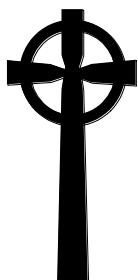


Life

and



Death



John and Elaine McLachlan
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Chapter 1 GOD'S DEFINITION OF LIFE

God's idea of life and death is very different from modern-day thinking. His explanation begins in Genesis, when He created the world as we know it in careful detail. He spoke the creation of plants and trees (Genesis 1:11) but it is not recorded that He breathed them into life, and they were created, not just to be beautiful, but also for animals and humans to eat. (Genesis 1:30)

Then God spoke living creatures into being. (Genesis 1:20-25) They are named as living and moving, and this is the world's definition of life – living and moving, with growth or increase.

But when God created humans He breathed His LIFE into them, to be in His own image, able to create by speaking, to rule with Him on the earth. They were given intelligence and God looked forward to

fellowship with them as His own children. But this LIFE as God saw it was not to be independent of Him, but as His "team", under His tutelage and guidance. LIFE then was designed to be walking hand in hand with God. Thus Enoch walked with God. (Genesis 5:22&24)

Essential to receiving this guidance was one rule – you are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but 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 2:16&17)

When Israel was enslaved in Egypt, the last plague to force the Pharaoh to let the Israelites go free was 'death of the first-born'. (Exodus 11) There was only one way the Israelites could escape being affected by this threat, and they were told to obey a command – not only must they celebrate a 'Passover' meal, but they must put some of the lamb's blood on the sides and tops of the door-frames of the houses where they eat the lambs. (Exodus 12:7) God was gradually teaching about the LIFE He planned for His children. Again, in this instance He asked for obedience. After they had escaped from Egypt God made them a glorious promise, to show how He thought about His children. "You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to Myself. Now if you obey Me fully and keep My covenant, then out of all nations you will be My treasured possession. Although the whole earth is Mine, you will be for Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." (Exodus 19:4-6) Living with His presence is that fullness of LIFE.

We can notice that God does not ask them to keep the Ten Commandments in this promise, but to keep His covenant. God had

made covenants with Noah and Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, promising to be their God. Amos wrote – "do two walk together unless they have agreed to do so?" (Amos 3:3) God is asking the Israelites to agree with Him. How gracious is Almighty God who only asks that we agree with Him? Amos also writes on God's behalf, "seek Me and LIVE." (Amos 5:4) Jeremiah writes on God's behalf, "how gladly would I treat you like sons and give you a desirable land, the most beautiful inheritance of any nation. I thought you would call Me Father." (Jeremiah 4:19) Moses spoke more on the blessings of obedience. (Deuteronomy 28:1-14) The words speak of prosperity and success, but more, others will see that you are called by the Name of the Lord. (Deuteronomy 28:10) This fulfils God's original commission to "be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it." (Genesis 1:28)

Moses asks the people to "carefully follow the terms of this covenant, so that you may prosper in everything you do." (Deuteronomy 29:9) When he has finished his discourse he challenges his hearers, "this day I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you LIFE and DEATH, blessings and curses. Now choose LIFE, so that you and your children may LIVE and that you may love the Lord your God, listen to His voice, and hold fast to Him. For the Lord your God is your LIFE." (Deuteronomy 30:19&20)

From these words and many others we get a glimpse of keeping God's covenant. But although this forecasts a good LIFE, because of the curse everything will still end in death, because this is the result of humans choosing to be disconnected from the LIFE giver.

Chapter 2 GOD'S DEFINITION OF DEATH

We have already quoted what God defines as death – independence from Him. He stated the rule so that Adam and Eve could choose to obey. "You must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will die. (Genesis 2:17) But the fact is obvious that they did not die as the world understands death. The serpent in the garden assured Eve that "you will not surely die...for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." (Genesis 3:4&5) Is the knowledge of good and evil then a good thing? When God sets the standard of what is good, that is being like God, when we do not know what good is, this causes us a great dilemma. Learning God's heart is only learnt in relationship with Him, and we cannot have a relationship with a Holy God if we are not holy. Therefore it is losing our relationship with God that is what God calls death. LIFE is connection with God and DEATH is broken connection. God wants us to have LIFE, and gives us right standing with Him as a gift, which we cannot earn or deserve. If we choose to be independent of God, as Adam and Eve did, we have actually refused the gift.

The writer to the Hebrews warns that we are not mature until we understand righteousness, or right standing before God, and, by constantly practising God's Word, have trained ourselves to distinguish good and evil. (Hebrews 5:13&14)

Paul states, quoting from the Psalms, that there is no one righteous...no one seeks God. All have turned away...there is no one

who does good, not even one...there is no fear (reverence or honour) of God before their eyes." (Romans 3:10-18; Psalm 14:3; Psalm 53:3; Psalm 36:1)

Paul also writes, "As for you, you were DEAD in your trespasses and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of the world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts." (Ephesians 2:1-3)

The devil has always done what he does best; deceive, tempt and accuse. Jesus describes him as a thief who comes only to steal, kill and destroy. (John 10:10) But Paul uses the word "live", describing how we exist under the control of the evil one, and this is what the world thinks is life, way short of what God thinks. God offers abundant LIFE but humans just settle for existence, because they are ignorant of what God calls LIFE.

And so the sad story throughout the Old Testament is, "Just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned – for before the law was given, sin was in the world. But sin is not taken into account when there is no law. Nevertheless, death reigned from the time of Adam to the time of Moses, even over those who did not sin by breaking a command, as did Adam, who was a pattern of the one to come." (Romans 5:12-14) The pattern Adam set was followed even after the Law was given. John makes a sad statement, "Jesus would not entrust Himself to them, for He knew all men." (John 2:24)

Since the devil is the root cause of our "death" we could ask why God allows him free reign on the earth today. John writes that the whole world is under the control of the evil one. (1 John 5:19) Isaiah explains how and why such a glorious morning star would be cast out of Heaven. "How you have fallen from Heaven, O morning star, son of the dawn! You have been cast down to the earth, you who once laid low the nations! 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 heights of the sacred mountain. I will ascend above the tops of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High." (Isaiah 14:12-14) Jesus said He saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven." (Luke 10:18) Everything in Heaven is under God's rule so He cannot have anything defy His authority. Even putting ourselves as our 'god', to order and rule our own lives, makes us enemies of God. But just as Jesus was tested by the devil, all His followers must learn to overcome him too. The message from Heaven is that we overcome him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of our testimony – the experiences where God has been real in our lives. (Revelation 12:11)

Chapter 3 OUTRIGHT REFUSAL OF LIFE AS DEFINED

John explains God's answer to the death problem. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through Him all things were made; without Him nothing was made that has been made. In Him was LIFE, and that LIFE was the light of men." "He was in the world,

and though the world was made through Him, the world did not recognise Him. He came to His own, but His own did not receive Him." (John 1:1-4 & 10-11) John also tells why He was not received. "Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed." (John 3:20&21)

Because of this behaviour Jesus has spoken – "No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him, and I will raise him up..." (John 6:44) Yet a prophetic promise was made before Jesus was born in the flesh. Isaiah writes on God's behalf, "Here am I, here am I. All day long I have held out My hands to an obstinate people who walk in ways not good, pursuing their own imaginations – by people who continually provoke Me to My very face...who say keep away; don't come near me." (Isaiah 65:1-3 & 5)

We, the writers, find it hard to understand why people harden their hearts to such a generous and loving God. But Paul explains – "The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God." (2 Corinthians 4:4)

The illustration of the effects of this refusal is demonstrated by Pharaoh's behaviour during the plagues of Egypt. (Exodus 7-12:31) God decided to act on the cries of His people in slavery, to free them, because He is merciful and cannot see His children suffer if they do not want to any more and call out to Him. This 'waiting' is an enigma in itself – why do the people even want to suffer, rather than pray to our merciful God? And why does God wait for them to call Him before

He acts? But God, who is Love, will never force Himself, because force is not love and respect of a person's self-will, which is a gift that we are given when we are born into this world.

God's rescue plan was to send serious trials in the form of ten plagues. Moses was to go to Pharaoh and ask him to let the people leave Egypt (and slavery and suffering) to freely worship their God, and to warn Pharaoh of the consequences. After each of the first four plagues Pharaoh hardened his heart and would not listen. By the fifth plague God made a distinction between His own people (who had called out to Him) and the Egyptians, but Pharaoh hardened his heart again and would not let the Israelites go. Then there is a change and the Bible records that God hardened Pharaoh's heart. (Exodus 9:12; 10:20&27)

After all these trials Moses needed to give God's people a pep talk. "Your eyes have seen all that the Lord did in Egypt to Pharaoh...with your own eyes you saw those great trials, those miraculous signs and great wonders. But to this day the Lord has not given you a mind that understands or eyes that see or ears that hear..." (Deuteronomy 29:2-4) He speaks for the Lord, "I did this so that you might know that I am the Lord your God...Carefully follow the terms of this covenant, so that you may prosper in everything you do." (Deuteronomy 29:6b&9) The covenant that he is speaking about is the promise of blessing for obedience.

God is patient but He says, "My Spirit will not contend with man forever, for he is corrupt." (Genesis 6:3) After He had said this eventually He sent a flood to destroy those who refused LIFE and therefore, by default, chose death. Later the Israelites who did not keep covenant

were slaves in Egypt for 430 years before they were freed. But they still persisted in their own ways. Later again they were in captivity in Babylon for 70 years, mourning and crying, but not repenting. (Psalm 137)

When asked why He taught in parables, Jesus replied, "Though seeing, they do not see; and though hearing, they do not understand. In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah: You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving. For this people's heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they close their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them." (Matthew 13:13-15) Later Paul writes about the Israelites, "What Israel sought so earnestly it did not obtain...they were hardened, as it is written: God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes so that they could not see and ears so that they could not hear, to this very day." (Romans 11:7&8) The writer to the Hebrews concludes, "It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the LIVING GOD." (Hebrews 10:31)

Historically these are the facts concerning the consequences of refusal, for the edification of all those who come after.

Chapter 4 THE PLEAS OF THE PROPHETS

When God wanted to speak into the lives of His people who had chosen to have commandments, rather than a personal relationship with God, He called those who did seek Him to be His messengers. He was grieved that the people He had chosen were more interested

in "having a (human) king to lead us, like the other nations." (1 Samuel 8:5) God had already warned His people – "When you enter the land the Lord your God is giving you do not learn to imitate the detestable ways of the nations there." (Deuteronomy 18:9) But His people not only forgot His commands, but continually chose to go their own way instead.

God called prophet after prophet to speak out His call to His people. The messages of the Godly prophets express God's anguish. He had such beautiful plans. Isaiah begins, "Hear O heavens! Listen O earth! For the Lord has spoken; I reared children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against me...Ah, sinful nation, a people loaded with guilt...they have forsaken the Lord; they have spurned the Holy One of Israel and turned their backs on Him. (Isaiah 1:2-4) This prophet writes a great amount about God's plan for redemption. He had a personal encounter with His God (Isaiah 6), and when he knew God's longing and God's heart towards the sinner, and heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send? And who will go for Us?" his immediate answer was, "Here I am. Send me." The message given to Isaiah was "Be ever hearing, but never understanding; be ever seeing but never perceiving." Why does God send such a cryptic message? Jesus said the same to the Pharisees, because they practised ritualistic religion but did not seek that relationship with God. They lived, but did not have LIFE. "You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about Me, yet you refuse to come to Me to have LIFE." (John 5:39&40)

Jeremiah was called by God at what Jeremiah regarded as a young or inexperienced age. (Jeremiah 1:6) God told Jeremiah that He would "put words into his mouth". "Has a nation ever changed its gods? But My people have exchanged their Glory for worthless idols. Be appalled at this, O Heavens, and shudder with great horror. My people have committed two sins: they have forsaken Me, the spring of LIVING water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water." (Jeremiah 2:11-13) But this book too is filled with God's longing that His people would turn back to Him.

Ezekiel hears from God after magnificent visions of Heaven. "He said to me, 'Son of man, stand up...and I will speak to you.' As he spoke, the Spirit came into me and raised me to my feet, and I heard Him speaking. He said: 'Son of man, I am sending you to the Israelites, to a rebellious nation that has rebelled against me; they and their fathers have been in revolt against me to this very day. The people to whom I am sending you are obstinate and stubborn...and whether they listen or fail to listen – for they are a rebellious house – they will know that a prophet has been among them'". (Ezekiel 2:1-5)

Daniel's message came out of his experience, living in an environment of self-indulgence in king Nebuchadnezzar's palace, while trying all the while to live in obedience to God's law. (Daniel 1:5-8) He knew that God's ways were the absolute best, and had faith in God that living according to His idea of LIFE would make his own life a witness to God's faithfulness and to His glory. The stories in this prophecy demonstrate Daniel's belief, and also how God longs for all

His children to know Himself, to the point where God can share His secrets with confidence.

There are four Major Prophets, and in Jewish (and therefore Biblical) numerology the number 4 is significant as an indication of completion. The Divine name has four letters (YHWH). There were four rivers flowing out of the Garden of Eden (Genesis 2:10) and there are four corners of the earth (Revelation 7:1 & 20:8) from whence blow the four winds (Jeremiah 49:36 and Ezekiel 37:9 and Daniel 7:2). In his vision of the glory of God Ezekiel saw four living creatures (Ezekiel 1) and with these we may compare the four living creatures seen by John. (Revelation 4:6). Then there are four gospels. (Quote from New Bible Dictionary, page 897)

There are twelve books attributed to Minor Prophets. Twelve is linked with the elective purposes of God. The Hebrew year was divided into twelve months, the day into twelve hours (John 11:9), Israel had twelve sons (Genesis 35:22-27) and thus there were twelve tribes of Israel, the people of God (Genesis 49:28). Christ chose twelve apostles (Matthew 10:1ff). (Quote from New Bible Commentary, page 898)

Since these Minor Prophets are intrinsic to the elective purposes of God, it is also interesting to understand their messages. They are not listed in chronological order in the Bible, but more in the order of the progressive revelation of God.

Hosea (725 BC) marries an adulterous woman whom he redeems in order to have her for himself again. He woos her with promises – "Come, let us return to the Lord...he will heal us...he will bind up our wounds...After two days He will revive us; on the third day he will restore us, that we may LIVE in His presence." (Hosea 6:1&2) Then he

writes what to do. "Return, O Israel, to the Lord your God...take words with you and return to the Lord. Say to Him: 'Forgive all our sins and receive us graciously, that we may offer the fruit of our lips.'" (Hosea 14:1&2)

Joel's (760 BC) message is in his name; Joel means 'God is good'. He describes the devastation by which the earth groans because of the sins of the people. He makes it plain that repentance is called for. But he too tells of God's mighty redemptive purposes. "Afterwards I will pour out My Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. Even on My servants, both men and women, I will pour out My Spirit in those days." (Joel 2:28&29)

Amos (760 BC) is a shepherd who answers God's call to prophesy. His message is to Israel's neighbours as well as to Israel. He also puts out the call to repentance, "Seek Me and LIVE." (Amos 5:4); "Seek good and not evil, that you may LIVE." (Amos 5:14) He finishes with God's promise for "all the nations" (Amos 9:12-13): "The days are coming, declares the Lord, when the reaper will be overtaken by the ploughman and the planter by the one treading the grapes. (The ground is prepared faster than the harvest can be gathered in; the one who processes the harvest will do this even as the seed is being sown.) This speaks of what Jesus said – "The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into His harvest field." (Luke 10:2)

Though Obadiah is the next prophet, he is later chronologically; (590 BC). His name means a worshipper of God and what he writes is

concerning Edom, the people of which "pursued his brother with a sword, stifling all compassion, because his anger raged continually." (Amos 1:11) Edom became God's enemy because he was against God's chosen people and did not repent. God shows no favouritism and even His enemies can repent and turn to Him for mercy. Indeed we are all enemies of God, by default, when we are not in God's Kingdom. (Philippians 3:18)

So Jonah (790 BC) was sent to Nineveh, to ask them to repent and they did, but Nahum (630 BC) records that eventually they received the repercussions of their treatment of God's people. He records that the Lord is a jealous God. (Nahum 1:2) Since Nahum's name means 'comfort' this message was supposed to comfort those who chose to repent – to turn back to God.

Micah (whose name means – 'who is like God') was contemporary with Hosea (725 BC). His message concerned Samaria and Jerusalem – a warning of coming judgment. He writes concerning the disastrous witness of God's chosen people to the nations around. "Lately my people have risen up like an enemy". (Micah 2:8) "You rulers of the house of Israel, should you not know justice, you who hate good and love evil." (Micah 3:1&2) His own testimony is, "But as for me, I am filled with power, with the Spirit of the Lord, and with justice and might, to declare ... to Israel his sin." (Micah 3:8) But Micah finishes his prophecy by identifying God's nature. "Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of His inheritance? You do not stay angry for ever but delight to show mercy". (Micah 7:18)

Zephaniah and Habakkuk are also contemporaries (620/610 BC). They were sent to warn the people of the destruction of Jerusalem, and life as they had known it, because they had turned away from following the Lord. (Zephaniah 1:6) Jerusalem was destroyed (in 587 BC), just one generation later. God is good and He always warns those who will listen, so they are able to escape the coming disaster. He had given the Israelites more than 100 years before His judgment fell. He had said a long time before that His Spirit will not contend with man for ever, for he is corrupt. (Genesis 6:3)

There are three more Minor Prophets. Haggai and Zechariah speak to those who had returned to Jerusalem after 70 years of captivity in Babylon (515 BC). Although their messages are also relevant to us today they are also specifically to these people whose hearts were largely not changed towards their God. Malachi, whose name means 'the messenger', is the last Old Testament prophet (397 BC) with words of reproof and warning. Though there are plenty of historical records for the following 400 years, it was plain, as God had known from the beginning, that His relationship of love for His people was not reciprocated because "the heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it? I the Lord search the heart and examine the mind..." (Jeremiah 17:9&10)

So the Divinely inspired messages ceased until John the Baptist becomes the forerunner, prophesied by Isaiah. (Isaiah 40:3-5)

Chapter 5 THE WORLD'S PERSPECTIVE OF LIFE

The trouble with rejecting God's standard is that we make our own, based on our indulgences. When we do not 'die', in other words, it does not seem to hurt us, we assume that God is too strict, so what He says is not true. This was the whole trouble in the story of Eve and the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. (Genesis 2:15 – 3:7) Whether this is a literally true story or a parable makes no difference. It illustrates perfectly the sinful human heart.

What is interesting is a saying that has come into being – eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die. As written it is actually in the Book of Mormon (2 Nephi 28:7), but in God's Word is a composite of two Biblical sayings. Solomon, writing of the meaninglessness of life, says, "So I commend the enjoyment of life, because nothing is better for a man under the sun than to eat and drink and be glad. Then joy will accompany him in his work all the days of the life God has given him under the sun." (Ecclesiastes 8:15) But Isaiah writes, "See, there is joy and revelry, slaughtering of cattle and killing of sheep, eating of meat and drinking of wine! Let us eat and drink, you say, for tomorrow we die! The Lord Almighty has revealed this...till your dying day this sin will not be atoned for." (Isaiah 22:13&14) In full context we can see that, though it is good to enjoy life by eating and drinking, without the honour of God and His Word it is a dangerous situation in the long term. But the expression when used in our modern context demonstrates that it is a good thing to live for the moment, no matter what the consequences. But we justify indulgences with this philosophy, just as Eve and Adam did in the Eden story.

The book of Proverbs, attributed to Solomon, considered the wisest person of his time, begins, "the fear (or honour) of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline." (Proverbs 1:7) "Wisdom is from God and will keep us safe from calamity, disaster, distress and trouble." (Proverbs 1:27) Thus, if God is the source of wisdom and we reject Him, we cannot be surprised that wisdom escapes us. "The evil deeds of a wicked man ensnare him; the cords of his sin hold him fast. He will die for lack of discipline, led astray by his own great folly." (Proverbs 5:22&23) The devil knows our weaknesses and we will be tempted along those lines. But in the world's standards we measure wickedness by what we don't like in others, and by comparing ourselves against another more foolish than we perceive ourselves to be. Everyone has some standard, according to upbringing or conscience, flexible for ourselves but condemned in others. This flexibility lowers morality in society – we call it the lowest common denominator. The leaders in the world who might try to keep society's standards higher, end up making more and more rules, which are harder to keep and likely to be broken and punished, and the punishments need to be harsher to force the laws to be kept.

So we are surrounded by rules which are broken and laws which are impossible to keep to the letter, and this is our 'life'.

Then there is work; blood and sweat to make a 'living'; enough money to feed and clothe ourselves and our families, often with ungrateful overseers. Setbacks, such as sickness and loss, both from natural causes and from someone else's dishonesty, happen but this too is regarded as 'life'. In some places the government takes a

provisory role with pensions, effectively making the one provided for dependent on their largesse. What was meant to help people in trouble becomes a right for all. The thinking becomes, "we've got to get our share."

Many of Solomon's proverbs compare God's way of LIFE with sinful man's ways. He uses the word – 'fool' – very often, a person who lacks wisdom. A fool exposes his folly (Proverbs 13:16); a fool is hot-headed and reckless (Proverbs 14:16); fools mock at making amends for sin (Proverbs 14:9); a fool spurns his father's discipline (Proverbs 15:5); folly brings punishment to fools (Proverbs 16:22); of what use is money in the hands of a fool (Proverbs 17:16) and a man's own folly ruins his life, yet his heart rages against the Lord (Proverbs 19:3).

But most people see these faults in themselves and others, but do not consider that these ways are foolish. They don't see themselves as fools and would probably be offended that the Bible describes folly-like life actually as the way they are.

The Apostle, John, sums up the world's thinking. "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. The world and its desires pass away..." (1 John 2:16&17)

James writes, "For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you will find disorder and every evil practice". (James 3:16)

Normal life, then, for people who, by default, are owned by the devil, because they do not know or believe that God has a better way, is to expect to manage their lives as best they can, and every man for himself.

Chapter 6 THE WORLD'S PERSPECTIVE OF DEATH

The world only understands life – coming into the world in a body, and death – life leaving a body. But the Bible tells us that we must be born again by the Spirit and that there is a second death – two births and two deaths.

But this Biblical concept can only be revealed to the mind and heart by the Holy Spirit, because the unbeliever's mind is dead to the secrets of God, and the heart of sinful man is deceitful. When the unbeliever hears he cannot grasp the truth. Therefore from the day we are born, life is as described in God's curse on the man and the woman. "Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return." (Genesis 3:17-19) "I will greatly increase your pains in child-bearing; with pain you will give birth to children. Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you." (Genesis 3:16)

God's curse on mankind is His way of showing both His holiness and His mercy. Just as we punish our children for wrongdoing to train them in what is right and wrong, God faithfully trains His children. (Hebrews 12:5&6) When our children recognise that they have done wrong because of the punishment inflicted they have a choice to say sorry and learn from their mistakes. If they choose to scream "unfair", "mean" and other abusive words (which all parents hear every now and again) the parent/child relationship suffers. So it is with a relationship

between God, the Father, and His children. But in a way it is much worse with a Holy God, whose very holiness would burn up all sin, as the Bible describes God's holiness as "consuming fire". (Deuteronomy 4:24 and Hebrews 12:29)

God has also planted in man's psyche a fear of death. Some dare-devils like to stretch themselves to the very edge, perhaps even to defy what God has put in our hearts as a safety measure. So to the average person who is an unbeliever when sickness comes they rush to the doctor, when monetary troubles come they rush to the bank or preferably the government for handouts, or even sometimes, very foolishly, they buy another lottery ticket or gamble somewhere. But 'lady luck', as the world calls it, is very fickle, and a situation can escalate. We have a high incidence of suicide because people do not know a generous God who holds out His hands all day long to an obstinate people who walk in ways not good, pursuing their own imaginations..." (Isaiah 65:2)

Suicide (and euthanasia) presents another problem. The Bible states clearly, "God does not want any to perish, but everyone to come to repentance." (2 Peter 3:9) It also states "God wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth." (1Timothy 2:4). So the Holy Spirit is always wooing, right up to the day of our last breath.

. If people exit before the appointed day they might not have yet heard that voice calling them home. They will miss out on God's blessings in answer to their cry for help.

The world would like to find the "fountain of youth"; the one who does not know or believe God's plan for mankind is always going to

great lengths to stay young and beautiful, even when the years have taken their toll. These will spend any amount of money to achieve this, not knowing that God has said, "He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength." (Isaiah 40:29-31)

"Man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment." (Hebrews 9:27) The judgment will be eternal LIFE or the second death. (Revelation 20:11-15) The death that the world understands is the crossing over from this life to the presence of God. When a person dies they do not join their friends in hell (as they might hope!) and only their bodies go into the ground to turn to dust. Since each person has a soul, a spirit and a body, and only the body is mortal, the soul and spirit return to God.

The world rightly fears death, but it is for the wrong reason. So they cannot understand why Jesus died for their sins.

Chapter 7 THE PRICE IS PAID

God's plan for redemption was formed in His mind as soon as Adam and Eve sinned by disobeying God's command, and inviting death into their lives. (Genesis 3:17) Though the devil had gained control from those to whom God had given it, God immediately began the process of teaching how LIFE could be regained, one step at a time. First He covered Adam and Eve with the skin of a sacrificed animal, and sent them out of the place where they might have lived forever, in order

that they may taste death. Because we are designed to carry God's LIFE, just as physical death is chillingly cold, so also is spiritual death. God feels far away. And this 'feeling' reigns in the heart of every unbeliever – a sense of loss and being lost, a void that can only be filled by this LIFE-giving breath of God, His Holy Spirit. This is why Jesus said He came to seek and to save what was lost. (Luke 19:10)

But the Scripture says that God does nothing without revealing His plan to His servants the prophets. (Amos 3:7) God had given the authority to mankind to speak LIFE on earth and mankind would have to bring this about. So God began to look for a man who would obey Him and learn from Him. Restoration would come through the shedding of blood and the glory-clothing, which God had done to reclothe Adam and Eve. But all through the Old Testament there were so few who were willing, but God always has a remnant. These gave out the message of Messiah, the Anointed One of God who would be obedient to do and say the works and words of God, until shedding His blood. Then when God was satisfied, mankind could again be clothed with His glory. Isaiah writes that Jesus was given a picture of the result of His obedience, which helped Him face the ordeal of suffering that He would endure. "It was the Lord's will to crush Him and cause Him to suffer, and though the Lord makes His life a guilt offering, He will see His offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the Lord will prosper (be successful) in His hand. After the suffering of His soul, He will see the light (the glory, the clothing of God, and the LIFE on them) and be satisfied". (Isaiah 53:10&11)

The writer to the Hebrews calls Jesus the author and perfecter of our faith. Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness because the penalty for sin is death. In the process of teaching this the people were taught to sacrifice animals. "The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean. How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the LIVING God."

(Hebrews 9:13&14) Jesus is the author of our faith (our trust that all this is true). Jesus, Heavenly Father and the Holy Spirit agreed together and planned this redemption and restoration, and then They put Their plan into action over all the years until it was completed on the Cross. Jesus, Himself, testified, "It is finished!" (John 19:30)

The plan is perfect, because Jesus did everything necessary to enable us to come to God. But it falls back onto our response. There are two kingdoms until the devil is annihilated. This is why there were so many calls to turn back to God. Although Jesus has done everything necessary, the devil loves his power and encourages all in his kingdom to use it so he can keep his captives. We choose to believe the message that Jesus gave; **"the Spirit of the Lord is on Me, because He has anointed Me to preach good news to the poor** (humble in spirit, (Matthew 5:3)). **He has sent Me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners** (those who are captive in the kingdom of the devil) **and recovery of sight for the blind,** (especially those who have been blinded to the gospel (2 Corinthians 4:4)) **to release the oppressed**

(those who mourn their sin), **to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.**

(Luke 4:18&19)

Indeed the price is fully paid for us to freely come to God. Not only has Jesus opened the way to God for us but, "because He LIVES for ever, He has a permanent priesthood. Therefore He is able to save completely (and for ever) those who come to God through Him, because He always lives to intercede for them." (Hebrews 7:24&25)

The opportunity to repent is always open. It is not just the year of God's favour, but the age of God's favour. At Jesus' birth the angelic pronouncement was "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom His favour rests." (Luke 2:14) Paul writes how simple it is to receive. "The Word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart, that is, the Word of faith we are proclaiming: that if you confess with your mouth, Jesus is LORD, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved." (Romans 10:8-10)

Chapter 8 ETERNAL LIFE

We always go back to God's original plan. Mankind was created to live in God's place, Eden; to follow God's way to live, eating of the tree of LIFE to live forever; and to submit to God's training to learn to rule this earth, by fellowshiping with Him and obeying, agreeing with His covenant. It is very plain that God's own family were supposed to be like Him. But God had given them freewill so that they could choose.

When God conceives a plan He always follows it through, so "the eyes of the Lord range throughout the earth to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to Him." (2 Chronicles 16:9)

There are two specific references to eternal/eternity in the Old Testament. When Moses blessed Asher (whose name means happy or blessed) he declares, "There is no one like the God of Jeshurun (the poetic name for the people of Israel and meaning the upright one or the beloved one), who rides the heavens to help you and on the clouds in majesty. The eternal God is your refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms." (Deuteronomy 33:26&27) "This is what the high and lofty One says – He who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: I LIVE in a high and holy place, but also with him who is contrite and lowly in spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite." (Isaiah 57:15) These verses show God's heart of longing to bless people. He conceived a plan of such goodwill, forgiveness and love.

But there are many references to "for ever". There is a note in the Cruden's Concordance (page 188) that this word does not necessarily mean eternal. God Himself, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, is eternal and His promises are eternal, but His relationship with man is dependent on response. The covenant ratified between God, the Father, and Jesus is to make available to all people the offer of eternal LIFE, through the ministration of the Holy Spirit. (Luke 11:13) So Jesus came to introduce a new Covenant to enable all people to receive what God had planned for at the beginning.

There must have been some who knew God's plan. A rich young ruler came to Jesus with the question of how he could obtain eternal life. (Matthew 19:16; Mk 10:17; and Luke 18:18) The disciples were perplexed at Jesus' answer and asked Him, "Who then can be saved?" (Mark 10:30) So Jesus is teaching that the gift of eternal LIFE is saving us from God's wrath (His revulsion and repudiation of all sin). In speaking about the end times Jesus compares eternal punishment and eternal life. (Matthew 25:46). There is another story told about an expert in the Law asking how to inherit eternal life. (Luke 10:25) In these questions posed to Jesus, the questioner thinks that there is something we can do to **earn** this gift. But John's gospel makes the gift of eternal LIFE clear. "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in Him may have eternal LIFE. (John 3:15) Jesus speaks many times about fields that are ripe for harvest. (John 4:35&36) This is for eternal LIFE and He sends out reapers or workers. This is the increase that God originally planned for His family to be involved in. Because the proud Jewish people did not want to be in Jesus' family, although they searched the Scriptures they were missing out on the LIFE that God offers. (John 5:39) This is the real danger in following traditional religion. Jesus makes it very plain that "whoever eats His flesh and drinks His blood has eternal LIFE. (John 6:54) This was a very difficult saying for Jesus' hearers. But as Peter and the other disciples developed their relationship with Jesus, by following Him, God had revealed the truth to them that it is Jesus who has the Words of eternal LIFE. (John 6:68) Again Jesus repeats Himself – I give them (those who hear My voice) eternal LIFE.

(John 10:28) Even as Jesus is confronted with imminent crucifixion He is more concerned for those for whom He will die. The prospect of giving eternal LIFE to those who will believe in Him, rather than choose the world's ways encourages Him for His sacrifice. (John 12:25) And to His Father in His prayer for Himself and all those who follow Him He voices God's purpose for sending Him into the world to die. "Father, the time has come. Glorify Your Son, that Your Son may glorify You. For You granted Him authority over all people that He might give eternal LIFE to all those You have given Him. Now this is eternal LIFE: that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom You have sent." (John 17:1-3).

Jesus says He readily gives the gift to all who will receive but the leaders in the early church continued to need to learn and to teach about the grace of God towards undeserving people, of all nations and cultures. Jesus had paid the price for all people, not just the Jews, or the church of the time. When Paul and Barnabas spoke to the Jews in Pisidian Antioch, (Acts 13:48) their message was rejected so they turned to speak to the Gentiles – those who were previously outside of God's covenant. "To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honour and immortality, He will give eternal LIFE." (Romans 2:7) "Grace might reign through righteousness to bring eternal LIFE through Jesus Christ our Lord." (Romans 5:21) "Now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves to God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal LIFE." (Romans 6:23) Paul writes to Timothy, "Pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, endurance and gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal

Life to which you were called," (1 Timothy 6:12&19) and teach others to "take hold of the LIFE that is truly LIFE."

But the Apostle John has the most to say about God's ultimate gift. "For God loved the world so much that He gave His One and Only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal LIFE." (John 3:16) "This we proclaim concerning the Word of LIFE. The LIFE appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal LIFE, which was with the Father and has appeared to us." (1 John 1:2) "See that what you have heard from the beginning remains in you. If it does, you also will remain in the Son and in the Father. And this is what He promised us – even eternal LIFE." (1 John 2:24&25) "And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal LIFE, and this LIFE is in the Son. He who has the Son of God has LIFE; he who does not have the Son of God does not have LIFE." (1 John 5:11&12) In conclusion John writes, "I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal LIFE...we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know Him who is true. And we are in Him who is true – even in His Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal LIFE." (1 John 5:13&20) "For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them LIFE, even so the Son gives LIFE to whom He is pleased to give it." (John 5:21) "I have come that they may have LIFE, and have it to the full." (John 10:10)

Jude, the brother of Jesus, who at first did not believe, finishes his letter, "But you, dear friends, build yourselves up in your most holy faith and pray in the Holy Spirit. Keep yourselves in God's love as you

wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to bring you to eternal LIFE." (Jude 21)

We said at the beginning there are two births and two deaths. Eternal LIFE begins at the second birth, (as outlined in John 3:3-8) when Jesus teaches about being born again by the Spirit of God. This is eternal LIFE which goes across the natural death and on into the presence of God for ever. But the Bible is clear. "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved." (Acts 4:12)

"Christ Jesus, who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made Himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted Him to the highest place and gave Him the Name that is above every other 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 2:5-11)

"Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep." (1 Corinthians 15:20) All who put their trust in these words will truly follow Him. Thank you Lord!

This is a prayer that anyone can say to receive God's gift:

I turn from my own ways and turn to You, Lord. I believe Jesus died for my sin on a cross, but You raised Him to the highest place in heaven, where even now, He is praying for me. I want to be born again by the Holy Spirit, so, according to Your offer, I believe and I receive. Thank you Lord. Amen.