

PRECIOUS GEMS OF THE FAITH:

WEEK 1: Love

When I was in grade 9, in 2008, I was invited to attend a sports evening at a youth group in Durban by some friends from school. Through one worship song the Lord prompted me to accept His gift of salvation. That night, as I read the words being projected onto that white screen, His love pierced my heart and He showed me how much I was worth to Him.

God gave me something that night. Something that I never thought was possible: perfect, limitless, unconditional, unwavering, everlasting, all-consuming, undiluted, extravagant LOVE.

God took me in His arms and embraced me. Despite my shame, despite me having nothing to offer Him in return, despite me being a broken, lost and hurting young boy, He loved me. I didn't deserve His love. I didn't deserve His forgiveness. I didn't deserve His grace or mercy.

Yet despite all this, I knew that He loved me – and still does – because He *chooses* to. He chooses to love me because He *wants to*. And He wants to love me because that's just *who He is*. I am convinced that Paul was passionately in love with the God of love and that he used this passion to inspire others to fall in love with God too. Consider Romans 8:35-39:

³⁵ Can anything ever separate us from Christ's love? Does it mean he no longer loves us if we have trouble or calamity, or are persecuted, or hungry, or destitute, or in danger, or threatened with death? ³⁶ (As the Scriptures say, "For your sake we are killed every day; we are being slaughtered like sheep.") ³⁷ No, despite all these things, overwhelming victory is ours through Christ, who loved us.

³⁸ And I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God's love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow—not even the powers of hell can separate us from God's love. ³⁹ No power in the sky above or in the earth below—indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Prayer Points: Thank the Lord for His faithful love. Thank Him for His grace and mercy. Thank the Lord for His forgiveness and patience. Thank Him for sending His son to die so that you might live.

WEEK 2: Grace

Grace, by definition, is unmerited favour. Therefore, in order for grace to exist, there would need to be an object undeserving of the favour being bestowed upon it. Grace should cause all of us to fall to our knees and admit our dependence on God.

I love the way Jesus explained this truth in the Parable of the Lost Son in Luke 15:21 – “Then his son told him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and you. *I don’t deserve* to be called your son anymore’” (*emphasis mine*).

This is where you and I come in... The conversation of grace always begins with “*I don’t deserve*” and this is an absolute, universal truth. It is not true for some and false for others. We, all of us, don’t deserve life, love, happiness, blessings, good health, children, friends or laughter. The consequences don’t stop there though... if we don’t deserve life, happiness and laughter, then the next logical question to ask is ‘So then what do we deserve?’ and the answer is pretty scary: NOTHING GOOD! The reason for this is that we have sinned against a Holy and Perfect God by disobeying His commands.

Here are some practical questions we could ask ourselves to see if we acknowledge and worship God for His grace, or take the grace of God for granted in our lives:

Do you consider yourself to be a good person?

What standard do you use to measure what is good?

When you measure your goodness according to God’s standards (Exodus 20:1-17; Mark 12:28-34), do you find yourself guilty (evil) or innocent (good)?

What is the penalty for transgressing God’s commandments (Romans 6:23)?

Praise God that this is not the end of the story! (Read John 3:16-17)

The amazing thing about grace is that it is always undeserved, and when it is acknowledged and understood, it always produces a grateful and thankful heart.

Prayer Points: Thank the Lord for His favor. Thank the Lord for His kindness towards you. Thank the Lord for the many blessings that He pours out on you each day. Thank the Lord for His goodness towards you.

Week 3: Humility

“For who makes you superior? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not receive it?” (1 Corinthians 4:7, ISV)

This series of rhetorical question from Paul is enough to inspire humility in even the most skilled and successful people in the world: “What do you have that you did not receive?” Just think about that for a moment... ‘Your’ education, ‘your’ skills, ‘your’ talents, ‘your’ achievements, ‘your’ health, ‘your’ possessions, ‘your’ children, and yes! Even ‘your’ faith! None of these things were achieved solely by your own efforts. They were imparted or given to you by God or others. One need only consider the logical implications of the following truth: you didn’t decide where, when and to whom you would be born.

Paul’s last question is aimed at ridding us of pride. How can you boast about something that you did not achieve on your own? The answer: You can’t! I can’t take credit for what you have done if both of us did the job together, and you can’t take credit for what I have done if both of us have done the job together. In the same way, not one of us can take full credit for the ‘good’ people we are or ‘good’ things that what we do because we could not exist without God and we can do nothing good without Him – John 15:5. We must submit ourselves to God and allow Him to shape us into who He wants us to be, and then we must give praise to Him for making us that way.

Our natural response to success is pride and the temptation is to look at something amazing and beautiful that you were only a *part of* and to say: “Wow! Look at what I have achieved! I am so proud of myself.”

But it is only when we come to realise that *everything* we have has been given to us by God that we can truly humble ourselves and give glory to God for the things He has given to us.

Take some time to reflect on our perfect example of humility in Philippians 2:5-11 – Jesus Christ Himself.

Prayer Points: Thank the Lord for as many things as you possibly can: your education, talents, job, skills, achievements, possessions, children, health, life, family, toys, etc.

WEEK 4: Truth

We live in an increasingly relativistic world where the word *truth* has different meanings to different people. Truth is something that should *never* be relative. Something cannot be true for you and false for me at the same time... If something is truly true, then it should be true all the time for everybody and not just true for some people and not for others. Take gravity for example: if I believe that gravity is a lie, does that mean that gravity no longer exists? No. That would be irrational. Gravity does exist. This fact is not just true for me, but for everybody on the face of the earth – whether they believe it or not.

It is so important that we know the truth that we might be set free from the lies. Absolute, Universal and Objective Truth is the hardest truth to find, but it does exist and we should seek to find it.

The principles found in the Bible are absolute, universal and objective truths. They were relevant when Moses wrote them down millennia ago, and they are just as relevant for us today.

Meditate on the following scriptures and allow the Holy Spirit to speak to you through them:

John 8:31,32 and 36 – Jesus is the truth.

John 17:17-21 – God's word is truth.

Psalm 119:160-168 – God's word was true in the beginning, and will continue to be true until the end.

Prayer Points: Thank the Lord for His truth. Thank the Lord for allowing us to know the truth. Thank the Lord for setting us free by the truth. Thank the Lord for helping us to understand the truth. Thank the Lord for Him being the truth.

WEEK 5: Faith

Faith is vital to living an abundant life as a Christian. Hebrews 11 truly is an amazing chapter saturated with rich spiritual insights on the topic of faith. Hebrews 11 defines faith as the assurance of things hoped for and the evidence of things not yet seen. Secular scholars define faith as a strong trust, confidence and belief in someone or something.

When you begin to dissect each verse in Hebrews chapter 11 it becomes clear just how important faith is in the life of a Christian:

It is by faith that we are able to understand that God formed the world through His word (v3). By faith we are made righteous in God's sight (v4). By faith we are translated, moved, changed and transformed by God into His likeness (v5). By faith we are able to please God and are rewarded for believing that He exists. We are also rewarded for seeking Him by faith (v6). By having faith in God's word we are saved from impending doom and destruction (v7). Faith enables us to obey God (v8). By faith we are able to receive an inheritance from God (v9). By faith we are given the power we need to wait *patiently* for God's promises to be fulfilled (v10). By having faith in God's faithfulness we receive strength to do the impossible (v11). By faith we are able to endure testing and trials (v17). By faith we are able to win people back from death (v19). By faith we are able to bless others (v20). By faith we are able to worship God – even when confronted with death (v21). By faith we are able to obey God rather than man (v23). By faith we are able to disassociate ourselves from being identified with the world (v24). By faith we are able to choose suffering over sin (v25). By faith we are able to choose insults over riches (v26). By faith we are able to persevere and see God (v27). By faith we are able to receive salvation from death (v28). By faith oceans can be parted and we can walk on dry ground (v29). By faith we can bring strongholds down (v30). By faith we are saved from destruction (v31). By faith we can overthrow kingdoms, rule with justice, receive God's promises and shut the mouths of lions (v32-33). By faith we can quench flames of fire, escape death by the edge of the sword and turn our weakness into strength (v34). By faith we can receive loved ones back from the dead (v35a). By faith we can choose torture over freedom and place our hope in life after death (v35b). By faith we can endure mockery and taunting; whipping and chains; imprisonment and a gory death; oppression and mistreatment (v36-37).

When you look at all of the things that faith enables us to do, it becomes a precious gift that we cannot afford to neglect or take for granted.

Prayer: Ask the Lord to give you more faith. Ask Him to enrich your understanding of faith. Ask God to help you practice your faith. Spend some time alone with God thanking Him for His faithfulness. Ask the Holy Spirit to grow your faith daily. Ask God to help you take a small step of faith this week so that He can show the world His strength and power through you.

WEEK 6: Integrity

Although the principle of integrity is found throughout the Bible, the actual word *integrity* appears only a few times. In the original Hebrew manuscripts, the word used for *integrity* is either *tôm* or *tûmmâh*. Integrity can be defined as a state of completeness, innocence, perfection, simplicity and uprightness. The following scriptures help shed some light on what is meant by *integrity*: Exodus 18:21; 1 Kings 9:4; 2 Kings 20:3; Job 27:5; Job 33:3; Psalm 15 and Psalm 26:1

From the passages mentioned above we can deduce several things about *integrity*.

From Exodus 18:21 we learn that men of integrity fear God, love the truth and hate covetousness.

From 1 Kings 9:4 we learn that integrity implies an innocent and undivided heart (wholly devoted to God).

From 2 Kings 20:3 we learn that to walk in (or to live a life of) integrity is to walk (or live) faithfully with God in His direction.

From Job 27:5 we learn that integrity implies the pursuit and maintenance of one's moral innocence.

From Psalm 15 we learn that integrity means being morally undefiled, clean and sound. Integrity also implies intentionally doing what is fair, right and just. Integrity also implies speaking the truth from the heart and thinking things that are good.

This passage also explains that one with integrity does not slander his neighbor, gossip, do evil to his neighbor, disgrace or shame his neighbor. A person of integrity does not compromise on the truth, does not charge interest on a loan and does not take a bribe.

From Psalm 26:1 we learn that integrity means to put our full trust in the Lord and to not backslide.

Integrity is a precious principle in the Bible as it has the ability to bring great honor and glory to God if it is practiced properly. At the same time, a lack of integrity in one's life can give people a distorted view of God and can bring great shame on a person/church. Integrity is to be highly valued by *every* Christian. Integrity and uprightness of heart, mind and action should be pursued and maintained in the life of every Christian.

Prayer points: ask the Lord to help you to discover the value of practicing and pursuing integrity on a daily basis. Ask the Lord to help you to walk uprightly before Him and others. Ask the Lord

to keep you on the right path and to let your life be a good witness of His unchanging faithfulness, justice and love for all people at all times.

WEEK 7: Hope

“For I know the plans I have for you,” says the LORD . “They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope.” (Jeremiah 29:11, NLT)

Jeremiah 29:11 is one of my favorite scriptures. There is just so much that can be said about this verse, but there is only one word that I would like us to focus on today, and for the remainder of this week: hope.

The Bible highlights the beauty of hope throughout the Psalms:

- By placing our hope in God, He strengthens our hearts (Ps 31:24)
- God’s mercy falls on us when we hope in Him (Ps 33:22)
- Those who place their hope in God are happy (Ps 146:5)

Hope is a very powerful tool that God has given us as humans and I fear that we don’t fully realise the power it holds to set us free from discouragement and sadness. Part of the reason for this, I believe, is because we have been let down so often that we are too afraid to hope again. Most of the time we don’t feel like our lives are headed for life and goodness as Jeremiah 29:11 says. Most of the time it feels like our future is headed for disaster and chaos.

Sometimes we can be let down because our hope is in the wrong thing altogether (Job 27:8; 31:24).

Psalm 42:5; 11 reads: *“Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God.” (NIV)*

I want to challenge you this week to put your hope in God. I want to challenge you to say Psalm 42:5; 11 to yourself (aloud) every time you feel discouraged or disheartened this week.

Prayer: Thank the Lord for His trustworthiness. Thank the Lord that He is faithful. Thank the Lord that we can put our hope in him. Praise Him for His mercy and peace. Ask the Lord to fill you with hope. Ask the Lord to help you to place all your hope in Him and His promises and His Word. Ask the Lord to help you to wait patiently on Him while you learn to place your hope in Him from this day on. Ask the Holy Spirit to fill you with hope and trust in His good, pleasing and perfect plan for your life.

WEEK 8: Patience

Patience is something that all Christians are told to practice as it is part of the fruit of the Spirit mentioned in Galatians 5:22. Many Christians seem to struggle when it comes to having patience. This is, I believe, because of a common misunderstanding that some people have of the meaning of the word. In the scriptures to follow, we will learn that patience is not just a virtue that should be strived for, but a character trait that implies an emotional and mental state of being that can only be achieved through the power of the Holy Spirit.

The Bible mentions the word patience only 34 times (KJV). The word patient is only mentioned 9 times (KJV).

We learn some interesting facts about patience when we look at the original Hebrew and Greek words for patience.

The Hebrew word patience ('ârêk) is used in Ecclesiastes 7:8 to refer to a person being slow to anger (emotional state of fortitude).

The Greek word patience (hupomonē) is used in Romans 2:7 to refer to cheerful or hopeful endurance or constancy (patient continuance). A lot of people seem to miss the cheerful part of this definition... They seem to think that having patience means grinning on the outside and painfully waiting for the suffering to end on the inside. This verse is in fact telling us that true patience means being cheerful in a bad or hopeless situation – which is much more of a challenge to us than just being patient on the outside...

The meaning of the word hupomonē comes from another word (hupomenō) meaning: to persevere, remain behind, stay under, bear trials and patiently suffer. From this word we learn that patience means staying cool when going through trials. It implies a state of submission to God through the situation – no matter how tough it might be at the time (mental state).

Lastly, we learn from 1 Timothy 3:3 that to have patience (epieikēs) means to exhibit moderation, gentleness and appropriate behavior in heated situations.

Prayer: ask the Lord to help you, by the Power of His Holy Spirit, to become more patient in character. Ask the Lord to help you to become more stable in your emotions. Ask the Lord to help you to trust Him in difficult situations. Ask the Lord to help you to have hope in every situation. Ask the Lord to help you to joyfully endure whatever it is that you are going through. Ask the Lord to grant you the ability to be moderate, gentle and appropriate in your response when going through tense and stressful situations – as you patiently trust in Him for His provision, justice and deliverance.

WEEK 9: Forgiveness

21 Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?" 22 Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.

23 "Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. 24 As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold was brought to him. 25 Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt. 26 "At this the servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.' 27 The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go. 28 "But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins. He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded. 29 "His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay it back.' 30 "But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt.

31 When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that had happened. 32 "Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. 33 Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' 34 In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.

35 "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart." (Matthew 18:21-35. NIV)

In this parable Jesus clearly illustrates the importance of forgiveness and the penalty of unforgiveness.

Peter must have felt pretty smart and spiritual by asking Jesus if he should forgive a person 7 times, especially since the Old Testament Law states that a person should be paid back what he is owed – "23 But if there is serious injury, you are to take life for life, 24 eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, 25 burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise" (Exodus 21:23-25).

Instead, Jesus replies by saying that Peter should be willing to forgive not only 7 times, but 77 times. Jesus is essentially saying that we ought to forgive those who trespass against us an unlimited number of times... not just when it suits us, and not just when we feel like it.

To make matters worse, Jesus says that those who do not forgive will be tortured: "In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed". When we refuse to forgive others, God refuses to forgive us (Matthew 6:14-15). Could it be that you are being tortured by anger, anxiety, fear, depression, sleeplessness and sadness because you refuse to forgive? (Ask the Lord to speak to you about this.)

The challenge for us is to forgive people because we choose to, not because we feel like it. I am convinced that Jesus didn't feel like forgiving the Pharisees and Roman soldiers when they nailed Him to that cross, spat on Him and mocked Him. He forgave them because He loved them.

Prayer: Everlasting Father and Gracious God... help me to forgive my father, mother, brother, sister, friend, aunt, uncle or enemy by the power of your Holy Spirit. Help me to let go of the debt that is owed to me. Help me to forgive my neighbour for the wrong that was done to me. Help me to trust that you will deal with them as you see fit. Set me free from the torture that I have been afflicted with because of my unforgiveness. In Jesus name. Amen.

Week 10: Identity

Your identity is one of the most precious gifts given to you by God. Sadly, most people never discover who they truly are. Those that do, generally take years, if not decades, to do so on a very meaningful level.

There is only one question that you need to answer with regards to identity. The question itself is very easy to understand, but most people don't even know where to begin when trying to answer it!

The question is: Who are you?

Most people – when confronted with this question – begin to describe their occupation, title, gender, physical features and characteristics. This, unfortunately, does not adequately answer the question.

The way that we answer the question above in a meaningful way is by asking another, more important, question: “Who does God say I am?” This question is more important because of one simple fact: Only the creator can tell the creation who/what they really are.

When we start to explore who God says we are, it becomes clear that there are certain things about us that are good and certain things that are bad. For many people it takes years to unlearn what they have been taught about themselves (from friends and society). It then takes a few more years to accept the truth about who they are from God's Word, generally speaking.

Here are but a few things that God says about who we are:

- You are a sinner: Romans 3:23
- You are loved: Jeremiah 31:3
- You are His personal creation: Psalm 139:13; Ephesians 2:10
- You are cared for: 1 Peter 5:7
- You are chosen, royal and special: 1 Peter 2:9; John 15:16
- You are His child: Ephesians 2:19

The world likes to tell us that we are worthless and good for nothing, but God has an entirely different message for us about who we are. The question is: who are you going to believe; and how is this going to change the way that you live?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, please help me to understand who I am and who you have made me to be. Please help me to separate the truth from the lies and please help me to discover my true identity in You. Help me, Lord, to see myself for who I really am, and to live appropriately. In the precious name of Jesus Christ I pray these things. Amen!

Week 11: Surrender

Surrender is a foreign concept to most Christians – especially in the 21st Century. Everybody likes to hear that they have the victory in Christ, that they have won the war and that they are on the winning team.

What most people fail to realize is that we are actually prisoners of war. Yes, it is true that we win the war, but only in the sense that we did not die in the heat of battle. We were all graciously saved by our former opponent (enemy) – God. Paul makes this point very clear in Romans 5:10 (*...while we were enemies...*) and James 4:4 (*...friendship with the world means hostility with God...*).

Yes, it is true that we are on the winning team now, but it is not because we chose the right team to start off with. It is only because we were ‘forced’ to surrender and submit to the One who is most powerful.

One scripture that helps us to understand this concept is 2 Corinthians 10:3-5: *“For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.”*

This verse uses two specific Greek words that are crucial to our understanding of what it means to surrender. The first word is: aichmalōtizō (to make captive or to bring into captivity). This word is derived from: aichmalōtos which is used to properly refer to a prisoner of war, that is, (generally) a captive. The second word is: hupakoē (compliance or submission).

These verses help us to realize that we need to actively choose to surrender ourselves to God’s will and purpose. To surrender to Christ – in the way that these verses advocate – means to surrender our sentiments (feelings, reactions and outlook), opinions, mental dispositions (more or less earnestly in a certain direction), interests, affections, cares and thoughts to God. We need to ‘wave the white flag’ as it were and stop fighting, and adopt, God’s feelings, outlook, opinion, interests, affections, cares and thoughts on every topic.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, please help me to surrender my thoughts, feelings, opinions, interests, affections, cares and thoughts to you. Help me to realize that your ways are much higher and much better than my ways. Help me to become more aware of the areas in my life that I need to surrender to you and help me to stop fighting your will and purpose for my life. Amen.