads to action. Compassion is birthed out of anger at what is happening to someone you love. To that anger is added empathy – entering into the emotions of those who are suffering. God's love moves in your heart. It physically upsets you.

Sometimes I see people in Sudan and Palestine bruised, crushed, naked, starving and shell-shocked. It is easy to break into tears. But with the tears there is also great anger. Compassion isn't sympathy, for compassion always leads to action. Sympathy feels the pain. **Compassion stirs the will**.

Why is this important? You mean so much to God and He has **compassion** for you just as he did for Lazarus. The **foundation** for the permanent release from bondage is found in this: in **knowing** and **accepting** and **enjoying** the love of God for you.

Say to yourself with complete belief, "God loves me!" How much does He love us? Rev. 1:5-6, ***"He loves us and has loosed us*** (completed action) ***from our sins and made ….."*** Calvary is the proof of God's love for you!

So often a small thing happens and Satan tempts us to believe that it is proof that God doesn't love us. Look to the Cross! It is overwhelming evidence that He loves us.

They said of Jesus as He wept, ***"See how much He loved him"***. If you feel inferior, if you are experiencing all kinds of problems, say to yourself, "God loves me. God loves me. God loves me." Hold the ground of faith that God loves you. You have been set free at the Cross. Believe you are loved! Mary and Martha **saw** that Jesus loved Lazarus. Jesus has always loved you and He always will love you. Jesus feels your hurt in His heart. He empathizes. He has compassion and He will take action.

Step Two: "Where have you laid him?"

This question was to help them realise their lack of faith. The two sisters acted very normally. Their minds and everyone else said, "Lazarus is dead." Jesus sent a message: ***"It is not unto death."*** But

Lazarus died! They were now **in conflict** – conflict between what God had said and their very real experience – he was dead!

How did they try and resolve the conflict? They began to **rationalise** what Jesus meant.

- ***"If You had been here he wouldn't have died."*** Perhaps Jesus tried to get there, but didn't make it and Lazarus died. If He **had been** there Lazarus would have been healed. This is a convenient theological interpretation that fitted the facts, but left their respect for Jesus intact. But it denied to them the life of Lazarus.
- **Second rationalisation**: Jesus says to them, ***"Your brother will rise again"***. This is a simple statement that they misinterpreted. ***"We know he will rise again on the Last Day."*** Jesus never mentioned the Last Day! Once you have come to terms with your bondage, any rationalisation can be used to deepen your lack of faith.

So often we know we are in bondage and we have all sorts of reasons why God is allowing us to remain in this state. We rationalise, misinterpret and distort all the great promises of God so we can accept the truth about God's promises, but accept that they don't apply to us. We understand the love of God, but we remain in the bondage we are in. We even say, "It is the cross I have to carry"!

Martha says, ***"Yes Lord I believe"***! But did she? A few minutes later they stood outside the cave and Jesus ordered the stone to be taken away. Martha said, "***There will be a terrible smell!"*** Clearly, she didn't believe at all.

It is so easy to say, "I believe" and then rationalise away belief. But Jesus would change everything! Their lack of faith had buried Lazarus and by burying him, they had sealed their unbelief. They did a good job! They wrapped him up and put a stone at the entrance of the cave.

So Jesus question was, ***"Where have you put him?"*** When unbelief has got hold of us, it holds us very tightly. We only slowly grow in faith, but we grow very rapidly in unbelief. Whatever is holding you in bondage – holding you back – you **can** be set free. Refuse the devil's lies that it is always going to be like this – fears, weaknesses, bondages, bad temper besetting sins etc.

A lady felt called to go to a particular country. She went on short-term. She returned, got married to a man who had no intention of leaving and she said with sadness, *"I have failed God and for me it has always been second best."* What a dreadful lie of the devil! Because you have failed God, from now on it is second-best!!

1 Jn. 1:9 ***"When we confess our sins*** (I didn't do what you've told me to do. Please forgive me.) ***God is faithful and just to forgive us our sin and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."*** There is no mention that it is going to the second division from now on. There is no relegation with God. When it's gone, it's gone! You are straight back into the full blessing of God. Goodness and mercy will follow you all the days of your life. Don't rationalise away God's promises. So how did Jesus deliver them?

Step Three: "Roll away the stone"

When Jesus said, ***"Roll away the stone"***, immediately there was resistance. Why? There is a terrible stench in there! Death is in there! A decomposing body is in there! They had all gone there, at best they hoped Jesus would say, "Lazarus come out!" and he would come out through the wall of the cave.

There are lots of people who want to be set free, but don't want the stone rolled away. They don't want to have revealed what's inside! *"Brother will you pray for me? There is an issue in my life." "What is it?" "I can't tell you!"* Well the issue stays there until the stone is rolled away.

There was a great revival in the Old Testament under a young king called Josiah (2 Kings 22-23 and 2 Chron. 34). His father and grandfather were some of the worst kings Judah ever had. The temple had been neglected for decades. The Book of the Law was found and it stirred Josiah's heart to believe that the people needed the presence of God in their midst. He said, ***"Open the doors of the temple"***. But they said there was a mess inside. Unless the doors are opened, you can't get in to clear out the rubbish.

John the Baptist said, ***"Repent and bear fruit in keeping with repentance."*** (Mt. 3:8) In other words, let everyone **see** you have repented by changing your way of life.

Part of your spiritual release is to say to God, "I want it all gone!" And to open up the doors, roll away the stone and clear away all that is rotting in your life.

To become free in God, you must be willing to roll away the stone. There is no shortcut to freedom that bypasses repentance. It is very shameful and hurtful to roll away the stone. You won't like the

smell of your own sin! Empty tombs look and smell fine! People are going to think less of you. That tomb had probably become a tourist spot! But God is not shocked.

Step Four: "Come out"

Jesus cried, ***"Come out."*** Why did He shout? He had been looking forward to this for four whole days! And out he came! I wonder if he hopped out – arms and legs bound – unable to see at all! How did he make it?

How God releases you doesn't really matter. You are alive and **nearly** free. I don't think Lazarus had been lying there wondering how Jesus was going to set him free from death!

It was an amazing sight. It shook rigid the professional mourners! What a unique funeral! Did they stay around for their money?

Lazarus is alive and standing there but still bound. He is alive but he is not living free. He is alive but he can't live! Living is the daily enjoyment of being free – eating, drinking, walking and talking.

Step Five: ***"Unbind him and let him go."***

To be really free, facecloths have to be taken off – all the bandages must be removed. Then he could hug his sisters! Resurrection life doesn't wear bandages!

What are the bandages?

- negative attitudes
- our self-rejection
- our negative thinking
- our wrong dispositions

We can be free of all these and we can live free!

Family and friends **can help**, ***"Take the bandages off!"*** Someone must have volunteered!
I wonder what they felt like! What would he look like?

What were Lazarus' reactions? He had been four days in there dead! "Thank God I am alive and free!"

What God starts, He will perfect. The Lord Jesus is not only the 'Alpha' but also the 'Omega'. He is the beginning and the end. He is the Author and the Finisher.

When are you going to live free? From today onwards? You are going to go home changed!

Lazarus went home. A while later Jesus returned to a big feast in Lazarus' home. It says that many believed in Jesus – not only because of the words of Jesus, but because they saw Lazarus alive and free.

People will come to Jesus and understand His power to liberate us when they see what has happened to you. The Jews wanted to kill Lazarus because so many were believing in Jesus.

Go on and live free. You are free. Come out! Throw away the bandages and be free!

5. Going on to maturity with God

"Let us go on to maturity" (Heb. 6:1-3) ***"For the harvest has come"*** (Mk. 4:26-29)

Introduction

Maturity and harvest go together. When wheat is mature it is ready to harvest. Maturity is when we have come to wholeness. We have been sharing about the joy we have in our fellowship with God the Father and His Son Jesus Christ. The fellowship is seen as: the enjoyment of His presence; a deepening friendship with Him; a supernatural life and living free.

Now we come to our last focus: fellowship with God is always **a going on to maturity**. We can't stay in fellowship with God the Father and remain in immaturity – i.e. stuck! There may be a few plateaus and pauses en route. There may be special times of "refreshing" – retreats, conferences, experiences that are a special blessing and accelerate growth. But God will not let you settle down. Good things become tiresome if you never move on to something else.

Grandchildren really like Mars bars! But what would they say if I gave them 20 one after another? Even the blessings of God can be like that! If we assume that this is all I want – this is it – the abundant

life – then even those blessings can turn sour on us. Many believers have lost the blessing because they have failed to realise that we must go on! So let us go on to maturity.

In Greek, ***"Let us go on"*** has the sense of 'let us be borne along' – like a ship borne along by the wind. So there is a force – a dynamic – that bears us along. We want to go on, but it is not **our** will that makes us go on. No! We are propelled forward by the power of the Holy Spirit. We are carried along as we are going forward. It is like crossing a busy street with a four-year old. You hold his hand and almost propel him across. So it is not left to me to go on to maturity. The great power of the life of God propels us forward to maturity.

If you play rugby you know that it is very different kicking into the wind and having the wind behind you. So God is not saying to us, "I want you to go on. Now go!" But "I want you to go on and I'm going to make sure that you will go on!" I trust you have been blessed at this retreat, but don't stop – go on.

1. The blade stage: signs of immaturity

What is maturity? The easiest way to detect it is when all the signs of immaturity have gone. How would you define a mature believer?

- It is nothing to do with the **age** of the believer. 50 years a believer doesn't make you a mature believer. Timothy was young; yet clearly he was mature enough to be a trusted leader.
- Some confuse maturity with **intellectualism**. They don't understand all the person says and assume it was "deep", but they are merely using long words that hide confused thinking. What of the model we have in the Lord Jesus? Was His preaching "deep"? No. It was in stories that were easy to follow for everyone in that culture. The Kingdom of God is not an easy concept. Yet Jesus made it so clear in His parables.

  The man sowed the seed in the field and then there was nothing more he could do about it. Then nature – the genetic code – took over. Out of the ground grew small blades of leaf – i.e. the seed sprouted as warmth and water in the soil caused germination. At the beginning there was not much showing. Life is like that. Babies develop in the womb. The development of life in new believers is hidden. You wonder if they are alive in Christ. But in time you notice the change. First you see the blade. It is small – not much different from grass. You are not sure what it is. But as it grows it bends in the wind.

  New believers are like that. They enjoy meetings. Most of the controversies and tensions in the church are completely over their heads. They are just hungry.

- There is **no sense of responsibility** or the ability **to evaluate**. Little children are like this. Children either like something or they don't like it. They can't evaluate the benefits or the harm of doing something. If a child likes it, he wants too much of it. He can't stay away from it! Hence the junk food culture. This is a mark of immaturity. Immaturity is not necessarily a bad phase. It is where we all start. It is only wrong if we don't move on.
- **A fantasy world phase** – everything is either wonderful or absolutely scary. You are George and dragons always lose. The problem of this fantasy world is that you are utterly dependent on feelings. If you live in a type of fantasy world, you will never grow into maturity with God. We live by **faith**, not by fantasy. Some live in a dream world of fantasy. This gives you a great culture shock when you discover the real world. It is easy to do this: "Oh, it has been a tremendous year!" When in reality, it has been awful! If you have spent several years making friends, but no one has come to faith that is not wonderful! So fantasy causes us to fool ourselves and maybe others.

  So coming to maturity is coming to terms with **the realities of life** including the very difficult issues. Maturity is learning that your spiritual life is **not dependent on external stimuli** – outside meetings etc. It is dependent on the great spiritual disciplines of the Christian life – fellowship with God through prayer, meditation and Scripture.

- **Failure is disastrous**. Small children try so hard to please or to succeed in a project, but then it doesn't work out. The child is devastated. My four-year-old grandson made a plane with stickle bricks and it broke! There was anger and tears. His little world had collapsed. Satan loves to keep believers at this stage!

  Failure/sin can be dealt with – 1 Jn. 1:9. There is forgiveness! **Satan magnifies failure**. 'God has written you off'! Immaturity always enlarges the calamity. Many give up because of this.

- **Immaturity magnifies issues beyond reality**. This can be embarrassing; you can take a small child to the Tower of London. You have to wait in a long queue. He says, "Look at that man's big nose!" You can't say, "You are not supposed to say things like that!"

  Immaturity sees things out of proportion – sickness, mistakes etc. Immaturity sees problems in the same way – out of proportion in the mind. Things seem bigger than they really are when measured by faith in God. ***"There is nothing too hard for God."*** Maturity is reading the problem alongside the Word of God. Then you will see it as an ever-decreasing issue. Yes, you will have problems, but God will always be greater than your problem.

- **Self-centred relationships of the immature**: These are typical of little children. They want a special friend. It is noticeable at birthday parties. Who is invited? A typical scenario would be that a very good friend from last month isn't invited. Why? He's not their friend anymore. Why? He played with someone else! "My friends only play with me". The immature are like that – fickle in their relationships – self-centred in terms of their relationships.

  Many believers are like that inside – childish in their relationships. They find it difficult to have good, deep friendships but hold them with openness. So many believers feel rejected. They have never matured. Paul said to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 3); ***"But I, brothers could not address you as spiritual people, but as … infants in Christ. … for while there is jealousy and strife among you … are you not of the flesh? … For when one says, 'I follow Paul and another I follow Apollos, I follow Peter …'."***

  So often there are divisions among us. Why does this happen? We are still children. We are immature. This is true in churches. People ask, "Who is preaching this morning?" We need to grow up in our attitude to relationships. We should not ask what people can give to me or what I can get out of it. If they give to others and not to me I should not reject them as friends. You get the same thing in missiological prescriptions – a form of judgmentalism.

  Notice: Stephanos in Corinth – one of those baptised by Paul – the first converts in Achaia, ***"The household of Stephanos … they have devoted themselves to the service of the saints."*** (1 Cor. 16:15)

  In Greek 'devoted' has the same root as 'addiction'. It is only once used in the New Testament. He was 'addicted' to serving the saints! He was not a self-centred man. His joy was in serving others and his whole family was like that. They blessed the church in Corinth – not because they were loved and appreciated by the believers, they were blessed because they could minister to all and sundry. Probably there were some in Corinth who were offended by this 'addiction'. "I was sick, and he didn't visit me." "I'm going to leave your group." "Why?" "Well, if you don't know that, I'm not telling you!" "What have I done that is so bad?" "Well, didn't you know, I've been ill all this past week?" "How was I to know?" "Well, you should have known!"

  These are immature responses. Offence is often swift and taken because of trivial things. There is self-centredness. People are hurt because they didn't get the attention they wanted or expected. So they magnify their problems and behaviour because then they get attention. We must grow out of such childishness. Because God loves you, be released from this sort of immaturity – the need for people to always bless me! Maturity is seeking to bless others.

- **Finding it hard to come to terms with the unknown:** People are nervous about doing something they have not done before. My eight-year-old granddaughter was very nervous about climbing a rock wall. She watched others. She saw that the harness worked. Still she was very afraid. She tried a few 'mounds' and slipped. After lots and lots of encouragement she made it to the top and then you couldn't keep her off it! She wanted to climb all rock walls wherever they were.

  There are different areas of immaturity. I grew up in Borneo, Singapore and India. I was left in England aged 11 and only saw my parents every five years. This wasn't a 'major' problem for me, but it is a problem for others. Many fear the unknown – imagination magnifies issues – monsters in the cupboard etc. Maturity is **not** having imaginary fears, but having a balanced outlook. God is with me. He knows the way. So nothing can really harm me. Fear is a terrible taskmaster and a major cause of attrition.

Well, these are some of the signs of immaturity. Go on to maturity. Don't stay immature! Lose yourself in faith. Live in an atmosphere of faith.

Back to the parable again:

2. The ear and the full-grained stage: coming into full maturity

The blade has all the promise of the things to come. There is an exploratory time as you go from stage to stage. Growth is often in stages – more like steps. You need to explore the plateaus (flat bits) – the new world you've been brought into. There are new stages in worship, in Bible ministry, in witnessing, in understanding worldviews (guilt, shame, fear cultures). As you grow – move up the stairs – some critical people might judge you. Always examine criticism Biblically and change if necessary.

First the blade is peeping out. Then the stalk grows and the ear appears. The ear is full of seeds leading to fruitfulness. As you watch others it is very hard to predict what they will become. You think some have great potential, but they never reach fruitfulness. They sort of fade away. They spring up quickly and disappear quickly. Others look weak/sick at the beginning, but in the end they are very fruitful and have a tremendous ministry in God.

The plants that live the longest don't grow the fastest. Progress is the result of **process**. Maturity isn't coming with very little knowledge and ten years later knowing everything. Spiritual maturity is **spiritual** growth. In the physical world there is a fading of one stage and a process of change to the new – i.e. day and night, spring and autumn etc. There is a process of growing into maturity.

Don't be anxious about it. Jesus addressed this issue, ***"By being anxious can you add 18 inches to your height?"*** A child often gets very anxious about how he/she will grow. The commercial world is very good at cruelly exploiting this anxiety. There is also a tendency to do this in Christian conventions leading to spiritual anorexia or bulimia!

Faith in God is essential if we are to keep growing. God has promised us that, ***"He who has begun a good work in us will bring it to perfection in the day of Jesus Christ"*** (Phil. 1:6).

Others notice our growth and sometimes bless us by telling us so! In the physical world you never notice your own physical growth or decline over a short period. If you begin to get proud of your growing maturity, God will often lead you into a wilderness experience. Paul had a fear that after he had preached to others, he might be disqualified (1 Cor. 9:27). ***"The man who thinks he is standing, let him take heed lest he fall!"***

So don't constantly look at yourself to see if you are growing. And never preen yourself if you think you are or get anxious if you don't think you are! Allow the Holy Spirit to mature you and believe that He will do so.

3. A full head of corn – fruitfulness

When the corn is fully-grown the grain seeds almost fall into your hand as you touch the ear. The weight of the grain causes the head to bow over. It is ripe and ready to harvest. The great mark of spiritual maturity is that **you are bursting out with the life of God**. The life of God in you is bursting to fall out. It is saying, "Please pick me now".

So often the people who have blessed me are people like that – bursting with the life of God. Everything they say is such a stimulation to me and to my life. It is so good to hear of such people. You "feed" on such people. There are different gifts and ministries but mature people **bless** you, encourage you, warm your heart and strengthen you.

Jesus went around blessing people. So it is today, even if at times He strips us bare in the presence of the Almighty, Holy God. The blessing of joy and the blessing of conviction are both blessings.

Covet a life that is a blessing to others. Aim for full spiritual maturity – bursting with the life of God. I want a life that is not just moving on, but that is moving out.

"Joseph – the fruitful bough whose branches went over the wall." (Gen. 49:22)

We are blessed to be a blessing to others.