

What is truth?

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Jesus said "For this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me."

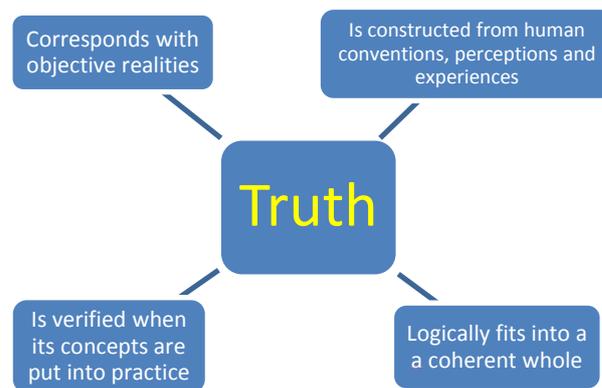
When He said this Pilate immediately asked a vital question: "What is truth"? John 18:37, 38.

Our answer to this question is very important because Jesus also said: *You will know the truth and the truth will set you free.* John 8:32. If we are to have freedom in Christ we **must** believe the truth.

The Greek word for truth is *alétheia* (from *aléthés*, "true to fact"). It is translated as *truth*, *fact*, and *reality*. In ancient Greek culture, *alétheia* was synonymous for *reality* or *fact* as the opposite of *illusion*.

The concept of truth is vital importance to us all so it has been widely researched, studied and discussed.

Various theories have emerged:



We can use these theories to work out whether something is true or not. Here are some examples:

1 + 1 = 2. Is this true?

- Corresponds with objective realities. When we have one item and add another we get two items.
- Is constructed from our conventions, perceptions and experiences. Early in our life we learnt that $1 + 1 = 2$.
- Is verified when its concepts are put into practice. Try adding one item to another and we get two items.
- Logically fits into a coherent whole. $1 + 1 = 2$ assumes a decimal numbering system. In a binary system (which is what all computer operations are based on) $1 + 1 = 0 + 1 \times \text{binary } 10$. There is no number 2 in a binary system.

So $1 + 1 = 2$ is true (in a decimal system) but it is not the full truth.

Jesus rose from the dead. Is this true?

- Corresponds with objective realities. The Bible and historical records of those who were there at the time describe Jesus as rising from the dead.
- Is constructed from our conventions, perceptions and experiences. At some stage in our lives we heard that Jesus rose from the dead. We believed this and built up a concept of what this means. The concept grew and developed as we learnt more, accepted Jesus as Saviour, and as our faith grew. We developed an assurance that Jesus rose from the dead.
- Is verified when its concepts are put into practice. When we invite Jesus to be our Saviour He comes in and works mightily on our behalf, right throughout our lives. He can only do this if He is alive.
- Logically fits into a coherent whole. Evidence from the Bible, history, the behaviour of those who were there at the time, other people's experiences, and our own experiences, all indicate that Jesus rose from the dead.

The earth is flat. Is this true?

Thousands of years ago. People believed that the earth was flat. To them this was an undisputed truth.

- ☑ Corresponds with objective realities. What they saw was a flat earth. Because they couldn't travel very far there was no idea that the earth could possibly be round.
- ☑ Is constructed from our conventions, perceptions and experiences. It was believed that the earth was flat and no-one had ever experienced anything to disprove this.
- ☑ Is verified when its concepts are put into practice. In their limited travels it always appeared the world was flat.
- ☑ Logically fits into a coherent whole. At the time they could only see the earth from a limited perspective. To them it was true that the world was flat.

In the last few hundred years. We have travelled right around the world and have even been able to see the world from space. We now know that it is round, not flat.

- ☑ Corresponds with objective realities. Photos from space show the earth is round. People can fly or sail right round the earth.
- ☑ Is constructed from our conventions, perceptions and experiences. When we travel we can go right round the earth.
- ☑ Is verified when its concepts are put into practice. We look at the horizon and can see the curvature of the earth.
- ☑ Logically fits into a coherent whole. Evidence from travel, space, science, our experience and the experiences of others shows that the earth is not flat.

(And the Flat Earth society still maintains that the earth is flat!!!).

This shows that just because we believe something doesn't necessarily mean that it is true.

This is especially important for Christians because we all have lots of different beliefs yet most of us think that what we believe is the truth! We often don't recognise that when we were younger we used to think we had the truth then. As we have grown and matured we have learned more and our beliefs have gradually changed, but we still think that what we believe is the truth.

Always remember that God's truth is so much bigger than you can ever imagine.

"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways", declares the LORD. "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. Isaiah 55:8

You can never know all of God's truth. It is much better to believe strongly in the various aspects of your faith, and have a strong assurance of its truth, but stay open to learning more of God's truth.

If you don't it is very easy to become dogmatic, narrow-minded and bigoted, and this will stop you from growing in our faith. Christians who think they know it all, have got a lot to learn!

If something is true in any situation it is called **objective truth**. It is true regardless of situations, cultures, experiences etc. for all time. It meets all of the tests listed above.

When we believe something to be true it may or may not be objective truth. Just because we believe something to be true, doesn't make it true. Even if we believe it passionately! "Truth" that is considered to be true because we believe it to be true is called **psychological truth**.

Psychological truth can have significant consequences if we believe something to be true, and it actually isn't. That's because what we believe is worked out into our day to day lives. *As a man thinks in his heart so is he.* Proverbs 23:7. We may fervently believe that something is true and when we live this out in our lives we are actually deceived and living a lie. This is the cause of much bondage for many Christians.



Here are some examples where people have believed something is true when it actually wasn't true. Each of them has led to significant social consequences:

- A belief that God created the world in seven 24-hour days. This is based on assumptions that Genesis can be interpreted in the same way that we would interpret scientific documents, and that the Hebrew word for day (*yom*) means the same as we use the word "day" today. This has led to the creation-evolution debate that still rages in some parts of the world.

- A move in New Testament times by a group called the Judaizers who were trying to bring Christians back under Law (when Christ has fulfilled the Jewish law and set us free from all of its demands). This issue was addressed in Galatians and Hebrews, but the concept that we must work to earn God's favour still remains powerful for many Christians. We are not under Law but under grace!
- The concept that God is nasty and vindictive. Many people still ask "Why did God do that to me?" when things go wrong in their lives. We even have "Acts of God" written into our insurance policies for major disasters!
- Justification of slavery based on false ideas like "God says slaves must obey their masters (Colossians 3:22) so slavery is God's will".
- Repression of women based on false ideas like "The Bible says women should be silent so women should have no role in churches".
- The power of pastors or priests. The church has become an organisation led by pastors or priests who may or may not exercise power over their people and justify it as coming from God. Jesus is supposed to be Lord!
- A tragic modern day example is in Africa where there is a fervently held belief that having sex with a virgin cures AIDS. This has led to millions of young people contracting AIDS.

So believing something is true doesn't necessarily make it true!

Now another very important example:

Every word in the Bible is true. Is this true?

Many Christians (without thinking too much about it) believe that everything in the Bible is true. We have grown up with this concept and to challenge it is unthinkable.



- Corresponds with objective realities. We have read verses in the Bible, put them into practice and God has blessed us as a result.
- Is constructed from our conventions, perceptions and experiences. We have been taught that *all scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the God's people may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.* 2 Timothy 3:16. We have assumed that the word "scripture" in this verse means the Bible as we have it today and have had no reason to doubt this. (Even though some parts of our Bible like John's gospel and Revelation hadn't even been written when Paul wrote 2 Timothy!).
- Is verified when its concepts are put into practice. As we have learnt more and more from the Bible we have found it relevant, trustworthy and makes sense of life.
- Logically fits into a coherent whole. Evidence from our church life, our personal Christian life, our reading of the Bible, testimony from other Christians and our own study of the Bible points strongly to its truthfulness.

We assume that when we read the term God's "word" it is talking about the Bible. (Even though the Bible nowhere says it is God's word and Jesus is clearly described as the "Word" in John Chapter 1).

But then we come across verses like the following:

Let your eyes look straight ahead, fix your gaze directly before you. Proverbs. 4:25.

Money is the answer for everything. Ecclesiastes 10:19.

Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death. Quoted by Jesus in Matthew 15:4, based on Leviticus 20:9.

If your right eye causes you to sin gouge it out and throw it away. Matthew 5:29.

These kind of verses (and countless others) cause us a dilemma. They are part of the Bible but they are obviously not true to the realities that we know (or sometimes even to the character of the God that we know). When we come across verses like these we tend to ignore them and focus on verses that we like or that fit in with our beliefs.

But when we think about it a bit more deeply we realise that we have to **read verses in the Bible in context** and **interpret the Bible in a valid way** if we are to gain from it the truth that we know it contains. What we really need to do is learn how to approach the Bible so that the Holy Spirit can reveal God's truth to us from it. Fortunately the Holy Spirit is very good at doing this!

Getting God's truth from the Bible may involve:

- Acknowledging that we come to the Bible with preconceptions and biases, and opening ourselves to the Holy Spirit so that He can reveal the truth of God's word to us.
- Recognising that God used many different people and approaches in bringing together the books that are now in our Bible.
- Recognising that different parts of the Bible are history, poetry, prophecy, parables, stories, letters, etc. and reading them accordingly.
- Reading verses and sections of the Bible in their historical and cultural context.
- Identifying the purpose for which parts of the Bible were written, who they were written to and why they were written, and understanding them in that context.
- Recognising that the meaning of words and concepts in ancient Hebrew or Greek culture may be quite different to the meaning of the same words and concepts today.
- Trying to find the meaning that the original author sought to convey and that the original readers would have taken from this. (Technically, this is called *exegesis*. Exegesis is focused on trying to understand the message that God was seeking to convey to the original readers in their particular situation).
- Always base any application of the Bible to our current situation on valid exegesis. (Technically this is called *hermeneutics*. Hermeneutics tries to find the message that God is trying to convey to us today in our historical and cultural situation).
- Recognising that God is big and that whatever little bits of truth that we understand from the Bible, there is still so much more we can learn.

So "every word in the Bible is true" is really just a trite belief. If we think about it we will realise that many parts of the Bible don't portray themselves as being true (e.g. the sections in Job where statements made by Eliphaz, Bildad and Jophar are recognised as being poor advice); some parts are stories told to illustrate a point (like many of Jesus' parables); and some parts are just the musings of people about God and His ways (which is why some of Solomon's Proverbs don't ring true to life. e.g. the proverb quoted above. Are we really not to look to the left or the right and only ever look straight ahead?).

Exegesis is the process of trying to find the original meaning of parts of the Bible:

- What did it mean when it was originally written?
- What was the message the original author was intending to convey?
- What was the message the readers/recipients would take from it?
- What was the Word of God to the original readers/recipients in their situation?

Hermeneutics is the process of interpreting parts of the Bible so that they have meaning for us today.

- What does it mean to us today?
- What is relevant for us in our situation?
- What is the Word of God for us today?

If we are to interpret the Bible accurately any hermeneutics must be based on thorough exegesis, under the guidance and inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

Now we come to the most important question of all:

Where can truth be found?

Fortunately Jesus answered this question for us.

He said: ***I am the way, the truth, and the life. No-one comes to the father except through Me.*** John 14:6.

Truth is found in Jesus Christ! Jesus is the truth!

This is backed up by another statement that Jesus made:

Your word is truth. John 17:7. The Greek word for "word" used here is *logos*. *Logos* can be translated "word", "utterance", "cause", "intent", "work", "reason", "intelligence", "wisdom".

The logos (word) is the reasoning, intelligent, guiding, correcting, controlling mind and wisdom of God.

And in John Chapter 1 we find that Jesus is the logos (word) of God!

In the beginning was the Word (logos), 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. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. John 1:1-5,14.



Jesus is the logos of God! In Jesus is found the whole mind, wisdom and intelligence of God.

That's why He could say: *I am the truth.* John 14:6.

“The truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth” is only found in Jesus Christ, the logos of God!

If you want to know the truth, look to Jesus: He is the truth.



This leads us to another important question:

How can we know the truth?

Truth applies to all aspects of life; not just “spiritual” truth. Everything in the universe comes from the One who created this world and everything in it – the Lord Jesus Christ. *By Him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by Him and for Him. He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together. Colossians 1:16,17.*

So every aspect of our lives has its source in Jesus. e.g. mathematics, science, ethics, geography, relationships, economics, spirituality All areas of life are governed by and operate under truths which Jesus designed. Modern research and scholarship is always trying to discover these truths. We have learnt much from our studies but there is still lots more to learn. The full, complete, objective truth about the world we live in is found only in the One who created it: the Lord Jesus. Take, for example, the law of gravity. This is something that was designed by God and operates under His control. We understand it and can work with it, but we can't change it or get rid of it. It is one of the truths that God has chosen to build into His world.

So how can we know this truth that is found in Jesus Christ? Well there are many different ways and it is certainly worth applying yourself to seeking truth in all of these ways.

Listen to my instruction and be wise; do not disregard it. Blessed are those who listen to me, watching daily at my doors, waiting at my doorway. For those who find me find life and receive favour from the Lord. But those who fail to find me harm themselves; all who hate me love death. Wisdom has built her house; she has set up its seven pillars. Proverbs 8:33-9:1.

Here are some ways that we can discover truth:

- From Jesus' example. *I have set you an example, that you should do as I have done for you.* John 13:15.
- From the Bible. *Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.* Psalm 119:105.
- By revelation of the Holy Spirit. He is *the Spirit of truth.* John 14:17. *He will teach you all things.* John 14:19.
- Through the Church. The Church is called *the pillar and foundation of the truth.* 1 Timothy 3:15.
- From an analysis of the lessons of history. *Everything that was written in the past was written to teach us.* Romans 15:4.
- From a study of science. *Let the wise listen and add to their learning.* Proverbs 1:5.

- Through study and scholarship. *Instruct the wise and they will be wiser still; teach the righteous and they will add to their learning.* Proverbs 9:9.
- By reflecting on our experiences of life. *Turn your ear to wisdom, apply your heart to understanding; call out for insight; cry aloud for understanding.* Proverbs 2:2.

As we do this we gain insight which must be analysed, evaluated, interpreted and reflected on, as we build our concept of truth, in any given situation. Then, as we learn more of truth, we grow in understanding and maturity. And (hopefully) we become more and more like Jesus, the source of all truth.

But God has provided two main ways by which we can know the truth that is found in Jesus Christ.

- The Holy Spirit.
- The Bible.

One of the major roles of the Holy Spirit is to take the truth in Jesus (the logos) and reveal it to us.

And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counsellor to be with you for ever - the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. But the Counsellor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things. John 14:16,17,26

When the Counsellor comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father, He will testify about me. John 15:26

Notice that the Holy Spirit is called *the Spirit of truth*. He reveals the truth to us by speaking into our hearts through what's known as a *rhema*. When we receive a rhema we sense the Holy Spirit is saying something to us, deep in our heart. It is often associated with a lift in our spirit or a tingling: an 'anointing'. Along with the anointing there is a sense in our mind of what God is saying to us (which comes as a revelation).

The word (rhema) is near you. It is in your mouth and in your heart. Romans 10:18.

The Holy Spirit may speak directly into our hearts or (more commonly) by taking the written words in the Bible and making them come alive to us in a personal revelation.

So every time we open our Bibles the Holy Spirit has the opportunity to speak to us (via a *rhema*) from God's word. This can be mind and life changing (if we believe and obey what God says!). Rhemas from the Bible then become the main way that God speaks His truth to us.

Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path. Psalm 119:105,

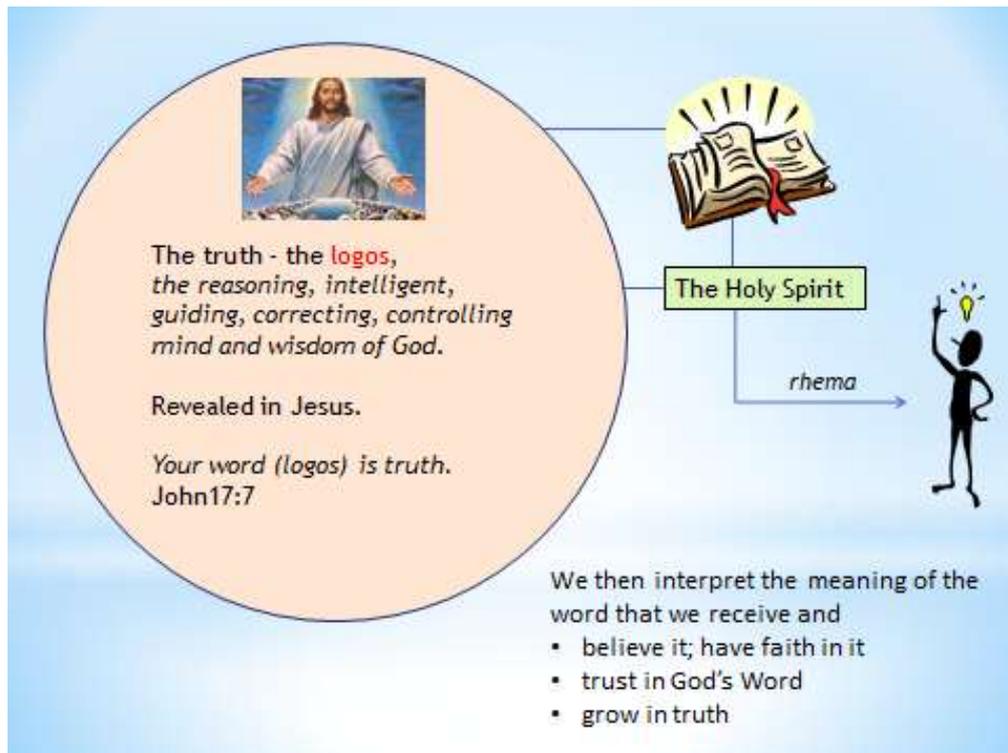
The unfolding of your words gives light. Psalm 119:130.



We then (hopefully) believe what the Holy Spirit is saying to us, and put our trust in God's word. In this way God gradually reveals more and more of Jesus to us and we grow in our understanding of truth. As we grow in truth we become more and more freed from the shackles of sin and error. We become more like Jesus and are able to please God more in what we do and who we are.

We, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into His likeness with ever increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit. 2 Corinthians 3:18.

The main way we receive God's truth is by revelation of the Holy Spirit from the Bible



Truth is found in the person of Jesus Christ; is expressed through God's word (logos); and is revealed to us by the Holy Spirit.

Growing in truth

We can only ever know a very small part of the whole truth that is found in Jesus Christ. God is so much bigger than we humans can ever comprehend or imagine. This means that at any given time we will probably:

- know some parts of the truth.
- be developing in our understanding of other parts of the truth.
- will have no comprehension of some parts of the truth. (There's just so much to learn!).
- will be deceived with respect to some parts of the truth (because our current understanding is wrong or is still developing).

This will continue throughout our lives but, hopefully we will be continually growing in our understanding of truth.

At any given time we could have any one of the following as part of our understanding:

Untruths: beliefs that are false, containing no truth in them at all. Examples of untruths are *God doesn't love me. I can do whatever I like without consequences. I am the most important person in the world.* If we believe untruths as being true we are actually deceived.

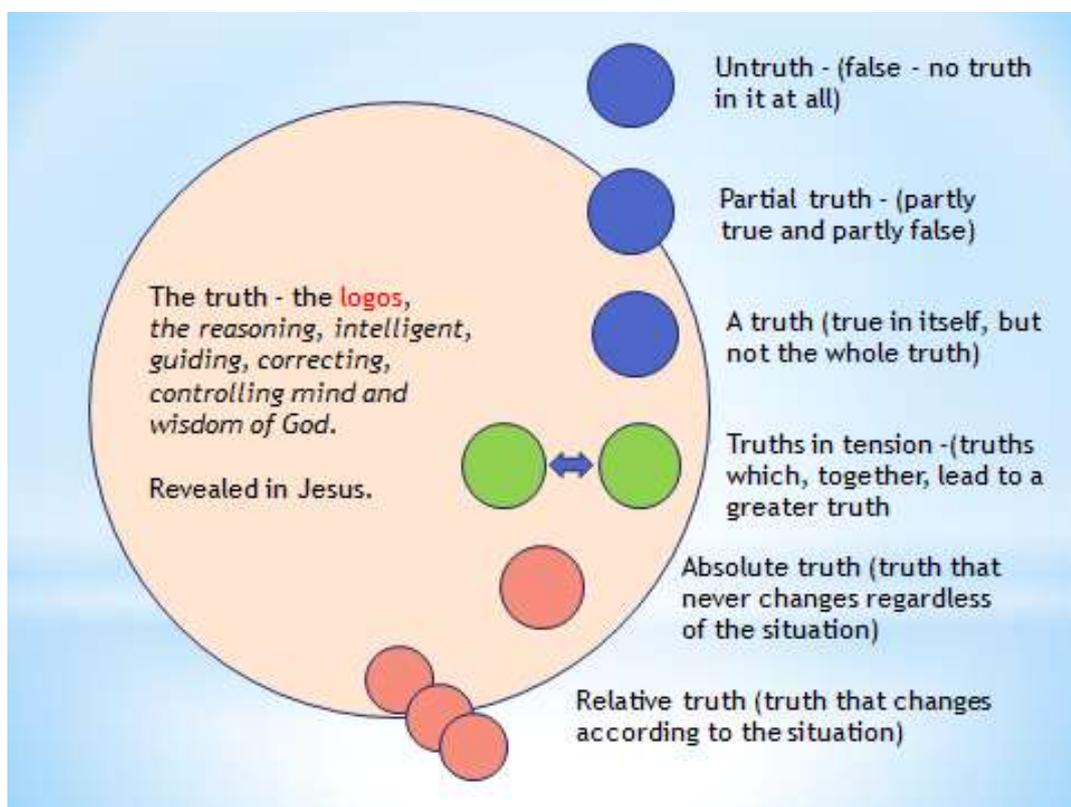
Partial truths: beliefs that are partly true and partly false. An example of a partial truth is that *God answers prayers with a 'Yes', a 'No', or a 'Maybe'*. It's true that God answers prayers but He is Lord of all and knows what He is doing. Seeing answers as 'Yes', a 'No', or 'Maybe' is to look from our perspective, not God's. If we believe partial truths are the whole truth we can easily get dogmatic. This has been the cause of much division within the Christian church.

A truth, as compared to **the truth**. This is something that is true in itself but is not the complete truth. It is often a truth that is part of a much bigger picture. An example of a truth like this is that *Jesus died on the cross to bring forgiveness for sins*. That is true but Jesus died on the cross for many other reasons as well. e.g. to make atonement; to die in our place; to fulfill the Jewish sacrificial system. (It's unlikely that we will understand the full importance of why Jesus died on the cross till we reach heaven!).

Truths in tension. These are truths which are apparently contradictory but which, together, lead to a greater truth. Western minds often find it hard to comprehend that two conflicting truths can still both be true, but in the Jewish mindset that Jesus used and understood it was commonplace. Examples of truths in tension are *Pray in faith believing and you will receive* as compared to *Pray and keep on praying*. Or *once Christians are saved they are always saved*, compared to *Christians can fall away and lose their salvation*. Both sides of these apparently contradictory truths are clearly taught in the Bible and together help us pray effectively, give us assurance of salvation, and help motivate us in our Christian lives.

Absolute truths. These are objective truths that never change. They are true regardless of situations, cultures, experiences etc. for all time. An example of an absolute truth is *God is love*. In His very being God is love. This can never change.

Relative truths. These are truths that change relative to the situation. Many of the promises of God are like this. God promises to do something but only if we fulfill conditions that He places upon us. A good example is *In all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purposes*. Romans 8:28. This verse is not a 'blank cheque' that says God will make everything go well for Christians. He doesn't! For the promise in this verse to be true we must love God and be doing the things He wants us to do. Not understanding this often leaves Christians confused when what they believe doesn't seem to work out in practice.



So if you are a “seeker after truth” you will be engaged in a life-long search to know more of the truth that is found in Jesus Christ. Here are some tips to help you in this search:

- Make it your life’s priority to get to know Jesus better. *I want to know Christ* Philippians 3:10
- Be open to learning more, especially in areas where you think you have ‘the truth’. *Not that I have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me.* Philippians 3:12.
- Never be dogmatic and say or think that you have ‘the whole truth’ on something. *We know in part We see but a poor reflection...* 1 Corinthians 13:9,12.
- Learn how to interpret the Bible in a valid way and study the Bible intensively. Allow the Holy Spirit to reveal more of God’s truth to you (especially in areas where you think you are OK or where you are sure you are ‘right’). Be open and obedient as the Holy Spirit reveals His truth to you. *Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.* Psalm 119:105.

Walking in the truth

We have seen that Jesus is the truth (John 14:6) and that one of the main roles of the Holy Spirit is to reveal this truth to us. Jesus said two other amazing statements about truth:

You will know the truth and the truth will set you free. John 8:32.

If the Son sets you free you will be free indeed. John 8:36.

As we know more and more of the truth we become more and more free! This is because our lives are based more and more on truth, rather than on falsehood or deceit. We become more and more like Jesus, and more and more free from the shackles of sin, selfishness, and our old, fallen nature. How wonderful! Jesus becomes more and more our Lord, and we increase in the fruits of this: *love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self control.* Galatians 5:2.

The end result is that we are able to walk in the truth.

It has given me great joy to find some of your children walking in the truth, just as the Father commanded us.
2 John 1:4.

It gave me great joy to have some brothers come and tell about your faithfulness to the truth and how you continue to walk in the truth. I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth.
3 John 1:3,4.

And, ultimately, that is what Christianity is all about. Going through life in a close personal relationship with Jesus; becoming more and more like Him daily; doing what He wants us to do; fulfilling the purpose that God has for our lives; walking in victory over sin; being responsive to the Holy Spirit; glorifying God in everything.

The truth sets us free to be like this! To walk in the truth!

Unfortunately far too many Christians are missing out on the freedom that is theirs in Christ, and are living in bondage. Here are some of the main areas where Christians can be in bondage, and how the truth can set us free.

- Believing partial truths or untruths because we interpret and use the Bible in an invalid way. e.g. proof texts.

Don't be dogmatic in what you believe. Have assurance and confidence in the Lord, but always stay open to learning more of His truth. Study the Bible in depth and learn how to interpret it in a valid way. Recognise that your understanding is limited and always seek for more. Seek a greater revelation of God by the Holy Spirit.

- Not knowing, believing or living in our position "in Christ Jesus". As a result we choose to be dominated by our old sinful nature, rather than living in the freedom and victory we have in Christ.

Study Romans Chapters 6-8, and live in the truth taught there. Know your position in Christ; accept it by faith, and then yield every aspect of your life to the Lord. Resist the old nature and choose to be led by the Holy Spirit. Glorify Jesus in all you do and fulfil His purposes for your life.

- Keeping our spiritual life separate from the rest of our life, and thus creating a 'religious' life with its own culture and standards.

Recognise that God made you spirit, soul and body, and that He wants you to be whole in all areas of your life. Allow the Holy Spirit to lead you and make you more like Jesus in every aspect of your life. Be aware of the power of religion and how it will seek to take away your freedom. Let Jesus be Lord so you always do what He wants you do and be what He wants you to be.

- Being critical of others' faults and disregarding our own.

Stop judging other people. Love them instead. Repent of your sin, forgive others, and lay down your life in service for others. Ask the Holy Spirit to search your heart and cleanse you from all sin, any bitterness and all remnants of the old nature. Then be obedient to Him. Be gracious towards others who are on the same journey as you are. Live in love. Be a servant of all. Honour Jesus in all you do.

Freedom comes as we know the truth that is found in Jesus Christ, and then as we walk in that truth.

Discussion questions

What is truth? Where is truth to be found? How can we find truth and grow in it? How can we walk in the truth?

What is the relationship between truth, deception, freedom and bondage? What can Christians do to get greater freedom from deception and the bondage this brings?

What is the word of God? How can we receive God's word into our lives? What does this do for us?

How can we interpret the Bible in a valid way? What is the role of the Holy Spirit in this? What is our role in this?

Give examples of the different types of 'truths' in the diagram on page 8. For each describe how you can grow in your knowledge of the truth.

What can you do to be a life-long seeker after truth? How will this affect your life in the future?

What have you learned from this study on truth? How will you put this into practice as part of your on-going growth in Christ?