

Images of Christmas

London South, December 2010

- **This quiet time series is designed to be as flexible as possible so that you can use it for your daily bible study time or in addition to anything else you are studying at the moment.**
- **The core material is intentionally brief and additional material is included in the footnotes so that you can read as little or as much as you like.**
- **If you want to read even more, then try reading the whole of any chapters mentioned in the core or additional material. This might be useful in any event to put matters in a clearer context. In addition you could start to re-read the book of Acts in preparation for South's theme for 2011, 'Acts in our time'.**

Wednesday 22 December

Where does the Christmas story begin (part 1)?

"Then God said, Let us make man in our image, in our likeness"¹

Genesis 1:1-25²

- In making Man³. God seems to have stored up all the trouble that we see in the remainder of Genesis and the following sixty-five books of the Bible⁴.
- Perhaps he should not have bothered with us and just stopped after the animals had been created. In making Man, was God just finishing off creation with another creature or was he was making something or someone special?
- God made the animals according to their kind, but made Man⁵ He made in His own image. Unlike any other earthly creation, Man is supposed to be the image of God. Together, male and female, we are supposed to be just like Him and this is where Christmas begins.

Colossians 1:15-20

- God sent someone in His own image so that through him and by following his example, we can truly reflect the image of God in which we have been created.
- How much would you say that you currently reflect God's image?
- Think about 2 or 3 things which you could change to better reflect God's image. Each day for the rest of the week, pray about making progress in these areas.

¹ Genesis 1:26

² Chislehurst Caves just outside Bromley is a great day out and a good opportunity, if you are brave enough, to experience total darkness.

³ What if to avoid all the trouble Man would bring, God had decided not to make Man? It would have been a quick and easy solution to the problems that we now see in the world as Man would not have been here to cause them. Perhaps creation would have worked better without Man's interference. What if God had made man, but had decided to make a different 'model'? Once you have spent your hard earned cash buying a new smart-phone or an MP3/4 player, it is quite irritating when the manufacturer (any link with a traditional view in respect of the account of the fall of Man is purely coincidental) seems to bring out a new one? Perhaps God could have made a minor design modification to Man? For example, what if man's free will had been replaced with a simple set of instructions that he/she would be compelled to follow (e.g. do not sin would be a good one)? Would that have fixed the problem of Man? Could it possibly have caused more complications? What is clear is that the world would be a very different place, but would it be a better one? Would love or anything else be missing from such a world? To truly love, and perhaps to truly be alive, do you need to be free to choose what to do, whether to love and who to love?

⁴ Even those of us who are parents appreciate that their children will disobey them and cause all sorts of trouble, but they still choose to have them. Love is very compelling.

⁵ Not a single gender, but rather male and female together.

Thursday 23 December

Where does the Christmas story begin (part 2)?

“So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.”⁶

Genesis 3:6-13

- We should all be familiar with the story of the fall of Man; Adam, Eve, a piece of fruit⁷ and Man loses the closeness with God they previously enjoyed and ceased to accurately reflect the image of God in which they had been made.
- The fall was about disobedience and Man’s immediate⁸ desires.⁹ The consequences of the fall were death and a guilty conscience.

1 Peter 1:17-21

- God knew what Man would do and planned a way back, ‘before’, creation. A way to turn our hearts and minds away from ourselves and back to Him so that we can truly reflect the image of God in which we have all been made. God wants to walk with us again¹⁰, with men and women whose hearts and minds remain, by choice, one with His and to whom the world and its desires are not enough¹¹.

Colossians 3:1-10¹²

- Christmas is about the coming of the opportunity to be freed from the guilt¹³ of our own thoughts and actions and to have the life that God planned for us.
- The Christmas story begins with Man’s greatest need¹⁴, call it grace, call it forgiveness, call it whatever you will. It is about getting Man’s heart to a point at which we want to use our free will to love and please God and not simply ourselves.
- Christmas is about God giving us the best present ever, the opportunity to be renewed or remade in His image.

⁶ Genesis 1:27

⁷ Compare Genesis 3:6 and Colossians 2:1-3. We all too easily look for wisdom and knowledge in the wrong places.

⁸ Romans 6:20-23. Any benefits from sin are short term, but the consequences can be eternal.

⁹ Proverbs 25:28.

¹⁰ Genesis 3:8

¹¹ Philippians 3:7-11

¹² Colossians 2:8-14

¹³ Hebrews 9:13-14; Hebrews 10:1-23

¹⁴ Have a think about your real needs in the context of Mark 2:1-12

Friday 24 December

Why does God bother?

"...you are a forgiving God, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love. Therefore you did not desert them, even when they cast for themselves an image of a calf and said, `This is your god, who brought you up out of Egypt"¹⁵

1 John 4:7-19

- God loves his children,¹⁶ it is as simple as that. He loves us even though we are all too often disobedient¹⁷ and He never stops wanting to be close to us.¹⁸
- God sent Christ into to world to give us the opportunity to be freed from the guilt¹⁹ of our own thoughts and actions. God has done his part to free and remake us in His image, we now need to do our part in response to God's love²⁰.

1 John 3:16-20

- One aspect of becoming more like God means that we need to love others in the way that God has loved us. In loving and giving to others we are doing what God has done from the beginning of creation. By truly loving others we can become a little more like God and more accurately reflect his heart.
- Make time for other people's needs this Christmas²¹ Think of some ways in which you can love others, "*in actions and in truth*".
- What about a love for the lost?²² Christmas is a great time to share you faith especially with your friends and family. Why not share you faith this week with a close friend or family member?

¹⁵ Nehemiah 9:17-18

¹⁶ Jeremiah 31:3

¹⁷ Hosea 3:1

¹⁸ 1 Timothy 2:1-6

¹⁹ Hebrews 9:13-14; Hebrews 10:1-22

²⁰ Colossians 1:9-14, 1 John 5:3-4

²¹ Acts 20:35

²² John 3:16

Saturday 25 December

All I want for Christmas

"Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death--that is, the devil-- and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death."²³

Hebrews 2:14-18

- God made us in his image and then became like us to save us from ourselves.²⁴

Psalms 27:1-5

- What are some of the things that you seek in life?²⁵ Would God be the one thing you ask for, seek and find satisfaction in?
- Today of all days, do not forget that God is your life²⁶ and has given us the opportunity to be and remain free.²⁷

²³ Hebrews 2:14-15

²⁴ John 1:14-18; Philippians 2:5-11

²⁵ Psalm 17:15

²⁶ Deuteronomy 8:10-18

²⁷ Romans 8:1-4

Sunday 26 December

Love Him in return

"To whom, then, will you compare God? What image will you compare him to?"²⁸

Deuteronomy 6:4-9

- God's love is unfailing²⁹ and eternal.
- God does not need our worship, our prayers, our money or anything else for that matter,³⁰ but what He seems to want is our love and for us to put our faith in Him.
- God does not just want a legalistic and lifeless observance of commandments. If that was all that mattered, he could easily have made Man as a different model³¹ without free will and we would have obeyed without question.

Psalm 42:1-2³²

- What he wants is: for us to use our free will to love Him in return³³; and an obedience that comes from love.³⁴
- We should get to a point where the very things that are close to our hearts and important to us are the same things that God wants.³⁵ Hearts that reflect the image of God's heart.
- What are the desires of your heart? Write down a few of them. What do you think are some of the things that are on God's heart? Write down a few of them. How much common ground is there between the things on your heart and the things on God's heart?
- Is there anything that is too difficult or too challenging for you to do each day for God?³⁶ Are you prepared to pray that God will take away your earthly desires so that your heart can more closely reflect His?
- Today: pray that you can become a man/woman after God's own heart.

²⁸ Isaiah 40:18

²⁹ Exodus 15:13

³⁰ Acts 17:24-31

³¹ See day 1

³² Psalm 37:4 - is God and having a relationship with God the greatest desire of your heart? How do you view this verse? If you delight yourself in the Lord, is it so that you can have a close relationship with him (i.e. he is your heart's desire) and how important is it that you receive earthly blessings as well?

³³ Mark 12:28-31

³⁴ 1 John 5:3

³⁵ Acts 13:22

³⁶ Genesis 29:18-28 - a man's love for a woman meant that he was prepared to work of 7 years and 1 week until he could marry her and 14 years in total. The years seemed like days to him because of his love for her.

Monday 27 December

See to it

"I had a dream that made me afraid. As I was lying in my bed, the images and visions that passed through my mind terrified me. So I commanded that all the wise men of Babylon be brought before me to interpret the dream for me."³⁷

Hebrews 3:1-15

- We have a responsibility to each other. We need to be involved in each others lives to: see to it that our hearts do not go astray; and help each other to better reflect God's image.
- Do you have people involved in your life who help you on a regular basis? Are you involved in theirs and other people's lives helping them?³⁸ Do you welcome the involvement of other people in your life?³⁹
- If plans fail for lack of counsel,⁴⁰ we need to choose our advisers carefully.⁴¹
- Love and friendship are key components of a discipling relationship. We need to speak the truth to one another honestly and in love.⁴² Sometimes this means that sparks will fly.⁴³
- How do you respond to earnest counsel?⁴⁴
- If you do not yet have other people regularly involved in your life, then make some connections and arrange at least two meetings in January with another brother (if you are a brother) or sister (if you are a sister) or a small discipleship group. Make a decision to see to it.

³⁷ Daniel 4:5-6

³⁸ Philippians 2:1-4

³⁹ Psalm 141:1-5

⁴⁰ Proverbs 15:22

⁴¹ 1 Kings 12:6-17; 1 Kings 12:26-30; Isaiah 19:11

⁴² Proverbs 27:9

⁴³ Proverbs 25:11-12; Proverbs 27:5-6; Proverbs 27:17

⁴⁴ Jeremiah 38:14-16 (sadly Zedekiah's oath did not include any assurances in terms of listening and acting upon Jeremiah's counsel).

Tuesday 28 December

Shades of grey

“Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.”⁴⁵

1 John 1:1 to 2:6

- How are you doing at living in the light, walking as Jesus did, becoming more like Him and in doing so becoming more like God?⁴⁶ Remember that we cannot live in two worlds or with two minds.⁴⁷
- How did the Christmas celebrations go? Hopefully you did not give anything in exchange for your relationship with God.⁴⁸ Talk to someone involved in your life if you need to.⁴⁹
- Live in the light not in a grey and shadowy twilight zone between darkness and light.

1 Peter 1:22 to 2:12

- Are there things in your life that should not be there? Things that you need to get rid of to become more like Jesus?⁵⁰
- Is obedience to God of paramount importance to you or are you prepared to compromise your convictions in certain circumstances?⁵¹
- Every new day is an opportunity to get rid of all that holds us back.⁵² Use each day well.

⁴⁵ Romans 1:22-23

⁴⁶ John 12:44-46; John 5:16-21

⁴⁷ 1 John 2:15-17; James 4:7-8

⁴⁸ Matthew 16:24-26; Hebrews 12:16

⁴⁹ Psalm 32:1-5; Isaiah 29:15

⁵⁰ Colossians 3:5-10

⁵¹ Daniel 3:13-18

⁵² Hebrews 12:1-3

Wednesday 29 December

God does not like mushy peas

"If anyone worships the beast and his image and receives his mark on the forehead or on the hand, he, too, will drink of the wine of God's fury, which has been poured full strength into the cup of his wrath."⁵³

Revelation 3:19-20

Proverbs 3:11-12

Hebrews 12:4-11

- It is important to remember that true love is not about mush.
- God wants us to become more like Christ and in doing so do become more like Him. He will therefore discipline and correct us and we should welcome it.⁵⁴

Romans 8:28-31

- What is your attitude to difficult and challenging times? Do you believe that God has or still has a plan for you?⁵⁵
- Pray today that you can better understand God's plan for your life and that even if you do not⁵⁶ you will still keep you faith in and remain faithful to Him.

⁵³ Revelation 14:9-10

⁵⁴ Deuteronomy 8:1-5; Proverbs 1:7; Proverbs 10:17; Proverbs 12:1; Proverbs 13:18; Proverbs 13:24; Proverbs 15:5; Proverbs 15:32

⁵⁵ Jeremiah 29:10-11; Genesis 50:15-21

⁵⁶ John 13:7

Thursday 30 December

Cold hearts warm hands?

"There is no rest day or night for those who worship the beast and his image, or for anyone who receives the mark of his name. This calls for patient endurance on the part of the saints who obey God's commandments and remain faithful to Jesus."⁵⁷

Matthew 24:4-14

- It can sometimes be very easy to get caught up in the world and its desires, believing that we are close to God, when in fact the very things we do are opposed to His will.⁵⁸
- In the context of **Mark 3:28-30** John Charles Ryle, the first Anglican Bishop of Liverpool wrote⁵⁹:

"There is such a thing as a sin which is never forgiven, but those who are troubled about it are most unlikely to have committed it. On the other hand, those who actually do commit the sin are so dominated by evil that it is unlikely that they would be aware of it."

- We can easily even get distracted by normal everyday things take our focus away from God.⁶⁰

Colossians 3:1-2 & Hebrews 3:1

- Having great quiet times is not about legalistic observance. It is about keeping our hearts and minds close to God and focused on Him.
- The measure of a great quiet time should not be how much time you spend, but rather how much more focused on God you are, how much more faith you have in Him, how much more faithful you are to Him and how much more like Him you are becoming. Even if you just take little steps each day and each week, over time you will make significant progress.
- Make a decision to have great quiet times so that you become more like God in heart and mind.

⁵⁷ Revelation 14:11-12

⁵⁸ Compare Judges 17:1-6 with Deuteronomy 27:15; Revelation 3:14-20

⁵⁹ J.C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels*, 1869

⁶⁰ Luke 12:22-34; Luke 8:4-7 & 8:14

Friday 31 December

What are we?

“When Adam had lived 130 years, he had a son in his own likeness, in his own image; and he named him Seth”

John 1:10-14

Romans 8:28-29

- We are God’s children.⁶¹ We died, were buried, were born again and God is now our Father in the new life that we live.
- Let us live as His children should, not in sin or with a worldly focus, but with faith, love and the actions that accompany them.

Jeremiah 6:16

- Think about the direction God wants your life to take in the New Year.
- Pray about the direction, the decisions you need to make and the steps you need to take to make sure that you follow the, ‘good way’, which God has planned for you.⁶²
- Think about some decisions and share them in a discipleship group or with someone you are in a discipling relationship with. Make some decisions and if you set some goals for the New Year, try to limit them to the first 3 months, review them at the end of the 3 month period and then repeat the process with new or renewed decisions/goals for the next 3 months and so on until the end of the year.
- Please remember that a goal is a means to an end, not the end itself.⁶³
- Also remember to help whoever you share your decisions with, to make their own decisions/goals.

⁶¹ 1 John 3:1-3

⁶² Matthew 7:13-14; Luke 13:22-25

⁶³ Isaiah 29:13; Mark7:1-8

Saturday 1 January

Acts in our time

Paul replied, "Short time or long--I pray God that not only you but all who are listening to me today may become what I am, except for these chains."⁶⁴

Acts 4:34-35

- The contribution that we took up at the end of December to help our brothers and sisters in the South was just the beginning.
- Our focus in 2011 will be on the book of Acts and how we can have the faith, love, devotion and actions in our lives that are pleasing to God.

Acts 17:10-11

- Start reading or re-reading the book of Acts today. There are 28 chapters and if you read at least 1 chapter a day you will have a good overview of the book of Acts by the end of January.
- Think about the things that you as an individual and the fellowship in the South as a whole could or should do to reproduce the Acts of the Apostles in our lives in 2011 so that we can all get ready to turn our lives and this world upside down in 2011.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Acts 26:29

⁶⁵ Acts 17:6, the words translated in the NIV as, '*These men have caused trouble all over the world*', are sometimes (e.g. KJV, NAV and NRSV) translated as, '*These [men] that have turned the world upside down.*'