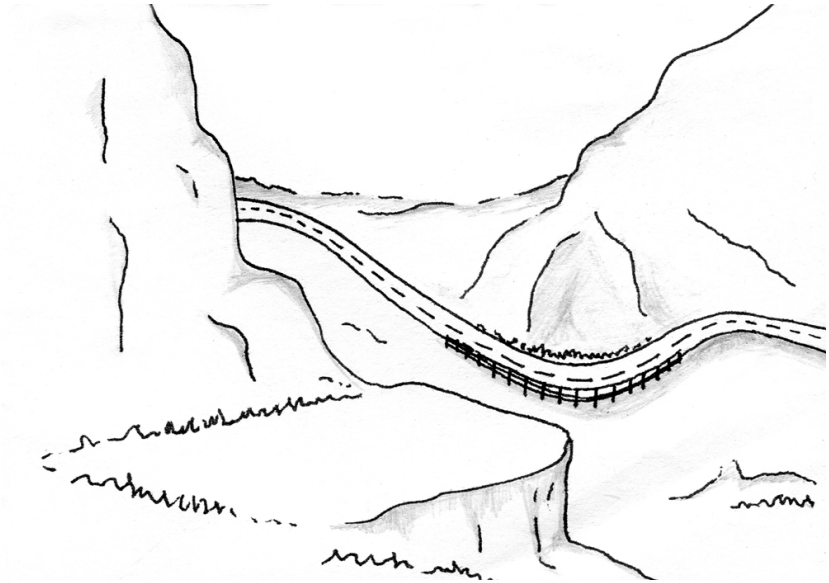


A View from the Mountain Side



By Simon Coward

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Introduction

Now when he saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them, saying:...
Matthew 5v1-2

In Wales there is a particular mountainside I like to walk up and sit and pray as I look over the view. It's a bit of struggle to get up there, but once the climb is over it is amazing to sit before the Lord and enjoy the scenery away from all the hustle and bustle of the world.

As I sit there I can see the cars climbing up the road through the valley below, until right below my favourite spot they come to a sharp bend in the road. Having ridden motorbikes and driven cars and vans round this bend I know that it is not an easy bend in either direction. It's steep, very sharp and because of an outcrop of rock is blind in both directions with no way to see the road ahead until you have almost completed the bend. If that was not bad enough, regular sprinklings of changeable mountain weather adds a whole new dimension making the roads even more difficult to navigate. As I sit on my mountain perch, I watch as the wise drivers almost grind to a halt as they try to work out how to take the corner safely. Only fools try to take the bend at speed and many pay the penalty for their folly as they find themselves sliding towards the barriers or into the path of oncoming vehicles.

The problem for all the drivers is they cannot see the road ahead or what is coming the other way and yet from my spot on the mountainside I can see the whole route clearly. No longer is the view blocked by embankments, instead I can see miles in each direction. It would be nice to be able to let the drivers know that the road ahead is clear or blocked, but they wouldn't hear me because they are concentrating so hard on the short patch of road ahead. Life would be so much easier for them if only they could see the view from the mountainside, but for that they would have to stop and get out of their cars and get above the situation.

One of the things we see in the life of Jesus is his constant walks up the mountainside to be with the Father, sometimes spending the whole night up there (*Luke 6v12*). It was something he did so often that his disciples

knew where to look for him (Mark 1v35-37).

However, Jesus didn't just go up the mountainside alone, it was a place where he called his disciples to follow him:

Jesus went up on to a mountainside and called to him those he wanted, and they came to him.

Mark3v13

The mountainside was a place of teaching and calling for the disciples and follows a pattern we see in the lives of other great men of God like Abraham, Moses, Elijah and Elisha. It is the place where the humble of heart climb to find direction from the Father, a place away from the influence and distractions of the world, a place to humbly sit and learn.

For Jesus being "The Way" (John 14v6) meant that his lifestyle was and is a lifestyle that we are to follow. As it tells us in Ephesians 5v1, we are to be "imitators of God" or as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 11v1, we, like him, are to follow the example of Christ.

This book is not going to give you the answers to all your problems. Instead, I hope to encourage you to climb the spiritual mountainside to meet with the one who has the answers and who knows the road ahead. Like all mountains it will take effort, reading the book alone will accomplish nothing, just as sitting in the car park looking at the hill takes us nowhere. It will take action, time and effort will be involved and sacrifices will need to be made. Our heart attitudes and perspectives will be challenged and changed, but if we will put in the effort, the view from the top will be worth it all as we see the path through His eyes.

Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is - his good, pleasing and perfect will.

Romans 12v2

1 – The problem of pride

And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over the everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.

Ephesians 1v22-23

It is interesting to note how many times we read of someone falling at the feet of Jesus. The great (*Mark 5v22*), the weak, the unclean (*Mark 5v33*) and the sinner (*Luke 7v37-38*), all came before the Lord and fell at his feet. It's not the sort of behaviour we would expect in this day and age, especially in Western cultures, for the idea of humbling ourselves before someone is frowned upon in our modern world. Equality is the slogan that we hear all the time, an equality that bows down to no one. We live in societies obsessed with exercising our rights, no matter what the cost to others or even self, and yet sitting at the feet of Jesus was normal, it was the place of teaching for the individual (*Luke 10v39*) or the crowd (*Mark 3v32*) and is symbolic in it's nature. For to sit at someone's feet shows a recognition that the other is superior and that they, the knowing, are passing knowledge and information down to us, the unknowing.

Being the “unknowing” is not something we find easy, even before God. It is an issue that goes right back to the fall of man.

“For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”

When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realised they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves.

Genesis 3v5-7

In this passage we see how man was tempted by a wisdom that was not from God, in other words they would no longer need to sit and wait on

the Father for instruction, instead they would know what to do themselves. It is the pride that we see at the centre of Satan's downfall as he sought to move himself from the position of servant to the position of equal.

You said in your heart,

"I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God; I will sit enthroned on the mount of assembly, on the utmost heights of the sacred mountain.

I will ascend above the tops of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most high."

Isaiah 14v13-14

Satan wanted to throw off the Lordship of the God Almighty, no longer being subject to his teaching, rather being the one who would teach those whom he ruled over, those that would become subject to his ways. It is why he was so desperate for Jesus to bow down and worship him in the wilderness (*Luke 4v5-7*). For in doing so Jesus would have been sitting at his feet and recognising Satan as his God.

Sadly though, the ways of Satan are the ways of the world, and especially in Western culture, where intellect, knowledge and wisdom, are seen as all powerful. They are seen as key factors in how we see others around us and also how we see ourselves. Our self esteem is so often built on these measures of the world when they are the very thing that the Lord has rejected (*1 Corinthians 1v27-29*), for they are a pride in self attained wisdom, a wisdom that has not come from God and has not required us to sit at His feet.

John writes:

For everything in the world-the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does-comes not from the Father but from the world.

1 John 2v16

This boasting of what we have is not just the material things of this world, but the intellectual knowledge we have gained, our perceived su-

periority that comes from knowing. This knowing, this wisdom, is one of the most dangerous forms of pride that enters a man and is a destroyer of revelation from God. It destroys because when we know, or think we know, we do not seek teaching, for who seeks what he already has?

One of my hobbies is electronics for model railways and at the moment I am working with some new components that I do not understand and so have spent many hours seeking out experts to help and teach me. If I already knew how to use them, or worse, thought I knew. I would not have sought a teacher, instead I would have gone along on my own convinced that I was doing things the right way. It is only because I have been able to humble myself and admit I do not know and symbolically sit before the feet of another that I have been able to be taught. It has not been easy, for with the older components, people sought my advice; Before, I was the teacher, now I am the pupil, before I spoke, now I sit and listen.

When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realised that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and took note that these men had been with Jesus.

Acts 4v13

Peter and John like all the disciples had spent time with Jesus, they had visited a number of mountainsides together. However, it's not just the fact they went up on the mountainside with Jesus, for many Pharisees had listened to Jesus, it is the fact that they humbled themselves and sat at his feet to be taught with no illusions of equality or of already knowing the answers. The recognition that he was the teacher (*John 1v38*), and as such they needed to spend time listening, is very important, for the great danger comes when in our pride we think we already know or come with our preconceived ideas that dull our hearing. This type of pride is one of the most deadly killers of revelation from God, for it hardens the heart in a way that no seed from the Lord can penetrate.

If we want to be the true Spirit led children of God, learning to submit our intellectual wisdom is going to be a tough step we are all going to have to take, but there is no other way.

Jesus said:

A student is not above his teacher, but everyone who is fully trained will be like his teacher.

Luke 6v40

Only as we measure ourselves against the life of Christ do we truly see how little we know and therefore how much we need to learn. Those lessons need to start with humility and a casting aside of the worldly based intellectual superiority we have relied on for so long. It is not easy, but just like climbing the mountain, it starts with a step in the right direction.

2 – This is going to take some time

*I waited patiently for the Lord; he turned and heard my cry.
He lifted me out of the slimy pit, out of the mud and mire;
he set my feet on a rock and gave me a firm place to stand.
Psalm 40v1-2*

One of the joys as I sit on my mountain perch is that now and again military jets fly through the valley below, sometimes there may be ten or eleven through the day, other days one or even none at all. It is always amusing when someone new turns up and asks what time they will be flying through, almost as if the military are running to my timetable. I explain how it works and that it's just a waiting game; some will wait a few minutes before heading back down, others, who really want to see the spectacle, will wait patiently, often for hours for the two or three minutes of excitement as the jet passes through, it all depends on the desire of their hearts.

It is the same as we wait before the Lord, for as the psalmist says, it's not just about waiting, but waiting patiently. We only need to wait patiently when something takes some time, you do not need patience when something is instant. It is here again that we start to see the challenge of sitting before the Lord, how long will it be before He speaks?

This becomes even more of a problem when we are in the midst of a struggle, when we want an answer and we want it now. The psalmist points out that he didn't just wait patiently for the Lord, he waited patiently while in a slimy pit! Waiting on the Lord in times of trouble is a step of faith in itself, a trust that the Lord alone is the answer and that He will give the answer in His time, the right time; if only we will sit at His feet and wait. It is that struggle to keep our eyes and thoughts fixed on Jesus (*Hebrews 3v1 & 12v2*) when we are in a desperate situation that is trying to drag our eyes off the Lord.

Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and com-

plete, not lacking in anything.

James 1v2-4

Often when Christians talk about living by faith they are thinking of going out and doing things for the Lord and yet the basics of the life of faith are based on seeking the Lord and humbly waiting before him. If we cannot get these basics sorted in our lives, how do we expect to go on and do greater things? It can come as a very uncomfortable shock to realise that our trust in the Lord is far smaller than we may at first think. For if we are not seeking the Lord, if we are not waiting patiently before Him, then our actions and decisions are based on our own views and ideas rather than the Lords, and despite our spiritual talk, we are not walking by faith at all. For if we have the answer without waiting on the Lord, how can it be His answer? How many decisions do we make without seeking the Lord? It's quite concerning for a people who claim to walk by faith.

The usual response to this is that the Lord has given us intelligence and so we should get on and use it. We can't be waiting around for the Lord all day for every little decision! Yet in *1 Thessalonians 5v17* we are told to "*pray continually*". Again it is so easy to reduce this down to passing an endless shopping list to the Lord of how we see the world needs fixing and sending God out to do it as if he was our servant. Let us sort ourselves out and get in the correct positions, let us put the Father back on the throne, lift up Jesus as Lord and allow the Holy Spirit back into the position of the great teacher and guide (*John 16v8-13*). Once we have put God in His rightful place in our lives, only then can we place ourselves in our rightful place, as the humble servant waiting for instruction, waiting on a word from the master. Praying without ceasing is as simple as asking the Lord a series of questions about what to do next and acting on His response. It is what a true walk with the Lord is all about, following in His footsteps. Sadly, once again it's not something we are good at because we just don't listen. In our pride we have already made the decision and at best will ask the Lord to bless "our" ways assuming that they are His ways.

As we look at the fall of man in the garden of Eden, once again we see the tragic consequences of intellectual pride. Adam had been clearly

told:

“You must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die.”

Genesis 2v17

However, Adam and Eve, just like so many of us today, did not take God at His word. Satan’s classic argument tempts the pride of intellect:

“You will not surely die.”

Genesis 3v4

Put simply, God didn’t really mean what He said! I have lost count of how many times I have heard Christians justify the reason for disobeying or watering down the commands of the Lord because God will understand because “these are unusual or difficult circumstances or “times have changed”. In other words we follow in the pattern of Satan, questioning and disputing the commands of God and overriding His authority because according to our prideful intellect and knowledge, we know better than Him. Let us be truthful and admit that there are times when for all of us, the ways of God and his instructions in the Bible can seem completely stupid and at odds with the situation we find ourselves in. However, if we will humble ourselves and cry out to the Lord, He is the one who will lead and guide and deliver us within the boundaries of His word. The situation may seem impossible to us, but He has been preparing since the beginning of time. Our crying out to Him is the call of faith towards the one we see as our deliverer. It is too easy just to assume we know and the consequence of not seeking is a pattern seen throughout scripture.

In *Joshua 7v1-9* The Israelites attack the small town of Ai. They had just defeated the mighty walled city of Jericho and so taking a small town would be easy and wouldn’t even require the whole army (*Joshua 7v3*). Notice that at no time do they seek the Lord, everything is based on their own perception of what has gone on and what they believe will happen next. Sadly their worldly intellect could not detect the ways of the Spirit and discern the sin in the camp (*Joshua 7v1*), only once defeated did they seek the Lord (*Joshua 7v6-9*) and as they waited on Him the revelation

came of the mess they had put themselves in.

Did they learn from this? Sadly the answer is “no”! A couple of chapters later in *Joshua 9* we read the account of the Gibeonite deception. Once again the Israelites make an intellectual decision based on what they see and hear in front of them. The key to their downfall was simple:

*The men of Israel sampled their provisions but did not enquire of the Lord.
Joshua 9v14*

In their intellectual pride they assumed that if they just followed a set of rules all would be well. Seeking the Lord is much more than obeying a set of rules, it's a constant living relationship, of hearing and acting on the Lord's direction. It's a lesson that Moses had tried to teach Joshua for we read in Exodus:

*The Lord would speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks with his friend. Then Moses would return to the camp, but his young aide Joshua son of Nun did not leave the tent.
Exodus 33v11*

Moses went to speak to and lead the people only after he had sought the Lord. It was a lesson he tried to instil into Joshua leaving him before the Lord in the tent of meeting, his own personal mountainside; yet it was a lesson he quickly forgot as his intellectual pride and leadership duties took over. As Christians we have become so used to this wrong way that we begin to teach the new believer sets of rules, giving endless instruction on how they should live; yet we are very poor in teaching them to seek the Lord for themselves mirroring our own failures. For we reap what we sow (*Galatians 6v7*) and replicate what we are, as Jesus said:

*Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit.
John 3v6*

We pass on the intellectual, when the real blessing to believers, young and old alike, is to be led into the ways of waiting on the Lord and hearing his voice of instruction for themselves. It is so sad that we try to bring about change in another instead of allowing the Lord to do it through His

gentle instruction. Our assumption is that we know best, when we actually know nothing except the assumption that comes through pride.

When it came to seeking the Father, for Jesus, the one we are to follow, seeking the Father was not something fitted into the odd free moment, it had priority, he cancelled his free time, forsook his rest and even his sleep to spend time listening. Even as the son of God he did not presume, but walked in faith, seeking and obeying as the Father led him. If he as the Son of God needed to do that, how much more do we? It will take time and it will take effort, but do we have something more important on our heart?

*Seek the Lord while he may be found;
call on him while he is near.
Isaiah 55v6*

3 – So how bad has it got?

“The watchman opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. But they will never follow a stranger, in fact they will run away from him because they do not recognise a stranger’s voice.” Jesus used this figure of speech, but they did not understand what he was telling them.

John 10v3-6

In the passage above, Jesus is talking to a group of Pharisees, the most spiritually learned men in Israel. These men would have spent years reading through the scriptures and discussing various ideas and doctrines with each other. They would be looked upon as some of the most important and influential spiritual leaders in the country, following every rule and regulation that they could find in scripture, and even some they couldn't. Yet when the Son of God stood before them, they didn't understand him or even worse argued with him. Imagine, Jesus, King of Kings and Lord of Lords, has come down and stood before them and despite all their learning and claimed knowledge of God, they disagree with him so much that they have him crucified for going against how they say scripture should be interpreted, having no concept that the one they are putting to death is the very same one they claim to worship!

If we think the same does not happen today we deceive ourselves (*Romans 12v3*). Even when we humble ourselves enough to admit it happens, its always another denomination, another church, another person; it couldn't be us that has a problem, we know and do so much! Let us cut straight through all our pride and go to the real indicators of how bad things have become in our churches and in our own individual spiritual lives. Let's start out with a quick look at the prayer life of the church.

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.

Acts2v42

In this one verse we can see how far we have drifted from the purposes

of God for we read here the four items that the early church was totally centred around. Note that the early church was devoted to these things. It wasn't a casual taking part when they had some free time or on a special occasion. When we are devoted to something, other things are sacrificed and pushed to the side and so for the early church none of these items was to be pushed out. Each one was a central pillar of the early believers lives that was to be continued, whatever the cost. Now we don't have time to go in to all four of these items, so we will stick with the theme of this book, hearing and being led by the Lord, prayer.

If you ask a Christian if prayer is important they will tell you it is crucial for any and all believers. Great answer! So if it is so important why are so few praying? Put on a fellowship lunch, a church picnic or some other entertaining visiting speaker or worship group and the church is full. Put on a prayer meeting and it's a different story entirely. The importance of prayer is mentally accepted, but the intellect deceives us by allowing us to think that knowing and doing are the same, that believing is the same as walking in faith. One intellectually acknowledges the truth while the other does it.

Our devotion to the Lord in prayer is no longer as devoted as we would like to believe it is. If we are honest, the prayer meeting is the worst attended meeting in most churches. Even when we have a prayer meeting we tend to need to encourage ourselves to get into the mood with some songs, so even in a prayer meeting that lasts an hour, time in prayer is reduced again. Even when we do pray, it's all about telling the Lord what He needs to be doing, rarely are we able to sit at the feet of the Lord and listen to Him? Is it really such an inconvenience to come into the presence of the one we claim to love with all our hearts and allow Him to guide us with His loving wisdom.

Let's look outside the prayer meeting, let's take a look at the Sunday service; how much of the service is spent in prayer and listening to the Lord? In a ninety minute service do we pray for more than a few minutes? We'll sing and dance and raise our hands and fill every little part of the service with music and activity. Anything to prevent us from actually having to speak to the Lord. Sadly it shows us just how poor our relationship with the Lord is. As for listening to the Lord, it just doesn't happen; we

have such a packed agenda that the Holy Spirit doesn't have a time slot allocated to speak in.

You may cry out, "but we are worshipping the Lord, in song!" And you may be. However, the issue is that we have been deceived and moved our devotion from prayer and replaced it with a devotion to music; prayer has been sacrificed for song and it has gone on for so long that it is viewed as being completely normal. In fact to question it in this day and age will even cause upset to many, but question it we must. For as our devotions slip slowly off course we need to understand that so too does our destination. A ship that leaves harbour one degree off course will be a couple of metres closer to the harbour exit on one side than the other, but a few days later, when it tries to enter it's next port, will find itself miles off course and probably on the rocks.

We need to understand that this is a major issue caused by the lack of seeking the Lord, but worse, because we downplay the importance of seeking the Lord in our services, we, by example, teach the younger believer to do the same. We are deceived through our own lack of prayer and pass on that deception to others, deceiving and being deceived (2 Timothy 3v13).

It is such an easy deception to fall into, for Satan's deceptions, just like in the Garden of Eden, work best when our prayer life is weak and our pride is large.

Jesus warned his disciples of this danger:

"Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing but the body is weak."

Matthew 26v41

What did the disciples do in response to this? They went back to sleep and fell into temptation (*Matthew 26v43-46*), deserting the Lord when trial came upon them! Doing exactly what they had been doing before the Lord spoke to them. Let us be under no illusions as to the seriousness of this issue.

"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord' will enter the kingdom of

heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me you evildoers!'

Matthew 7v21-23

This is talking about the church, talking to those who claim to be doing the will of God, yet have no relationship with Him. They know of Him, but don't know Him. Note also the scariest part of this passage, it's not talking about the few, but 'many'. In our intellectual pride, and therefore lack of seeking, we may have drastically underestimated just how big a problem we have and just how far off course we have drifted as well as just how much of the problem we as individuals have become.

The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?

Jeremiah 17v9

The Bible warns us of how deceitful we can be, not only to others and the Lord, but how we can so easily deceive ourselves. That deception is fuelled by our pride, for pride makes us vulnerable to all sorts of deceptions, for the prideful heart is hardened towards God, it is the unteachable hardened path that the seed cannot penetrate.

"The pride of your heart has deceived you, you who live in the clefts of the rocks and make your home on the heights, you say to yourself, 'Who can bring me down to the ground?'

Obadiah 1v3

4 – The deceitful heart

But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God - having a form of godliness but denying its power. Have nothing to do with them.
2 Timothy 3v1-5

When we read about the end times we always tend to think about others, after all, no one likes to think of them self as the one who is going astray for we always know better. The problem is that we find it hard to see ourselves in the way God sees us. Our mind is blinded to the true motives of our hearts.

As the Bible says:

The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?

Jeremiah 17v9

We talk of giving our lives to the Lord when so often we just keep it to ourselves, covered over by a spiritual veneer that hides the true state of our hearts, while at other times we are just following the example that we see before us in the lives of other believers assuming we are all going the right way. For surely no one with a heart for the Lord would go the wrong way!

Sadly this could not be further from the truth, for as we turn our hearts towards the Lord, the enemy will throw his best weapons against us and his specialist weapon over the years has been deception. Allowing a religious fulfilment while gently steering us away from the true course that God wishes us to follow; our enemy doesn't bring a radical change of direction, perhaps a few degrees, nothing that will be noticed or raise alarm, for a few degrees makes little difference to our course in the short term, we end up a few metres off course, but in the long term those few metres start to add up. Those little misdirection's, "Did God really say?" "Surely God would not allow that to happen to a Christian?" "It doesn't

matter because He is a forgiving God." "They are doing it so it must be alright." How easily the enemy invades our minds with thoughts of self to lead us off course.

Often we are not willing to confess our pride, and by confess I do not mean saying sorry. True confession is first a realisation of sin followed by a repentance, a turning from sin. A repentance from pride means that we have to turn from the old ways and confess that we have depended on the ways of the world, the ways of the enemy, and now need to humbly come before the Lord for His instruction.

Sadly the greatest block to this happening is our pride, for in our pride we assume all is well, it is always others who are wrong, but is it? One day we will stand before the Lord at the end of a very long race. How terrible it would be to find out that in our pride we ran the wrong way and got ourselves disqualified. Too often the attitude of believers is that all will be well and that God in His grace and mercy will lower the standards to allow us to have a prize even though we have chased after foreign gods. We need to understand that God's grace and mercy are just that, His! He decides who and how they are poured out, not us. When we start to assume in our pride we are no longer serving the Lord, rather we are dictating to Him, raising ourselves up in prideful assumption, speaking words we have no authority to speak.

In our pride it is so easy to assume we know, to assume no harm will come to us and that the Lord's blessings will be poured out on us come what may. It's the same prideful deception that was sold to Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden. For all of us the warning Paul gives when taking communion need to be heeded:

A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup.

1 Corinthians 11v28

It is very easy for us in our pride to fail to examine ourselves and to miss the fact that we are no longer walking in Christ. We may be walking in a knowledge about Christ, we may be walking in an activity in the church, yet in our pride have failed to see that our relationship with the Lord has

died, just as the Lord warned Adam and Eve that it would.

Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. No, I beat my body and make it a slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.

1 Corinthians 9v24-27

5 - Surely I cannot be deceived?

If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives.

1 John 1v8-10

The trouble with deception is that a good deception is so good, you don't even know you have been deceived; and if there is one thing that makes it easier for us to be deceived, it is the blindness caused by pride.

The problem with pride is we deceive ourselves by convincing ourselves that we cannot be wrong, it must be the other person. We have built our box of doctrines and our view of God and the world, everything is so neat and tidy; how could we possibly be wrong? Indeed the more we know and the longer we have known it, the harder it can be for us to see the deception, for our flesh and intellect tell us that we have wisdom, that we have knowledge, so we could not possibly be deceived.

Do not deceive yourselves. If anyone thinks he is wise by the standards of this age, he should become a "fool" so that he may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness in God's sight. As it is written: "He catches the wise in their craftiness"; and again, "The Lord knows that the thoughts of the wise are futile."

1 Corinthians 3v18-20

The Lord showed me how easily we can be deceived in a very simple way. I had been to a pastor's prayer meeting where a subject had come up that had caused a bit of debate. As I was walking home I was praying about the subject when the Holy Spirit gave me one of those incredible moments of revelation to show how easy it is for us to be deceived. At the meeting there had been about 10 pastors from different denominations, all trained leaders, all "knowing the truth". As the Lord pointed out to me, if we all had a different viewpoint it meant that only one person in the room could have truly known the Lord's viewpoint and the rest of us must be wrong! And as the Lord graciously showed me after, even the one who was closest was wrong!

This was a brutally hard lesson, but it showed me that all of us are subject to deception through pride, especially intellectual pride; that so called "Godly wisdom" that Satan promised in the garden (*Genesis 3v5*), a so called Godly wisdom gained without seeking the Lord. That simple lesson also showed me that even the smallest twisting of scripture can have far reaching consequences for the whole of the message we proclaim, for as a brick is laid out of alignment in a wall, so to are the bricks that surround and join to that brick. They too must be twisted out of alignment to get them to fit together. The wall is left with a bulge, a weakness that may seem of no consequence to us at first; but a weakness that the enemy will spot and use for his next attack. For any decent enemy knows to attack the weak spots, and the enemy we fight has had the whole history of humanity to hone his skills, he knows our weak spots better than we do.

Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.

1 Peter 5v8

Many years ago I served as a watchman in the engine room of the mission ship "Doulos". I would spend my nights wandering around making sure that everything was running correctly and that nothing caught fire. Staying alert in the early hours was always difficult. At times I would have to invent work just to keep myself awake and alert, for it would have been so easy just to sit down and fall asleep. After all nothing had gone wrong on the previous night or night before that, so why not just rest and close my eyes for a moment or two? It was a constant battle, but I knew the truth. If I closed my eyes and rested just for a moment, I would sleep for an hour. At that point I would no longer be alert; if a fire had occurred it would have spread out of control before anyone found out, risking many lives including mine. So I fought to stay awake, I stood and walked, I checked and rechecked the equipment just in case. Was it worth the effort night after night?

That discipline, that watchfulness paid off in my spiritual life and it paid off in the engine room too, for just a few weeks before my two years was complete, as I did my endless round of checks I noticed some smoke

coming from a generator's exhaust. A small amount of oil had leaked and was starting to burn under the insulation, nothing spectacular, easy to miss, but because I was alert I spotted the problem and with the help of a colleague it was the work of a moment to extinguish. Yet had I been asleep, had I been distracted, the result could have been totally different.

On a ship the watch keeper is not put on duty when something goes wrong, that would be too late. He is put on duty to watch out for things going wrong so he can warn all those around him of what he has found. We are told to stay alert because there is a lion out there trying to devour us. It is too easy for us to deceive ourselves, to proclaim the enemy has no power over us and that we have nothing to fear, yet that pride in our strength is the very weakness the enemy uses to devour us as it blinds us to the warning signs. The enemy has always attacked and deception has been his greatest weapon, for he has not been called "The Deceiver" and "Father of Lies" without reason (*John 8v44*).

*...Bold and arrogant, these men are not afraid to slander celestial beings.
2 Peter 2v10*

We are warned to be alert; we are warned that even those who think they are closest to the Lord and the truth will be deceived. So let us humbly come before the Lord and confess our pride and ask that he would give insight and wisdom that we may see the truth and not be of those who are led astray.

*For false Christs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and miracles to deceive even the elect - if that were possible.
Matthew 24v24*

6 - What is the point of deception?

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the seas and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground."

So God created man in his image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

Genesis 1v26-27

When God created man he was different to every creature that had come before, he was a spiritual being in the image of God. God had put him into a position of ruler, but at the same time in a position of servanthood. For God had given man authority over the things on the earth, but had not given him authority over the things of heaven, for man was to rule in submission to a Heavenly Father who was over and above him. The created was to rule in the image and authority of the creator, doing the will of the Father and tending to things as the Father would do.

Jesus gave them this answer: "I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does."

John 5v19

Jesus in these words shows us how man had been created to live in submission to the Father, a life of submission that brought freedom to man and glory to the Father. For in this pattern a picture was being painted of the sovereignty of the Father and His supremacy in all things. Adam and Eve just like Jesus walked in communion with the Father, receiving instruction and guidance as they walked in fellowship with Him.

Not only did this put the Father in his rightful place in the order of things, but it also put Satan in his rightful place, in submission to man. Man, walking in the authority God had given him, was to rule over all the creatures on the earth, a place where Satan had been cast down to for his rebellion against the Father. For Gods children, if they walk in obedience should master sin and the Devil.

He must not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgement as the devil.

1 Timothy 3v6

He replied, "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven."

Luke 10v18

Jesus, being from eternity to eternity, had been there when Satan had rebelled and had witnessed him being cast out of heaven like lightning, this wasn't about him being cast out gloriously, it was him being cast out at speed, thrown down to earth in a flash to be trampled on underfoot and humbled. Satan had become conceited, because of his position and beauty he had even stepped beyond the boundaries of pride. For when we are full of pride we boast about our accomplishments, when we are conceited we boast about what we have not even accomplished as if we had accomplished it already. Satan, in his conceit, saw himself as equal or greater than God and had been removed from heaven in a moment. For in heaven the Fathers rule is supreme, only a fool or the conceited would mount a challenge.

I have given you authority to trample on snakes and scorpions and to overcome all the power of the enemy; nothing will harm you.

Luke 10v19

Just as when we walk in obedience to Christ we walk in authority and overcome the enemy's schemes and tactics, so Adam and Eve, when ruling in obedience to the Father also overcame the plans of the enemy. Nothing could harm them as long as they walked in the Father's ways, listening and doing his will. So when we read of Satan tempting Adam and Eve, his goal was far more than just leading them astray, his goal was to rekindle his kingdom goals, by replacing the Father, as the one who is worshipped, with himself. For as the Bible says:

Don't you know that when you offer yourselves to someone to obey him as slaves, you are slaves to the one whom you obey - whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness?

Romans 6v16

Satan in his deception of Adam and Eve had replaced God as the "Father" of mankind. For they now followed in the footsteps of their new ruler, listening and doing, deceiving and being deceived. Eternal life had been swapped for worldly death in a matter of moments. God's rule had been broken in their lives and a new era of slavery had been ushered in, but a slavery that had been sold as "freedom". They bought freedom from God's authority, but were sold into the slavery of sin. The temptation of being like God (*Genesis 3v5*), knowing all things, led to them losing their spiritual relationship with the Father, the most valuable thing they possessed.

Thankfully when Jesus came he was resolute in his desire to do the will of the Father; he was willing to walk in submission no matter what the cost. So when Satan tried to offer him the same shortcut, Jesus was not fooled for a moment. The temptation was real, the offer was real, yet his rejection of Satan was absolute. His humility saved him, for instead of a desire to rule his desire was to serve.

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour. "All this I will give you," he said, "if you will bow down and worship me."

Jesus said to him, "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.'"

Matthew 4v8-10

Satan's deception has been constant and the goal is always the same; to remove the authority and rule of God in our lives and convince us that we know better; to raise us up in his own image in rebellion against the Father and so to destroy his reign and exalt himself as ruler in our lives.

It is important that we remember this great deception for it is the ongoing battle we fight; it is a war we are part of, even if we haven't realised it and are still asleep, for it's impact is eternal.

7 - Who is deceiving me?

Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.

James 1v22

It would be nice to say that our greatest source of deception comes from others, to have someone to blame for being led astray, sadly the truth of the greatest deception lies much closer to home.

For a time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn away from the truth and turn aside to myths.

2 Timothy 4v3-4

The horrible truth is that we often want to be deceived, we want to throw off the Lordship of Christ and return to ruling our own lives and to have a God that will serve us. We want someone to justify our disobedience to the Lord and encourage our desire for the things of this world. For where there is no desire there is no temptation, so if we did not have our eyes and desires fixed on the things of this world we could not be tempted.

Let us look at a very simple example of hearts desire and temptation. I need to lose weight; I know it and my doctor has encouraged me to lose weight with the threat of health problems if I don't! That doesn't mean my doctor hates me, he has disciplined me because he wants the best for me. I know the healthy foods I should be eating, but it is amazing how easy it is for me to justify to myself why it's alright to buy a bag of doughnuts or a bar of chocolate. I will tell myself it's just a small amount and I will do some extra exercise, but the truth is I am deceiving myself. I do just as Satan did in the Garden of Eden (*Genesis 3v1-6*). "Did the doctor really say?" "Those health problems are not definite!" "Just think of the taste and that moment of pleasure."

In my desire for the wrong things I am killing myself, while deceiving myself that all will be well, but the issue becomes bigger because the more I

eat the wrong things and get a taste for them, the more I desire them in the future. It's an addiction that can be as dangerous as alcohol or drugs, but I can downplay it in my mind, because it's just a bit of weight.

The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?

Jeremiah 17v9

It is the same with sin in our lives, so often we think we can justify it or downplay it. After all it's just a small sin, God won't mind it. How easily we follow Satan's deception and fool ourselves with a "Did God really say?" We allow the ways and words of God to be twisted in ways that suit the ways our flesh wants to be led, we deceive ourselves by claiming we had been tricked when really we know that this was the true desire of our heart; for we are not led astray by things we do not desire. I cannot remember a time in my life when I have been desperate for a bit of lettuce or cabbage. I know they are good for me and there is some in the fridge, but I don't find myself sneaking downstairs to get some, they are not the desire of my heart.

When tempted, no one should say, "God is tempting me." For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.

James 1v13-15

The truth is that our own hearts deceive us, and lead us astray and sadly as we bite into the forbidden fruit we get an even greater taste for it and desire it even more, our self deception has just made the battle even harder for ourselves.

It's hard as that sweet taste of sin remains in our hearts and minds for a long time. Only by the washing and renewing that comes through Christ can we be set free, and for that we need to have a change of heart attitude towards the Lord. The Bible has a word for this, "repentance", a turning away from the things of man and the ways of the world, a turning in thought and attitude towards God's ways.

One of the ways we deceive ourselves is by having a pride in following the rules. Obeying the commandments, the laws and regulations of God as if they are the proof of our godliness, yet those laws, those rules were not written for the godly, they were written for the ungodly, to show them how far off course they had strayed. The people that Jesus came into conflict with most, the Pharisees, obeyed the rules more than anyone else. They prided themselves in this area, yet sadly it was an obedience that came from a love of the rules, the religion, rather than a love of God himself. The true man of God should not obey the rules because they are the rules, he should obey them without noticing or even knowing them as he is led by the Holy Spirit. It is what Paul talks about in *Romans 2v14-15*, a law that is not written, but comes out of a heart relationship with the Lord.

As an example, when I first got saved I just knew I had to stop swearing, not because some Bible verse had been pointed out to me, but I just knew the Holy Spirit was convicting me in that area. I therefore obeyed a rule, not because I knew the rule, but because I listened to the Lord and acted out of an obedience that came from a desire for Him. I was being transformed from the inside out. The law is there to show me how far off course I have drifted. If I am truly seeking the Lord and listening to Him I should never get close enough to the boundaries to need the rule of law. However, the great deception comes when we start to live our lives according to the law and confuse that with being led of the Spirit. Just like the Pharisees of old, we substitute a relationship with God for a relationship with the rules, a knowledge about God rather than a knowing of God.

Jesus tried to explain this to the people in *Matthew 5v17-48*, for in their deception they assumed themselves to be godly because they obeyed the rules. What Jesus was showing was that if the heart is right, the rules are not an issue. The rules are only needed as a guide for the rebellious heart. If our heart is right before the Lord, then the overflow in words and deeds will be the ways and actions of God, but when we focus on the rules, what we are really doing is working out how much we can get away with without breaking the rule.

It's just like in my car when I enter a speed limit. The limit is 30mph, but I know the speedometer in my car is ten percent inaccurate, so a true 30mph is when I am driving at 33mph. In other words I am not interested in showing love to those who might walk into the road and who would have their injuries reduced by my slower speed. Instead all I'm interested in is going as fast as possible without getting a ticket from the police. That sadly is how we treat the Lord when we reduce Christianity to a set of rules. Our hearts are not set on His desires, it's just about avoiding any punishments. It is the change that took place in Paul's life, that took him from being a Pharisee of Pharisees to a heart after God.

But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ – the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith.

Philippians 3v7-9

Just as the Pharisees deceived themselves by thinking that their knowledge and obedience to the rules of the law made them holy, so we too need to be careful that our knowledge of scripture is not used to deceive us of how poor our relationship with the Lord has become.

8 – The deception of doing well

But, “Let him who boasts boast in the Lord.” For it is not the one who commends himself who is approved, but the one whom the Lord commends.

2 Corinthians 10v17-18

As we continue to think about pride, the opposite of humility, the attribute we see in Christ, (*Philippians 2v6-8*) and in any great man or woman of God, we need to understand that pride is “anti Christ”. It is always anti the ways of Christ, it is not a godly attribute, rather an attribute that led to the fall of Satan and in turn to the fall of man. The idea that we can manage without God’s input into our lives, setting our own plans and directions as we see fit (*Genesis 3v5*). It is the exact opposite to the instruction we are given in *Romans 12v1-2*, to humble ourselves and through that humility of the servant heart, listening to the Lord, allowing Him to instruct, teach and guide us, that our minds can be transformed to the mind of Christ.

This lack of seeking and having confidence in the flesh and the reliance on our intellect, has infected our lives to such a degree that we don’t even notice it any more. Let us use a nice spiritual example to show us how far we have drifted off course.

Something happens in our community, we see a need, and so we form a plan on how to fix the problem. We start a meeting to help “fix” the problem or “meet” the need. It all sounds so spiritual, but sadly we charge ahead of the Lord without seeking his input. We make our plans based on what we think the need is, not understanding what the real heart need is. We minister to the flesh hoping that somehow the spirit will be influenced. Now let us not look down on helping others, for we are called to help but notice the “call”. It is not just about doing what we think is best, it is about seeking the Lord for what He knows is best, for only as we walk in obedience does the Holy Spirit minister. It is too easy to race ahead in the flesh assuming we know what needs to be done. The same happens in ministry, the pastor sees an issue in the church and crafts a great message to deal with the problem. However, the pastor crafts his message to deal with what he perceives the problem to be

through his intellect, what he sees and hears. Meanwhile God is aiming at the heart and so often the actions and attitudes we see are a symptom of the unseen heart, something that only God sees and only He has the answer to the issue. The danger is that in our intellectual pride we think we have sorted the problem, but we have only papered over the cracks, for only Holy Spirit conviction will deal with the true issues and for that we need to be hearing clearly from the Lord and be prepared to humbly speak a message that may make no sense to us.

To see how easily we have lost track of the Lord, let's think about a simple statement that we hear all the time in church. "We are planning to do this... but if it doesn't work we'll try something else." Think about the statement for a moment, because we say it and similar a lot. What we are saying is that we have a plan and if we don't see the physical, numerical signs of success within a specific time period we will move to plan B. This is a classic example of intellectual and flesh driven pride in action. We have set the plan before the Lord and we have set the parameters of success. This sort of statement is considered to be normal, it shows wisdom, but it is not the wisdom of God, it is the wisdom of prideful man. For in the Lord there is only one plan, His plan, and it's success or failure is not measured by numbers, but in our obedience to carrying out that plan as He dictates. For we often fail to comprehend that very often a ministry to a few, is not just about the few, it is teaching us humility and perseverance, a quality that James says makes us mature in the Lord (James 1v4). In our pride we think it is all about ministering down to others when so often it is about the Lord trying to teach us servant hood.

As we go our own way, as we set out our plans, obviously taking a moment to ask God to bless "our" plans (it's like asking God to bless our rebellion, our lack of listening), the next danger comes when our plans start to succeed, by our parameters of success. For success quickly goes to our heads and we start to form a pride in the numbers we are helping. Let's look at that again; the "numbers" (something that we can physically count and boast about) that "we" (notice it's become our efforts rather than the Lord) are helping. We need to make sure that we understand that the people do not need us, they need the Lord. We also need to be careful that we do not become puffed up because people now rely on us, developing a pride in being needed and wanted. The great danger here is

that they do rely on us, when our ministry is to teach people to rely on the Lord, for we are not God. In our success we have ceased to be a blessing, and have instead become a curse, no longer pointing them to the all sufficiency found in Christ and Christ crucified but creating a new addiction of dependency on us.

Preaching the message of the Lord will never be as popular as the message of the flesh (2 Timothy 4v3), we will not gain big crowds, but the message will be of the Kingdom and a true blessing to those who listen. Let us remember that Jesus was not popular, we often think of the big crowds, the miracles and the feeding of the thousands, but the truth was that at the end of the day, very few were willing to lay down their lives and follow.

Jesus was willing to walk away from the crowds and the fame because his heart was set on following the instructions of the Father. He led the crowds by example, word and deed, and many times was rejected and eventually crucified for it and yet that is where the real blessing is (Matthew 5v10). So often our desire for the crowds is nothing to do with the Kingdom of God, rather it is the prideful needs of our ego.

*May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.
Galatians 6v14*

9 – A time for change

When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, “Brothers what shall we do”?

Peter replied, “Repent and be baptised, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit”.

Acts 2v37-38

The day of Pentecost is often looked on as a great moment in church history when the Holy Spirit moved in power and the apostles, being led by the Holy Spirit ministered with thousands being saved. Many long to see a return to that sort of ministry today with attempts to manipulate the Holy Spirit in to doing what we want when we want it. However, as we look at the day of Pentecost there are some lessons we need to learn because as usual in our pride, we are looking for and waiting for the outcome, yet have not done the preparation work that is required beforehand. For although we tend to look at the events that happened on the day of Pentecost, we often forget the events and actions that took place leading up to the day.

The first thing for us to remember is that the disciples had been humbled, most had deserted Jesus (*Matthew 26v31*), either in the Garden of Gethsemane or in the hours that followed leading up to the cross. Peter, who had been the proudest in his declaration that he would never forsake the Lord (*Matthew 26v33-35*) spent a whole night denying Christ in word and action, so as we look at the disciples after the crucifixion we see a group of men who had become abundantly aware of their failings and shortcomings. This is important for us to understand, because without this humility their own ideas and opinions would always try to overcome the ways of God, trying to do things their way, whether it be calling down the fire (*Luke 9v54*), deciding who should and should not be allowed to bother the Lord (*Matthew 19v13-14*), or outright rebuking the Lord and telling him to change his plans (*Matthew 16v22-23*). This group of often proud men had been reduced to a weak and fearful group hiding behind locked doors for fear of the Jews (*John 20v19*) and it is this now humbled group that Jesus appears to.

Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's might hand, that he may lift you up in due time.

1 Peter 5v6

Jesus himself was able to be used because of his humility (*Philippians 2v6-11*) and this verse in *1 Peter 5v6* is the same instruction that Paul gives in *Philippians 2v5*, that we need to be humbled before the Lord. For only in humility can the Lord speak clearly to us, only when we are able to for-sake our own plans and ideas can we be truly led by the Holy Spirit.

Every time I take communion I am struck by the words:

"This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me."

1 Corinthians 11v24

The idea that Jesus, day after day, month after month, year after year, constantly, hour by hour and minute by minute submitted his will to the Father is almost beyond my comprehension. The Son of God, humbled in constant submission to the Father, seeking the Father's will as the sustenance that kept Him going (*John 4v34*). He didn't come up with his own plans or ideas, it was always about humbly submitting to the will of the Father and as we look at the disciples, the message of repentance, of turning away from our own prideful self will, that was preached on the day of Pentecost (*Acts 2v38*), is the state of heart that they had started to truly learn in the period between the cross and that great day. It was not an overnight change, it took place over a period of fifty days. Nearly two months of waiting in Jerusalem, pondering and discussing the teaching and life of Jesus that they had seen over the previous three years.

Instead of having plans and ideas for how the future would work out, it tells us that they constantly sought the Lord in prayer (*Acts 1v14*). Seeking the Lord, truly seeking the Lord, rather than telling the Lord, always comes from a heart that is humbled and has submitted its own opinion to the will of the Father. It is this humbled heart that the Lord has plans for, for only the humbled heart is fertile enough to receive a word that can grow. As soon as there is pride, our heart is hardened and the seed bounces off, stolen by the evil one (*Matthew 13v19*).

For fifty days the disciples humbled themselves and sought the Lord in prayer, that is a picture of true repentance from the ways of sinful man, pride! It is the thing that the Lord waits patiently for in all of us (2 Peter 3v9), but the question as always is have we hardened our hearts so much, has our pride blocked up our ears to such a degree, that we can no longer see how far off track we have drifted and in our pride declare that all is well with our souls.

If we want to see the power of Pentecost in our lives we are going to have to go through a period of submission, of humble repentance that leads to a true seeking of the Father, recognising His true status as God Almighty. Only then will we start to understand the plans he has for our lives.

Then you will call on upon me and come and pray to me. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.

Jeremiah 29v12-13

10 – An escape from captivity

“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you,” declares the Lord, “and I will bring you back from captivity.”

Jeremiah 29v11-14

In our pride it is easy to miss the fact that so many areas of our life have been taken captive by the enemy. We may think we are free and know what is happening, but we miss the fact that in failing to seek the Lord, we have become captive to the thoughts and teaching of others.

Proverbs tells us:

A fool finds no pleasure in understanding but delights in airing his own opinions.

Proverbs 18v2

In this age that we live in it is very easy to become captive to the opinions of others to the point that our whole Christian life is not based on revelation from God, but rather the opinions and traditions of others. In not truly seeking the Lord for ourselves we create a void that instead of being filled by the voice of God is filled with the words and advice of this world, words and thoughts that then take our minds captive leading us in the direction it desires (*Colossians 2v8*). For once we think we know, we do not seek any more but accept the advice given us as the truth without question. Although there is wisdom in seeking advice from others, our first advisor should always be the Lord. He should be our first contact whenever we need wisdom as we are told in *James 1v5*. In reality our first call is usually to a friend or family member, or maybe the pastor, we then want them to give us wisdom to act right away, wanting the wisdom of God without having to seek Him.

I remember as a pastor someone doing this to me and my response was that I would have to pray about it. The person then pressured me and

asked for my opinion. I responded by asking them if they wanted my views or the view of God! I can easily give my opinion, but that is based on how I see things; it is information given without checking with the Lord! Is that sort of information a blessing to others or a curse? Even if the opinion is given with the best of intentions. The fact is that I am making a judgement based on what I have been told which is based on the opinion of the person asking me the question so at best my response will be an intellectual opinion based on an opinion. In giving my opinion I have stopped the person from seeking the Lord and instead have taken over the role of the Holy Spirit. I have robbed them of learning the discipline of spending time seeking the Lord, far from blessing them, spiritually I have allowed them to be led in the wrong direction, encouraging them to follow the ways of worldly wisdom rather than Godly wisdom.

Only as we humble ourselves before the Lord do we realise just how little we allow Him to speak to us. For even when we finally go before the Lord we rarely shut up long enough for the Lord to speak. Let us go back to the basics, the one doing all the talking is the teacher, the one doing the listening is the student. When we look at our prayer lives in the light of that statement we see that far too often we take the role of being the teacher of God. It is no wonder that we don't know His will, His plans for our lives, because we don't allow Him the time to speak. We need to understand that when we go to the Lord with an issue, very often the answer is not what we expect because we look at the visible while the Lord starts to deal with the invisible foundations, the thoughts, attitudes and opinions that need to be sacrificed in order for us to know the will of God (*Romans 12v1-2*).

If we read the prayers of the Apostle Paul in his many letters we see that his constant prayer for the church was wisdom and revelation; the desire for each one to be hearing clearly from the Lord. Only as we humble ourselves and seek Him do we start to restore the lordship of Christ in our lives and us as His humble servants, walking in obedience to the word of God as led by Him rather than the advice of others.

When God speaks into our lives it is an incredible experience. Just as the disciples experienced a burning of the heart within as Jesus taught them on the road to Emmaus (*Luke 24v32*), so the Lord desires us to experi-

ence the same, each one individually being led of the Lord, knowing His call (*John 10v3-5*). There is no discrimination, His calling, His leading, is available to all of us if only we will seek it. Not as a second hand revelation through someone else but as a first hand relationship between a child and their Heavenly Father. The blessings of taking this time to listen are beyond measure, for one of the first things it does is free us from the captivity of others, of the world and it's opinions. Instead we can each know clearly the direction the Lord is leading us in and as we walk in that direction our minds are transformed and we see things as the Lord sees them (*Romans 12v2*). No longer will we see things based on our opinion or the opinion of others, rather we will see the truth as it really is, based on the revelation of God.

As we humble ourselves and listen, sacrificing our opinions, allowing the Lord to lead and guide us we gain an inner strength in any situation, no matter how bad, for if we know we are walking in His ways, we know we are safe in His hands, giving us a confidence to move forward in His strength. Also as we allow the Lord to speak into our lives, we gain a peace, for we no longer have to strive trying to work out the route ahead, instead we gain the peace of God knowing that we just need to follow His voice and allow Him to deal with the difficult stuff and the truth of *Jeremiah 29v11-14* becomes evident in our lives. Our goal becomes simple, to fulfil the instructions for the day and we start to experience the true blessing of what it means to be a son or daughter of God (*Romans 8v14*).

The blessing of walking in obedience has eternal consequences, for when we read about the great men and women of faith in *Hebrews 11* we see a list of people who simply listened to the Lord and walked in obedience to his calling, each one of them had an ear that could hear and a heart that would follow. Their deeds and actions in the Lord did not just have consequences for their lives, but blessed many around them and through the Bible are blessing us today.

Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.
John 8v32

It is the blessings we see in the book of Acts as the Holy Spirit spoke

clearly into peoples lives, leading and guiding them as to what to do and when, bringing glory to His Name and building up the body of believers.

True freedom is found as we surrender our will to the will of the Father, no longer are we held captive to the ways and will of the world. As we allow the Lord to speak, if we will give the Holy Spirit the time He needs to bring us revelation, we will know a new freedom and strength in the Lord that we have never known before. There is no magic formula, it is just a simple following in the footsteps of Jesus, surrendering our will to the will of the Father, taking the time to listen and then acting on the instructions given.

The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.

John 10v10

11 – The view from the mountain side

For in his own eyes he flatters himself too much to detect or hate his sin. The words of his mouth are wicked and deceitful; he has ceased to be wise and do good. Even on his bed he plots evil; he commits himself to a sinful course and does not reject what is wrong.

Psalms 36v2-4

As believers we often get a very distorted worldly view of sin, looking at it from the same viewpoint as the world. In our minds we have a scale that we measure it by, murder being seen as a serious sin, things like little white lies are seen as a minor infringement. It's a viewpoint that we have developed by following the laws of our countries and even how we perceive God to be in scripture as we read through the Old Testament. Yet what we so often fail to understand is that God is looking at our heart attitude towards Him and that ultimately all sin is against God. Things that in the flesh may seem minor to us, to God, as he looks at the heart, are seen from a totally different perspective.

But Samuel replied:

“Does the Lord delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of the Lord? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams. For rebellion is like the sin of divination, and arrogance like the evil of idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the Lord, he has rejected you as king.”

1 Samuel 15v22-23

The idea that failing to listen and obey the Lord, failing to heed His call, is in His eyes as sinful as divination or witchcraft can seem harsh and at odds with the ways of this world, the ways that our intellectual pride have led us in. To understand that this intellectual pride that has deafened us to His calling has led us into an arrogant pride that the Lord looks on as idolatry may seem extreme, yet we need to understand just how serious our failure to listen has become.

We cannot claim to be God's people if we are living in rebellion, failing to listen and therefore serve the King in the way He desires. In our pride we

may think we are doing a good job, but in the end it will be burnt up as mere stubble (*1 Corinthians 3v11-15*). The foundation of our spiritual life is Jesus Christ, not just as a remote acceptance of what he did on the cross on that fateful yet glorious day, but the daily example that he lived, dying to self until on that last day he had given his all to the glory of the Father.

That life, a life of humility and sacrifice is the life we are called to live, not just as a command to be obeyed, but as an attitude of heart towards the Lord (*Philippians 2v5-8*). It is what the true Christian life is all about, not a following after the example of men, but following after the example of Christ (*1 Corinthians 11v1*). If we will do this our relationship with the Lord will blossom and grow in ways that we cannot imagine. Instead of having to be directed by the rod of correction, we will be guided by the gentle loving words of the Father.

As we grow in our ability to listen and obey, the Lord is able to trust us with greater tasks, tasks that will lead us into greater discovery of the Lords provision in all situations and a real experience of seeing the Lords ability to guide us through any situation that this world may throw at us. This is the joy of the view from the mountain side as we start to see things through the eyes of God and as we experience the blessings of an improved relationship with Him. This is not only a joy for us, but is the very purpose of Jesus dying on the cross, to make a way for us to be able to come into the Fathers presence and listen to His voice. Too often eternal life is talked about as going to heaven and being able to meet those that have died before us, yet Jesus says eternal life is to know the Father (*John 17v3*), to be in true relationship with Him. The rejection of many who thought they followed the Lord will be because they do not know the Father and therefore He does not know them, a lack of knowing demonstrated by their lack of seeking (*Matthew 7v23*).

Now as we near the end of this short book, we need to make a decision before the Lord that shows what our heart is truly set on. For we can know the truth, we can admit our failings, yet still do nothing. It is so easy to just go back to the old ways even when we know the truth. As Jesus would often ask people who came to him; "What do you want?"

Is the Lord valuable enough in our lives for us to turn from our own ways and humble ourselves, sitting at his feet and listening, or do we have other idols that are more important to us? This is when, if we will allow the Lord to show us, we see the truth of our hearts. Throughout history the Lord has spoken to his people, it has always been the Fathers desire that each one of us should know His voice for ourselves. The question we must ask is do we want to listen, do we want to hear the voice of the Lord? If we are honest, many do not, they don't want to get close to God for fear that the truth will be revealed (*Exodus 20v18-19*). Yet if we truly want the relationship that Jesus died on the cross for, there is no alternative, than to humbly come to Him in prayer.

He who has an ear, let him hear...

Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in the mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it – he will be blessed in what he does.

James 1v22-25