

# **Questions About Life**

*Understanding Why We Are Significant*

*David Gooding*

A Myrtlefield House Transcript



**MYRTLEFIELD**  
HOUSE  
[www.myrtlefieldhouse.com](http://www.myrtlefieldhouse.com)

## Contents

1	<a href="#">Life's Ideals</a>	3
2	<a href="#">Life's Failures</a>	12
3	<a href="#">Life's Outcome</a>	23
4	<a href="#">Life's Final Assessment</a>	33
	<a href="#">Appendix: Why I Do Not Accept the Theory of Annihilation</a>	44
	<a href="#">About the Author</a>	46

David Gooding has asserted his right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as Author of this work.

Copyright © The Myrtlefield Trust, 2019

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved. May not copy or download more than 500 consecutive verses of the ESV Bible or more than one half of any book of the ESV Bible. Quotations marked KJV are from The Authorized (King James) Version. Rights in the Authorized Version in the United Kingdom are vested in the Crown. Reproduced by permission of the Crown's patentee, Cambridge University Press. Other quotations are Dr Gooding's own translations or paraphrases.

This text has been edited from a transcript of a series of four public lectures by David Gooding held in the British Legion War Memorial Building, Waring Street, Belfast (N. Ireland) in 1965.

All rights reserved. Permission is granted to reproduce this document in its entirety, or in unaltered excerpts, for personal and church use only as long as you do not charge a fee. You must not reproduce it on any Internet site. Permission must be obtained if you wish to reproduce it in any other context, translate it, or publish it in any format.

Published by The Myrtlefield Trust

PO Box 2216

Belfast, N Ireland

BT1 9YR

w: [www.myrtlefieldhouse.com](http://www.myrtlefieldhouse.com)

e: [info@myrtlefieldhouse.com](mailto:info@myrtlefieldhouse.com)

Myrtlefield catalogue no: apl.019/bh

## Life's Ideals

### *Is One Religion as True as Another?*

If it is a proper thing to begin a new series of lectures with a confession, I think I should like to confess that I find it no martyrdom, but an exceedingly gratifying thing, to be asked to come and deliver a second series. It gives me an opportunity to complete what must have been an exceedingly incomplete and one-sided account of things.

Last year I was comparing Christianity with other systems of thought such as humanism, and generally arguing that the objections which humanism raises against Christianity are not so serious as they might appear. Christianity in itself is an exceedingly rational system of thought. Even suppose I proved that, much remains unsaid from any sort of argument of that kind. There are many people who would agree that Christianity is quite a reasonable faith. They may go further and be of the opinion that, if we are to attain to ideals that are worthy, we shall need some kind of religion, and Christianity is as good as any; perhaps the best that there is.

But, even starting from that premise, I feel that much remains to be said when we come to the question of applying Christianity. Supposing we accept that Christianity is a good thing, a decent religion and a reasonable system of thought; it is when we come to apply it to the practicalities of daily life that so many people drift apart and most of the misconceptions occur. I can do no more than speak from my own experience. I find it quite a common thing that many people who would agree that Christianity is reasonable enough, hold to the view that I have expressed as the subtitle of this lecture: whereas Christianity is a good religion, nevertheless *one religion is quite as true as another*.

### **Is religion just about making us good?**

For instance, people of other faiths, and a good many people who profess Christianity, would seriously hold that view. Religion, they say, is a means of helping us to be good, to behave decently and get the best out of life. If we can agree there, it doesn't really matter what sort of religion you have, so long as your religion helps you to the objective of being a decent kind of person.

### **An analogy from the world of sport**

To try and understand what they mean, let us take an analogy from a completely different realm, the realm of sport. Everybody knows that, perhaps in the first place, the purpose of sport is to have some recreation of mind, exercise of body, and enjoy the fun of it all. Not only

so, but in the process, perhaps, to build character, unselfishness, a team spirit, and so forth. The fun of the game helps us to discipline ourselves.

Now then, if you're going to attain those worthy ideals of bodily and mental exercise, refreshment and self-discipline, you must have rules by which to govern the game. The book of rules is in the clubhouse and there's a referee to apply them. Behind the referee stands the rule book and the committee that made the rules, and each player bows to the referee. That's part of the whole 'religion' of sport, for you can't have players doing just any old thing; it would ruin the game. There would be no self-discipline, no healthy exercise, no team spirit, nor any of the good ideals that we look for in sport.

Given those understandings, suppose someone says, 'My sport is rugby, I think it's a very good sport and I believe wholeheartedly in its rules.' But someone else believes in the rules of soccer, and they're quite different rules. You can be off-side in one game, and not off-side in the other. In rugby, you may pick up the ball and run, but you mustn't do that in soccer unless you happen to be the privileged goalkeeper.

Now, suppose they started arguing. The rugby enthusiast says, 'My rugby is the only way.' We can see at once that would be absurd. It's the only way if you're a rugby player, but there are many other systems that are all equally good for the general aim and object of getting mental and physical exercise.

Suppose, then, you got hold of the rule book of each game, and said, 'What about the rules in this book: are they true?' You'd have to immediately qualify that. You would have to say, 'They're true for anybody in that particular game, but if you're not in that game you bow to other rules.'

If you happen to have chosen boxing as your particular sport, you can deliberately bash your opponent on the nose and draw his blood. That's quite all right according to the rules of boxing. But if you should be playing rugby, it's not supposed to be according to the rules to deliberately bash anyone on the nose. The two sets of rules seem to contradict each other, but we can explain it all by saying that each set is equally true to that particular game.

### **Different rules, but the same goal?**

On that analogy, some people take their view of religion. Christianity is a very good faith; Buddhism is also a very good faith. Jesus, Mohammed and Buddha are all equally good. They all have different ways of going about the same thing: inculcating self-discipline, striving after purity, being decent to other people, improving the world and living harmoniously. Who bothers if some of the rules should conflict? According to some people's chosen system of self-discipline, they don't eat pork, while others say it's quite all right to eat pork. One is just as true as another; they're all going for the same goal, but by different rules.

That is an extreme view, held mostly perhaps by people who are not Christian. However, in this modern era it is held in theological circles, blown very strongly by the winds of change in the direction of a general joining up of religions. Perhaps it is a strong view, and you may think it is possibly irrelevant for this present gathering. There are committed Christians who believe that Christianity is unique in some sense; they own the divinity of Christ and believe he is risen from the dead. But then it is a well-known fact that there are so many different versions of Christianity that you could almost count them as different religions. At one

extreme, you have the cloistered monk with his asceticism. On the other, the street corner preacher with his fulsome oratory and insistence on people being saved. What shall we say about that? I find many people are inclined to the view that it doesn't really matter which interpretation of Christianity you hold. They're all equally good; all are aimed at the same goal, so it doesn't really matter what rules you apply.

Perhaps there never was a day such as this, in which popular opinion in religious matters inclines to the view that, because religion is all about being good—being kind and tolerant to one's neighbour—it would be the very opposite of true religious spirit for any one particular interpretation of Christianity to say it was the only one. That would be regarded nowadays as intolerant, and therefore against the very spirit and basic goal of Christianity and religion. There has been so much bitter wrangling between Christian sects that there is a tremendous amount of cogency in the idea that it doesn't really matter what interpretation you put on Christianity, or how you work it. They say: *One religion is as true as another because, whatever religion or whatever interpretation it may be, they're all leading to the same end of making us good.*

There's a very great risk, therefore, of me delivering an exceedingly unpopular lecture.

### **Christianity's prime concern is our personal relationship with God**

I want now to comment on that general idea, or rather to give what I consider is Christianity's comment on that sort of proposition.

In the first place, I should say that Christianity's comment would be that, whereas maybe religion in the broader sense is concerned with making people good, Christianity's fundamental concern is not primarily with making people good. I know that is a very provocative statement, but Christianity's prime concern is with God as a person and our personal relations with him.

And you say, 'Whatever is the difference?'

There is a very considerable difference! It would be quite easy to have a series of ideals and work to them with religious fervour, and yet for one's personal relationship with God to be quite a mess. Let me first call in the help of a somewhat crude analogy.

Allow me to imagine a pirate ship in the good old days of piracy. The captain was educated at Eton, but he somehow got into this trade, feeling a little bit hard-done-by by those who were a bit richer than himself. Anyway, now he's a pirate. In his ship, everything is conducted with the strictest regularity and their ideals are exceedingly commendable. They will never hurt women and children, never frighten them more than they have to, never needlessly kill, and show every respect for human life. They wouldn't think of leaving anybody in danger and whatever booty they take, they distribute it among themselves on the most equitable of terms. Everybody obeys the captain; everybody is considerate of his fellows. Their ship is a little bit of heaven on earth in its own little circle, and, apart from the minor matter of occasionally relieving overly rich people of a few unnecessary belongings, their ideals are exceedingly high, and very good.

That may be so, but their relations with the Crown are exceedingly bad. When you look at that little pirate ship by itself, it's all very nice and proper. Their ideals are good; but if you

consider those people in their high ideals in relation to the Crown, then, of course, all their high ideals go for absolutely nothing.

### **Saul of Tarsus**

You may think that is an exceedingly strange and very crude analogy, but I find that situation in the Bible itself. There is at least one famous example of this. The character who began life as Saul of Tarsus was not only a religious man, but a religious man with exceedingly high ideals. And what is more, those ideals were not only for him to appear religious before men; they were real, genuine, moral ideals, not just religiosity. He prosecuted them with all the ardour and energy of his being. His code was the Ten Commandments, and he could honestly say in later life that, as far as he knew, he had pursued those ideals to the full.

What accounted for his conversion from Judaism to Christianity? He discovered that, while his ideals were excellent, his personal relationship with God was completely astray. He never would have dreamed it himself until he came in contact with Jesus Christ our Lord. In Christ he discovered exactly what God is like, and found that his relationship with God was abysmally wrong. I needn't tell you of the revolution it led to in the man's attitude.

So, I'm going to suggest that as our first consideration. If you say to Christianity, 'one religion is as true as another,' Christianity will say 'not so,' because, first and foremost, Christianity is not so much about our moral and ethical ideals, but our heart attitude to a personal God as revealed in Christ.

## **It is through Christ that we can know God personally**

### **Worship him in spirit**

Taking the next step, we all know that Christianity calls us not only to believe in God and worship him in a sort of formal and perfunctory fashion: 'God is spirit,' says the Bible, 'and those who worship [God] must worship in spirit . . .' (John 4:24).

At the very lowest, it means that our worship of God must be something that takes our full energy and whole heart. To sum it up, the Bible says that we are to *love* God; not just to be correct and proper and nice people, never doing anybody any harm, paying our divine rates and taxes as occasion demands. If we are to love God, here we come across another practical difficulty. *You cannot love someone you do not know*, and Christianity does claim that the only one who can tell you what God is really like is our Lord Jesus Christ.

Now let me explain that, because I suspect many of us will have the idea that we know all there is to know about God, or at least a tremendous lot about him. We can look at his creation and see his greatness; we can admire his engineering skill in making our universe. If we are artists, we can appreciate his colour schemes and we can delight ourselves in the music of the birds he has made. We can gather a lot about God from observing human life and seeing human affection, and deduce that God is loving and kind, and good, and pleasant, and happy.

We may feel we know a tremendous lot about God, and the Bible says that is quite so. But in this deeper sense of knowing him, it says that only those to whom Christ gives the ability to know God know him personally.

For instance, you may like Benjamin Britten's music—I can't say I'm over-enraptured with it myself. You may be knowledgeable about the intricacies of the way he builds his works and be able to talk a good deal about Benjamin Britten. But you may not know him, for Benjamin Britten is a far bigger thing than his musical works. If you only know him through his musical works, you can't really say you know Benjamin Britten.

God is far bigger than the creation he has given us. We may know a lot about God, says Christianity, but only those to whom Christ has given the ability to know him, know God personally.

All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. (Matt 11:27)

Let me try to explain that.

You say, 'I know a lot about God. I believe God is beautiful and kind, and loving, and gracious. What more do I need? What is it I lack?'

Well, take me and my dog. There are some things I share with my dog. For instance, a general delight in beefsteaks. If you give my dog a beefsteak, he has the capacity to enjoy it, and he gives every evidence that he is enjoying it. If you give me a beefsteak, I don't waggle my tail, but I do try and show that I'm enjoying it. My dog appreciates the warmth of a comfortable fire on a winter evening, and so do I. He appreciates a bit of affection, a little tickle round the ears; in other sorts of idioms, so do I. If you were to take my dog into your library and show him one of your beautiful oil paintings by Constable, he wouldn't know what it was. If you played him a bar or two from Benjamin Britten that you so revel in, he'd howl his head off. So, you do share something: your dog goes so far with you, but then no further.

The Bible comments on that sort of situation between us and God. It says that only those to whom God gives his Holy Spirit really know him in that more intimate sense (see Acts 5:32; 1 Cor 2:11). You see, for your dog to come and enjoy your Constable, he would have to be given a distinctively human spirit; and for a person to come to know God, the only way that's possible is for him or her to be given God's Holy Spirit.

I nearly said, that is the extreme claim of Christianity, but I hope I am making it clear at this stage that we are not talking about some faraway abstruse theological proposition, we are talking about an exceedingly practical matter. I hope it doesn't appear that I'm too pompous, but my impression is that there are large numbers of people who maybe accept the general sort of Christian doctrines and they're doing their best to worship God, but finding it an unsatisfactory business just for this reason. I personally fear they do it as a duty. Maybe they enjoy the church music and the good works that go along with Christianity. But at the bottom of it all, they are trying to worship a God whom they do not really know personally. They lack this intimate fellowship, for they have never received what Christ calls *eternal life*.

*Eternal life is a gift from Christ*

I shall take it that all of us are aware that Christianity does offer to people a gift that it calls eternal life. Said Christ, 'this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent' (John 17:3). In other words, Christ gives a new life to those who

will have it: a spiritual life that has the ability of knowing God, and makes true fellowship with God possible for the first time. Only those who have received this gift get true satisfaction from the worship of God.

I daresay at this stage somebody will say, 'Well, that sounds all marvellously mystical, and in fact it makes life very, very difficult. Here am I, doing my level best to be good, as good a Christian as anybody else may be, and I find that difficult enough. Now what you seem to be saying is that Christianity is even more difficult than that. When we've done our very best at being good, now we've got to add this extra bit of trying somehow to get hold of this mysterious experience. Are you not making Christianity far too difficult for the ordinary person?'

And the answer is, of course not. In fact, it is the very reverse, because our Lord said that this new life, this new ability to know God, is something which he gives that no religion at all can give, not even the Christian religion. If you think of the Christian religion as a sort of a code of self-discipline around our worship, then even Christianity as a religion doesn't give you this. It is something that Christ, and only Christ, can give, which is why it is impossible to take the view that one religion is as true as another. And I want to stress, if I may, that *this new life is a gift from Christ*.

Let me take the same old analogy with a different twist. Suppose that we have here a man, his dog, and his baby boy. The dog has gone through a long training; the ritual was tremendous. It comes in at the back door, sits down and scrapes its feet on the mat. That's how well it's been trained. It never would think of climbing up on to the sofa. It has its own little box that it sleeps in and it wouldn't dream of jumping up at a guest. If it's offered anything, it doesn't take it in the ordinary beastly manner; it sits up on its hind legs and begs for the thing. It's a beautifully trained dog. What's more, it's learned so much about its master that it can often almost foresee his will. It's been out with him, doing a bit of rough shooting, or maybe gathering in the sheep, and can understand all sorts of communications from its master.

In that respect, you may say it's far advanced over this one-year-old baby. But in another sense that baby has something the dog will never have. The baby has a capacity to know his father, a capacity the dog will never acquire. All the training of the dog would never give it what the baby has. How did the baby get it?

You say, 'Well, the baby will have to be trained before he understands his father.'

Yes, he'll be trained at home and at school, but it's not the training that gives the baby the ability to know his father. The training only develops the ability that's already there, and came with the gift of life. The baby didn't struggle to get it; he was given the life.

#### *Being born again is Christianity's number one essential*

That is a true analogy, not one that I've made up. The Bible itself repeatedly uses it. The Bible says that, if we're to know God, we must receive from Christ a new spiritual life. That is the meaning of the phrase we hear bandied about in so much popular preaching, but it's fundamentally true and not to be sneered at. Our Lord said, 'You must be born again' (see John 3:1-8). It is Christianity's number one initial necessity.

But the tremendous thing about Christianity is that this new birth and receiving the new life is not something that we attain to, nor qualify for, by rigid and prolonged religious disciplines. We receive it free and for nothing, in the sense that a person could come into this room tonight not a Christian, meet with Christ, and receive that life here and now this very moment and depart a child of God with all the potential within him now for knowing God and, therefore, of worshipping God and serving him acceptably.

I trust by now it is very, very clear that in this context we cannot possibly say that one religion is as true as another. Only Christ can work that miracle and give a person the very life of God, what God calls 'eternal life' (John 3:15).

### **Worship him in truth**

And then our Lord laid it down that they that worship God must worship him not only in spirit, but according to truth (4:23).

That is, on the one hand Christianity claims to give people the potential ability of getting to know God; on the other hand, it doesn't leave them to some sort of vague and mysterious feelings about what God is like. Christianity freely says and preaches that if you want to know God, you will find him perfectly and fully expressed in Jesus Christ.

You will find a lot about God through others in the Bible. Moses, maybe, who happened to be a Jew; Melchizedek, the priest of Salem, who wasn't a Jew and belonged to some other faith, the name of which we're not given in the Bible. In their day these men told about God in their limited way, but Christianity says that if we want to know fully what God is like, we will see that expressed in Jesus Christ. Therefore, anyone who would worship God and attain to Christian ideals must worship God according to truth—that is, according to what Christ has said.

I want to descend from abstruse theology to the very practical realms. Christ has shown us a lot of things about God, but take this one instance, the question of God's attitude to personal sin. The Bible says that God is angry (Ps 7:11 KJV), and you will perceive at once that a good many people will disagree with that completely.

I was talking to a student just the other day. He was, in fact, a Buddhist. He said to me, 'Christianity and Buddhism are really about exactly the same thing.'

I said, 'That's news to me.'

'It's the same God,' he said.

Presently, the conversation veered round to what God is really like. As I was trying to put to him what I felt Christianity was saying, I happened to mention this matter of the wrath of God.

'Oh, no,' he said, 'I couldn't have that. I don't think God gets angry. I couldn't begin to picture God as angry.'

I said, 'Why not?'

'That seems to me like an old grandfather up in the sky with a big stick.'

So I said, 'You've just told me that God is love. Suppose I said, that seems to me like an old grandfather up in the sky with a bag of sweets in his pocket.'

'No,' he said, 'it's not quite like that.'

I said, 'No, indeed not. But why will you accept that God is love, and on the other hand say that God does not get angry with sin and sinners?'

*Is there such a thing as the wrath of God?*

So here we come to an exceedingly practical point. Take this one question of whether God is angry with sinners and if there is such a thing as the wrath of God. It is a matter of fact that, of all the preachers and prophets, it was Jesus Christ our Lord who most told us that God is angry and there is wrath that will descend on unbelieving and impenitent people. If that is so, the person who says God doesn't get angry may have a very fine system of religious thought, but it's idle talk to say that it is the same as Christianity and one system is as true as another. Christ and Christianity say that God is angry against sin, and it's impossible for a person to achieve proper relations with God until this matter of sinfulness has been brought out into the light and properly forgiven.

It is here, of course, that Christ is unique. He makes it possible for men and women to face themselves in the starkest reality, with all their actual misdeeds and potential for sinning. Because Christ has offered a full sacrifice for sin, it is possible for anyone to be accepted and received by God. Christianity is unique and in our next lecture I will deal more fully with that matter, because our failures and God's attitude to them are of prime and fundamental importance in the practical things of Christian experience.

Finally, for now, if you say that one religion is as true as another, Christianity will say, 'No, there are such things as idols.' And, again, 'One religion is not as true as another. Some are only half the truth.'

### **Can we be sure of God's acceptance?**

Take one other practical facet of religious experience, the matter of whether we can be absolutely certain that we have been received by God, are children of God, and will never be cast out.

If you want to do a little bit of scientific investigation, take two hundred Christians at random, and put that simple question to them, 'Do you think it is possible to be sure that you've been accepted with God, and you will never be cast out?' You'll get very varied answers. A very high proportion of people will say, 'Certainly not. Nobody can possibly be sure.'

But the Bible says it plainly this way round. Summing up Christian faith, the Apostle John puts it like this:

And 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, in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life. (1 John 5:20)

### **What do we know?**

1. *That the Son of God has come*—that is the objective thing. We know that God has revealed himself. There is no doubt; we utterly know it.

2. *That he has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true*—that understanding I was talking about earlier. The people to whom Christ has given this ability to know God are absolutely sure of it. Listen again to the Christian claim, ‘We know that he has given us this understanding so that we may know him who is true.’
3. *That we are in him who is true, in his Son Jesus Christ.* That is, God has accepted us to himself, and will never cast us out. He has shared his life with us and will never withdraw it. ‘We know it’ is the Christian claim.

### **One religion is not as true as another**

So I want to leave it there. It is obviously impossible to maintain that these two interpretations are reconcilable. It can’t be equally as good to say, on the one hand, that the person who doesn’t know and doesn’t think you can know, has exactly the same relationship with God as the one who says, ‘Yes, because God is my spiritual Father, I know that I am in Christ and I have received that understanding of which the Bible speaks.’

As it’s obviously impossible to say that they’re both equally true, allow me to point out how eminently satisfying the Christian claim is. It is indeed possible for a man or woman to be reconciled to God in this fashion, to receive from Christ a spiritual life they didn’t have before, and to enter into a fellowship with God that is a new life and a new living with all its different and new potentials. If someone can know that and be utterly sure, how satisfying that personal relationship is.

You may think it is a crude analogy, but I don’t know that any woman would be content to say, ‘I don’t know whether Mr So-and-so is my husband or not. Sometimes I think he is, and sometimes I think he isn’t.’ It’s not a crude analogy, for God’s love for Christians is like the love of a man for his wife (Eph 5:25). The basic thing about that relationship must be the security of knowledge that they will not be cast out (John 6:37).

That is the Christian viewpoint on this matter—*one religion is not as true as another*. But if Christianity is true, then it’s not so much that we must decide on the basis of what we’ve discussed this evening which one of these various interpretations and theological arguments is true and which one is not. Jesus Christ is present in this room, not discussing with us alternative views of religion, but saying, ‘I have the power to impart a new life. If you only knew this gift of God, you would ask for it, and I would give it to you. If you receive it, you will come to that satisfaction and assurance’ (see John 4:10). It is for each of us to consider this in a calm, considered and unemotional way.

So, the question we should ask ourselves is not whether we think this religion is better than that one, but ‘what shall I do with this fantastic claim from Jesus Christ, that he’s offering me spiritual life as a gift, which now I have either to receive or decline?’ The Saviour’s remark to the woman of Samaria was, ‘If you knew what the gift was, you would ask for it, and I would give it.’

## Life's Failures

### *Can We Reach God's Standards by Our Own Efforts?*

Our topic for this lecture is not by any means the most pleasant. In fact, perhaps it would take quite an effort of our will to concentrate our attention on it for any length of time. Life's failures lie so close to the citadel of our personalities that continued attention upon them tends to depress us and we feel a sense of threat.

The happy extrovert will not want his sunshine to be clouded by being reminded that this world is a place marked by failure, and in parts by very dark failure. The over-conscientious introvert will find the subject so depressing that in the end he will put up psychological barriers and protections and want to argue either that we are not so bad after all, or, even if we are, what does it matter?

In addition, many of us have a history behind us. Perhaps in our younger days, when life was full of idealism, we made some serious attempts to cope with our failures and improve them, but the frustration and sense of failure have made us a bit wearied of the topic. In fact, that is why people at large very often find the topic of religion embarrassing. It raises old ghosts, puts its fingers into old sores, and is painful. Therefore, if we are to consider what Christianity has to say about life's failures, we shall need a little bit of courage and perseverance, because it insists on absolute realism and is bound to bring some skeletons out of our cupboards.

On the other hand, I would like to make the point quite clear at once that *true* Christianity is probably far more hopeful than many people imagine. Indeed, it is very safe to say that biblical Christianity is much more kind to failing human beings than the popular version. I find it so widespread and ingrained in people's thinking that perhaps you'll permit me to outline what I understand it to be.

### **What does popular Christianity have to say?**

Popular Christianity faces men and women, and says, 'You ought to believe in Jesus Christ.' By which it means, 'You ought to believe he's a good man, perhaps even a prophet, and perhaps in some sense the Son of God—whatever that means.' That leads on to believing that his teachings were exceedingly good, and we ought to rule our lives by the teachings of Jesus Christ, summed up in the golden rule, 'whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them' (Matt 7:12). It exhorts people to do their best and be honest, keep the Sermon on the Mount and follow the teachings of Jesus Christ.

But sooner or later it comes face-to-face with the problem that, however honest our efforts are, we all fail to keep those teachings as we ought to. Then it says something like this: 'Jesus Christ did tell us that God is love. He is kind and full of pity, so, if we sincerely repent of our failures, God is prepared to forgive us and encourage us to make a new start.'

So far so good.

But if we ask, 'When we have done our best, what hope have we that we shall be accepted by God and enter his heaven?', then we begin to find the inadequacies of the popular version, for it says that we can't have any certainty. We must go on doing our best and, in face of repeated failure, all we can hope is that God will forgive us up to the present. It's anybody's guess whether we finally achieve acceptance with God and qualify to enter his heaven.

That version, as you may see at once, is exceedingly depressing and it's no wonder that many people rebel against Christianity, if that is the Christianity they know.

In the first place, it sets an impossible standard. It holds out the teachings of Jesus Christ and God's holy law to people who cannot possibly keep those high standards, and then, faced with repeated failure, it can offer no certainty that success will come in the end.

### **What does true Christianity have to say?**

True Christianity is vastly different. But if we're going to see how it works and allow it to work in our experience, we must first of all be prepared to let Christianity in all its radical realism diagnose the trouble. I'm not going to repeat last week's lecture, but in this matter too, Christianity does start with the same basic proposition. The most serious thing about human failure is not that it makes us uncomfortable, nor that it fills us with self-loathing, nor even that it hurts other people and does them injustice, but *the Bible says that it is sin against God*.

Where the Bible comments on these things, you will find a whole list of terms that are not so much symptoms of failure, as terms that imply that our substandard behaviour has disrupted our relationship with God. It is coming short of God's glory, says the Bible (Rom 3:23). It is transgression of God's law, disrespect of God, ungodliness, and so on and so forth. And therefore, when Christianity outlines its programme of rescue, it starts where people, perhaps at first sight, wouldn't expect it to start. They are normally so anxious with getting on with the practical matter of improving their behaviour that they expect Christianity to say that they ought to have a go at doing better. So they're a little bit confused when they find that Christianity doesn't start there, but in a realm that seems to be, sort of, theological and a bit remote.

It says that the first thing we must do about our failure is to get our relationship with God put right, and not to ask what standards of behaviour would satisfy us, but what would satisfy God. If we were able to come up to it, what standard would God say that we could resume personal fellowship with him? We know perhaps all too well from our reading of the law of Moses in the Old Testament, from the Sermon on the Mount in the New Testament, and from a good deal else of the Bible, the standards that God asks and the kind of behaviour that would satisfy him.

## The nature of God's law

But just at this juncture I would like us to ponder the real nature of God's law.

### *It demands one hundred percent*

To put it in a nutshell, God's law spells out unbroken perfection, and God is not prepared to accept anything short of that. Perhaps our popular notions need a little bit of adjusting. Perhaps without ever having deliberately put it there, we have it in our thinking that God's law is like a university examination. The paper is set, everybody knows that the questions are going to be difficult, but if we score, say, fifty percent, we're almost certain of passing. Indeed, at Queen's, if you scored sixty percent, we should say you were very good. If you were to score seventy-five percent, we should say you were bordering on genius. And if you scored ninety percent, something would happen that's never happened before.

We get it into our heads that God's laws are like that sort of thing; an examination paper in which, if we achieve sixty percent, God will be very pleased with us. But the realism of the situation is vastly different. Allow me to quote a difficult phrase. The Bible says that if we keep the whole law and offend in one point, we are guilty of all (Jas 2:10). We have broken perfection, and that is sin.

Somebody says, 'But that is an absolutely unreasonable attitude to take to people that live in a world like ours. Is God so unreasonable?'

We'll leave that aside for the moment. I'm merely pointing out what the facts are according to the Bible: *God's law demands one hundred percent.*

### *It has sanctions*

Another thing we ought to understand is that God's law is not just a little kindly advice. Many scholars have suggested that *the law of God* in its original Hebrew term does mean 'advice, instruction', pointing us along the way we ought to go. And so indeed it is advice in that sense, but it is evidently very much more. God's law is a something that not only demands certain standards of conduct, but has sanctions added to it.

We mustn't try to escape that by saying that the Old Testament and the law of Moses were a little bit primitive, but Jesus Christ has come along and told us that God is love, and he's not quite so hard and austere as we used to think he was. When Christ came to interpret the Old Testament law, he had some very solemn and hard things to say. He said that the man who got angry with his brother in an ungoverned temper was in danger of hell fire (see Matt 5:22). As you will perceive, I cannot apologize for that expression. Our Lord was no sentimentalist, he insisted that *God's law has sanctions*, and coming short of it brings them down upon us.

Somebody says, 'That is a very gloomy situation indeed.'

But if we feel like that let's hurry on to the next point.

## Why did God give the law?

### *To expose our sin*

Here we come across what I am sure is a completely novel idea to many people. The popular version of Christianity says that God gave us the law, and we should try and keep it in order to qualify for his acceptance and entrance into heaven. That is precisely the opposite of what

the Bible says! God did not give us the law so that we should keep it in order to win his acceptance. Indeed, it says that God gave us that law so that it might prove us guilty.

He gave that law to do in the spiritual realm what any good physician would do in the physical realm. The doctor himself would diagnose our case and tell us what our need is. If we were not inclined to seek the necessary cure and treatment, he would use his diagnosis to try and make us see how serious our ailment is, and drive us, if need be, to seek treatment. In somewhat technical terms, that is precisely what the New Testament says: ‘. . . that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God’ (Rom 3:19).

I suspect you can see already what a tremendous amount of mischief has been done in people’s thinking by the popular misuse of God’s law. People have taken this thing, which was meant to expose our trouble and get us to see the nature and hopelessness of our spiritual disease, and they’ve merrily preached it to men and women, offering it to them as a standard that they should try and live up to, causing them endless despair and frustration as a result.

*The law is a diagnosis, it’s not a cure.* It’s not the medicine. God’s law is a very necessary thing, like a thermometer. A busy housewife is running a temperature, she’s in for a very good dose of the flu. But she insists on running the house still, and thinks it’s quite impossible that she could go to bed. The doctor is called in and insists on taking her temperature, so he puts the thermometer into her mouth— it’s 104.5°F. He says, ‘You have to go to bed otherwise you’ll be dead with a temperature like that.’ She disagrees most firmly and wishes there weren’t such things as thermometers, but in the end she’s persuaded to go to bed. The thermometer has done a very unpalatable job, but we all know she doesn’t swallow the thermometer in an attempt to get well.

God’s law was never given so that we should try and keep it in order to deserve God’s acceptance. It was given to make us face ourselves in a realistic fashion. If we haven’t done so before, it brings us to discover that we are incurable sinners, and some kind of rescue operation is necessary.

I want to dwell on that for a moment, because it is important that it sinks in. The people who misuse the law, and think that they’ve got to keep it to get to heaven, generally go in one of two ways.

If they are very honest and sincere people, they will do their level best to keep it, and in the end they’ll turn themselves into spiritual slaves. They’re being good because they feel they have to be good in order to earn God’s favour. They work hard at being good, and, in trying to earn a place in God’s heaven and gain his approval, they have turned themselves into spiritual slaves, and God doesn’t want spiritual slaves. God doesn’t propose to sell his friendship: it can’t be bought on the market of good behaviour.

Or if they are a little bit blasé, they will say, ‘I’m a Christian and I do my best to lead a Christian life.’ By keeping the Bible at arm’s length they manage to persuade themselves that they’ve achieved a Christian standard—more or less. Then, of course, it comes as a rude shock and a very uncomfortable sort of experience for anybody to come along and tear away that impression.

This kind of situation repeated itself many times when our Lord was here on earth. In fact, the four Gospels are taken up to a great extent with describing these situations. Some people

were very sincerely of the persuasion that you have to keep God's law in order to qualify for a place in his kingdom and be accepted with God. They did their utmost, and in the end some of them thought they had more or less attained—they had more or less kept the law. There was that one famous incident of the young gentleman who came to the Lord, and said, 'Master, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?' And the Lord said that he was to keep the commandments. Instead of seeing the point that he couldn't keep them, he said with tremendous self-assurance, 'But, yes, Master, all those things I have kept.' Of course, he'd done no such thing (see Luke 18:18–21).

If you read carefully our Lord's Sermon on the Mount, you will find him engaged in a very delicate and uncomfortable operation that consisted in removing the illusion from people that they had kept God's law; at any rate, near enough.

Christ said, for instance, 'The law says, "You shall not murder." And you Pharisees imagine that, just because you haven't actually stuck a knife into somebody, you've fulfilled the law.'

But he pointed out that God's law is not just a mechanical thing like that. God's law is spiritual. Maybe he hasn't murdered anybody, but if a man loses his temper with his brother, and hates him, Christ says that it is just the same as murder (see Matt 5:21–22). Similarly, with adultery. Many a Pharisee prided himself that he'd never had illicit relations with his neighbour's wife, but, says Christ, 'That's not enough—it's good, but it's not keeping the law. A man who has let his imagination dwell on it, though he hasn't done the deed, has at heart broken the law' (see vv. 27–28).

Understandably, the Pharisees were furious. It was one of the causes, amongst others, why in the end they hounded Jesus Christ to the cross. It was so distinctly uncomfortable to have this illusion pulled away and their sin exposed, for it left them on the same level as the woman on the streets and the despised tax collector. When they had done their very, very best, they were still coming short of God's standards; they were still spiritually bankrupt.

## **The turning point**

I have dwelt here at length because for many people down the centuries this has proved to be the turning point in their spiritual pilgrimage. When we come to see what God is saying by his law, and discover that, even when we have honestly done our best, we are spiritually bankrupt, it makes us ask whether God has now some other way of coping with this matter of life's failure, that doesn't tell us to do our best to keep the law. And, of course, there is another way. It is the Christian gospel.

### *The Apostle Paul*

It was the turning point in the spiritual pilgrimage of the Apostle Paul. I know history tells us of his great experience as he travelled up the road to Damascus, in which he saw the risen Christ (Acts 9). But he had another experience. He was brought up in a very religious family, and was good at religion. He had kept the law and could honestly tell us that he was above reproach. You couldn't have pointed a finger at him.

But one day he remembered the commandment in the law, 'You shall not covet' (Exod 20:17). It came to him as a shattering revelation, for he found that he did covet, '... if it had

not been for the law, I would not have known sin. For I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, “You shall not covet” (Rom 7:7). He determined to do his very best to stop it, but to his dismay the more he tried the worse it got. You may say it was a very small peccadillo, but it shattered the principle on which he had been living.

If your righteousness depends on keeping God’s law one hundred percent, you only have to pierce it in one place and you’ve ruined it, says the Bible: ‘For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it’ (Jas 2:10). You only need one puncture in a balloon to let the air out and the whole thing will come down. It shattered Paul’s confidence in any sort of character that he could weave by his own efforts, and brought him to see how glorious, and yet how very different, Christianity’s way is of coping with human failure.

### **How does Christianity deal with human failure?**

Not merely repenting of one or two odd things that are wrong—it’s wrong to steal, it’s wrong to commit adultery, it’s wrong to do this and do that. That’s involved, of course; but it’s repentance in a far deeper sense, that, when we’ve done our best, we are spiritually bankrupt.

#### **It looks for the cause**

We tend to be so occupied with the incidentals, but as in most things our Lord had some very illuminating remarks to make. He was commenting upon that perverse human tendency of putting other people right. We can see other people’s faults very clearly, and very often are found in the enterprising business of casting specks out of other people’s eyes when we’ve got a big log in our own (Matt 7:3–5). So he used an illustration (see vv. 15–20). He said, ‘Are grapes gathered from thorn bushes?’ Of course not, you gather grapes from a grape vine. How do grapes come on a vine? Not by accident: grapes on a vine are indicative of the nature of the tree that bears them.

We can see that in the world of horticulture, but we find it very difficult to see that it is the same in the world of human nature. My individual failures and my more serious faults are not accidents, nor curious exceptions to the rule. They are indicative of a deeper cause. To be blunt, they spring from the fact that our human nature has gone wrong; it is rotten.

Somebody will say, ‘But, sir, you’re getting worse and worse, and worse now. This is exceedingly depressing. Is there no hope for humans?’

There is indeed. The first thing to do is to face up to the trouble, and in the end we shall find it kinder. If we ask what it is that makes everybody sin—why does every mother’s fair-haired little boy and blue-eyed little girl, invariably and without exception, grow up to be a sinner?—the answer comes back, because we were all born with a sinful nature. The Bible adds that it is not altogether our fault. The man going down the road, helplessly drunk, the housewife who loses her temper, the teacher who is sarcastic and bitter—it’s not altogether their fault. They have failed because they were born with a fallen, sinful nature, that resulted from the transgression of the forefather of our race.

I must say, I am exceedingly attracted by that. I do unashamedly believe in the Bible’s account that the human race has been tainted at its root by the sin of its first forefather. It’s the

kindest doctrine that was ever preached. It doesn't come alongside a person, and say, 'You wretch, you are altogether personally responsible for the mess your life is in.' It says, 'Indeed, in some part you are to blame, you have deliberately gone that way. But in some great part it wasn't your fault to begin with, and you are exceedingly to be pitied.' God is a realist. He knows that we were born sinners before we personally started to sin, and that much we could not help because it was somebody else's fault.

### **It provides the remedy**

Here is the happier side of the story. God doesn't come alongside us, and say, 'Now you must do your best to go right,' because that would be a mockery of our position. He says, 'I have a rescue operation. You became a sinner, you couldn't help it, it was somebody else's fault, and I'm prepared to save you. Again, it will not be by your personal effort, but by what somebody else has done.' It will not be by our effort, but by what God has intervened to do, particularly through Jesus Christ.

The first thing then is to put right this ruptured relationship so that God can receive us into his friendship, fellowship, and partnership in this business of living. On what terms can he accept us? It can't be by our effort. He can only accept us because Christ has died and suffered the sanctions of the law, so that God can maintain all his value judgments and say that sin is the hideous thing that it is, and yet at the same time be perfectly just in receiving men and women who are still sinful.

I want to stay here because this is glorious, and it is where Christianity differs from religion.

Religion says, 'Try and improve yourself so that God may accept you.'

Christianity says, 'You'll never do that, but God has found a way of being able to accept you as you are, without any improvement.'

Knowing the very worst about us, God loves us and is prepared to accept us as we are. He can do that in a way that's perfectly consistent with his own standards and the sanctions of his law, because Christ died to bear our sin, its consequences, and its guilt (see Isa 53:6; 1 Pet 2:24).

The New Testament tells us that Christ's death upon the cross was not merely an example of courage and devotion to God, nor an expression of man's enmity against all that's good and holy. When Christ died, he suffered the sanctions of God's law and the wrath of God against sin. Because the law was upheld and honoured by the death of Christ, God can now accept those who are willing to be accepted, not on the ground of their personal attainment, either real or potential, but because of what Christ has done.

### **Two good reasons why that is right**

1. *God's love for men and women.* In spite of the tremendous standards of his law and holiness, God still wants us, and will go to any length to save us.
2. *God's realism.* He doesn't ask us first to improve; he doesn't even make his acceptance of us depend upon our improvement. He's prepared to take us as we are and accept us into his

personal friendship and fellowship because of what Christ has done. That's why Christianity calls itself a gospel and not a religion. There is a heaven of difference.

### **What popular Christianity says**

'What do you mean then, when you say that God is prepared to accept us because Christ died for us? We do believe, perhaps, that Christ did die for our sins. Doesn't the Bible say that he did? But doesn't that mean that if we come in sincere repentance to Christ, and confess our sins, God accepts us up to the present? He wipes clean the sheet of the past, and gives us the chance to have another go. But, of course, it's still on the same terms. We've got to do our best because we've been forgiven so far, but everything will now depend on how well we do in the future.'

### **But that is not true**

If acceptance with God for those who believe in Christ meant that God forgives them up to the present, and from now on they must do their very best and God will decide at the end whether they've passed, they would be back under the same old principle. It would depend on them and their behaviour, and we know from the start that they would never come up to the standard. Acceptance with God because of what Christ has done is a far more radical thing than that. It is acceptance first and last; now and for ever. Realistically, it must be so. The principle of acceptance with God on the ground of our attainment is out for ever.

Those who are prepared to receive Christ and come to God solely through what Christ has done, are received not only now, but God guarantees that he will never cast them out. The Bible is exceedingly firm on this. In case you should think I've run away with enthusiasm, let me quote you what it actually says to those people who are 'in Christ Jesus', those who have abandoned hope in their own endeavour: 'There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus' (Rom 8:1). Or to take another phrase from the Bible, they 'shall not come into condemnation' (John 5:24 KJV). Not merely is their past forgiven, but their whole self as a unit of human personality—past, present and future—is accepted with God for ever.

I told you that Christianity is kinder than some people make out.

You say, 'But how can it be?'

### **There is only one judgment**

The Bible tells us that God does not hold court every day of the week. He says there is only one judgment, and it comes after death. It's not that your life is judged today and now there's a clean sheet, so you go on and see what happens next. Just as the one judgment is after death, 'so Christ, [was] offered once to bear the sins of many' (Heb 9:28).

God is exceedingly frank; he keeps nothing 'up his sleeve'. He has the courage to tell us that if we abandon trust in our own effort and put all our faith in Christ and what he has done, Christ's death upon the cross has already happened so he's already cleared the page of God's judgment book. We may have great peace of conscience towards God and know that we are accepted by him now, and it will never be otherwise.

*Does that mean that we can live as we like?*

But, of course, you can think now of tremendous objections. The commonest of all is that, if a man is sure that he is accepted with God, sure that he will be in God's heaven and never be cast out, tomorrow he can go and do as he likes. In the name of good religion and getting people to behave properly, you've got to keep them on their toes and not tell them too much. You've got to keep them uncertain, otherwise they will just do whatever they like.

The objection is not valid, but it's a very interesting one because you'll find it in the New Testament. It's precisely how people objected to Paul. They said he was preaching something terribly wrong by telling people they could be sure of acceptance with God; he was just playing into the hands of sin by encouraging people to do what they like.

If people brought that up against Paul, and many people, perhaps even you, would bring it up against me, doesn't it show that I've got the right end of the stick? At least, I've got the gospel that Paul preached. Nobody ever objects to popular Christianity when it says that it all depends on you, nor that it would encourage anybody to sin. I'm in the right camp.

## **What does acceptance with God do?**

### **1. It promotes gratitude to God in our hearts**

Firstly, when a person puts his faith in Christ, he acknowledges the reality of the situation. He knows that he's a bankrupt sinner, and will remain a sinner in that sense, because he will never be perfect here on earth. He sees that God has done something about it. Knowing what he is and what he will be, God is prepared to accept him because of what Christ has done. Then that sets loose within that person a tremendous stream of gratitude to God.

Do you remember the story of the woman who came into Simon's dinner party (Luke 7:36–50)? She crouched down beside Christ and began to weep and wash his feet with her tears, and wipe them with her hair. Simon objected strongly. He was a very good, religious Pharisee, but he didn't like this display of evangelical emotion. Our Lord had to point out the significance of it.

He said, 'Do you know what all her personal gratitude to me means? It is because the woman has been forgiven. It's just like a man who had two debtors. They couldn't pay anything; they hadn't got anything to pay with. The man forgave them, and the result was that they felt grateful to the creditor and loved him because he had forgiven them. That woman's affection to me is because she knows she has been forgiven, and that I have accepted her. Simon, you're exceedingly religious. When I came into your house you gave me a courteous welcome of a sort, but I've not seen that personal affection in your heart towards me that I've seen in this woman's heart.'

He left Simon to work out the reason why. He was full of doing the best he could to obtain approval of God, but Simon was quite a stranger to the emotion of gratitude to God for forgiveness.

## 2. It restores our relationship with God

The person who has come to Christ finds himself not only accepted, but then he comes across what is the second great thing in Christianity: a relationship with God restored because of Christ's sacrifice.

Christ, being a living personality, imparts his Holy Spirit, and being God he is able to join himself to a believer. This is not mysticism, it is reality. Once a person has received that new power it begins him on the road of Christian discipline, and God tells us straight that there will be a lot of discipline. Many lessons have to be learned and mistakes will be made. The process of facing up to sin and repenting of individual sins and habits will go on all through life and the path may be hard indeed. But while that kind of Christian discipline goes on and develops a person's character, the basis of our acceptance with God is never called into question. It doesn't depend on our progress; it depends on what Christ has done.

Far from that leading to licence, it does the opposite. Now secure that we will never be cast out, we are not afraid to look at ourselves in a realistic fashion, free of that natural tendency to turn a blind eye to our faults. There is no need to be content with shoddy standards, and we don't need to dither on the edge of a nervous breakdown if we discover sin in our lives. We are still accepted with God because of what Christ has done, and we find the courage to look at ourselves realistically and begin the work of Christian discipline.

## 3. It encourages us to please God for the right motives

We're no longer trying to be good for what we get out of it or to earn a place in heaven. I find a lot of my agnostic friends object strongly to Christianity. They say, 'Why should I be good just to get a place in heaven?' They object to being good for that motive. 'It's nothing more than cupboard love,' they say.

Popular Christianity is merely a form of cupboard love, earning a place in heaven, being good for what you get out of it. But true Christianity receives a person because of what Christ has done, and encourages him to be good simply to please God, and because being good is worthwhile.

You'll say, of course, 'I know a lot of people who claim to be saved, or some such talk, and I've seen them in business.'

Doubtless you have. I've seen them elsewhere. Our Lord said you would see quite a lot of people like that. *Tares*, he called them, among the wheat (see Matt 13:24–30 KJV). But the fact that there are tares does not make the farmer plough up his field of wheat, and discard the wheat. Because there are people who claim to have Christian salvation, and then go on to show that they are utter hypocrites with no experience of God at all, should not make any of us so silly as to throw away the genuine salvation that Christ offers.

This is not some involved theological puzzle; it is the basis of a personal relationship, for God is a person. There is an obvious difference between the person who's always trying to do his best in order to be accepted with God, and says, 'God, I'm doing my best – will you accept me on those terms?', and the person who says, 'God, I have tried to do my best, and sometimes I haven't done anything of the sort. I admit that I'm a spiritual bankrupt and I now see the seriousness of having broken your law. I want to have fellowship with you. I need salvation

and I accept your offer that Christ died for me, knowing what I am, what I have done, and will yet do.'

There is a tremendous difference. If you were going to sum it up in brief technical terms, it is the difference between heaven and hell.

## Life's Outcome

### *Does Life Have Any Purpose?*

One of the ancient sages, so we are told, sat himself down to contemplate the world around him.<sup>1</sup> He observed the sun, he watched it get up one morning, climbing steadily higher and higher, and got the impression it was going somewhere. As afternoon came on it began to decline, disappeared from his sight, and that seemed to be that. But then the next morning it got up again, precisely where it had on the first day. So his impression that the sun was going somewhere was completely shattered, and he found it had come back simply to where it started. It was the same the next day, and all the days. It was merely a never-ending circle.

He looked at the rivers and watched how busily and energetically they were pursuing their way down the riverbeds. He thought, surely they're going somewhere? And so they were in a sense, for they toppled themselves down into the sea. But then, presently, the sun came out and evaporated the water, and took it up into the clouds. The winds took the clouds back over the mountains, precisely where the water started. They weren't going anywhere after all. It was only a circle.

Then he felt the wind. It was blowing with some gusto today from the north at a tremendous pace. Surely it was going somewhere? But tomorrow it changed, and it was east. Presently, it was west, and then south-west, but before you knew it, there it was, back again, blowing from the north. It hadn't gone anywhere at all. It was only a circle.

The more he looked, and the more he thought, he came to the impression that human life is like that. For all its bustle and bother and energy, and its seeming to get somewhere, it is but a circle, never-ending, getting nowhere. He dismissed it all as labour and vanity.

### **Is life taking us anywhere?**

We may not share his pessimism, but I suppose it's in all of us at some time or other to ask ourselves, where is life getting us to; has it a purpose; does it go anywhere? The question seems to be ingrained in us and we cannot easily think of things not having a purpose.

Your neighbour buys himself a new car. You come home one Monday night, and there he is. He's got it out of the garage, and he's washing and cleaning it. Well, you've got to keep a new car clean. You come home on Tuesday night, and there he is underneath it, greasing all the joints, and you say, 'Filthy job, but you can't have a car without doing that.' Wednesday night, there he is at the plugs. Difficult and temperamental things, plugs, but they've got to be adjusted if a car is going to move and get you anywhere. Thursday, he's at the windscreen

---

<sup>1</sup> King Solomon, Ecclesiastes 1:5-7.

washers. You can't see unless the windscreen washers are right. Thursday night, he's at the gearbox. Troublesome things gears, if you don't do them properly, and now and again they need adjusting. So do the brakes, of course, and Friday night he's at the brakes. And Saturday? Something has gone wrong with the clutch.

You say, 'Poor old chap, but you can't have a car unless you maintain the thing.'

On Monday you come by, and, lo and behold, whereas you thought he would now at last be going somewhere in this car, he's started to polish it all again. Tuesday, it's the greasing, and you watch as this goes on for a week or two until you can't resist it any longer. So you go up to him, and say, 'You fascinate me. I've been watching you for many weeks, and all you seem to do is go the round of cleaning the car, polishing it, adjusting it, and keeping it well stocked up with oil. Don't you ever go anywhere in it?'

And he says, 'Go anywhere, what do you mean? I'm far too busy to go anywhere in it. It takes so long to keep it right that I just haven't got the time.'

You'll think, of course, that the man has taken leave of his senses.

*Is this life all there is?*

It's not a dissimilar feeling that comes over Christian preachers at times when they invite people to consider the purpose of life. The reply comes back, 'We haven't got time to think about those things. Life is so full, business is so pressing, and there's the children's education, and one thousand and one other things.'

Yes, life is one round of filling up our bodies with the fuel they want, keeping the roof over our heads, and maintaining ourselves in repair; but when are we going to have the time to go somewhere? And, anyway, where are we going?

Somebody says, 'But that's not a fair question to ask. The idea that life has got to have a purpose beyond itself is quite illusory. We have no justification for thinking that. We ought to cut the knot of our problem by saying that life hasn't got any purpose. We're just here to enjoy whatever comes, doing the accounts, the washing up, enjoy our relaxation and recreation, and that's all.'

Perhaps in a limited sense there is some sort of truth in that idea: we're meant to enjoy life as it comes. But we cannot ultimately escape the question that comes into all our minds at times: when life comes to its end, is there any hope of life beyond the grave?

Those who have enjoyed life and had it good will find themselves saying, 'But why must I die and leave it all? Is there no hope of enjoying something further, perhaps something fuller? Is our experience just given to mock us, to whet our appetites, and then lead us to the disappointment of eternal oblivion?'

Those who have had life rough will ask it with an even greater insistence. 'Is this all? I find myself here with a brain and I can imagine what life could be if I had not been so limited. Is there nothing beyond, and no hope of something better?'

Most of us, in fact, wouldn't want an exact repetition; the endless repetition bores us. But we would be interested, surely, if there was something higher for which this life, with all its joys and sorrows, was but the beginners' class?

## Where Christianity is unique

I fancy we all know the comfort Christianity gives. I wish that we all shared its wonderful heartthrob, and the glory of its expectation. Christianity says that the grave isn't the end. It affirms that when we die, we are not done for. Those who have committed themselves to Christ, and received Christ, depart to be with Christ. The Bible describes it as being very far better (Phil 1:23). That is not meant to be a criticism of this life, as though it was something that we should hurriedly wish to escape. Christianity affirms that this life is good, very good, but there is better awaiting us. When Christians die it is not oblivion, it is consciously to depart and be with Christ, which is very far better.

While we may think we know exactly what Christianity says in general, I would like us to pay special attention to two unique features of biblical Christianity that tend to get overlooked in our general thinking. After all, Christianity is not the only *religion* that maintains survival after death.

### Christianity teaches that there will be a bodily resurrection of the dead

We haven't done Christianity justice if we merely think in terms of survival. For, while that is true, Christianity affirms as its great hope that one day there will be a bodily resurrection of the dead.

Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. (1 Thess 4:17)

Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: 'Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?' The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Cor 15:51-57)

I would like to underline that point, because some of our Christian theologians have come to the belief that this isn't what Christianity says at all. They will tell us that all Paul was saying in his ancient idiom is what we would say in our modern idiom, that a person survives after death.

A bishop's daughter once said to me, on the authority both of her father and her husband, who was a clergyman, 'I don't believe in a bodily resurrection.' Her husband had departed, and she said, 'I believe Peter lives on in his work, but I wouldn't really like to think of him coming out of the grave and being bodily resurrected. I don't think Paul meant that.'

But Paul did mean that! I say that without apology, for we have enough evidence to make up our minds on that score. Just to take one instance, when Paul stood before that learned society, the court of the Areopagus in Athens (see Acts 17:16-34). He knew that among them were Epicurean philosophers and Stoics, and not a few others. He was well educated himself, and had read, maybe, in the Greek philosophers. He knew right well that there were men who

had accepted Plato's theory of the survival of the soul after death. He preached to them what Christianity says, that Jesus Christ died bodily, and on the third day he literally, bodily, physically if you like, rose from the dead. They reacted with hoots of laughter. They didn't believe in a bodily resurrection. Their poet, Aeschylus, had said as much. Aeschylus had affirmed that once this body of ours collapses and goes to dust, there is no *anastasis*, no rising again.

Now we can easily see that, had Paul only meant that a man lives on in his work and somehow survives, Paul could have said, 'Gentlemen, you are too hasty in your mirth. I didn't mean a literal resurrection, with people coming out of their graves—I was using a metaphor to suggest that they live on in their toil.' But Paul said nothing of the sort. He positively affirmed a bodily resurrection not only of Christ, but also all who are Christ's.

Somebody says, 'You don't mean literal flesh and bone?'

Why not? In his argument on the subject, Paul says that there are many different sorts of flesh (1 Cor 15:39–41). There's animal flesh, bird flesh, fish flesh, and there's human flesh that we can observe around us at this present moment, why do you imagine it would be impossible for God to give humans a body of flesh? A different kind of a body, of course, working maybe on different principles; a different sort of flesh, a spiritual body as distinct from a soulish body.

But we must leave Paul answering the difficulties of his contemporaries, for we want to consider the next unique thing about Christianity. It teaches not only a bodily resurrection, but it affirms that this resurrection will take place when Jesus Christ comes back again.

### **Christianity teaches that Christ will come again**

If we're going to come to terms with Christianity and understand what Christianity is saying, I submit to you that we shall have to take seriously what Christianity says about the return of our Lord Jesus Christ. It will not do to say that when Christ and the apostles spoke of coming again, as they did on many occasions, they were merely using colourful language to suggest that God will somehow draw near to us in the crises of history and give us his help. The manifest fact is that they literally meant what they said.

They did not talk about the coming again of Christ as some bizarre addition to orthodox Christianity, nor some deluxe theological quibble for those who take Christianity rather seriously. They took it as one of the main planks of the Christian gospel, and the Christian affirmation that Christ came once, he is coming again, and the resurrection of the body will take place on that occasion.

#### *His second coming will be as literal as his first coming*

If we are going to see what answer Christianity gives to the question of life's outcome, we must now spend some moments thinking about the coming again of our Lord. As they watched our Lord ascend, the angels said to the apostles, 'This Jesus . . . will come in the same way as you saw him go' (Acts 1:11). The words are crystal clear, and the only way of escaping their plain sense is to jettison Christianity and write a new sort of Christianity out of your own head.

The Bible speaks of his coming in the future as a *second coming*. The first coming was literal, and so will the second be. The first had to do with our salvation, and so will the second. The

Bible puts it this way: 'But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself' (Heb 9:26).

When he first appeared on our planet, he came for the specific purpose of grappling with the basic problem of human sin. He died upon a cross 'for our sins' (1 Cor 15:3). He died to make it possible for God to forgive human sin, to receive all who will repent and come to him through Christ as self-confessed spiritual bankrupts, being reconciled to God not through their effort but through what Christ has done. Calvary stands as a historic fact and the witness that God has visited our world. He has shown himself and done something about human sin.

#### *The practical effects of his second coming*

The Bible then goes on to say that the way is open for man to come to God to be reconciled, to have his sins pardoned and forgiven, and to receive new life and the beginnings of personal fellowship that spell out salvation and eternal life. That happens now, but there is a part of our salvation that awaits his second coming: 'so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him' (Heb 9:28).

It means, of course, that he shall appear the second time as literally as the first, but not to deal with the question of sin. He's not going to die again nor offer another atonement. He's not coming then to try and convert people, but to put into effect the final stage of salvation for those who are already converted. That is, the salvation of their bodies. God's programme is that man is not going to disappear into thin air like some disembodied spirit, but saved as a whole personality, spirit, soul and body, and for that great final climax Christ will literally come again.

The early Christians were not only converted, in the sense that they had turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, but it was an integral part of their faith that they were waiting for God's Son to come from heaven (1 Thess 1:9-10). In another of Paul's letters we read that our citizenship is now really in heaven: 'But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself' (Phil 3:20-21).

And Christianity says more. It says that not only will individual Christians be raised, but that God has a programme for this world as we know it. He's not going to blow it into smithereens immediately and start again; he is going to deliver this groaning creation from its bondage of corruption, and bring it into the glorious freedom of the sons of God (see Rom 8:19-23). This world is not always to know its blight and its blast, and its cancer. The Bible uses a very expressive term indeed. It says that the world *groans*. The creatures around us groan, the plants groan if we could hear them.

It is the 'pains of childbirth'. As we see it now, it is not much more than an embryo, but it shall be delivered from that and the point of its deliverance awaits the perfection of God's work of redemption of mankind. God has a purpose that redeemed humans, when they have learned their lessons, are going to be given a new world, a new age, and when they've come to their age of responsibility, so to speak, God will put the administration of a cleansed and

healed world into their hands, as a proud father into the hands of his son who has now come of age.

You may say that this is a fantastic soap bubble of imagination, but it's what the Bible says, and I submit to you that the promise is a worthy one. The prospect is exceedingly glorious, and nobody would want to hope that the Bible isn't true, except those who have a rather poor view of this life. The more we've enjoyed this life, the more attractive it will appear to us that God is going to do something marvellous. We shall have a world delivered from its aches and pains, pests and diseases. There will be people who have been redeemed, who have learned their moral lessons, and the administration of earth will be put into their hands under Christ, so long as earth endures. When that glad period is done, when earth has worn out and the sun has gone black, God will carry his never-ending programme on to the next stage.

### *The religion of the Sadducees*

I have taken some time to emphasize that side of Christianity because I personally think it is very necessary. It will prevent us at least doing with Christianity what the Sadducees of old did with Judaism. They were some of the most inveterate opponents of the Christian gospel, although they professed to believe the Old Testament on which it is founded. The Sadducees were interesting people, very religious, and they were generally appointed as high priest, the primate of the Jewish religion. They tended to be the learned people and they had a considerable weight of influence on the Sanhedrin.

But the religion of the Sadducees had come to this. They believed in God of a sort, and in religion because it was a way of keeping people decent. Without religion, the people would run around like animals. It was nice to have a religious wedding service and show some decency for life. It would be very uncomfortable if people went around thinking it was all right to kill, lie, steal, and cheat. Religion kept people within the bounds of decency, and made life pleasant. Besides, it was a good intellectual exercise to go along and hear the choir sing in the temple, to enjoy the pageant and watch all the robes and vestments on the Day of Atonement, for instance. It made people decent.

But the Sadducees didn't believe that there were any angels or spirits. Life is just as you see it. That's all there is; there's no spiritual life beyond, with which we must come in contact if we are to find our true destiny. They didn't believe in resurrection. They held the view that once you've seen the show you die, and you're done for. They were, of course, extreme, and they found the Christian message very disconcerting.

There were these fishermen in Jerusalem, their capital city, preaching that resurrection had taken place and Jesus Christ had literally risen. These Christians preached that there is a spirit world, that God is a spirit too, and there is such a thing as coming into contact with him and being spiritually born again. Then they heard these Christians preaching that Jesus Christ had not only risen, but he was coming back again. He refused to abandon earth, but was determined to come back again and intrude.

There was a very big difference between the Sadducees and Christianity. We're not Sadducees, but would you not agree with me that there is a danger that we treat our Christianity somewhat like the Sadducees treated their Judaism? We go to church; we believe in religion—it doesn't really matter what kind. It's good for people and keeps them decent.

Registry office weddings are all right, if you like them, but isn't it much better to have it done decently? We like being good, but keep a practical belief in the reality of the spiritual world at arm's length, and do not live in the considered and deliberate belief that one day this same Jesus is coming again.

### **Christianity teaches that God has a programme**

Somebody will say then, 'But what evidence have we got? If this is Christianity, it is important to know what it is. And obviously, if Jesus Christ is coming again, and my future is bound up with his coming, then I must give very considerable attention to it. What evidence have we that it's not all a daydream, pie in the sky, that it's not merely dope for the masses?'

Perhaps I could best attempt to answer that by reviewing what I understand to be the programme that the Bible outlines. What is the reading of history as the Bible sees it, and its forecast for the future? The Bible says that this is God's world, and it didn't just happen. It would take a lot faith to believe it just happened like Topsy,<sup>2</sup> who thought that she grew from nowhere.

#### *God gave mankind responsibility to look after his creation*

The Bible affirms that when God made man upon this world, he had a definite programme for him to have dominion. Far from being unscientific, those early chapters of Genesis set mankind in a true, dignified and scientific relation to the world in which he finds himself. Not some primitive pagan bowing down in fright at lightning and thunder, but, right from the word go, made to be superior to the creation in which he found himself. He was to rule it, to organize and administer it and, the Bible adds, to subdue it.

Whereas God Almighty planted a *garden* in Eden (the very statement showing that the rest of the world was not a garden) and God made it so that man should have something to do. He was to be God's viceroy, using his brains and his intellect, and developing this earth for God. In some degree, he has done it. Who doesn't feel a certain pulse of pride when we watch mankind's own achievements: conquering earth, conquering the elements, and now on the verge of conquering space.

#### *God gave us a free will*

But then the Bible points out that you cannot take one or two steps along this road of acting as God's viceroy and developing earth, before you come across the moral problem of who is to have how much of the garden. It's a problem that's with us still and we find that, in developing earth and exploring space, somehow or other we cannot cut it loose from moral problems. The thing has become a rat race, with man's ugly temper ever looming behind the button that could blow the whole thing to pieces.

Not only a moral problem between fellow humans, but, more important, a moral problem between us and God. God gave us a free will, for God didn't want puppets. He wanted intelligent children, so he had to allow us to have a real choice between good and evil. A choice, in the end, between God on the one side, and no God, but just tiny me, on the other.

---

<sup>2</sup> A character in Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852).

The Bible's record is that mankind took his step of choice, grasped at his independence of God, and transgressed the very God that had given him his being.

I believe that story. I find mankind doing the very same thing today on the basis of intricate ideologies, spinning his philosophies to prove to himself that God isn't there after all; man does own the earth, and only man. Or maybe not spinning his philosophy at all, but only wanting it to be so, and drowning his conscience in the endless whirl of daily life.

*Through Abraham God established a nation and a land*

The Bible goes on to say that God didn't leave himself without witness and abandon the 'ship'. Man chose to go his independent way, but through a converted Abraham God eventually established a special and unique outpost on earth, in the form of the Jewish nation. That isn't to say that God didn't speak to the other nations, but he did speak to this one and called it aside for a special purpose. He gave it special privileges and declared that it would remain a separate nation all down history. Because of its disobedience, it would be scattered all around the earth, but it would remain a separate entity, and at last come back to its land.

I submit this as a very hard piece of evidence. In all of earth's history there has never been such a phenomenon as the Jew. The nations all said that they were not to go back to their land, but the Bible said they would, and they're back in it. And though the nations, the Christian nations included, have massacred and persecuted them, and our recent world has seen the gassing of six million of them, they are there and still a distinct entity.

*Through Moses God established his law*

God gave that nation an experience of the law, and if you compare their Ten Commandments, given long ago in the time of Moses, with the Code of Hammurabi, or whatever else you like, you will find unique features that are not found anywhere else. In Israel there is no idolatry; no multitude of gods. Right from the word go, they believed in one God. Not even one God per tribe, but one God who made the whole thing. The monotheism is so striking that many scholars have said it couldn't have been written by Moses, for if it was in that early day, it is no evidence for evolution, but evidence that God made himself known to people who otherwise would be wallowing in the mire of mythology.

*God gave them a unique book*

I'm aware that there are other holy books in the world, but the Old Testament is unique, particularly for its insistence, in ever-increasing tone, that God would send the Saviour of the world through this specific nation. No other book has dared to say it. We've had plenty of books that tell us to be good, that philosophize and speculate metaphysically about the nature of God, if he's there, but we've never had another book to say that, just as God has interfered in history to bring out the Jewish nation, so in the course of time he would send the Saviour of the world through that same nation.

The evidence for those accumulating prophecies is open to our inspection. It is the fact that Jesus Christ has come. Anybody who cannot see the striking agreement between Christ and what was written about him in the Old Testament before he came must be dull indeed. The interesting thing is that, when it comes to the very centre of the purpose for which the Old Testament said Messiah would come, namely, to give himself as a sacrifice for human sin,

be rejected by men and crucified, the very curious thing is that the whole matter is put beyond any doubt.

You could argue, 'Well, the Jews wrote the book. They mapped out what was going to happen to Messiah and then they went and performed it. Anybody can do that. You first write out a programme, then get your man to come along and match it up.'

#### *They rejected their Messiah*

But it was the very custodians of the book, through whom the prophecies had come, who turned against Jesus Christ. They said that he wasn't God's Son, and did their utmost to prove he wasn't. But it is a strange, strange thing that, in their effort to prove that he wasn't the Messiah, they did the very thing that proved he was.

Instead of putting Jesus on a throne, which they thought would prove he was the Messiah, they put him on a cross; only to find that that is what their Old Testament said would happen. Isaiah said that he would be rejected of men and he would die. The Lord would lay upon him the iniquity of us all; he would be wounded for our transgressions, and bruised for our iniquities, so that by his sacrifice we might have peace (see Isa 53:3-6).

And you say, 'Why did the Jews crucify him and so fulfil what the prophets had said, if they were trying to prove that he wasn't their long-prophesied Messiah?'

The answer to that is not hard to find. The Jews were very much like us in this respect. They saw that God was going to bring in a Saviour and a bright new world. The Old Testament pictures of it are vivid indeed. But they had it in their heads, as most of us have, that the Messiah would amass himself with chariots and horses, tanks and bombs, he would cut off the heads of his enemies and make Israel the victorious nation. The world is still committed to that notion: they think they're going to improve this world by developing it technologically and aesthetically.

#### *Fellowship with God needs to be restored*

But the thing that keeps us back from our golden age is not that our backyards are too small or that our cars don't have enough cylinders, or our wage packets are not full enough; the problem is what the Bible has said from the very start. Mankind is out of gear with the God who made us. The trouble is moral and spiritual. This golden age will never come until we are reconciled to God in personal fellowship with him, and we've got rid of the sin and guilt that lies upon us; not until we have bowed the knee to Christ as Lord.

#### *That is why Christ had to die and rise again*

Christ's first step in the programme was to die on a cross and suffer for human sin. It was at the hands of men, but, more importantly, it was at the hands of God. His death made it possible for men and women to come back to God in all our spiritual bankruptcy, and be reconciled to God. Then he rose again, says the programme.

Someone says, 'If he's risen again, why doesn't he start this brave new world now?'

For very good reasons. God's intention is to have men and women with free will, freely choosing God. Those whose sins have made them enemies of God, coming back freely, finding God again at the cross of Christ, finding personal forgiveness, and very deliberately receiving Jesus Christ as personal Lord and Saviour.

God says, 'Give them time.' He could easily send the whole thing up in smoke, but he wants men and women to come and be reconciled to him.

if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. (Rom 10:9)

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16)

That's why God waits.

### *Christ will come again*

We come back to where we started. God shall not wait for ever—'This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven' (Acts 1:11). History shall reach its climax: this present stage of human experience will end, the next will begin, and the Lord shall descend from heaven with a shout. The Christian hope is bright. The dead in Christ shall rise and the living shall be changed (see 1 Thess 4:16–17; 1 Cor 15:51–57). Then shall begin that second glorious stage, for which this one was made.

But here I must say something that I would rather not say. Whenever the Bible talks about the coming again of Christ, it points out that he will bring salvation only to those who in life were Christians. That is, those who had this personal experience of regeneration, had personally received the Saviour, and had been personally reconciled to God.

I'd like to be able to say that when he comes he'll wave a fairy wand and everybody will be saved—they all lived happily ever after—but you would recognize that at once for a fairy story. The Bible isn't a fairy story; man is too big for that. God deliberately gave him a free will and if he chooses to be reconciled to God through Christ, then his future is bright. If he refuses, I have no theories of my own, I can only repeat what the Bible says. If people refuse to believe what the Bible says, there is no sure and certain hope. As far as I understand holy Scripture, the alternative to trusting Christ and being saved is an unqualified and permanent disaster.

## Life's Final Assessment

*'What Judgment Shall I Dread, Doing No Wrong?'*

The Christian doctrine of the final judgment has an exceedingly solemn corollary; so solemn and unpleasant to contemplate that perhaps all of us have sometimes wished that it was not true.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, we may have tried one of those popular escape routes, along which people – even people who profess to be Christians – try to escape the idea of the final judgment with eternal perdition for the impenitent. Certainly, at some time or other in their careers, most Christian preachers and lecturers wish that the doctrine was not true. And some of them, as I say, have invented escape routes; notably two.

### **Escape routes**

#### **1. It originated in the pre-scientific age**

Primitive man, living near volcanoes and watching fire erupt from the jaws of the mountain, imagined that there must be a terrible, hot place in the middle of the earth. Their primitive imaginations, coupled with their uneasy consciences, got to work, and they came to the conclusion that the gods must have put a big furnace down there for the purpose of coping with those who are finally impenitent. The argument goes that, now that we have emerged into this scientific age, and we know that the middle of the earth isn't fire anyway, we can no longer accept such a crude idea that had its basis in pre-scientific observations.

#### **2. It originated with people whose moral sense was primitive**

Others have said, 'But surely this idea, that God would punish people eternally, originated with people whose moral sense was primitive?'

Their argument goes as follows: It was not merely that they lacked modern science; they lived in days when a man could easily be butchered, or strung and quartered, or burned at the stake, for holding unorthodox religious views. Because people were so primitive in their moral outlook, they imagined that God held the same view of things as they did. He would punish his enemies just like they were disposed to punish theirs. Now our moral sense has been a good deal enlightened by great prophets such as Jesus Christ. We have learned that

---

<sup>3</sup> This lecture is also in a separate transcript, entitled 'Is Hell a Reality?' The subtitle of this talk is taken from William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, Shylock, Act 4, Scene 1.

God is a God of love, and it's quite unthinkable that such a God of love would ever punish anybody—at any rate, punish them eternally.

So they say that the whole notion of a final judgment, and its corollary of eternal perdition for the impenitent, was a nightmare of the dark ages. We have happily escaped and emerged into the broad daylight of this modern era.

Certainly it is the fact that the Bible does speak of a lake of fire, and it does say that those who are finally impenitent will be cast into the lake of fire (see Rev 20:10–15). We do know, of course, that some of the medieval people, with their fevered imaginations, debased this biblical figure into the crudest literalism. If you should go, for instance, into the chapel of St John the Evangelist in the college of St John in Cambridge, you will find by the doorway as you go in a tremendous stained glass window that has the final judgment for its theme. Down at the bottom right corner there is a picture of a tremendous furnace, a sort of a brazier. Around it are demons, dressed in green livery with forked tails and cloven hooves, and tremendous pitchforks. They are in the process of stowing away human beings into this furnace, rather in the manner in which the Gestapo stowed away Jews in their gas chambers.

If we're going to be honest and fair with ourselves, we must observe that the crudity of the notion does not lie in the Bible, but in the medieval interpretation of what the Bible says.

### **What does the Bible say?**

The Bible's phrase is a solemn figure indeed. Our Lord himself used it (Mark 9:43, 47).<sup>4</sup> Gehenna, the valley of Hinnom, was a gorge outside Jerusalem where the city's refuse was cast, and eternal fires were kept burning there to clear up this terrible stinking mess of stuff and save the city from infection. Our Lord used those physical flames and burning as a figure of spiritual torment. He was not expecting anybody to imagine a hell in the form of a literal gorge outside of Jerusalem, but he was solemnly warning that, just as there is a fire which can consume our bodies, there is a torment for the impenitent. If the medieval people were, or indeed if we are, pleased to drag down that solemn yet noble figure into crude literalism, then it is not fair for us to charge the Christian doctrine with being crude. At least, if we do, we have no honest, logical grounds for totally rejecting it because, according to us, the doctrine is crude. Bible doctrine is not crude.

If we say that this is inconsistent with the love of God and it must have been invented by somebody with a cruel, sadistic turn of mind, that escape route also quickly closes when we consider the grounds for our belief in a final judgment.

---

<sup>4</sup> *Gehenna*, also called *Gehinnom*, abode of the damned in the afterlife in Jewish and Christian eschatology (the doctrine of last things). Named in the New Testament in Greek form (from the Hebrew *Ge Hinnom*, meaning 'valley of Hinnom'). [Britannica.com](http://Britannica.com)

## The grounds for our belief in a final judgment

### 1. The solemn statements of our Lord Jesus

It was our Lord who taught that God is love. You will search through Old Testament history to find anything comparable to what our Lord said about the love of God. It was our Lord who taught that salvation stems, not from man's efforts, but from the love of God. In this he is unique. He preached a God of love and demonstrated it in work and word, but it was that same Lord who preached more than any other that there is eternal torment for the impenitent.

It was our Lord, for instance, who took up and enforced in the spiritual realm the phrase that Isaiah the prophet had used in the physical realm, about a torment in which 'their worm shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched' (Isa 66:24). When the mocking Pharisee jibed that Jesus of Nazareth was taking things far too seriously, was it not our Lord who retorted with the story of a rich man in eternity, who found that he was in torment on the wrong side of a fixed gulf (see Luke 16:19–31)?

In answer to the question, 'Lord, will those who are saved be few?', was it not our Lord who said, 'Look, you make it your earnest business to be sure that you are inside the door of God's salvation, because the day will come when that door will finally be shut. Many people will come who had imagined they were on the inside, but shall find out in the end that they are on the outside. They shall knock, saying, "But, Lord, we took holy communion, and we often attended the public preaching of holy Scripture. Lord, open to us." And he shall say, "But I never knew you. Depart from me"' (see Luke 13:22–27).

It was our Lord who said those words, not one of his apostles. So, if we should find it fashionable and attractive to argue that we prefer the teaching of Jesus Christ to some of his apostles, we cannot even go along that escape route. If we believe Jesus Christ at all, we must be honest with him and face the fact that more than anybody else he taught that there will be a shut door, a gulf, and torment for the unbelieving and impenitent.

I should like us to notice that his teaching of this solemn fact was so inextricably bound up with his teaching about God's love that we cannot argue that the passages that speak about the love of God were taught by Christ, and the parts that tell of this fearful fate for the impenitent were put into the Bible by somebody else—the nice pieces come from Christ and the nasty pieces from somebody else.

### 2. God gave his Son to save us from perishing

But even that argument fails. I need do no more than quote that famous statement of the gospel that many of us have known from our infancy, 'For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son' (John 3:16 KJV). Here is the most profound statement of the love of God. Here is God's love in its furthest extreme: he *so* loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son. But then, if you enquire why he gave him, and how the love of God is practical and significant, the answer comes: 'that whoever believes in him should not *perish*'. The word is inextricably bound up in the very heart of the gospel. Unless we are prepared to say that the cross of Christ—that extravagant expression of the love of God—was all to no

purpose and an idle exercise, we must admit the Bible's statement of its purpose. It was to rescue those who will believe from perishing.

### 3. God raised him from the dead

Not only do we believe the doctrine of the final judgment on the authority of Christ's word, but God has also gone out of his way to give us confirmation. Paul said to the learned chamber of the Areopagus, '[God] has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead' (Acts 17:31). The assurance that there is to be a day of judgment is found here, says Paul: 'God raised Christ from the dead.'

This is an exceedingly important statement, and I would like us to ponder it. We are told in some modern versions of Christianity that the ideas of a coming judgment, the resurrection, and our Lord's atonement, are all myths. Our Lord's resurrection itself is a myth that you have to accept only if you find yourself disposed to believe it. If you don't, you don't; that's all. It's only true for those who really believe.

But I remind us all that that is not the Bible's position, nor, indeed, was it Paul's. Paul knew that there were Epicurean philosophers among his listeners in the Areopagus court, and one of their leading tenets was that there was no final judgment. They had many exponents, and many variations upon their central theme. In his version, Lucretius exultantly preached his doctrines of materialism, and welcomed them as a man welcomes a gospel. He welcomed the theory of evolution, not merely because he felt it was scientifically true, but because he felt there was a gospel in it. That's why he wrote in poetry, and the *purple passages* are where Lucretius expounds what you may call 'the gospel of evolution', which is that when a man dies the atoms of his body go apart and join that nondescript, non-personal stream of indestructible matter, but he himself ceases to exist.

The gospel of Lucretius says that, because the man ceases to exist, all those stories of a coming final judgment and torments for the impenitent are so many grandmothers' stories that they use to correct their children, but have no existence. Evolution nowadays is likewise accepted as a gospel, not because people are compelled by the evidence, but because it seems to hold out hope that there will be nothing left to face a judgment after death.

Anyway, when Paul stood before the Areopagus court, he was facing learned philosophers who held that view, wedded to evolution—that when a man dies he's finished, and there is no judgment. These people were not predisposed to believe Paul's Christian theories; he must present them with some evidence, without first granting the Christian premise. Very boldly, and without any hesitation at all, Paul offered them the historic facts—not merely Christian belief. I repeat, the historic fact that Jesus Christ literally rose on the third day is divine confirmation of what he himself had so consistently taught throughout all his life: there is a resurrection of the dead and there will be a final judgment.

I offer that same evidence to all non-Christians present, especially to any modern Epicureans. You don't have first to believe what Christianity says before you may have evidence that there's going to be a final judgment. You can read your Bible as you read the daily newspaper, if you like, and the Bible will claim that there is objective, historic evidence

that Jesus Christ rose on the third day, and God offers it as confirmation of Christ's teaching that there will come a final judgment.

#### **4. Our own moral sense**

We may know this matter too, by the witness of our own moral sense. There's a very interesting story in the Bible of a so-called thief who hung alongside Christ on Calvary. Interestingly enough, the word translated 'thief' is a word that the historian Josephus used of the political rebels who were trying to lead a revolution and throw off the capitalist Roman system. For his crimes against the government and the people, one of them was being executed alongside Christ.

He got converted, and the interesting thought processes that led to his conversion have been recorded in brief. He first observed that Jesus Christ was innocent, in the sense that the revolutionary himself realized that he personally wasn't. He had done crimes enough, and he knew that Jesus Christ was an innocent man, guiltless of any such revolutionary or anti-social activity. Nevertheless, he was being hounded to death by unscrupulous politicians and religious leaders, suffering the same condemnation as men who were self-evidently and self-confessedly guilty. In his final moments, he pondered that situation.

This is a world in which not uncommonly the innocent suffer along with the guilty. We find ourselves reflecting on that matter, telling ourselves how wrong it is, and feeling our tempers rise against this wicked perversion of justice. But let us observe what is happening. We have within us a moral sense that can see the difference between right and wrong, and calls aloud that right should be vindicated. The unfair judgments of this world, and all the suffering they have brought, should be put right and reversed. Where does that moral sense come from? If it just happened and is not backed by some absolute standard, some absolute deity, then it is a will-o'-the-wisp that bears no practical relation to the facts. It's an utter cheat. History has proved down many centuries that this is a world of enormous unfairness. If there's no god outside to give us that moral sense which makes us decry the situation, then we'd better admit that our moral sense is no more than a chance convection of atoms within the brain. It's a lie and a cheat because it doesn't square with the facts of the world as we know it.

But this revolutionary who was dying beside Christ believed that his moral sense came from God. If there is a God who cares so much about right and wrong that he has given us the moral ability to see the difference between right and wrong, it seemed self-evident to him that there must come a day when that God will redress the balance and vindicate right. Otherwise he would deny himself, and the whole of man's experience is a farce. Very close to death, he saw that justice was not going to be vindicated in this life and he expressed his firm belief that, morally, there must be another world, and there will be a final judgment.

#### **5. The principles given in the Bible**

I would like now to turn to the principles of that final judgment as we're given them in the words of holy Scripture, because it is my feeling that the principles that will operate at the final judgment are not generally understood. Incidentally, that is why, I put that quotation

from Shakespeare, wresting it of course from its context, as a subtitle for this talk: *'What judgment shall I dread, doing no wrong?'*

A common plea by which we try to comfort ourselves is: 'There may be, and probably is, a final judgment, but I stand as good a chance as anybody. I've not done anything really wrong—what judgment shall I dread, doing no wrong?' That sort of argument proceeds from the assumption that the final judgment is going to be a great weighing machine, or a sort of examiner's meeting to mark people's scripts. A good and famous surgeon recently said that when he stands there he expects his life will be weighed, and he sincerely hopes that the good will be at least fifty-one percent. That is a very common idea: we like to tell ourselves that we have good hope of making at least fifty-one percent on the good side.

But that is not how it is going to proceed. The Bible says that the standard by which men and women will be judged is God's law. Anything that comes short of the one hundred percent mark will be judged as sin and worthy of the sentence of that law, which is separation from God. I know this must sound somewhat cruel, but, unless we are prepared to invent a religion of our own, if we are going to lay any claim to being Christian at all, we must be honest to what Christ and his apostles said: 'whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it' (Jas 2:10). He has broken perfection and come short; it will not be a question of weighing whether our good deeds outweigh our bad.

Nevertheless, the Bible does say:

And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done. And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done. (Rev 20:12–13)

The dead shall be judged by the things that are written in the books according to their works; that is, the books of God's records. There will not be indiscriminate judgment. It does make a difference whether a person has attempted to be honest and decent, or whether he has lived a life of careless selfishness and cruel sadism. In fact, our Lord had a very pointed remark to make to the people of his own day in the city of Capernaum, where he lived a good deal of his life. They had heard the Christian gospel perhaps more than anybody else:

And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? You will be brought down to Hades. For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. But I tell you that it will be more tolerable on the day of judgement for the land of Sodom than for you. (Matt 11:23–24)

*The judgment will not be indiscriminate*

People shall be judged in that sense according to their works. The people of Sodom and Gomorrah had never heard the Christian gospel in the same way as the people of Capernaum. Therefore, though the people of Sodom and Gomorrah were very wicked, and the people of Capernaum were good and proper people who went to the synagogue every Sabbath, our Lord announced that eternal perdition for those people of Capernaum would be a far more

solemn and painful thing. They had had more privilege, more chance of accepting the Saviour, and they had more light in which to decide the matter. Therefore, when eventually they decided to reject him and go on with their own religion, the guilt they incurred was inevitably far greater than the ignorant sinners of Sodom. And we, who live in a city that has been so fully evangelized for so long, should not let the point of that escape.

But perhaps the most important thing to get hold of, it seems to me, is what the Bible says about whether a person, as a result of that judgment, is finally lost or saved. I call your attention to the actual explicit words of Scripture. It talks of those who are cast into this lake of fire, and we look very keenly to see on what grounds. 'And if anyone's name was not found written in the Book of Life, he was thrown into the lake of fire' (Rev 20:15). It does not say, if anyone failed to get fifty-one percent; it does not say, those who fell below thirty-five percent, or, those who were guilty of enormous sins, were cast into the lake of fire. The determinant is not a person's works at all, for, if we are to be judged by God's law, the Bible tells us that all shall fall short (Rom 3:23). Those who enter heaven are not people who only come ten percent short. It's not on that basis whatsoever, but on another thing completely — if anyone's name is not found written in the Book of Life. The Lamb's Book of Life, that heavenly register, records every single soul that has had a personal transaction with Christ: everyone who has received the Saviour.

*What will determine whether a person is lost or saved?*

According to the Bible, salvation does not depend upon our efforts to keep God's law, or success in keeping it. God's law merely proves a person to be a complete bankrupt; even when he has done his best he is a bankrupt. 'For by works of the law,' says the Bible, 'no human being will be justified [before God]' (Rom 3:20). We are saved not by self-effort, but by what Christ has done for us. When Christ died at Calvary, the Bible tells us that he 'bore our sins in his body on the tree' (1 Pet 2:24); 'the LORD . . . laid on him the iniquity of us all' (Isa 53:6). And God, who is a realist and knows us and foresees that at the very end we shall still have come short of his perfection, has given his Son to deal with this great cosmic problem of sin. For the person who will own his bankruptcy and receive Christ into his personality, God says that he is forgiven. He is right with God, he is redeemed, his name is entered in the Lamb's Book of Life.

It is this that will determine whether a person is lost or saved. It is not whether his works were good or bad, but is his name in the Book of Life? That is, has he received the Saviour? Is he one of Christ's?

With this, square the words of our Lord when the people come at last and the door is shut. They come knocking, pleading for admittance. You will notice that they come with the words of a popular version of Christianity: 'Lord, look at our good works. Many times we have taken Holy Communion—we ate and drank in your presence. We were zealous in attending the public preaching of the word—we heard you preach in our streets' (see Luke 13:26).

This is a popular impression of Christianity, but they remain outside. And the reason why they are outside is this, 'I never knew you,' says our Lord. Not, 'I didn't know you existed,' but, 'I never had those personal intimate dealings with you, and you with me, when I accepted

you and you accepted me, and we became one (in a far deeper and more spiritual sense than man and wife accept each other and become one).

*We can know in this life that our names are in the Book of Life*

Here I want to point out a most delightful, and yet in its way a most solemn, thing. It is a common notion that, if these things are true, at least we have a breathing space in which we may wait. We must wait, at any rate, until the last and final day to know how our own personal case will fall. Some people find a good deal of comfort in that, but the realities of the situation are otherwise. The Bible is emphatic that, although the judgment does not come until after death, the decision is knowable in this life. It is knowable on what I may call the good side—and therein is the wonderful glory of Christianity. Those who are cast into the lake of fire are those whose names are not in the Book of Life; but the Bible asserts that those whose names are written in the Book of Life may know it during this life.

In fact, the impression the New Testament leaves is that this was common knowledge among the early Christians. For instance, Paul wrote to a church of Christians not long converted at a place called Philippi, and in a casual reference about some of his fellow Christian workers he used this delightful phrase: 'whose names are in the book of life' (4:3). That was written somewhere about AD 50–60, and they already knew. Again I must admit that this is not popular Christianity, but it is in the Bible. Says Paul of these ordinary people who had received Christ and were Christians, 'their names are already in the Book of Life.' With what comfort they proceeded to life's end, and their peace with God was profound. However dissatisfied they were about their own spiritual attainments, their peace with God, their prospect of eternity, was sound. They knew that their names were already in the Book of Life. Paul also says that there is 'no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus' (Rom 8:1).

## **6. The words of the Judge himself**

Our Lord himself, from whom these teachings derive, made the point explicitly. You remember that famous occasion recorded in John 5 when he was talking to the Jews, and made his astounding claim that he was the Son of God and equal with God. *He told them that at the final judgment he, Jesus of Nazareth, was going to be the judge.* That was an extraordinary claim for a thirty-year-old person to make, but he made it. He was making the point that God was committing judgment to him because he is human as well as divine, and understands how humans feel. The judge for that august tribunal will be human as well as divine.

Having claimed that he is going to be judge in that last day, he said these tremendous words: '*whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life*' (John 5:24). Notice that it's present tense.

And then comes the very important phrase, '*He does not come into judgement,*' or if you prefer the Authorized translation, 'shall not come into condemnation'. This is not a theory put forward by some philosopher. If there is any truth in Christ at all, these are the words of the judge himself, giving a statement beforehand of what shall be the decisions of the court.

He that hears my word (here and now)  
and believes on him that sent me (here and now)

has eternal life (here and now)  
and shall not<sup>5</sup> come into condemnation,  
but is passed over *already* from death to life.

It's like a man who is a condemned criminal in the death cell just awaiting his sentence, and the pardon is given to him. He holds it in his hand and with the pardon walks out of the cell to life—he has passed over. So, said Christ, in that most profound and spiritual sense, the person who hears his word and receives him in this life already has eternal life, has already passed over from the condemned cell into life.

You say, 'How can the results be known before the great final day?'

It springs from what the great Christian gospel is and from how it works. There is to be one judgment, and it comes after death: 'It is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgement' (Heb 9:27). There are not several judgments, but one judgment after death, and God tells us that, just as there is one judgment, so Christ was once offered. Not twice, not three times: 'Christ, having been offered once . . .' (v. 28). It's over now; the offering is complete. No more has to be done or suffered; the sacrifice has been made and it is finished. The work that secures a person's forgiveness with God has already been done.

God wants us to know it. He courageously tells us it is done, it is finished, so that the person who receives Christ as Saviour and becomes one with Christ knows it already. The bill is paid; the sanctions of the law have been suffered, and he has passed over already from death to life.

#### *True Christianity offers peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ*

As a Christian preacher and lecturer I am exceedingly proud of that. I think God is supremely wonderful and far more courageous, as well as realistic, than the petty theologians who peddle popular Christianity. Popular Christianity has people waiting in suspense all their days, digging them in the heels and telling them to be good, through fear of a coming judgment.

But it is not so with real Christianity, which will tell those who have received Christ that whatever happens they are already accepted with God. They will never come into judgment, they will never be cast out. They are already saved; there is no condemnation; they shall be saved from the wrath of God. That's what Christianity means when it says that Christ gives us peace with God: 'Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ' (Rom 5:1).

That does not mean of course that when a person receives Christ he is free to do as he pleases. The New Testament is full of explanation that when a man receives Christ, he is acquitted. He is right with God—his relationships with God are right. God receives him for Christ's sake and will never ever cast him out. But then, of course, the path of discipline begins in the school of God's family.

A person does not become a saint with perfect behaviour overnight. There will be many falls, many mistakes: the battle against sin will go on until his last day. If he grows careless, the Bible bluntly says that God will chasten and discipline him. If necessary, God will use the

---

<sup>5</sup> The Greek is exceedingly emphatic: 'shall in no wise whatsoever'.

final discipline of removing his physical life (1 Cor 11:30). Discipline in God's family is a real thing, but so is acceptance. And the glory at the heart of the Christian gospel is that the person who comes confessing his bankruptcy in all realism to God, stakes his faith wholly in Christ, and receives Christ, is received by God and shall never come into judgment.

## **7. The fundamental sin is to reject Christ**

But, of course, there is a solemn side. It can already be known in this life, and each one may know for himself if he shall be lost. Because, again, it is not how well he shall have done in the end; it is whether his name is in the Book of Life, whether he has received God's Son. And of the one who refuses God's Son as Saviour, the Bible says: 'Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God' (John 3:18).

We must not therefore let ourselves run away with the idea that we are safe, so long as the results are not yet published. Each man and woman may know right now. The Bible says that the person who does not believe is already judged. Of course there is opportunity while life lasts to change one's outlook. There is opportunity to come in true repentance and confession of one's spiritual bankruptcy to receive Jesus Christ as Lord. But the thing that determines the result is a something that happens in this life, which we may already know.

You say, 'This doctrine, that the impenitent will be eternally separated from God, is crude. Is it not altogether out of proportion with a person's sins? Suppose a man has been a sinner; the idea that he will be eternally separated from God for it is, surely, a punishment that's altogether out of proportion with the crime?'

One can understand the objection, but it leans on the popular notion of why a person is judged anyway. It says, 'He has not been such a big sinner as all that, has he?' But I repeat, the determinant that will decide if he is sent to eternal torment is not how big his sins have been, but has he received God's Son? The person who comes to a final decision and says no to God's Son is refusing eternal life. He is refusing eternal redemption and refusing God. There is no alternative to God, but eternal perdition.

This is not a cruel doctrine. It lies in the nature of the fact that a person recognizes that his religion is not going to improve him enough to gain him acceptance with God. The only thing that will save him is for him to come in confessed bankruptcy and receive Jesus as Saviour and Lord. That person doesn't say, 'Not just yet. This wouldn't be popular with my friends. If Christians do anything wrong, they ask God to forgive them. Can't I just ask God to forgive my sins, without receiving Christ?'

*That is the fundamental sin and human problem.* We want God's forgiveness, but we're not quite sure whether we want to receive Christ as Saviour and Lord, taking him unreservedly into our personalities. And that is all God is really basically interested in, for everything hangs upon it. If a person rejects Christ, he rejects God, and a nice examination paper full of good works is irrelevant.

You say, 'But, surely, I would get the chance to change my mind in eternity?'

That is supposing a lot of things that we just do not know. We don't know what eternity is. Our Lord, who does know and who loves our souls, tells us that when eternity dawns it shall not be a place of change in that sense. Our choice will be fixed. Moreover, in that day

there will be no means with which to repent, for the only thing that can possibly cause a person's heart to change and repent is the love of God. God has demonstrated that love in giving his Son to a cross for us, raising him from the dead, and asking us to receive him into our personalities. The person who says no to the love of God in Christ shall find in eternity that he has rejected the only thing that could lead him to a change of mind.

*God shall not annihilate a person<sup>6</sup>*

That would not be loving on God's part, for he has given us a will and ranked us as responsible creatures. If we take that will and say no to Christ, God will not degrade us to the level of beasts. God cannot for his own sake wipe out the decision so that nobody knows of it. God in all his courage will honour our decision, honour our personalities; it shall be known eternally that we have refused Christ through our own choice.

I want to end this lecture and this series of lectures with a few quotations. I do it for this reason. When our Lord warned us of that man who found himself tormented in Hades, he reminded us that in his life he had the Scriptures.

I beg you, father, to send him to my father's house—for I have five brothers—so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment. But Abraham said, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.' And he said, 'No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.' He said to him, 'If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.' (Luke 16:27–31)

They had the Bible, and if they did not believe the naked word of holy Scripture then they would not be convinced by any ghostly apparition from the other world. We must not expect that God is going to give us strange feelings and wonderful apparitions to convince us of this truth. We have the word of God. God is no emotionalist with firework displays; he expects us to believe what he said because he said it. Each one must make his or her personal decision.

And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgement, so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him. (Heb 9:27–28)

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. (John 3:16–18)

---

<sup>6</sup> See [Appendix](#).

## APPENDIX

### Why I Do Not Accept the Theory of Annihilation

If you ask me to choose three reasons for not accepting the theory of annihilation, I would choose the following:

1. The word for punishment in Matthew 25:46 is *kolasis*. The formation of the word—that is, its ending ‘sis’—shows that it is an active noun meaning the process of punishing and not simply punishment. Compare the Greek word *praxis*, which means ‘a making’, with *pragma*, which means ‘a thing made’. ‘Eternal punishment’ might be consistent with annihilation, but ‘eternal punishing’ cannot be held to describe annihilation. Advocates of annihilation sometimes express themselves as believing in eternal punishment, but not in eternal punishing. But as I understand it *kolasis* means punishing. That is why Bauer’s Lexicon lists examples from secular Greek, in which *kolasis* means ‘torture’. One of its citations is very much to the point *hē epimonos kolasis*, meaning long-continued torture.

2. Revelation 14:10–11 warns that the one who takes the mark of the beast will be ‘tormented with fire and sulphur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment goes up for ever and ever’. It might be possible to argue that this smoke going up for ever and ever is like the smoke of Sodom and Gomorrah, indicating that the city and all its inhabitants have been annihilated. But the argument is not sound; for verse 11 goes on to say that ‘they have no rest, day or night’, and this phrase must refer to the experience of those who are undergoing this torment. John Stott argues that one cannot deduce the eternal torment of individual people from the phrase in Revelation 19:20, which declares that ‘the beast . . . and . . . the false prophet . . . [will be] thrown alive into the lake of fire’, where ‘they will be tormented day and night for ever and ever’ (20:10), because, according to John Stott, the beast and the false prophet are not individuals but institutions. But Revelation 14:9–11 explicitly speaks of individuals: ‘if anyone worships the beast . . .’.<sup>7</sup>

3. Philosophically and theologically I cannot see that the case for annihilation (or at least John Stott’s version of it) is either just or merciful. He agrees that the impenitent will be judged according to their works; and that must mean there will be degrees of punishment. Indeed, our Lord informed us that it will be more tolerable for the men of Sodom and Gomorrah than for those of Capernaum (Matt 11:24). To hold that the impenitent who appear before the great white throne will be immediately annihilated, means that all sinners, whatever the degree of their sinning, will suffer the same punishment. Indeed, instantaneous annihilation is scarcely a punishment at all; and therefore people like John Stott have to admit that the impenitent will not be instantaneously annihilated, but first punished and then annihilated. But in most

---

<sup>7</sup> See: David L. Edwards and John Stott: *Evangelical Essentials: A Liberal-Evangelical Dialogue*, pp. 312-329, Hodder & Stoughton Religious; First Edition (1 April 1988).

civilized countries, a man who is to be executed for murder is not first tortured and then executed—that would be regarded as a very savage thing. If the man is to pay the supreme penalty, then he is not submitted to any preliminary torture before being executed. On John Stott's theory then, the impenitent will first be punished for a finite period and then annihilated. That suggests to me that he imagines that, by this finite period of punishment, they pay the penalty for their sins; and when the penalty is exhausted they are then annihilated.

That, to my mind, raises two very big questions: Is it possible for a human being to exhaust the penalty of his sins in a finite period of time? And if it is, why is that human being not set free upon the completion of the penalty? In English law the criminal who has suffered the penalty for his crime is regarded as being thereby justified. I assume that John Stott's reply to this would be that the finite period of punishment is on account of the man's individual sins. But when he has paid that penalty he is annihilated because he is still unrepentant towards God and refuses to believe in the Saviour. Annihilation, therefore, is the punishment for the one sin of rejecting the Saviour—not so much for rejecting his sacrifice, because, having suffered for his own sins and being thereby justified, the man needs no sacrifice. He is annihilated simply for his wrong attitude of heart towards the divine persons. If that is so, then—excuse my apparent *antinomianism*—free will is not what it appears to be. God turns out after all to be like Mr. Henry Ford, who told his customers that they could have any colour of car they wished, so long as it was black!

A God who gives his creatures irretrievable free will, and even when they persist in using it to reject him still honours the gift he has given them, is to my mind far greater than a God who gives his creatures free will only as long as they do not use that free will to decide against him.

## **About the Author**

**DAVID W. GOODING** is Professor Emeritus of Old Testament Greek at Queen's University, Belfast and a member of the Royal Irish Academy. He has taught the Bible internationally and lectured on both its authenticity and its relevance to philosophy, world religions and daily life. He has published scholarly articles on the Septuagint and Old Testament narratives, as well as expositions of Luke, John, Acts, Hebrews, the New Testament's use of the Old Testament, and several books addressing arguments against the Bible and the Christian faith. His analysis of the Bible and our world continues to shape the thinking of scholars, teachers and students alike.