

Follow Your Heart

**Knowing God Personally
is Possible**

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Introduction

It is with great joy that we make this revised version available to our readers in East Africa and beyond. As God has placed a desire into our heart for spending eternity in the presence of God our Maker, we should not allow our family or religious background to keep us in captivity forever. Rather, let's follow our heart's longing which tells us that we should be able to come to God like a child that runs towards the open arms of their mom or dad.

Knowing God is not only possible, but is indeed what God desires for each of his children. We believe that these pages will be opening a new door to many of our readers.

*Walter Eric,
Life Challenge team*

Follow Your Heart

True faith or formal religious duties?

Christians and Muslims have many things in common. They believe in one God, worship in holy sanctuaries (churches and mosques), have similar annual religious calendars (Christmas, Good Friday and Easter for Christians, Eid ul-Fitr, Eid ul-Adha, Laylatu'l Mir'aj and Laylatu'l Qadr for Muslims), and set aside one day a week for a major community worship service (Sunday and Friday respectively). Outwardly both religions can look very similar. Their worship services can be very formal and repetitive. The Muslim salat, in particular, follows the same pattern day after day, year after year, decade after decade without variation. The adhan, the call to prayer, never changes. The hajj pilgrimage perpetuates an exact sequence of religious practices which have been observed unaltered for fourteen centuries. Many Christian churches are no different. Catholic and Orthodox priests chant out the same prescribed prayers week after week just as Muslim imams do.

Some years ago a Muslim lady said to me "Whenever I go to the cemetery I look at all the Muslim graves on the one side and the Christian graves on the other, and I say to myself, 'What's the difference?'" Well, if you're looking for the living among the dead, you're not likely to find much. All three monotheisms, including Judaism, have preserved their religious systems in set formal ways,

going round in circles as they return annually to the same routines, ceremonies and holy days, all based on outward conformity and formal worship. A Muslim shopkeeper in Jerusalem once remarked “There are only three big businesses in Jerusalem. One collects money on Fridays, the second on Saturdays, and the third on Sundays.”¹

Formal monotheism. Is this really what God wants? A slavish commitment to repetitive ceremonies for as long as we live? A verse from the Bible shows how monotonous and ultimately meaningless this can be. I will highlight

We have many religions on earth. - Heaven, however, sees only three.

the key words to help us note the main point: “And every priest stands *daily* at his service, offering *repeatedly* the same sacrifices, which can *never* take away sins” (*Hebrews 10:11*).

The irony is obvious when you compare the repetitions with their inability to achieve anything: every – daily – repeatedly – the same – yet *never* accomplishing the goal!

Islam places a tremendous emphasis on formal, repetitive worship. There is no room for spontaneous prayer or praise while performing each *raka'ah*. A true Muslim will not only wear a beard but will trim it to a prescribed length to follow the *sunnah* of Muhammad. A skullcap must be worn while praying in a mosque. Shoes must be removed. The same motions of washing beforehand (*wudhu*) must always be followed in obedience to the Qur'anic injunction: ‘Wash your faces, and your hands up to the elbows, and wipe your heads and your feet up to the ankles’ (*Surah 5:6*). Each *ruku* (bowing down) and *sajdah* (prostration) must be performed in unison with the other worshippers present, in the same way, at the same times, every day. During the *qa'dah* (the

¹ (The quote is from the Discovery video *Jerusalem: City of Heaven*)

sitting position) the same *taslim* must be recited as each worshipper passes the greeting to his left and right. No variation of this ceremony is allowed at any time.

Islam claims to simply restate the original religion of submission to God, claiming that all the previous prophets followed it. The Qur'an says that it came only as a *tasdiq*, a 'confirmation' of what was before it (*Surah 10:37*) and not as a new form of religion. If so, the true religion of God must always have focused on formal, repetitive submission, the homage of a servant to a divine Master who can neither be personally known nor loved for who he really is.

The Bible paints a very different picture. It does not see God's religion as always the same, simply a conformity to exact patterns of worship that have never changed and never will. As it covers the history of God's relationship with his people, it shows a progression and expansion as God draws ever nearer to his own, and it finishes with a glorious climax when he takes the initiative to redeem his people and invites them to a living, personal relationship with him. Not as servants bound to do his bidding, mind you, but as children born of his Holy Spirit, forgiven of their sins, and booked for eternal glory. Join me on a journey as we discover the Christian message displayed in the lives of God's servants throughout history.

Cain and Abel: True and false Religion

We have many religions on earth. They include Judaism founded by Moses, Christianity by Jesus, Islam by Muhammad, Buddhism by Gautama Buddha, and many others like Hinduism without any known originators. Heaven, however, sees only three. The first is *Antitheism*.

It is the worship of anything other than God, the creature rather than the Creator. Whether it is the veneration of pagan idols, ancestral spirits or other beings, it makes no difference. It's all the same to the angels of heaven – the worship of anything and everything *but* the true God. The Bible describes antitheists perfectly: 'for although they knew God they did not honour him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking and their senseless minds were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man or birds or animals or reptiles' (*Romans 1:21-23*). The definition concludes: 'they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed for ever! Amen' (*Romans 1:25*).

The Two Oldest Religions on Earth

The only other two religions on earth, as heaven sees them, are the oldest that have ever existed. They were founded on the same day by two brothers and, outwardly, they can look very similar. The brothers were Cain and Abel, the sons of Adam and Eve. On the day that the first religious ceremonies were ever performed on earth, Cain and Abel each brought an offering to God. Cain had become a farmer who lived from the produce of the ground. So he brought a portion of the fruits of his labour and offered it to God. Abel, however, had become a shepherd, so he brought a different present, a sacrifice of his young lambs and their fat portions. There seemed to be no real difference between the two offerings, but the Bible says "the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard" (*Genesis 4:4-5*). What followed is well-known: Cain was angry and rose up against his brother, killing him in a field.

The Qur'an confirms the story: "And relate to them the story of the two sons of Adam with truth, when they offered a sacrifice which was accepted from one of them but not accepted from the other. He said: I will certainly kill you" (*Surah 5:27*). Neither book states why Cain's sacrifice was rejected, but the Bible goes on to show why Abel found favour with God. It says 'It was by faith that Abel brought a more acceptable offering to God than Cain did. Abel's offering gave evidence that he was a righteous man, and God showed his approval of his gifts. Although Abel is long dead, he still speaks to us by his example of faith.'" (*Hebrews 11:4*). The key words are the first two: *by faith* Abel won God's favour.

The Faith of Abel

Abel's sacrifice tells you what that faith was. He presented the shed blood of his lambs. Abel loved the Lord, but he was painfully aware that he could, at times, be as cold to him as his brother Cain was. He knew he was implicated in his parents' sin in the Garden of Eden and that he could offer nothing to God from the fruit of his own labours to redeem himself.

He also knew, however, that God had warned the serpent in the garden: 'I will put enmity between you and the woman,

Abel was the first man to offer true faith to God.

and between your seed and her seed; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel' (*Genesis 3:15*). This clear statement that God would one day raise a Saviour from Eve's descendants who would suffer severely to achieve human salvation, but would fatally injure the serpent at the same time and deliver her offspring from its power, was Abel's hope. His sacrifice sent its own message: "I know my sinfulness and that I can by no religious means commend myself to you, but I am offering back to

you something that is your own, slain with its shed blood, because I sense my redemption will come at considerable cost to you." Abel was the first man to offer true faith to God. This is the second religion heaven sees, and it is the only true one. It is the Faith of Abel.

The Religion of Cain

Cain, however, had no true love for God. In his pride and self-righteousness he did not believe he was implicated in his parents' sin. He also provocatively challenged God: 'Am I my brother's guardian?' (*Genesis 4:9*) right after he had killed his brother Abel in cold blood. Yet Cain was prepared to acknowledge God as his Creator. He had brought a present just as Abel, but his was only a gesture, a token offering from the abundance of his labours. He would have been willing to worship God occasionally, but regarded his life as his own and believed he was free to exploit the earth for *his* benefit alone. He would come round every now and again to salute God, perhaps once a week or for a harvest ceremony once a year, but no more. Cain was the founder of *formal monotheism*, worshipping God without truly loving him. This is the *Religion of Cain*, the third religion heaven sees, and it regards it as entirely false. It is the largest religion on earth today and embraces every expression of formal monotheism, whether Judaic, Christian or Islamic. God himself summed it up in these words: 'These people say they are mine. They honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. And their worship of me is nothing but man-made rules learned by rote' (*Isaiah 29:13*).

Cain's anger showed the difference between him and his brother. He might well have retorted: "I would have been willing to come round many times to salute you, once a week if need be. Why did you reject my first offering so

completely?” God’s answer to him would have been: “Abel made only a single offering, but it was an all-embracing commitment of his whole life to me, trusting me for his salvation. I will one day, by a single offering of my own, perfect for all time those who are sanctified” (*Hebrews 10:14*). The Faith of Abel is the only true religion the world has known or ever will know. It is a vibrant, living faith as opposed to dry, outward conformity. It offers God nothing of its own, it trusts God entirely for its salvation. It does not look on the outward appearance and say *what am I?* A Muslim, Jew or Christian identified by my dress, beard, head-covering, robes, weekly worship attendance, etc, signifying my allegiance to a particular religion? No, it asks the acid question *who am I?* How deeply within my own soul do I love God and how willing am I to pursue his perfect honesty, purity, love and righteousness? After my religious dress is removed, my beard shaved off, my priest’s robes put away, what is left? What do I have *within* myself to commend me to God? There is only one true religion on earth – it is human *faith* responding to God’s *faithfulness*, a theme we will explore more fully as we press on.

Abraham: The Father of the Faithful

All Muslims honour Ibrahim *alayhis-salam*. He is regarded as one of the greatest messengers of God. Christians likewise look to him as a model of a true believer and the father of the faithful. He followed the *true faith*, the Faith of Abel, and true Christians are said to be ‘those who share the faith of Abraham for he is the father of us all’ (*Romans 4:16*). The Qur’an likewise speaks of the *millata abikum Ibrahim*, the “faith of our father Abraham” (*Surah 22:78*). But why is Abraham marked out for his faith and not for his religious submission to God?

More than Mere Submission

The Qur'an sees the *millah* of Abraham as no more than unquestioning submission to the will of Allah. It says that he was one of the *musliman*, a "submitter" (*Surah 3:67*) and states that 'when his Lord said to him 'Submit!', he said 'I submit to the Lord of the worlds' (*Surah 2:131*). The command for "submit" in the text is *Aslim!* and his response is *aslamtu*, "I have submitted." All three words come from the same root letters as *islam* and *muslim*. This is not true faith, however. It is no more than an unquestioning resignation to God's will. It does not take the prophet's faith in God's faithfulness.

The Bible shows that God called Abraham to a much deeper relationship with him than mere submission to his will. It begins with a simple promise which God made to him when he complained that he had no heir to his

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estate: 'Look up into the sky and count the stars if you can. That's how many descendants you will have!' (*Genesis 15:5*). What follows is equally simply stated: 'And he believed the Lord; and the Lord counted him as righteous because of his faith' (*Genesis 15:6*). It seems too easy – Abraham just took the promise at face value and, because he believed God, he was declared righteous in his sight. He did not have to pray a number of times a day, fast for many months, go on pilgrimages or donate large sums to the poor to obtain God's approval. He just believed the promise and was immediately placed on an even footing with God.

His faith was to be tested again and again, however. Many years passed without anything happening. His wife Sarah, who had never been able to bear children and was growing older every year, told him to assist

God's promise to have offspring through her maid Hagar (*Genesis 16:2*). When Ishmael was born, Abraham was convinced that he must be the heir who was promised but eventually, thirteen years later when Abraham was 99 years old and his wife Sarah already 90 and still barren, God said to him: 'I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her; I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations; kings of peoples shall come from her' (*Genesis 17:16*). At first Abraham laughed at the prospect, but then it dawned on him that Ishmael was obviously not the child of God's promise. So he cried out to God 'May Ishmael live under your special blessing!' but God replied: 'No – Sarah, your wife, will give birth to a son for you. You will name him Isaac, and I will confirm my covenant with him and his descendants as an everlasting covenant" (*Genesis 17:18-19*).

When Isaac was finally born, Sarah demanded that Abraham send Hagar and Ishmael away. The patriarch was sore-pressed, but God confirmed her wish, advising Abraham at the same time that he would nevertheless make a great nation out of him. Still, Abraham was severely tested as he realised Ishmael had been rejected by God. At fourteen years of age he was sent away into the wilderness.

The Ultimate Test

Whenever Abraham looked on the new youngster he at least knew for certain that he was the child who had been promised. He looked forward to the day when Isaac would rise up as the fulfilment of God's promise that he would become the father of many nations. But, when Isaac had reached a similar age as Ishmael's when he was sent away, God finally spoke to the patriarch again. 'Abraham!' he suddenly called out (*Genesis 22:1*).

Abraham responded willingly, expecting to hear God define how his son was now to become a blessing to the generations to come. Instead God said to him: 'Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering upon one of the mountains of which I shall tell you' (*Genesis 22:2*). (The Qur'an records the incident but does not name or otherwise identify the son who was to be sacrificed – *Surah 37:102*. It does, however, confirm that the line of *nubuwwah* – prophethood, and *kitab* – scripture, would follow through Isaac's line – *Surah 29:27*.)

This was a far greater test for the patriarch. When Ishmael started turning into a young man, God told Abraham to reject him, but now, as Isaac reached the same budding moment in his life, God told Abraham to slaughter him! It was the supreme test of a man's love for God – to offer his son to him. If he would not spare his son, surely he would give him all he had (*cf. Romans 8:32*). It was the best any man could offer to God.

But Abraham was facing a far sterner test. God had promised him he would have descendants like the stars of the sky through his son Isaac. How could this promise possibly be fulfilled if he was to offer him up as a burnt offering? Abraham must have pictured the scene – his son cremated to ashes after being sacrificed and, as the wind came down and blew the ashes away, he would have imagined himself despairing "there goes the promise of God to the wind."

God listens to His Servant

By this time, however, Abraham had gone far beyond just submitting to God's will without asking further questions. When God, on another occasion not long before this, had threatened to destroy the cities of

Sodom and Gomorrah for their wickedness, the patriarch objected: 'Will you sweep away both the righteous and the wicked? Suppose you find fifty righteous people living there in the city -- will you still sweep it away and not spare it for their sakes? Surely you wouldn't do such a thing, destroying the righteous with the wicked exactly the same! Surely you wouldn't do that! Should not the Judge of all the earth do what is right?' (*Genesis 18:23-25*)

How could a prophet argue with God's decrees? This was not humble submission. But God honoured it, eventually promising not to destroy the cities if just ten righteous people could be found in them. (They weren't, and only Lot and his two daughters were eventually saved from their destruction.)

There's more to this than meets the eye. Abraham was calling on God to be true to himself. Believing that God is faithful, he placed all his faith in God's faithfulness. That is why he reacted when he heard something that seemed to deny that faithfulness. 'Every word of God proves true' the scripture declares (*Proverbs 30:5*), and Abraham faced the command to sacrifice his son with the same dilemma. How could God's promise be fulfilled if he was to sacrifice Isaac? He could have said to himself "I don't know but it doesn't matter. God has commanded me to destroy him, so I will. I'll just unquestioningly submit to his will. The unfulfilled promise will be his problem, not mine."

Reflecting God's Faithfulness

But Abraham didn't. He knew that his faith, which had earned him a declaration that he was righteous in God's sight, was merely a reflection of God's faithfulness. The sun generates light, blazing light. The moon can do no more than feebly reflect it but, as it faces the sun head on, it reflects that light to the full. Take away the moon

and the sun's sparkling light will be totally unaffected, but take away the sun and the moon will not shine at all. So God generates faithfulness as the sun generates light, but Abraham's faith was like the moon's light – no more than a reflection of God's glorious faithfulness.

Yet Abraham held to that faith. Like Abel, he continued to follow the only true religion in the world: *true faith*, and like Abel he was commended for it: 'By faith Abraham,

**... take away
the sun and the
moon will not
shine at all.**

when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was ready to offer up his only son of whom it was said "Through Isaac shall your descendants be named."

Abraham reasoned that if Isaac died, God was able to bring him back to life again. And in a sense, Abraham did receive his son back from the dead.' (*Hebrews 11:17-19*)

The Friend of God

God honoured Abraham and restored his son to him. He had passed the supreme test. He had been willing to give the greatest blessing in his life back to God, his only true son, and in this he perfected his faith, believing God would yet fulfil his promise to him by raising his son back to life. For this Abraham received a very special title. He was called *the friend of God*. Jehoshaphat, a righteous king of Judah many centuries later, prayed to God: 'O our God, did you not drive out those who lived in this land when your people Israel arrived? And did you not give this land for ever to the descendants of your friend Abraham?' (*2 Chronicles 20:7*) God himself once spoke of the nation of Israel as 'the offspring of Abraham, my friend' (*Isaiah 41:8*). James, an early disciple of Jesus and his blood-brother, also wrote of Abraham's faith and added 'he was called the friend of God' (*James 2:23*).

The Qur'an confirms the title: 'For God did take Abraham for a friend' (*Surah 4:125*). The Arabic word here is *khalilan*, "a friend", and Abraham has consequently always been known in Islam as *khalilullah*, the Friend of God. Yet the Qur'an gives no explanation for the title.

In the Biblical record, however, we can see more and more what true faith really is. God wants to have a living relationship with his people. He desires this far more than strict obedience to religious routines, observance of ceremonies and a repetitive adherence to prescribed prayers, prayer-times, etc. This will become ever more apparent as we proceed. At present, however, let us mark the symbol of Abraham's recognition – *true faith*. God did not forcefully project his righteousness at him, expecting him to respond in perfect righteousness and obedience to his every demand. No matter how religious, pious or devoted any man may be, he cannot match God's perfect righteousness. His sin will pull him down again and again.

God elected to project his *faithfulness* to Abraham and was delighted when the prophet responded consistently to it *by faith*, eventually perfecting it when being commanded to offer his son as a sacrifice. This is an important aspect to keep in mind as we move forward. We will see how Abraham's sacrificial faith was only a shadow of God's sacrificial love yet to be revealed. For the moment, however, let us press on to the next great patriarch in Israel's history, Moses, and see how God's plans and purposes for his people continued to expand and grow.

Moses:

The One who Knew God Face-to-Face

More than four hundred years passed before God moved again to communicate directly with his people. After forty years of prosperity as a prince in Egypt, and a further forty years in the Sinai wilderness as a fugitive from justice, Moses suddenly found himself face-to-face with the God of Israel. God called him to deliver the nation from Pharaoh's rule and, after a series of plagues which finally broke the back of Egyptian resistance, Moses led the people into the same wilderness on their way to the promised land, Canaan.

The last night in Egypt

The final scene in this famous story needs to be retold here. Pharaoh only relented when an angel from God slew the first-born of every family in Egypt in just one night. Only the Israelites who had obeyed God's word to sacrifice a passover lamb were exempted. They had been instructed to 'touch the lintel and the two doorposts' of their homes 'with the blood which is in the basin' (*Exodus 12:22*) and were further told to 'observe this rite as an ordinance for you and for your sons for ever' (*Exodus 12:24*). The angel of death would then *pass over* the home. A clear trend was developing as God's relationship with his people progressed. Abel had offered the blood of his lambs as an atoning sacrifice, pointing ahead to a far greater sacrifice. Abraham was willing to offer his son Isaac as a similar token of a greater offering to follow. Now the people of Israel were commanded to place the shed blood of their sacrificial lambs across their doorposts. True faith was beginning to define itself. The hope of all God's true people, trusting solely in his grace and not their religiousness,

was increasingly being focused on the shed blood of the true Lamb of God to follow. True believers discerned this, and placed their faith in God's redemptive grace yet to be fully revealed.

God speaks directly

Not long after their exodus from Egypt, God instructed Moses: 'Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow, and let them wash their garments. Be sure they are ready by the third day; for on that day the Lord will come down on Mount Sinai as all the people watch' (*Exodus 19:10-11*).

Moses was not visited by an angel as a mediator from heaven.

On the third day the people trembled as God's presence was manifested on the mountain. There God spoke directly to the nation, giving it the ten commandments that were to become the backbone of Jewish moral law thereafter. It was a unique occasion, one for which God had been preparing for centuries.

Moses was not visited by an angel as a mediator from heaven. God himself drew near to the prophet and the nation, expressing his desire to relate closely to the people of Israel thereafter. To reveal his presence among them, God told Moses to build an ark with a mercy seat above it and said: 'I will meet with you there and talk to you from above the atonement cover between the gold cherubim that hover over the Ark of the Covenant. From there I will give you my commands for the people of Israel' (*Exodus 25:22*).

Visible proof

The nation had visible proof that God himself was present among them. Whenever Moses entered the holy

tent he had constructed as a tabernacle where the ark was placed, a 'pillar of cloud would descend and stand at the door of the tent, and the Lord would speak with Moses' (*Exodus 33:9*). When the people saw the cloud, they would

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rise up and worship. The story concludes: 'Thus the Lord used to speak to Moses face to face as a man speaks to his friend' (*Exodus 33:11*). Moses was overwhelmed that God was willing to relate so directly to him and the people manifesting his presence among them. He said to God: 'How will anyone know that you look favourably on me – on me and on your people – if you don't go with us. For your presence among us sets your people apart from all other people on the earth?' (*Exodus 33:16*)

Very boldly Moses prayed 'I pray you, show me your glory.' God responded: 'I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you my name, 'the Lord'; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy' (*Exodus 33:18-19*).

With respect, even at this stage God's revealed presence and favour go far beyond anything comparable in Islam. Far greater intimacy, fellowship, grace and favour between God and his own were to follow, but even at this stage the relationship between God and his people had far exceeded the highest expectations Islam can offer. God himself was visibly present among them. The cloud, which was a special manifestation of his presence, hovered over the mercy seat by day and shone at night. When it moved, the nation knew it had to follow and stay close to God as he dwelt among his people.

Reflecting God's glory

When Moses came down from Mount Sinai with two tablets containing the ten commandments, inscribed by God himself, 'Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God' (*Exodus 34:29*). Whenever he came out from speaking to the Lord, 'the people of Israel saw the face of Moses, that the skin of Moses' face shone' (*Exodus 34:35*). The Qur'an confirms the unique, direct relationship between God and Moses: 'And to Moses Allah spoke directly' (*Surah 4:164*). It says nothing further, but confirms the special relationship between them. The story of Moses in the Bible concludes with these words: 'There has never been another prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face' (*Deuteronomy 34:10*).

Abraham was called the friend of God. Moses spoke to God face to face as a man speaks to his friend. We see here the growing supreme purpose of God steadily being revealed. God's presence was so closely manifested that Moses' face shone when he spoke to him. God was going far beyond religious observances. His ultimate desire that his people should relate personally to him and know him directly was being increasingly revealed as time went on.

Tensions and conflicts

Unfortunately God's immediate presence brought constant tensions and conflict between him and the people of Israel. Time and again they distrusted and rebelled against him. Right from the start, when God called the nation to hear his word and receive his ten commandments, the people said to Moses 'You speak to us and we will listen. But don't let God speak directly to us, or we will die' (*Exodus 20:19*). When Moses went up the mountain to converse with God over forty days, the

people rose up and tried to shake off his presence and power over them. They made a golden calf and worshiped it, promptly proceeding to break every commandment they could to tell him precisely what they thought of him.

God's anger grew deep within him. Time and again he threatened to destroy them. 'I have seen this people, and behold, it is a stiff-necked people; now therefore let me alone, that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them', God declared (*Exodus 32:9-10*). A benevolent but righteous God among an unholy and stubborn people – conflict was inevitable. The nation did not want to draw near to God. For their unbelief he kept them wandering with minimal food and water for forty years in the wilderness. Despite all his favours towards them, the people just would not draw near to him. Living so closely among them, their sinfulness and hard-heartedness inevitably ground sharply against his righteousness and holiness.

God's ultimate aim

'And now, Israel,' Moses declared, 'what does the Lord your God require of you? He requires only that you fear the Lord your God, and live in a way that pleases him, and love him and serve him with all your heart and soul. And you must always obey the Lord's commands and decrees that I am giving you today for your own good.' (*Deuteronomy 10:12-13*). In this Moses revealed God's ultimate aim – a deep mutual relationship based on reciprocated love and obedience towards him. Even though he regulated various forms of religious ceremonies and observances to constantly draw out at least a formal worship towards him, they turned against him. From the depths of their hearts they did not want to draw near to him in purity, honesty, faithfulness and

love. Quite simply, they would have preferred to turn back to their former slavery in Egypt than live by faith in his faithfulness and allow his Spirit to examine the depths of their hearts and souls.

Some centuries later God again began to make his presence felt among the people of Israel. Another man arose with a burning love for God, a strong man who could unite the nation, and God moved to relate to him as it appeared his hopes for the nation might yet begin to materialise.

David: A Man after God's Own Heart

When David became king of Israel, God said: 'I have found in David the son of Jesse a man after my own heart, who will do all my will' (*Acts 13:22*). He was not talking of David's religiousness, outward adornment, or reverence for holy days, he was speaking of his inner being – his upright spirit, love for God, refined character, personal sincerity and deep faith. David expressed his devotion to God in his many psalms. He was a man of great weaknesses and failings, yet in spite of these he longed for God and turned his heart constantly towards him. He prayed: 'As a deer longs for flowing streams, so longs my soul for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God' (*Psalms 42:1-2*).

In another of his praise songs David declared: 'I love you, O Lord, my strength. The Lord is my rock, and my fortress, and my deliverer, my God, my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold. I called on the Lord, who is worthy to be praised, and he saved me from my enemies' (*Psalms 18:1-3*). He was not reciting from a prayer-book, he was

expressing the depth of his belief in God. He knew that true faith came from the core of a soul turned towards God. He did not project an outward appearance of uprightness to the world around him while remaining unregenerate within himself. He longed to be pure in all his thoughts, words and deeds. He cried out: 'Search me, O God, and try my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!' (*Psalm 139:23-24*)

Deep failure and true humility

When he did fail he examined his heart and prayed: 'Behold, you desire truth in the inward being, therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart' (*Psalm 51:6*), going on to plead: 'Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. Cast me not away from your presence, and take not your holy spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit' (*Psalm 51:10-12*). True humility before God also comes out as his prayer continues: 'The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and repentant heart, O God, you will not despise' (*Psalm 51:17*). David was chosen to lead Israel because his heart was true to God. He understood true faith. He knew it was a willingness to pursue inner renewal, a response to God's perfect faithfulness. When God commanded Samuel to anoint David king of Israel, he said to him: 'the Lord sees not as man sees; man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart' (*1 Samuel 16:7*). David knew and understood this.

Throughout his life David strived to unite the nation of Israel in the worship of the one true God. When he was able to rest after subduing all his enemies, David said to the prophet Nathan 'See now, I dwell in a house

of cedar, but the ark of God dwells in a tent.' Nathan replied 'Go, do all that is in your heart; for the Lord is with you' (2 Samuel 7:2-3). David proposed to build a great temple for God, to bring the people of Israel constantly together to worship God where his glory dwelt. But God told Nathan to speak to David and say: 'When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. I will be his father, and he shall be my son' (2 Samuel 7:12-14). God told him that his son would build the temple he proposed and concluded by promising: 'Your house and your kingdom will continue before me for all time, and your throne will be secure forever' (2 Samuel 7:16).

**"I will be
his Father, and he
shall be my Son."**

The promised son

As God had promised Abraham a son, so now he promised one to David as well. Solomon was the son promised and after his father's death he set about building the first Jewish Temple. In the generations to follow the people of Israel sensed that, while Solomon was the immediate son promised, the prophecy also spoke of a *greater* son to follow. God had assured David that the promised son would rule over his kingdom forever. When Solomon died the people soon realised the prophecy would only be completely fulfilled when the *greater* Son of David arrived and they looked forward to his day. Significantly God had said to David that the greater son to come would be his *own* Son. God had added unambiguously "I will be his Father, and he shall be *my* Son."

The prophecy is found in the Jewish Scriptures (the Old Testament), not some later Christian work. Like Muslims so the Jews have never believed that God has a Son, but right here, in one of their own books (2 Samuel) revered as the very word of God by all Jews throughout the generations since it was written, God's promise that his own Son would come into the world to establish his eternal kingdom was plainly foretold. The promise is confirmed in another passage: "And he will call out to me, 'You are my father, my God and the Rock of my salvation.' I will make him my first-born son, the mightiest kings on earth. I will love him and be kind to him forever; my covenant with him will never end. I will preserve an heir for him; his throne will be as endless as the days of heaven" (*Psalms 89:26-29*). This quote is also from another of the core books of Jewish Scripture, written a thousand years before Christianity began.

Both promises of a son to come, made to Abraham and David, came suddenly without any previous announcement or anticipation. As you read through the Jewish Scriptures you cannot but be amazed at how striking both prophecies are as there is nothing in the build-up before them to give the slightest hint of what was coming. God simply chose an appropriate moment to speak of things to come as his purposes for mankind and plans for its redemption unfolded.

God visibly manifested his presence

When Solomon had completed the Temple and the priests came out of it after placing the ark of the covenant in the holiest place: 'A cloud filled the house of the Lord, so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud; for the glory of the Lord filled the house of the Lord' (*1 Kings 8:10-11*). Once again God visibly

manifested his presence to the nation as he had done when Moses completed the tabernacle in the wilderness. Islam has never had anything comparable to this.

During those forty years when the Israelites had wandered around the desert regions because of their unbelief, the nation was stripped of its fertile surroundings and given nothing but manna to eat and water to drink. The people suffered under the pressure as God tested them severely to see whether they would be true to him or not. He projected his righteousness strongly at them and, whenever they disobeyed him, he reacted immediately, sending plagues and fires through their camps.

Unparalleled peace and prosperity

Now, however, God gave the nation forty years of unparalleled peace and prosperity. This time he let go of it, happy that the covenant he had made with Moses finally appeared to be working. His hopes for the nation had peaked and he allowed it to rejoice in its splendour. Even Israel's enemies were at peace with her. It was a golden age, a symbol of heavenly peace and glory to come. 'The king made silver as common in Jerusalem as stone, and he made cedar as plentiful as the sycamore of the Shephelah' (*1 Kings 10:27*).

Shattered hopes

Unfortunately the honeymoon did not last long. Solomon failed to focus his faith in God and turned to material extravagance. He married foreign wives who introduced pagan customs to the nation. Solomon 'clung to these in love' (*1 Kings 11:2*). When he grew old his foreign wives 'turned away his heart after other gods; and his heart was not wholly true to the Lord his God, as was the heart of David his father' (*1 Kings 11:4*). After

Solomon's death the nation soon divided in two as the people of Judah followed Rehoboam, Solomon's son, as their king while the northern tribes of Israel followed Jeroboam who placed two golden calves at Dan and Bethel to distract the people away from worshipping the Lord at Jerusalem. (*1 Kings 12:28-29*)

God said to Jeroboam: 'You have done more evil than all who lived before you. You have made other gods for yourself, and have made me furious with your gold calves.'

**He sought
an alternative
to judgment.**

(*1 Kings 14:9*). A succession of evil kings led the tribes of Israel into every form of idolatry and wickedness. Judah's history was more chequered – some of its kings like Ahaz were as bad as the kings of Israel while others like Jehoshaphat kept the people true to God, but it was only a matter of time before Judah too fell away and angered God intensely.

His hopes for the nation had been shattered. His wrath became white-hot against it. He could have summarily called Israel and all the other nations of the world, who had long abandoned the worship of God, to a final day of judgment. But he didn't. The God of all faithfulness, whose love for his people had also reached a peak, a white-hot intensity of its own, weighed up the possibility of yet bringing his people into a deep personal relationship with him. He sought an alternative to judgment. What was he to do – judge or redeem? His burning love made him choose the latter, but not after considering very deeply what price he himself would have to pay to accomplish his purpose.

Jeremiah and Ezekiel: The Promise of a New Covenant

No less than 17 of the 39 books of the Jewish Scripture come from the time of the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel. They lived about three centuries after Solomon and David. The writings of this time are, with the exception of the Book of Jonah, all prophetic works. They are full of prophecies about the future and focus on God's expanding revelation and the climax towards which it was heading. Some quotes from these books, however, show just how deep God's anger against his people was for consistently rejecting him at the time.

Hot anger

'My anger is hot against the shepherds, and I will punish the leaders,' God declared (*Zechariah 10:3*). Again he cried out: 'Woe to them, for they have strayed from me! Destruction to them, for they have rebelled against me. I would redeem them, but they speak lies against me' (*Hosea 7:13*). Yet again he exclaimed: 'I know how many are your transgressions, and how great are your sins,' adding 'I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies' (*Amos 5:12,21*).

Yet it was not just hot anger that moved God to speak so forcibly, it was also a deep grief that the nation he had chosen and loved from the depth of his being had so coldly chosen to brush him aside as we see in this passage: 'Like grapes in the wilderness, I found Israel. Like the first fruit on the fig tree, in its first season, I saw your fathers. But they came to Baal-peor, and consecrated themselves to Baal, and became detestable like the thing they loved' (*Hosea 9:10*). Therefore God proclaimed: 'Because of the wickedness of their deeds I will drive them out of my house. I will love them no more, all their princes are rebels' (*Hosea 9:15*).

Burning love

But between these quotes, which are only a selection of a number of condemnatory exclamations, come an abundance of similar texts where God declares his burning love for his people and his desire for their redemption. 'I will strengthen the house of Judah, and I will save the house of Joseph. I will bring them back because I have compassion on them, and they shall be as though I had not rejected them, for I am the Lord their God and I will answer them' (*Zechariah 10:6*). Again he declared: 'My heart recoils within me, my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my fierce anger, I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God, and not man, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come to destroy' (*Hosea 11:8-9*). Many others show how God's emotions at the depth of his heart had intensified within him. He loved his people and his compassion for them had reached a defining stage, but his wrath and anger against their coldness of heart had also reached their zenith.

Rebellious hearts

It was not just a simple matter of tossing a coin and choosing which would prevail. Throughout the Bible one finds that God's attitude to sin is absolute. He does not regard the sins that men commit as nothing more than acts of wrongdoing, oversights, mistakes or errors of judgment that can easily be forgiven. They confront and offend his holiness. From the time Adam and Eve first rebelled against him God has treated human sinfulness as a *rebellious condition*. It shows that humans do not truly love him, that their hearts are cold towards him, and that they do not care to enter into a close relationship with him where his Spirit is free to search their innermost

beings and cleanse their souls. Pious observance of fixed prayer-times, regulated fasting, formal recognition of outward rituals and ceremonies do not and cannot compensate for a heart that is cold towards him. Nor are these observances proof of an obedience that comes from the heart.

The books written at this crucial juncture of Israel's history show just how God feels about human sinfulness. Here is God's basic assessment of the human condition from one of them: 'The human heart is the most deceitful of all things, and desperately wicked; who really knows how bad it is? But I, the Lord, search all hearts and examine secret motives. I give all people their due rewards, according to what their actions deserve (*Jeremiah 17:9-10*). Two other quotes from books written at this time define God's perfect holiness and show why sin angers him and is not easily forgiven: 'the Holy God shows himself holy in righteousness' (*Isaiah 5:16*) and 'your eyes are too pure to behold evil, and you cannot look on wrongdoing' (*Habakkuk 1:13*).

God's attitude to sin is absolute.

God's character: righteousness and love

The Bible shows that although God has many attributes (such as those mentioned in the 99 names of God in Islam), two are paramount. By nature he is *righteous*, it is the basic facet of his being. Sinful acts and attitudes confront that righteousness and, as numerous records in the early days of God's relationship with man show, awful judgments can follow. Satan and his fallen angels were cast into pits of gloom never to be forgiven or delivered (*2 Peter 2:4*), every first-born son in Egypt was slain in a single night because of the nation's resistance

to God (*Exodus 12:29*), while numerous Israelites perished in the wilderness whenever they opposed Moses and defied the Lord (*Numbers 11:33, 16:35*).

The second great virtue in God's character is his *love* which is so deeply ingrained at the depth of his being that the Bible simply declares 'God is love' (*1 John 4:8*). But whereas his righteousness is at the forefront of his being and was quickly thrust in the face of those who

**Pious observance
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cold towards him.**

defied him in those earlier times, his love appears to have taken time to grow and rise from the deepest recesses of his being. It wasn't a natural affection for his people, it was a deepening desire for their best welfare *in spite of* their hostility towards him. It was a strengthening love for a world that was consistently proving to be decidedly *unlovable*. By the time of Jeremiah and Ezekiel it had reached its zenith and, although God could justifiably have called all mankind to judgment because of its sinfulness, he chose rather to express the fullness of his love towards it, making one decisive and definitive statement which was to shape his attitude to the human race for the rest of its days: 'I have loved you with an everlasting love, therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you' (*Jeremiah 31:3*). After intense reflection and inner resolve he decided to press on and almost immediately declared how he planned to change the God-man relationship altogether. In this way he brought the two together, uniting them in perfect fellowship, goodwill, personal knowledge and mutual companionship.

A new heart

God declared: ‘Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a *new* covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, *not* like the covenant which I made with their fathers when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant which they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. But *this* is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law *within* them, and I will write it upon their *hearts*; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each man teach his neighbour and each his brother, saying ‘Know the Lord’, for they shall *all know me*, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will *forgive* their wickedness, and I will remember their sin *no more*’ (*Jeremiah 31:31-34* – emphasis added).

This promise was unprecedented – God giving his people a divine motivation and power from within to keep his holy laws, opening the door for all his people to know him personally, and guaranteeing to forgive all their sins right here and now. And this wasn’t all. Through the prophet Ezekiel God went on: ‘A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will take out of your flesh the heart of stone and will give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances’ (*Ezekiel 36:26-27*), adding: ‘I will save them from all the backslidings in which they have sinned, and will cleanse them; and they shall be my people, and I will be their God’ (*Ezekiel 37:23*). Unlike the first covenant, where God had commanded his people consistently “You shall” and “You shall not”, placing the obligation on them to obey him unreservedly, he now consistently declared “I will, I will, I will”, *thereby placing on himself the obligation to ensure that*

his people would respond faithfully to him. True Faith had reached its peak. God's faithfulness was going as far as it possibly could – *guaranteeing* the faith of those who were willing to walk through his open door into a deep personal relationship with him.

A new golden age

The angels of heaven must have wondered, however, how he proposed to reconcile this open invitation with his perfect righteousness which would instinctively keep sinners at bay. How could absolute righteousness finally give way to perfect grace and mercy? How could God possibly introduce a new golden age in which his people, sinners to the core, could nevertheless be so forgiven that they could live in a perfectly holy relationship with him right now and know him from the depth of their beings? In short, how could God's Holy Spirit live comfortably in unholy human hearts? God gave them the answer: 'Behold I will bring my servant the Branch ... I will remove the guilt of this land *in a single day*' (*Zechariah 3:8-9* – emphasis added).

For centuries he had longed for his people to respond to him, to draw close to him and to obey his commandments from the depths of their hearts. But as their resistance

God was willing to enter the darkest recesses of the human world

increased, so his love grew until it went far beyond just wanting a more intimate communion with them than a master-to-servant relationship. God knew that the only way he could ever bridge the gap between his all-holy character and unholy human sinfulness would be for *him* to pay the price we should pay to satisfy his wrath and vindicate his righteousness. He promised to send a deliverer, whom he called "the

Branch”, who would bring redemption for the human race in less than a day. But it was obvious this deliverer would have to come *from his own being* if he was to fully pay the supreme price required to secure the forgiveness of God’s people and to do it in only a few hours.

God’s ultimate purpose

God fell back on his promise to David that he would give him a son who would rule over his kingdom forever. Remember that God said ‘*I will be his Father and he shall be my Son*’ (2 Samuel 7:14). Also remember what was pointed out earlier – this does not come from an original Christian text, it is found in the *Jewish Scriptures* written many centuries before the Christian era. The important thing here is that God was willing to give his own Son to achieve his supreme goal – the complete acquittal of all who would believe in him for the forgiveness of their sins and, with it, the free gift of eternal life. What we see here is God’s ultimate purpose – *to engage man in the closest possible relationship* – and what he was prepared to do to achieve this. In short, God was willing to send his own Son for the salvation of the world so that we might no longer be unworthy servants but become the redeemed children of God and heirs to his everlasting kingdom. God was willing to enter the darkest recesses of the human world so that we might behold his glorious light.

After going through what must have been an extremely painful experience when deciding to tear his heart apart to redeem us, God allowed himself a brief moment to savour and relish its eventual outcome. With great joy and tangible relief he declared: ‘*And they will be my people, and I will be their God. And I will give them one heart and one purpose: to worship me forever, for*

their own good and for the good of all their descendants. And I will make an everlasting covenant with them; I will never stop doing good for them. I will put a desire in their hearts to worship me, and they will never leave me. I will find joy doing good for them and will faithfully and wholeheartedly replant them in this land (*Jeremiah 32:38-41*). He went on to affirm the complete forgiveness of all their sins so that they might know him personally and live with great joy to his praise and glory: 'I will cleanse them from all the guilt of their sin against me, and I will forgive all the guilt of their sin and rebellion against me' (*Jeremiah 33:8*). We move on to the glorious new covenant age God had promised.

Jesus Christ: Son of David, Son of Abraham

Christianity has the most pessimistic view of what human beings are by nature – bound in sin and slaves to it to such an extent that they cannot acquit themselves – but it also has the most optimistic view of what men and women can become – sons and daughters of God, born of his Holy Spirit, transformed into his personal image, and generating his glory for all eternity. Yet, when God's supreme deliverer came to achieve this, he was missed by his own people and his mission is still overlooked and rejected by countless millions down to the present day.

Expecting the Messiah

The 17 prophetic works written at the time when God promised the new covenant climaxed the revelations of God to the Jewish people. The promise of a coming Messiah, a deliverer, was to be their final and supreme hope as God's purposes for the human race would be concluded. After these books no new ones followed. All

went quiet for about four hundred years. By the time Jesus was born the nation of Israel had feverish Messianic expectations. A similar period of silence, also just over four hundred years, had followed God's promises to Abraham before the first covenant had been introduced through Moses. The time for the new covenant to be enacted

**Abraham foresaw
the whole Gospel.**

had surely come. Israel waited anxiously and – correctly, as it turned out – expected the Messiah to appear at that time. Yet, when he came, only a relatively few recognised him while the nation as a whole overlooked him and, worse still, opposed and rejected him.

God had promised David a son who would rule over his kingdom forever. When Jesus one day asked the Jews: 'What do you think of the Christ? Whose son is he?' they replied 'the Son of David' (*Matthew 22:42*). Solomon, David's immediate son, had been Israel's most prosperous and powerful king. In his day Israel ruled its surrounding world. Peace prevailed. The nation now longed for a new king who would introduce a similar reign and one which would never pass away. They expected their Messiah-king to make the Jewish nation the most powerful and affluent on earth. But they had missed one crucial point – and they had no excuses for their oversight. God had promised *another* patriarch a son long before the time of David and Solomon who was also to prefigure a greater Son to come, and they should have paid most of their attention to *him*, for he was to appear first.

The Son of Abraham

You don't have to look far into the Christian Scriptures (the New Testament) to find out who it was. Just read the first verse of its first book, the Gospel of Matthew.

The opening text of the whole of the Christian Scriptures reads: 'The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham' (*Matthew 1:1*). It was *the Son of Abraham* whom they should have first anticipated. We looked at some length at the son God promised to Abraham, namely Isaac, the son of his wife Sarah. When Abraham took him up to Mount Moriah to sacrifice him, Isaac said to him 'Behold, the fire and the wood; but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?' (*Genesis 22:7*) Abraham replied 'God will provide himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son' (*Genesis 22:8*). The original Hebrew is more emphatic – it effectively says 'God will give *from himself* the lamb for a burnt offering.' Abraham was, in reality, saying to Isaac "my son, you are the offering, but take heart. You are only a type of another yet to come. God will one day give *of himself* the true lamb as an offering."

John the Baptist (*Yahya* in Islam), looking at Jesus as he walked one day, proclaimed "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (*John 1:29*), identifying the lamb of whom Abraham spoke. On another day Jesus himself said to the Jews who were arguing with him: 'Your father Abraham rejoiced that he was to see my day; he saw it and was glad' (*John 8:56*). He clearly had the moment in mind when Abraham had said 'God will provide himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.'

Abraham foresaw the whole Gospel. Isaac was born of the Spirit in unique circumstances, so Abraham knew God's Son would be born uniquely too (Jesus was born of a virgin woman). Abraham planned to sacrifice Isaac, knowing the Son of God would be sacrificed as well. Abraham believed Isaac would rise from the dead. In so doing he foresaw the resurrection of the Son of God. No

wonder we find it stated that the scripture ‘preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham’ (*Galatians 3:8*).

Whenever the following question is asked “what is the greatest gift God has ever given you to show his love for you?” some might say “my health”, others “my children”, or yet others “he answered my prayers and helped me when I was in terrible trouble.” All these are good answers, they show the kindness of God in providing for us and caring for us. But none of them cost him anything, they are not evidences of any depth of love in his heart for us. But if he should give his Son to die for us so that we could receive eternal life as a gift, be forgiven of all our sins, and be able to know God personally, *it would be the greatest gift he could give because it would come at the greatest possible cost to him.* And this is exactly what happened when Jesus came into the world! As one of his most famous disciples, the apostle Paul, put it: ‘Since he did not spare even his own son but gave him up for us all, won’t he also give us everything else?’ (*Romans 8:32*)

God’s highest treasure

This was the supreme price God was prepared to pay to gain the highest treasure he sought – a cleansed, forgiven people in whom his own Holy Spirit could always comfortably dwell. When Jesus died on the cross God’s wrath against the sins of all those who would fully believe in him was exhausted. The sin-holiness problem, which had caused such trauma during Moses’ time and in the generations to come, had been solved. The door was open for all those wonderful things God had promised through Jeremiah and Ezekiel to be fulfilled.

True Christian believers don’t just believe in God, they would have no special message for their fellow

monotheist Muslims if they did. But they do have a *very* special message for all who dwell on earth including Muslims. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, fulfilled the hopes

**... it would be
the greatest gift
he could give
because it would
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of all true believers when he laid down his life for their redemption. Abel sacrificed the blood of his lambs to symbolise his hope in God's salvation to come. Abraham was prepared to sacrifice his son and share his blood as a shadow and token of

God's great love in being willing to do the same one day in return for him. Moses ordered every Israelite family to spread the shed blood of a lamb on their doorposts and lintels, symbolising the crucifixion of the Son of God to come for their *eternal* deliverance.

Children of God

Our message to Muslims and all the world in consequence is this – in Jesus we have received the *salvation* of God, we have been given the full *forgiveness* of our sins, we have become the *children* of God, we have received the *Spirit* of God, we are heirs of the *kingdom* of God and, most importantly, we have come to *know* God as his saved, redeemed people.

When God spoke to Moses his face shone, reflecting the immediate presence of God before him and among his people. The glory of God was manifested in the first Jewish temple when Solomon dedicated it to God, again proving that God was *present* among his people in a very special way. But when Jesus, God's Son, stood among his people, the manifestation reached a new dimension. He took three of his disciples up a mountain apart and was suddenly transfigured before them. His

face shone like the sun, and his garments became white as light (*Matthew 17:2*). This time the glory far exceeded its manifestations at the time of Moses and Solomon, but it went still further. Jesus *himself* was transfigured. The glory shone through him. He did not reflect it or behold it, *he generated it from within himself in awesome splendour*. When the Son of God took human form, God and man became united forever. We will soon see how, in eternity, the followers of Jesus too will generate the same glory from within themselves.

With unfolded arms

In all other monotheistic religions God's image is much the same. He revealed his laws, summoned obedience from his servants, and folded his arms, watching and waiting to see what would follow. This is the Religion of Cain and it breeds formal monotheism. But, in fulfilling the hopes of Abel, Abraham and Moses whom he was willing to call his friends, God stepped off his throne, unfolded his arms, spread them out over all the earth, humbled himself and visited our world, paying the supreme price to show his eternal, perfect love for us and give us the assurance of a glorious place in his heavenly kingdom.

The Jews missed the Son of Abraham. They could not see that the Messiah had to come as his son first, in complete humility, to be sacrificed for our redemption. Paul puts it in these words: 'Have this mind among yourselves, which you have in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, and being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross' (*Philippians 2:5-8*).

Prophecies to the sacrificial death of the Messiah abound in the Jewish Scriptures. Most were made through David and Isaiah centuries before Jesus came. Many predicted the circumstances of his death in fine detail (*Psalms 22:1-21, 69:1-29*) while others declared the purpose of his sacrifice – to redeem the world from its sinfulness – in explicit, unmistakable language (*Isaiah 53:1-12*). The prophets did not know precisely what they were predicting but knew it was for generations to come. As the apostle Peter put it: ‘The prophets who prophesied of the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired about this salvation; they inquired what person or time was indicated by the Spirit of Christ within them when predicting the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glory. It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in the things which have now been announced to you by those who preached the good news to you through the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, things into which angels long to look’ (*1 Peter 1:10-12*).

His reign in glory

Many predictions of his reign in glory as the Son of David yet to come also fill the pages of the same scriptures. Sometimes predictions of the coming Messiah as the suffering son of Abraham were couched between others predicting his heavenly glory, so the Jews had no excuse. Here is a typical example: ‘Behold, my servant shall prosper, he shall be exalted and lifted up, and shall be very high (glorious son of David). As many were astonished at him – his appearance was so marred, beyond human semblance, and his form beyond that of the sons of men (suffering son of Abraham) – so shall he startle many nations; kings shall shut their mouths because of him (glorious son of David); for that which has not been told them they shall see, and that which they have not heard they shall understand’ (*Isaiah 52:13-15*).

Having first shown how the greater son of Abraham, Jesus Christ, not only humbled himself but was even prepared to be humiliated through his death on a cross, Paul then concludes: 'Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that *Jesus Christ is Lord* to the glory of God the Father' (*Philippians 2:9-11* – emphasis added).

**God and man
united to
each other –
for all eternity!**

Jesus gave the Jewish leaders of his time every indication of who he really was and that his coming had been clearly foretold. Moses wrote of him (*John 5:46*). Abraham rejoiced that he was to see his day (*John 8:56*). David, inspired by the Spirit, had called him his Lord (*Matthew 22:43*). They should have known and recognised him.

No greater love

To his own disciples, however, on the night before his crucifixion Jesus said: 'Greater love has no man than this that a man lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you' (*John 15:13-15*). God's cycle was complete. He had called Abraham his friend. He had spoken face to face to Moses as a man speaks to his friend. So now Jesus was able to speak to all his disciples present as the true friends of God. His impending death and resurrection were to open the door, at last, for all God's people to know him personally, to be forgiven of their sins, to love him with

all their hearts, and to eventually be glorified at his own level. It was what God had most deeply desired and for which he had endured so much.

The Holy Spirit: God's Presence Dwelling in Us

After Jesus rose from the dead he appeared to his disciples on various occasions. On the fortieth day he ascended to heaven after first telling them 'Behold, I send the promise of my Father upon you; but stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high' (*Luke 24:49*). He identified that power very clearly: 'Before many days you shall be baptised with the Holy Spirit' (*Acts 1:5*). Ten days after his ascension, as the disciples were gathered together in Jerusalem, 'a sound came from heaven like the rush of a mighty wind' and suddenly 'they were all filled with the Holy Spirit' (*Acts 2:2-4*).

God's deepest desire

God's deepest desire, to enter into the closest possible relationship with his people, was fulfilled as his own Spirit came down on Jesus' disciples. It was the beginning of the golden new covenant age. God and man united to each other – for all eternity! The climax of his supreme goal had been reached. While Jesus, the Son of God, had walked in human form among the Israelites, God was present *with* his people in a personal way far more intense and intimate than it had ever been at the time of Moses. But now, as the Holy Spirit came to live in the hearts of God's people and to remain there until Jesus returns, God became present *in* his people, resident within the deepest recesses of their hearts.

Remember this:

True Christian believers, born of God's Spirit,
know God personally.

They allow his Spirit to search the depths of their hearts,
to root out all dishonesty, arrogance, pride, lust,
religious self-sufficiency and malice.

They have an absolute assurance of eternal life.

They know all their sins have already been forgiven.

They love the Lord with all their hearts.

They know that God is worthy of their deepest affections,
having paid the supreme price to redeem them.

As they behold that love, perfected in the sacrifice of *his*
Son, they are free to love him with all their hearts,
souls and minds.

Nothing stands between them and
the kingdom of heaven.

To know God personally

The apostle Paul addressed the first true Christian believers as follows: 'now that you have come to know God, or *rather to be known of God*' (*Galatians 4:9* – emphasis added). This clearly shows that it was God's good pleasure to open the door for him to be known and not some religious effort on any *man's* part that brought him into this position. You too can know God personally – if you are willing to commit yourself to Jesus Christ and receive the fullness of his salvation.

Abraham's faith, perfected in his willingness to sacrifice his son, was a wonderful reflection of God's own faithfulness. But God's gift of his Son as a sacrifice for our redemption, is the perfect proof of his intense love for us. 'God showed how much he loved us by sending

his one and only Son into the world so that we might have eternal life through him. This is real love – not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as a sacrifice to take away our sins.’ (1 John 4: 9-10).

The World’s only true religion

Jesus said ‘Unless one is born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God’ (John 3:3). That includes you. To be born of God’s Spirit is the only way for any man, at any time, in any age, to be freed from his sins and become a citizen of heaven. True faith, the Faith of Abel, is the world’s only

The Qur’an comes tantalizingly close to acknowledging this revelation.

true religion, if it can remotely be called a religion. In reality it is a *living* faith, a response to God’s *faithfulness* finally and fully revealed in his salvation through Jesus Christ. Referring to God’s declaration that Abraham was righteous in his sight purely because he had believed in his faithfulness, Paul says: ‘But the words, “it was reckoned to him,” were written not for his sake alone, but for ours also. It will be reckoned to us who believe in him that raised from the dead Jesus our Lord. He was handed over to die because of our sins, and he was raised to life to make us right with God.’ (Romans 4:23-25).

So Paul continues: ‘Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come’ (2 Corinthians 5:17). God’s true people are those who have believed in Jesus, the Son of God, and have received his ultimate promise, the Spirit of God. Christians who read the Qur’an are often struck by the striking statements in the book that actually confirm this. The Qur’an comes tantalizingly close to acknowledging this revelation. Firstly, it says that an angel appeared to

Jesus' mother and said to her: 'O Mary, surely Allah gives you good news of a word from him whose name is the Messiah, Jesus son of Mary' (*Surah 3:44*). In the original Arabic the key words are *kalimatim-minhu* "a word from him." Note the words *minhu* – 'from him' – meaning that Jesus came *from God himself* and was not just another ordinary human being.

In another passage the Qur'an says of true believers 'These are they into whose hearts He has impressed faith, and strengthened them with a Spirit from himself' (*Surah 58:22*). The key words here are very similar: 'a Spirit from him' – *ruhim-minhu*. It is quite remarkable to find the Qur'an confirming the core of the Christian Gospel. Jesus was the Word who came from God (*minhu* – 'from him'), and the Holy Spirit who followed is the Spirit who also came from God (*minhu* – 'from him'). The Qur'an emphatically states that these two persons came from God himself. It does not use this expression (*minhu*) for any other personality in a similar context.

The door is open

The door is open for you to believe in God's Redeemer, Jesus Christ, and to enter into a personal relationship with him by receiving the Holy Spirit. All it requires is one supreme act of committed faith – believing in Jesus as your Lord and Saviour.

I have, in recent years, often asked Muslims three crucial questions. Firstly, *do you know God personally?* Have you come into the greatest of all relationships – a living, personal relationship with him? Secondly, *are your sins forgiven for his sake?* Have you been cleansed not only from the guilt of all your sins but also their power? Lastly, *do you love God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength?* Do you have real evidence

that God is truly to be loved, that he has done something outstanding to prove his love for you, and asks only that you respond to him in heartfelt love in return?

I have received a variety of answers to these questions, but a young Muslim woman recently gave me three answers that, in my view, correctly reflect the only real answers a Muslim can give according to Islamic theology. Firstly, she said: “According to Islam it is impossible to know God personally. You can believe in Allah, pray to him, worship him, but never know him.” She went on: “it is also impossible to know you are forgiven of all your sins. You can pray for forgiveness, try to keep the laws of Allah, and hope in his mercy, but you can never know for sure in this life that you are forgiven.” Lastly she said: “do I love God with all my heart? I’ve never really thought about that. I believe in him, I’m willing to serve him – but love him? That has never crossed my mind.”

Good news for you

The good news is that all three are open to you. The true God broke down the barriers between him and sinful men and women when Jesus Christ died for the sins of the world. The door was opened for all true believers to receive his Holy Spirit and live solely by faith in him (the Faith of Abel), rather than to try vainly to commend themselves to him by slavish adherence to fixed religious routines and rituals (the Religion of Cain). You *can* know God personally, you *can* be forgiven of all your sins, and you *can* love him with all your heart, soul and mind. These are the keys to eternal life.

Abraham’s faith reflected God’s faithfulness. It shone like the moon in response to the sun’s light. But true believers can do far more than this. They can *generate* the love of God back to him in return. They will shine like little suns in the kingdom of heaven. Jesus said ‘Then the

righteous will shine *like the sun* in the kingdom of their Father' (*Matthew 13:43* – emphasis added). Angels will continue to reflect the glory of God when that day comes, but true Christian believers will generate it back to him. Angels are God's heavenly servants, but God's redeemed people on earth are his *sons and daughters*. They will manifest the very presence of the Holy Spirit within them. Their light will shine from within in pure, transparent splendour. No wonder Paul spoke of: 'what no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him' (*1 Corinthians 2:9*).

**True believers
can generate the
love of God back to
him in return.**

By faith in Jesus, and by that faith alone, you can become a true child of God, know him personally, be forgiven of all your sins, and become an heir of eternal life. Jesus said: 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father but by me' (*John 14:6*). All true Christian believers are assured: 'Without having seen him, you love him; though you do not now see him you believe in him and rejoice with unutterable and exalted joy. As the outcome of your faith you obtain the salvation of your souls' (*1 Peter 1:8-9*).

The door is open for all human beings on earth, no matter what their backgrounds may be, in spite of all their sins and no matter how severe they may be, to receive God's perfect mercy in this age of grace and become the heirs of his eternal kingdom.

As Jesus put it: 'I am the Door; if any one enters by me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture' (*John 10:9*). That door will remain open until he returns.

It remains open to you.

Questions

The following questions will be of great benefit to get a better grasp of the message in this booklet. Please send your answers to us and let us know which other booklet from this series you would like to receive.

1. Explain how Islam expects of its followers a formal, repetitive form of religion.
2. How did Abel show true faith in God?
3. Complete the sentence: "And Abraham believed the Lord; and the Lord because of his faith."
4. State the basic difference between the sun and the moon.
5. Give an example how God listened to Abraham.
6. How did Moses reflect God's glory?
7. Complete the sentence: "The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit;" Explain in your own words what this means to you.
8. How many of the 39 books of the Jewish Scriptures popularly known as the Old Testament in the Bible come from the time of the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel?
9. What did John the Baptist (Yahya) have to say about Jesus that describes his special role?
10. What is your answer to the question: What is the greatest gift God has ever given to you? What gift did him cost the most?
11. Briefly describe the difference: "Angels are , God's redeemed people are"

**Booklets recommended
for our readers:**

1. Made for a Purpose
2. Dare to compare
3. Destination unknown
4. Dear Abdallah
5. Why trust the Bible
6. Man with a message
7. Qur'an and Bible
8. Follow your heart

Al-Kitab (Bible Course for Muslims)

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