

Questions that Matter for Life

The Bible's Answers that Satisfy Hearts and Minds

David Gooding

A Myrtlefield House Transcript



MYRTLEFIELD
HOUSE

www.myrtlefieldhouse.com

Contents

1	What Does it All Mean? Making Sense of the Universe	3
2	Do All Religions Lead to God? Where to Find the Truth	13
3	Who is a Sinner? The Purpose of God's Law	23
4	Can Love be True Without Justice? Finding the Way to Peace	35
5	Can We Ever Have Certainty? The Implications of Christ's Death	46
6	How Good Can We Be? Realistic Holiness	58
7	Why is Holiness Practical? The Freedom of Holiness	71
8	Is it Worth All the Trouble? The Problem of Pain	82
	About the Author	92

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. Scripture quotations marked NASB are from the New American Standard Bible®, Copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission. (www.Lockman.org). Scripture quotations marked RV are from the English Revised Version of the Holy Bible (1885). Other quotations are Dr Gooding's own translations or paraphrases.

This text has been edited from a transcript of eight talks given by David Gooding in Charlottetown, Canada, in April 2001.

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

e: info@myrtlefieldhouse.com

Myrtlefield catalogue no: apl.004/jf

What Does it All Mean?

Making Sense of the Universe

Thank you for the honour of being asked to come and address you. Let me first answer a few of your unspoken questions. It is my experience that when a visitor comes to a gathering such as this, certain questions fly around people's heads and are apt to get in the way of what is subsequently said, until those unspoken questions are answered. So let me answer some of them.

By way of background

No, I am not an Irishman; I cannot claim that dignity. It is not my fault of course. I was born in England and am an Englishman. Yet I am not just an ordinary, run of the mill type of Englishman. I am what the Irish call an 'improved Englishman', because I have lived in Ireland for more than forty years and in fact am a little bit more Irish than some of the Irish themselves.

Yes, I am a Christian. Not a very good one, but a Christian nonetheless, by the grace of God.

No, I am not a professional theologian. I am by profession a classicist. For many years, I have been a student and a teacher of Greek and Latin, both the languages and the literature, and in addition some of the philosophers from an historical point of view.

The value of classical Greek thought

I found the Greek literature absorbingly interesting, particularly the tragedies, because in them, unlike some modern equivalents, here were men who were trying to think through some of the very big issues that life raises for us. Whether, for instance, we are merely machines with no free will and everything is determined, or whether in fact we do have free will; and whether this universe is just an accidental thing and everything happens by chance.

I am proud, as a classicist, of some of the early philosophers and particularly what we call in the trade the natural philosophers, for in Europe some five hundred years before Christ and then on, there arose in Greece, in Ionia and Western Sicily and Italy, men who were no longer content to sit there and see the sun get up every day and take it for granted. They wanted to know what this universe was about, how it worked and what it was made of. It is extraordinary how some people (not you of course) can go through life and not really ask themselves the big questions: what is this universe all about, and why are we here anyway?

So I was a student of Plato and the Stoics and the Epicureans as well. And I am very interested as a Christian to notice that the historian Luke, in his record that we call the Acts of the Apostles, tells us that on one occasion Paul the Christian apostle was in Athens talking, as he usually did, about our Lord Jesus Christ—his life and death and resurrection—when he was accosted by some of these philosophers, and particularly members of the school of the Stoics and the Epicureans (see Acts 17). They wanted to know what on earth he meant when he was talking about Jesus and the resurrection, and so they invited him to come and meet them; and he went to the Court of the Areopagus and told them about Jesus Christ. Presently, I am going to read to you, if you will bear it, some of the things he said to those philosophers, but let me tell you a bit more about them first, so you will see how the things Paul said to them make sense.

I say I am proud of them because, about five hundred years before Christ, some of these men who were trying to think through what the universe is made of and what makes it work, invented the atomic theory. Some of you young folks may think that the atomic theory is a modern invention. Well, far from it. In times BC, Leucippus and Democritus were already inventing the atomic theory, which said that everything we can see is composed of tiny atoms that you cannot see. Of course we've improved on that since then, haven't we? They called them *atoms*, saying that you can't split them. We know that atoms can be split, but that merely puts the problem back a little, because inside the atoms are nuclei and inside the nuclei are quarks and things (whatever they are).

Finding out what the universe is made of and how it works is marvellous fun, isn't it? I remember friends of mine whose boys were given watches and nothing would satisfy them but taking the watches to bits to see how they worked. Whether they ever worked again, they didn't care. And indeed, around 500 BC there were those who questioned the notion that the sun goes round the earth, and they tended to think that the earth was not the centre of our solar system and that the earth went round the sun. That wasn't bad going for around 500 BC, was it? Some people think that the Bible was written in an unscientific age, when men believed in a three-decker universe with heaven up there and earth in the middle and hell somewhere beneath Australia, but of course the Bible wasn't written in such an age. Eratosthenes and others had long since measured the distance between the earth and the moon and, according to their predictions, Julius Caesar had altered the calendar. It is quite false to think that the Bible was written in an unscientific age. And Luke, whose history we shall read in a moment, was a doctor trained in the medical science of the day.

The summum bonum

The highest good

Men such as Leucippus and Democritus were not just interested in how the universe works. Some of them were even more interested in what we human beings are here *for*. 'What is the point of living?' they asked. 'What are we meant to be aiming at?' When the Latins asked: 'What is the real goal in life? What should be life's main purpose?' they called it in their Latin tongue the *summum bonum*. You don't need to worry about the pronunciation, but I might be

asking you whether you have a *summum bonum*. Have you got as far as thinking about that in this new year? Have you got clear in your mind what life is all about, what we are meant to be aiming at and what it is for? These philosophers said to themselves, 'Whatever this great purpose in life is that we are meant to be aiming at, it must be something as *an end in itself and not just a means to some other end*.' Let me illustrate for you what they meant.

We classicists who studied the classics in school and university used to have our legs pulled by the doctors and the scientists. They said, 'You lot of classicists, what do you think you're at? You're going off to university to study Greek and Latin so that you can come down to the schools and teach boys and girls Greek and Latin, so they can go to university and read Greek and Latin, so they can come down to the schools and teach Greek and Latin. That's going round in circles, isn't it?'

The scientists thought they had a point, and particularly the doctors. But you could turn it on the doctors, couldn't you? They come up to university and learn to cure our bodies, and look after our bodies and make them go. That is very kind of them and good, and we are all marvellously grateful to them. But then the question arises, why do we have bodies, and what are we meant to do with them? You see, if a man had a car, it would be very odd if he spent all his time titivating it up and putting it right and cleaning the plugs and adjusting the petrol and all this kind of thing, but never actually going anywhere in the car. The mechanics are jolly helpful for keeping the thing going, but that raises the question, what is it for? Where is it meant to be going? All thanks to the doctors for keeping our bodies in trim, but then it raises the question: what is life *for*?

Perhaps a young man will say to me now, 'Well we students haven't time to think about that. Our studies are so demanding. We've got to study hard to get our exams in computers or electricity or something, and we haven't time to think about those things.'

I see. Why do you have to study so hard?

'Well,' he says, 'I want to get a good degree.'

Oh, and what do you want to get a good degree for?

'I want to get a good job.'

I see. A well-paid job?

'Yes.'

Ah, and why do you want a well-paid job?

'Well, I hope to get married and have a home, and a wife and children, and it's very expensive, bringing up children.'

Oh, yes, I think it is. Why is it so expensive?

'I want them to go to a good school and to some college and get a qualification.'

What for?

'So they can get a good job.'

Why do they need a good job?

'Well they will hope to get married and have children.'

Oh, I see. That's expensive, and they want to have enough money. I see.

We are going round in circles, aren't we? If we step aside from the old whirligig of life for a moment, there is this big question. What are we here for? Have we got it straight in our sights what the real purpose of life is?

Epicureans and the highest good

If you had asked the Epicurean philosophers what the purpose of life is, the thing to aim at in life, they would have said it was *pleasure*. Now, they didn't mean getting drunk or excesses of any sort, or any kind of debauchery. They meant the chief aim in life was so to live so that the whole thing is pleasurable: calm, not excited, not troubled by worries and anxieties and that kind of thing. That is the best life to go in for. So generally they stayed out of politics and trade (because those things can be distressing and give you ulcers), and they aimed at pleasure. They spent most of their time philosophizing in what came to be known as the 'garden'. They were gentle souls on the whole.

That was their aim, and there are still many people in life whose aim is precisely that. Would it be yours by any chance? Is the main end of life simply pleasure and enjoyment? Well I wish you tons of it, but we can't hide it from our minds that sometimes life can be very far from pleasurable. 'Enjoy it while it lasts,' people say. Or, 'You can enjoy an ice cream, even though you know it isn't going to last forever.' Okay, but for many people, life isn't even an ice cream, is it? Life has its pains and problems.

Is pleasure enough for the goal in life? And what hope is there beyond it? Has life itself some goal when we come to its end? Is the end just a grave? The Epicureans said yes, there was nothing beyond the grave. They said they could prove it to you by their science. They said there is nothing in this universe but atoms and space; and everything, including human beings, is made of atoms (part of that is true). And they said, 'What happens when you die is the atoms come apart, and some of the atoms fall into the ground and grow up as grass, and then the cows eat the grass.' And where are you? As for man's soul, they said, 'Well that's made of atoms as well, and when you die, it comes to bits and you don't survive death.' They liked to think that. There are many people still today who like to think that that's all we are, and when we die, that's it, finished; there's no hope beyond the grave.

Imagine there's no heaven

I'll tell you why some of the ancient Epicureans like that point of view. There was a Roman poet at one stage; his name was Lucretius. He had embraced this atomic theory. That's jolly good, but I'll tell you why he liked it. We know, because he wrote five books of poems on the atomic theory. I suppose some people read them. He tells us in the beginning why he liked this theory. He says it proves that when you die that's it finished; there is no judgment to come, no God to be feared who will call you to account. There is no heaven of course, but more important to his point of view, there is no hell.

There are many people who hold the same prejudice, aren't there? They hope science has proved that when we die there's nothing left, because if there is a future beyond the grave, their conscience tells them that they may well have to give an account of themselves to their creator for the way they have behaved.

That is a serious point these philosophers raised, and it is with us still. It makes me, and it should make you, ask the question, 'When I die, shall I just be wiped out, or shall I be called to meet my maker, and account to him for what I have done in my life?'

Let's think about the opposites. These were Epicureans, so let's think about the Stoics.

Stoics and the highest good

The Stoics too had their theories about the universe, and they had their *summum bonum*—the highest good they were aiming at in life. They said these Epicureans were talking nonsense. Fancy any intelligent person ever thinking that pleasure is the main thing to aim at in life. That seemed to them to be very unworthy. I think sometimes we agree with them, don't we? We feel that merely enjoying yourself is okay, but that human beings are more important than mere entertainment and enjoying yourself.

The Stoics didn't know as much as we know now about the human body and the human cell. The more science tells us about that, the more the wonder grows. Think of the sheer fantastic design of the human cell, let alone the rest of the human body and brain. But when the Stoics looked at the universe and saw the marvel of the way it is designed they said, 'You know there must be an intelligence behind the universe.' They were right of course. Alas, they were wrong in that they then concluded that the intelligence is merely part of the stuff of the universe. In other words, there is no God supreme.

Because they felt that the universe was the result of intelligent design, they had to believe that everything that happened was planned by this intelligence. 'Everything in life goes according to reason,' they said. And then they got really muddled up, because they had to believe that all the very bad things that happened are also designed by the intelligence behind the universe. So they said, 'Ah, the goal we should be aiming at is to live according to reason.' There are some folks to whom that appeals: 'Give us sheer logic and none of this old entertainment stuff,' they say. 'That is how you ought to guide life.'

It landed the Stoics in a muddle. They said if you saw a child beginning to drown in a river, it would be an intelligent thing, a reasonable thing, to try to save the child; but, if in spite of your effort the child drowned, you mustn't grieve over it, because this has been caused by the great intelligence behind the universe. And if they had seen six million Jews about to be gassed by Adolf Hitler, they would have said it is a reasonable thing to try and stop it; but if you can't stop it, don't you grieve over it, because that also has been designed by the intelligence behind the universe. Our business is to agree with that reason and live according to reason. Stoics were hard, granite-like figures. They wouldn't allow themselves to grieve, not even over the loss of their loved ones. They had to believe that this world is the best of all possible worlds.

That isn't true, is it? That is not the Christian view, anyway. This world, according to the Bible, has been spoiled by malevolent powers that have induced men and women to disobey God, to try to live independently of him, to go their own way rather than serving the Creator; and that has led to endless tears, frustrations and a broken world. The Bible says to those who love God, who are called according to his purpose, that God will work all things together for good. For those who trust Christ, God, with his skilful ability, is able to make all of life, its sorrows as well as its joys, work together for good (see Rom 8:28). But the Bible does not hold that this present world is the best of all possible worlds. Indeed not; the Bible speaks in a very realistic way. It says the whole of creation groans in travail until now. But there is hope that one day even creation shall be delivered from her bondage to futility and corruption (see vv. 21–22). And of course, the Bible holds out hope for the individual. There shall be a resurrection of the dead. More of that as we go on.

But as for the Stoics, if you had asked them, ‘What hope have you for life after death, what hope for the universe?’ they would have said, ‘None.’ Some of them had a view that is a very odd one to us. It was that the universe is going round in cycles, and one day the whole thing will go up in flames and then start again; and everything that has happened until now will happen exactly the same way again. It is going to go round in circles. Isn’t it interesting if you think of it how so many people’s lives amount to this—that they are just going round in circles? They have no ultimate hope.

The Christian gospel to Epicureans and Stoics

It was to people such as the Stoics and Epicureans that Paul was invited to explain the Christian Gospel. The occasion is recorded in Acts 17.

So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: ‘Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, “To the unknown god.” What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel their way towards him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, for

“In him we live and move and have our being”;

as even some of your own poets have said,

“For we are indeed his offspring.”

Being then God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man. The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he 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.’ (vv. 22–31)

If we were to examine what Paul said in detail and think what lies behind it, we should very clearly see how he knew what the Stoics and the Epicureans believed, and was addressing the Christian gospel to these pagan philosophers in a way that would make sense to them. We haven’t the time to do that here, so I select four salient points from what he said about what the true God is like.

God is personal

The first point Paul makes is that God is *personal*: he is a person. Pointing to the idols around the place he said, ‘You know, we oughtn’t to think that the Godhead is like silver or gold, or stone or wood, or idols carved by man.’

Why should we not think that?

‘Because we are his offspring,’ Paul says, in the sense that we are all creatures of God. And because we are God’s creatures, you can argue certain things about God from what we know of ourselves.

You have often seen the sun up in the sky, haven’t you? It’s a vast affair, yet you are more significant than the sun up in the sky. I’m not flattering you; I’d even say it of myself, without any pride. My little brain is very small; you could get it inside a shoebox. The sun is tremendous. But my little brain is more significant than the sun. The sun is so much gas. The sun doesn’t know I’m here, but I know the sun is there. The sun doesn’t know how I work. Thanks to the scientists, I know a bit about how the sun works. We know we are far more significant than the sun. Why? Because the sun is just non-personal matter. We are more than that; we are persons.

If your car refuses to go, it’s no good talking to it and saying, ‘Look here, car, get going!’ and kicking it. Well it might work, but not for any good reason, because the car isn’t a person; we are.

You could take all the thousands of millions of galaxies in the sky, and without hesitation I say to you that you are far more significant than any one of them, or all of them put together. They are just impersonal stuff, and we know it in our bones that people—human beings—are persons, and persons are more significant than mere matter.

If we, God’s creatures, are persons, it would be foolish to imagine that God is less than personal; more than personal, yes, but personal. Having made us, he made us persons who can have fellowship with God. That is the first magnificent thing about creation. We are made by a God who made us as persons so that we might be able to have personal fellowship with him, and he with us. And there lies the wonderful claim of Jesus Christ our Lord. He says he can give us eternal life, and he defines it as this. It is not merely existing forever. ‘This is eternal life,’ he says, ‘that men and women may know you, the true and living God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent’ (see John 17:3).

God gives us free will

The next thing Paul talked about was the way God has made and runs this universe: how he has made us and how we tick. Was it true, as the Stoics said, that everything is fixed so that we have no free will?

Some people like to think that, don’t they? ‘I can’t help how I behave. God made me, so it’s his fault if I don’t go right. Everything is fixed. *Que sera sera*—what is going to be is going to be. There is nothing we can do about it.’

That isn’t true. Certainly God has made us. He made some of the systems of our bodies to be automatic. He overrules our circumstances. Those things are perfectly true. Not to put too fine a point on it, but your presence here this morning is not by chance either. Paul says God has appointed the bounds of our habitation (see Acts 17:26). God has overruled the timing of our birth and the place of our birth. He watches over our circumstances; and behind the scenes he orders things. What for? Listen to the next thing that Paul says. He has appointed the bounds of our habitation ‘that we might *seek* after him’ (see v. 27). Paul uses a very vivid word. He uses the word one might use of a blind man groping for something. There must be something there, and he’s feeling for it.

Even the atheist sometimes gets that feeling. As he looks at the universe around him, the atheist gets an uncomfortable feeling there must be something, someone, there. When Francis Crick, the discoverer of the DNA, wrote about the marvels of the cell, he warned his fellow scientists. He said that the apparent design of it is so overwhelming that, if you weren't careful, you'd get the impression it was deliberately designed. They have the sense that there is something, and not just something, but someone, there.

But notice what Paul told them. Yes, God overrules our circumstances. He has set the scene and set the stage, and given us minds as well as bodies but for this purpose. And here comes our free will: 'that we might *seek* after him.'

We are not computers you know. I don't know if your computer at home rushes to the door when you come in and says, 'I've been looking for you all day!' or something like it. Perhaps they can get machines like that, but we are not computers. God has done us the honour of giving us free will and expects us to seek him.

If every time you came home from your work you found a glorious bunch of flowers on the table that said 'Good wishes' but nobody signed it, and this kept on happening every week, what would your reaction be? 'Well that's one of those things, you know, perhaps that fell through the window; it's all by chance.' You wouldn't say that, would you? You would be consumed with interest. 'Who on earth is putting these flowers here, and how did they get in the window or through the door? How do they happen to know me; and who is it?' You would want to *seek*, wouldn't you? And with the evidence of creation around us that there is a God, and the evidence of design, God expects us to turn round and seek him. 'Seek the LORD,' says holy Scripture (Isa 55:6).

But please don't say, 'I can't be bothered; I'm not interested.' You are not interested to find your creator? You are just not interested in your creator? That is cardinal sin number one: to be a creature of God and not be interested enough to seek him and find him. It is the number one charge that the God of heaven lays against us in his word.

God will judge the world

The third thing Paul told them is that the personal God of heaven who expects us to seek him is a God who is going to judge the world one day.

The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he 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 17:30-31)

There is going to be a day of judgment. I wonder how you react to that.

You say, 'Now you are getting very gloomy, Mr Lecturer, talking about the day of judgment. Are you some Jeremiah or something?'

If that is your reaction, it is interesting that you should find talk of the day of judgment gloomy. When you read some of the Old Testament poets and prophets who thought of the prospect of a coming judgment, they began to clap their hands, and in their poetic language they said, 'Oh, you trees and you mountains and you lakes, clap your lands, for the Lord is

coming. He comes to judge the world in righteousness' (see Ps 98:7-9). They found the thought that there is going to be a coming judgment marvellously exhilarating. Don't you?

The last century has seen some horrors, hasn't it? To name the most colourful of them: Hitler with his six million Jews gassed and the multimillions dying through World War Two; Stalin with his elimination of sixty million plus; Pol Pot slaughtering all the intellectuals, because he didn't happen to like intellectuals; and Chairman Mao and Ceausescu, not to talk about that half-madman, Enver Hoxha, of Albania. What do you think about all of that? Do you just lift up your hands and say, 'Oh, I can't help it, but it's over now; let's forget it'? When you think of those millions unjustly persecuted and executed, wouldn't you be glad if it could be proved to you there is going to come a day of judgment when those wrongs can be put right? Or, are you on the side of wrong? Do you ultimately say that wrong doesn't matter?

Suppose it had been your mother gassed in Hitler's gas chambers. Would you simply say, 'Well she's dead now, and there's nothing to be done about it, and let's forget it and enjoy ourselves while life lasts'? Does your moral conscience say to you that such activity ought to be punished, and if there is a God in heaven who really loves humanity, he will one day call those people to judgment and deal with them? Which side are you on?

God has given assurance that when Jesus Christ was so unjustly executed and murdered by sinful men at Calvary, that was not the end. There is going to be a day of judgment; you may be sure of it. We haven't seen the last of Jesus Christ, God's Son, yet. If this world is a moral world, if our moral judgments as human beings can be relied upon, and that sense of morality comes from our creator, you can be utterly sure there is going to be a day of judgment. And by raising him from the dead, God has given assurance that he has reversed what men did to Christ at Calvary.

Why is it, do you think, that when some people hear of the final judgment they don't clap their hands and shout, 'Hoorah'? I think I know. It's because the Bible tells us, and so does our own conscience, that if God starts to judge, it won't be just Hitler he judges, will it? I too have sinned; I too have broken God's law; and conscience and the Bible combine to tell us that after death comes the judgment. It is a serious thing. The great destination of life is to meet our creator. What shall happen to us then?

Oh, the wonder of this! The Bible says, 'it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgement', but the Bible doesn't just say that. It says, 'As it is appointed unto men once to die, and after that the judgment, so Christ, God's Son, was once offered, sacrificed, and died to bear the sins of many' (see Heb 9:27-28). That is the gospel. We are creatures of God, made to live and serve him. We have turned, each one, to our own way. That is the charge. The charge is not that we have murdered our mothers-in-law or robbed banks or bashed policeman or committed unnatural vice. The heart of the matter is this: we were made by a creator to serve his pleasure and will, and we have turned. Scripture says, 'All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way' (Isa 53:6). Is that serious?

I remember just after the war being on a train journey in England. Food was short, and in my compartment there was a young man (I was young too then of course), and I shared my sandwiches with him, and he shared his coffee with me; and we got talking. And eventually,

I happened to say something about sin. He said, 'Sin? That's a silly term. I don't think anything about sin at all.'

Well I said, 'Is that so, old boy?' Well yes, he thought I was stupid, so I changed the subject. I said, 'Would you think you were clever enough to make a motorcar?'

Yes, he thought perhaps he would.

I said, 'Suppose you made a car, and five times out of ten, when you sat in the driving seat and you turned the steering wheel one way, the car went the other way. What would you do with that?'

He said, 'I'd scrap it.'

I said, 'I thought you would. But, wait a minute. Suppose nine times out of ten the car went where you wanted it to go, but once in every ten times it took no notice of you and went where it wanted to go itself. What would you do then?'

He said, 'I'd scrap that too. If I made a car, I would want the car to go where I wanted it to go one hundred percent of the time, or I would scrap it.'

We were made to do God's will. Our trouble is that we have gone our own way. We have not even sought him very often. I said, 'Old chap, you'd better be very careful that God doesn't put you on the scrap heap of eternity.'

But then we listen to the gospel again: 'as it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment: So Christ was once offered to bear the sins of many' (see Heb 9:27-28). There is a possibility of reconciliation, for putting the account right, of being forgiven, of receiving eternal life and becoming a child of God indwelt by God's Spirit, with the absolute certain hope that when life ends we shall be with the Saviour, and see him and be like him.

What are the terms? Repentance of course. But to make things clear, Paul said one more thing.

God cannot be bought

God is not 'served by human hands, as though he needed anything' (Acts 17:25). The thing that makes religion hard (or what people think of as religion) is the impression they have that you have to earn your salvation. You have, so to speak, to buy heaven by the good works you do, and they are jolly hard to do. That of course is false. You couldn't buy anything from God; he is not in business. He doesn't sell salvation to the best behaved. We have all sinned, he says, but he doesn't need us to pay him anything. The magnificence of salvation is that it is free, just like our physical birth was free. We did nothing to earn our physical birth, did we? I don't remember doing it myself. Salvation is likewise, absolutely free. 'The wages of sin is death,' God says, 'but the free gift of God is eternal life in Jesus Christ our Lord' (Rom 6:23). If God made you pay for salvation, he would be ashamed of himself. He is God; we have nothing to pay him with. But he wants our repentance. He wants us to seek him; he wants us to find him; and as we come, his hands are outstretched towards us with the offer of forgiveness, peace, pardon, love, salvation and a certain hope for all eternity.

[Do All Religions Lead to God?](#)

Where to find the Truth

In our first session, we heard the Christian Apostle Paul speaking to some ancient Greek philosophers, and thus to us all. He argues that God Almighty has so arranged our universe, and our individual lives in particular, that in response we should seek him and feel after him, so that we might find him. Many a thoughtful heart responds to that challenge still; it seems logical. If there is a God, and that God has made us, and if that God has put in the universe and in the world around us abundant and overwhelming evidence of his design; and we can see that we are not creatures of chance nor the product of blind, mindless, purposeless forces, then of course it is logical that we should seek this God who has made us. But the next question that arises in such people's hearts is: 'by what way shall I come to God? What particular religion shall I follow? Don't all religions profess to show us the way to God? But then there are so many religions. If I am sincere and determined to find God, what religion shall I follow?'

Objections to exclusive truth claims

Our topic is: 'Do all religions lead to God?' What is the true answer to the question? As a Christian, I quote unashamedly the words of our Lord Jesus himself, and his answer is unambiguous. He said, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me' (John 14:6).

Exclusive truth claims lead to violence

At this point many of my friends get exceedingly irritated. They say, 'That's religion for you with its narrow-minded exclusivism, and held by people who think that only their religion can possibly be right.' And then they will often point out to me that it is this exclusivism in religion that has led to such terrible wars and slaughtering in the course of the ages. And of course as a Christian I have to admit (and freely admit it now) that in the last two thousand years great organizations that have gone under the name of being Christian have taken to the sword and violence to compel people to become Christian, and have led their armies to attack and destroy those who adhered to other religions. It is a very sorry blot in history.

Of course, I at once point out what is the undeniable fact that when Christians do that they are flying in the face of what Christ himself taught. He forbade his followers to promote his kingdom, or even to defend his kingdom, by the use of violence and the sword. You may remember that dramatic occasion when he stood before the Roman governor, Pilate, on a capital charge. 'So you are a king?' Pilate said.

Our Lord said, 'You say that I am a king. [In other words, 'It's not the word I would use, but if you put it like that, yes.'] My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world. . . . For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice.'

And somewhat cynically, as a politician and a Roman military man, Pilate replied, 'What is truth?' (John 18:36–38)

Well, truth is surely what we seek, is it not? We need the truth on this vital matter: 'How shall I know about God, my creator?' And Christ, who said, 'I am the truth,' strictly forbade his disciples to use their swords in order to impose the truth. And it must be obvious why that must be so. If it is a question of truth, and if people are to receive it, they must be convinced of the truth. You don't convince people of the truth at the point of a sword, threatening that you will slit their throats if they don't accept what you teach. The God of heaven who gave us minds and a free will, will never authorize any of his servants to compel people to believe the truth.

Exclusive truth claims reject the truths found in other views

If we agree you shouldn't use force to compel people to accept your religion then you may well add, like my friends do, 'But then do not all religions have some truth about them, so that we do not need to restrict ourselves to Christianity?'

Well of course that does depend what you mean by *religion*. If you think of religion, as many people do, as some rules and regulations to help you to be good, then of course many religions sincerely teach people to be good: to respect their parents, to be kind and protect the elderly, to be merciful to little children and so forth and so on. You will find those precepts in many religions. But there is something deeper than that, isn't there?

I myself have a great deal of sympathy with a gentleman who was asked why he didn't go to church when he said, 'I don't think I need to pay a parson to tell me to be good; I know I ought to be good. That's not my trouble; my trouble is that, knowing I ought to be good, very often I'm not good.' Mere advice, however religious, to 'be good' is self-evidently inadequate. All of us in our quieter moments think of God our maker and hear the voice of our conscience within telling us that we have not been good. We should then ask 'How shall we find our maker and be reconciled to him?' In other words, the thing that I want to test tonight in this proposition: 'Do all religions lead to God?' is not religion in the sense of a moral code to 'be good'. I want to ask what other religions have to say about that deeper thing that Christians call *salvation*. How can I be saved? What must I do to be saved? Or, if you don't like that term, what must I do to be acceptable to my Creator, so that when I am called to face him he may accept me? And if we ask that, of course it is the plain fact that not all religions teach the same thing.

Now, I am a Christian and therefore I am biased; I admit that. I believe Christ when he says, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me' (John 14:6). But as I examine the question before us: 'Do all religions lead to God?' I must

necessarily comment on a number of religions, because the notion, which is so widespread, that all religions really teach the same thing, is not true. They do not teach the same thing.

Many argue what my Japanese friends argue, that it doesn't matter which religion you follow because it's like people climbing a mountain. Some people come up on the north side, and some people come up on the south side. The people on the west say their way is the best; the people on the east say, 'Nonsense, our way is the best way,' but, as they climb the mountain, they eventually find they all arrive at the same point.

That's very good for climbing mountains, but that won't do on the way to God, for if you look at the major religions, you will find they all disagree, and not merely about the path to get to him; they disagree about God himself. So I wish to examine some of these religions, and I shall try to do it respectfully. I apologize in advance if I say anything unduly offensive against any other religion, and I stand to be corrected, but tonight we are concerned with the truth, as all true religions should be. Truth is truth, and we should not compromise it.

So, do all religions lead to God?

Religious differences that matter

The question of God

Let's begin with strict Buddhism. Theravada Buddhism is the Buddhism taught by the Buddha himself. What is not often realized is that Buddha taught there is no God, or if there is, the Buddha was not interested in him. Strict Buddhism is not a religion. Buddha taught a way of, let's call it for the time being, psychological manipulation, that we might find freedom from distress, and peace of mind. He was not interested in God. His was not religion, but philosophy.

Take Hinduism, along with popular Buddhism. Hinduism has at its heart a contradiction. It teaches that *the One*, the ultimate, whatever it is, is just one. And yet at the same time it bids you worship your pick of forty-two thousand gods and goddesses with their temples galore. It seems to the outsider to start with to contradict itself when it talks about God, but obviously with its forty-two thousand gods, it is not talking the same thing about God as, say, Judaism is, whose basic tenet is 'The LORD our God, the LORD is one', and there is no other (Deut 6:4). Islam likewise teaches strict monotheism, and Christians likewise. Holy Scripture says 'there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all' (1 Tim 2:5-6). I shall sound too harsh if I say it, but it is sheer ignorance of the facts that makes people say that all religions lead to God.

Christianity will say more, for Christ claims to be God incarnate, which means both Judaism and Islam reject Christianity. The deity of our Lord Jesus—he is not mere man, though truly man, but is God-in-flesh—lies at the very heart of Christianity and the gospel it preaches: '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). It is clear then that even Judaism and Islam, though monotheistic, do not say the same as Christianity on this absolutely fundamental matter.

The question of what is wrong with us

Most of us are old enough to have realized that there is something wrong with us. I freely join the Apostle Paul who bewailed his situation. He says, 'I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing' (Rom 7:19). I suspect every one of us has had that experience in life. We have made our New Year's resolutions and promptly broken them. We tell ourselves that we are going to take a grip of ourselves, and we are no longer going to do this, that or the other. Then often before next Thursday comes round we have done this or that or the other. There is something wrong with us, isn't there? *What* is wrong with us? If we can't agree on that, how shall we find the right answer for putting it right?

What does Hinduism say? Hinduism says that everything is God. The moon is God; the sun is God; the earth is God; stones are God, animals are God, everybody is God; everything is God. The technical term for that is *pantheism*. But then at once you see that scarce makes sense, because if I am God, and you are God, and bad people are God, and good people are God, then there doesn't appear to be a lot of difference between good and bad. Isn't that so? If this bad man over here is in fact God, or a bit of God, then God must be disagreeing with God. And the difficulty with all such pantheistic religions is that in the end they have to confess to you that evil and good are ultimately the same. What person with a conscience could possibly agree?

Also, if you ask Hinduism and many other religions, including many of the Greek philosophers, what is wrong with us, they will blame it on our bodies. They say that the one true God is so pure and holy he never would have created matter. Matter is a very sorry and unworthy thing. Yet while the great supreme God never created this very sorry and unworthy thing, this main God is supposed to have created other little gods or demi-gods. And they all had creatorial powers, and one of them who was a little way down the list, went stupidly and created human beings whose bodies are made of matter. And that was a very sad thing, and if you want to be saved, they say, you have to try to keep as far away from the body as you can and so improve yourself, so that eventually your soul will go to heaven when you die.

Christianity says that is not only untrue but positively dangerous. Our bodies are not to be despised. According to the Bible, our bodies are made by God. In and of themselves they are good. And marriage is good and not to be despised or run away from. It is an insult to God the creator to call matter in itself bad. In the Christian truth you may see the wonder of the human body for the blessed Son of God, the Word, who in the beginning was with God and was God and is God, and who made all things, took a human form and became human. And the gospel tells us that he shall remain human forever. If you like to think of going to heaven in the biblical sense, then all the saved and the redeemed shall go to heaven with glorified human bodies for all eternity. That is very different from Hinduism, isn't it? To say then that all religions lead to God is just contrary to the sheer, simple facts.

What the Bible says is wrong

If there is something wrong with us, what does the Bible say it is? To put it simply, it is not the fault of our bodies as such. Here is what the Bible says, 'All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way' (Isa 53:6). Being creatures of God, made for God's pleasure and to do his will, we have used our free will to go against God, to break his

law and to ignore him. The Bible says, in the great exposition of the Christian gospel that is called the Epistle to the Romans, that one of the basic faults of humanity is that, knowing God, they did not like to retain him in their knowledge, and it adds: they did not 'give thanks to him' (1:21).

The sin of ingratitude to our maker is cardinal. If we would be direct and simple, even a child knows he didn't make himself, and that he ought to be grateful to someone for his very existence. If we think a long while about it, we adults know we didn't make ourselves either. And if it is the fact that we are made by our Creator to do his pleasure, then one of the chief things should be that we should be *grateful* to God, but 'all we like sheep have gone astray' the Bible says, 'we have turned—every one—to his own way.'

That is what is wrong with us. The human spirit has become alienated from the Father of spirits. The Bible says that people who are not reconciled to God are 'dead in trespasses and in sins' (see Eph 2:1). That does not mean physically dead. It is like when you try to ring somebody up whom you love, but when you lift the phone and try to speak, there is no answer, and the phone goes dead. That is the picture of humanity—dead, alienated in their minds from God. Or, to use a parable that our Lord spoke, it is like the father who had a son that proved to be a prodigal son. He said to his father one day, 'Father, what I want you to do is to divide up the inheritance and give me the portion that falls to me' (see Luke 15:12). Even we westerners can see the wrong of that, but to an eastern mind that was a hideous sin, for in the eastern mind there was never any hope of inheriting anything from your father until your father died. For a son to come to his father and say, 'Divide the inheritance now and give me my bit,' he might as well have said to the father, 'You're living too long, old boy. Get out of the way and give me my inheritance!' It was an extraordinary offence. And in the parable, the father gave the son what he wanted and said, 'Here you are, my boy.' And the son took it and went off into a far country, and his father commented later on, 'This my son was *dead*' (see v. 32).

That is our trouble. Our self-will, our irritation at God (who we sense to be some controller who is not letting us be free) has led so many people to break God's chains from them and seek to live a life of their own. It is not that they are murdering everybody they meet, but just going their own way and saying, 'I did it my way,' as the famous American singer had it. That is what is wrong with you; and not all the doing of good works in the world will heal that breach, for the fundamental thing is that we need to be reconciled to God.

The question of how to make things right again

What is the cure then? How do we put it right? Here, once more, you will find that all religions do not teach the same thing; and they do not all even claim to lead to God.

What does Buddhism say is the way to come to peace and to put right what is wrong? Classical Theravada Buddhism teaches that the trouble is our desires. We desire so many things and try to get them, and our desires churn us up inside; and we don't have any peace. The way to get peace is to overcome and eliminate your desires. That is the cure.

Some people say it works, but it has an inherent, logical contradiction. You want to get rid of all desires? Well what about the desire to have peace? The way to get peace is to get rid of your desires, but isn't the desire to have peace a desire? The thing is logically contradictory.

That brings me to another point that I ought to mention. It concerns both what is wrong with us, and the way to put it right. If a little child is born defective or deformed in some way, or if a man turns out to be an exceedingly bad character, the doctrine in much of Buddhism (jhāna Buddhism, as in Hinduism) will tell you why. They will say that person sinned in a previous incarnation. They teach the transmigration of souls, or *reincarnation*, which says that people are born into this world and live, then when they die they go back where they came from and eventually are recycled, and they have to be reborn. The reason they have to be reborn is that when they do something wrong in this world their soul is stained. Your sin loads you with what they call *karma*—your responsibility; and the only way to get rid of that stain is to suffer. But if you don't manage to suffer enough in this life, then after you die you will have to come back again and be born into this world once more and do some more suffering. Nor will you get free of being reborn until all the suffering has been accomplished and your karma has been removed.

I know some friends in my part of the world who think that is much superior to Christianity, and they tell me why they think so. They say, 'I haven't made much of this life, but if it's true that we are reincarnated and come back again, that gives me hope of a second chance.'

That is false. There is no second hope beyond the grave. Why would you want a second hope when this very moment God, in Christ, is offering you salvation, reconciliation, forgiveness of sins, the gift of eternal life and the absolute certainty and assurance of heaven? Why do you want a second hope after death? Why not take God's salvation now?

Every now and again on the radio or television or in some substandard novel, you will see people playing around with the idea of the doctrine of reincarnation. This particular person is supposed to have realized she was here before, and when she was here before, she was a grasshopper or a snake, or a queen or something. How it titillates the imagination, and the novels sell marvellously well! But it is the cruellest doctrine that man ever invented.

Take this child who has been born semi-paralyzed. What does the doctrine say about why this child was born deformed? Those who believe it say, 'Because this child did a sin in a previous incarnation.'

Oh, what sin?

'Well, we can't tell you.'

Oh, I see. How many incarnations ago? Because the world's been going on a long while, hasn't it? And so if this child had previous incarnations and has still not suffered enough, he shall have to come back to suffer some more. And obviously in all the incarnations so far, he has piled up a lot more sin and still hasn't paid for it, or suffered enough for it, and the dear child perhaps in this life will do some more sin. Can you guarantee he will ever be free of suffering?'

And the answer comes back, 'No, of course you can't!'

It is the cruellest doctrine that was ever invented.

I am reminded of our Lord when he was faced with a blind man, and the apostles said, 'Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?' He said, 'Neither' (see John 9:2-3). It is not the child's fault that he or she should be born deformed.

Forgiveness in this life

Reincarnation is a cruel doctrine because in those religions there is no such thing as forgiveness. I remember years ago there came to my door in the university a girl from Thailand who was a postdoctoral student in chemistry. She had heard that I was a Christian, and she came asking if I would mind if she asked me some questions about Christianity. She told me straightway she wasn't intending to get converted; she was a Buddhist and intended to stay one. But what did we Christians preach?

I said, 'We preach a Saviour, God's own Son, who died for us at Calvary on a cross to bear our sin and pay the penalty of sin, so that God can grant us forgiveness here and now. And not only grant us forgiveness, he lets us know we have forgiveness and puts our hearts at rest for life and for eternity.'

And as we talked together, I said to her, 'You have got a little girl?'

Yes, she had.

'If your girl did something bad and you had to scold her, and then she said, "Sorry", you would forgive her, wouldn't you? And you'd not only forgive her, but you would make sure the child understood that you had forgiven her.'

'No,' she said, 'I wouldn't. Who am I to forgive anybody? There is no forgiveness. The child has done wrong. She must suffer for it. No one can forgive anybody else. The only way to get forgiveness is to suffer.'

To say that all religions lead to God is to bury your head in the sand. All religions do not lead to God. And at that point in the conversation with this woman, Christians would want to get up on their two hind legs and say, 'through this man [Jesus Christ] is preached unto you the forgiveness of sins: And by him all that believe are justified from all things, from which you could not be justified by the law of Moses' (Acts 13:38–39 KJV).

Yes, but how do we get this forgiveness? Here we come to the very central point of Christianity. The gospel is that 'Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; and that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures' (1 Cor 15:3–4 KJV). As he pointed to the Lord Jesus, John the Baptist said, 'Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!' (John 1:29). And the great Old Testament prophet Isaiah, prophesying the coming of God's Son into our world says, 'he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed' (Isa 53:5). We have forgiveness through his blood, that is, through his death; 'we have redemption through his blood, even the forgiveness of sins' (Col 1:14 KJV).

And you say, 'How could the death of Jesus bring us forgiveness of sins?'

Because Jesus, though truly man, was also truly God incarnate. The heart of the Christian gospel is that, as Paul put it, 'the Son of God, . . . loved me and gave himself for me' (Gal 2:20). We were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, for 'God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us' (Rom 5:8). The central message of the gospel is salvation, forgiveness, redemption and reconciliation with God through the death of our Lord Jesus Christ upon the cross.

The question of Jesus

Do all religions lead to God? As you may know, Islam denies outright and with great indignation that Jesus died on the cross. Islam believes that Jesus was a prophet. It teaches, because the Qur'an teaches it, that Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary. But Islam denies that Jesus died on the cross. They say that at that moment God removed him from the cross and took him to heaven and put somebody else in his place, perhaps Barabbas or somebody else; they don't know who it was. In doing that they deny the very fundamental of salvation. We have redemption through the death of our Lord Jesus Christ as our sin bearer upon the cross.

Do all religions lead to God? Judaism, the older faith, believes there is just one God, but they deny the deity of the Lord Jesus, therefore they deny the value of his death, and that it was a sacrifice; they deny that he was the Lamb of God, given of God to take away the sin of the world. And how do they get forgiveness? To be blunt, they have no way of forgiveness.

I remember once giving some lectures to Christian students in the University of Cambridge, and they had asked me to comment on the significance of the First and Second books of Kings in the Old Testament, and I did my best. After one of the lectures, a student came up to me and said, 'Can I speak to you?'

I said, 'Yes, of course.'

He said, 'I hope you don't mind my saying, but I do admire the way you as a Christian are expounding our Old Testament books.'

I said, 'Well thank you very much. But don't your rabbis expound them?'

'No,' he said, 'they don't preach them in the synagogue.'

'What a pity; we could do with a few more Jewish rabbis getting up and denouncing the modern world's idolatry, like Isaiah the prophet denounced idolatry in his day. Why don't they do it? Aren't they concerned for me as a Gentile, to save me?'

Well he had no answer to that, but we became friends, and he came to dinner once or twice. As we talked about things we talked of course about Christ and salvation, and I said to the young man, 'You know, I'm a Gentile. I can't help that. It's how I was born. But I do admire your law in the Old Testament. There is no fooling about, no fudging of the issues. Here is law with the authority behind it of the almighty God who is laying down his standards. I admire that in our modern, permissive world. I'll tell you something else I admire in your Old Testament. It's that when you broke the law, as sometimes you Jews did (you're not a lot better than us Gentiles really) God didn't say, "Oh, that doesn't matter. I forgive you. Don't worry about that; let's brush it under the carpet." No, he didn't! Of course there are a lot of people who talk like that, and say that God is so loving he'd never punish anybody; but that's a lot of sentimental nonsense. When you Jews in the Old Testament days broke God's law, God didn't say it didn't matter, did he? You knew what you had to do. You had to bring an animal as a sin offering. It could have been a lamb, say, and the sinner had to put his hands on the head of the lamb and confess his sin before God and admit that he deserved to die as a sinner. And then, by God's mercy, the lamb was slain in the place of the sinner so that the sinner might find forgiveness.'

'Well yes,' he said, a little reluctantly, 'that's what happened.'

I said, 'Tell me, what about those lambs and bullocks that you used to kill in the Old Testament days to get forgiveness? Did they do any good really? I mean, did you think that the blood of a lamb would wash out the guilt of your human sin?'

'Well, no,' he said, 'of course not.'

'I thought that, because what do cows, for instance, know about sin? There is one thing to be said about cows: they don't go to bed with a bad conscience. It's we humans that get bad consciences. We know the guilt of sin, and conscience can disturb us uncomfortably in the middle of the night and at other times. We know what the feeling of real guilt is, not psychological guilt, but real guilt. And what could the sacrifice of animals that don't understand sin or guilt do to put away sin?'

He agreed heartily with me. I said, 'Well if they did no good, and God ordered these things, what was the point of them? Were they symbols of something, do you think?'

'Yes,' he said, 'they were.'

'Symbols of what?'

'No,' he said, 'don't press me. I don't want to spoil our friendship.'

'All right, I won't. But I will allow myself to make this remark. When our Lord Jesus came and died on the cross for the sins of the world (the "Lamb of God" come to take away the sins of the world, as the Jewish Prophet described him) and Israel officially rejected him, forty years later God allowed the Romans to destroy your temple, didn't he? And ever since then, your animal sacrifices had to cease because the temple was the only place where you could offer them. And now when you sin, you have nothing that can pay the price of sin.'

A unique message

It is not true that all religions lead to God. And when I hear our Lord Jesus saying, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me', I recognize a unique voice speaking a unique message (John 14:6). This is the Son of God, truly God and truly man, come to be the Lamb of God. And that is what I need.

Some ten years ago I was in Kiev, the capital of Ukraine, and the old walls had not quite come down in communist Ukraine at that time. I was invited by the headmistress of a state school to go along to address her whole school on Christianity. I grabbed the opportunity with both fists. So the school assembled, and a very pleasant school it was with a very gracious and smart and dapper schoolmistress, and she introduced me, and I held forth as best I could.

I must confess the students looked a bit bamboozled. When I finished, the headmistress explained to them, 'In the past, this wasn't allowed; you couldn't have religion in the schools, but the government has had different insights now, and they are going to allow it, and I am going to have religion in the schools, and not just Christianity but all religions.' Then the deputy headmistress, a very gracious senior lady, came up to me, and she said, 'May I ask you a question?'

I said, 'Yes, madam.'

She said, 'What do you think of UFOs?'

'Well,' I said, 'I can't tell you really, madam, because we haven't had any our way, and the government tells us the ones people have claimed to see are not genuine. But I believe you've had a lot in your country.'

'Yes, we've had a lot of UFOs, and when the last UFO came, the people inside got out.' (She was perfectly serious.) 'They told the locals that Buddhism was the true religion and not Christianity. What do you think of that?'

I said I thought it was remarkable. And I said, 'Madam, I tell you what I do think myself about Buddhism. I find it very difficult because it has no forgiveness, at least in most of its forms.'

'Oh, isn't there?' she said.

'No, there isn't.'

I told her the story about the student from Thailand who came to my room and told me there is no forgiveness in Buddhism. Then I said to her, 'You see, madam, I'll tell you why I personally am attracted to Christ. I don't need anybody to tell me to be good. I know I should be good. That is not my trouble; my trouble is that I haven't been good. And my question is, how do I find forgiveness without destroying my own standards, let alone God's? Suppose I deliberately get drunk, drive my car, and I kill your daughter. Will you as her mother say, "It doesn't matter; it's happened now, so just forget it and brush it under the carpet; we forgive you"? Is there no justice? If God loves your daughter, how can he forgive me for killing her and just say, "Oh, I'm so loving, just forget about it, because now that she's dead it doesn't matter"? That is my problem. How can I find forgiveness of my sin in a way that upholds the value of God's righteousness and my own sense of values too? That is what attracts me to Christ. In Christ, God tells us that sin must be punished; but in Christ, God tells us that though he must uphold his law and punish sin, the God who made us has provided a way that we might be forgiven and forgiven justly. That is why he sent Christ, his Son, to take my place and bear the penalty of sin for me. And when I accept him, in true repentance and faith, God assures me that the blood of Jesus Christ, his Son, cleanses me from all sin; and I have peace with God. I'm not only attracted by Christ, but I've noticed this, that there is no one else on the market who talks like him!'

It is true, for you have never heard, and you never will hear, someone talk to you as Jesus Christ does. He will come alongside you in a quiet and say, 'I am God, your creator. You are my idea; I made you. You have gone astray, haven't you? You have sinned. The God who made you loves you and will be loyal to you, but God cannot say your sin didn't matter. It must be punished and I, the Son of God, because I love you, came to die for you and pay the penalty for your sin.' No one will ever tell you that except Jesus Christ.

And to end with my own personal statement (because, after all, these things come down to our personal decisions), I find Jesus Christ to be true. He is the only one who, being sinless himself, came not just to tell me to be good, though he did tell me that, but he came on purpose to die and to give his life as a ransom for mine. Let me repeat to you his claim, for all religions do not lead to God. Jesus Christ says in our ears at this moment, 'Come to me . . . and I will give you rest' (Matt 11:28), for 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me' (John 14:6).

Who is a Sinner?

The Purpose of God's Law

The concept of sin

I am all too aware that the very concept of sin is nowadays out of fashion. Would that the practice of sin was out of fashion as well. I cannot say the same about the practice, but certainly the concept of sin is thought nowadays to be very *passé* and not to be discussed in gentle society. Of course, if I were talking to you about a campaign to lessen crime, then I suspect you might even be interested, for who isn't interested in the mounting tide of crime? I don't suppose it is so here in Prince Edward Island, with all its peaceful citizens, but in so many parts of the world, and where I live too, crime, including juvenile crime, with schoolboys murdering their schoolmates and other such things, is on the rise. People are interested in what can be done to lessen this rising tide. Crime is an offence against the laws of the state; but when it comes to calling something *sin* that raises another dimension completely. For sin is not just an offence against the laws of the state; sin is basically an offence against God.

More than bad behaviour

The concept of sin adds two dimensions to this matter. First, sin touches things that the law of the state cannot touch (such as pride and jealousy and envy) and brings God into the picture. As King David said long ago, when he was convicted for having committed adultery and murder and cried to God in the anguish of his smitten heart, 'Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight' (Ps 51:4). A second big implication is that if what we have done is sin against God, then conscience tells us it could have eternal consequences that do not disappear at death.

The concept of sin is regarded as old fashioned, but it is not that people are not against wrongdoing. People still feel that deeply. If the head of a research department gets envious at the potential discoveries that one of the junior researchers is doing and secretly goes and messes up his computer program and interferes with some of his chemical experiments, and then the junior researcher's research all comes out wrong and he gets blamed for it and dismissed from the team when it wasn't his fault, then we say it's a dirty, rotten deed that the head of department did. He should be dealt with somehow or other.

Something similar happened to a friend of mine who was doing his medical research in an institution in a country not far from here. A fellow student from the next-door lab stole his results and presented them as her own and got her degree through it and left him without a degree. You will say that again is a rotten, dirty business.

We are against bad behaviour, but to call that bad behaviour *sin* raises these other dimensions, doesn't it? It is not only an offence against your fellow student, nor perhaps even an offence against the state, but an offence against God, with potential eternal consequences. That means that we ought to think a bit about this.

A sense of fairness

What is this sense of right and wrong that we humans have deep in our hearts and consciences? It is a very real thing. Even children have it. Perhaps they have it more strongly than we hardboiled adults do.

Here is Tommy, and there is his smaller brother, Joey, and they are playing on the floor. And Tommy, being older and stronger, seizes Joey's toy, and Joey protests and there is a bit of a fight. Mama, hearing the shemozzle, comes through the door just at the moment Joey swipes his brother across the mouth. Well, it's not letting you into a secret to say that of course the older is mummy's favourite really, though she wouldn't confess it; and to see her favourite smitten across the mouth by this little upstart, well she deals with Joey and takes the toy away and disappears. Then Tommy gloats over his younger brother: 'There!' And Joey mutters under his breath, 'It isn't fair!'

Did you never feel that as a youngster? Children feel very strongly what isn't fair. They have a deeply ingrained sense of right and wrong. Where would you say that comes from? Is that merely a childish thing that we ought to grow out of when we get older?

We had a case recently in London. A man and wife were having coffee in a railway terminus when thieves came alongside and cut the cords of her handbag and ran off with it and her money. Instinctively she chased them. They got into a car, and when she tried to stop them she fell off the bonnet, and they ran over her and killed her. What will you say about that? You say, 'Well she would have been wiser to let them get away with it and saved her life. There was only £20 in the bag.'

But that instinctive feeling says: 'This isn't fair!' We could all think of one hundred and one other situations that are not fair, couldn't we? Where does that feeling come from?

Authority behind morality

The Bible says that our sense of unfairness comes from the fact that the God who made us has written this sense of fairness, of right and wrong, in our very hearts, so even if we have never read a Bible all our lives, yet the works of the law are written in our hearts (see Rom 2:15). Just as the laws of nature can be observed in the universe and in the cells in a human body, so the Bible says this moral sense is placed in us by God. It is not necessarily every detail of the law that is written there, but that basic moral sense that there is right and there is wrong.

Just playing games?

A lot of people shy away from that notion, because if God put it there then it is reasonable to think that one day God will call us to account for how we have behaved. So some people, my friends among them, try alternative explanations. 'No,' they say, 'we mustn't think of God as the authority behind morality. We don't need God in order to have a satisfactory moral system

and get people to behave.’ Instead, they say the rules of life are like the rules of a game. And you make those up yourself, don’t you? If you’re going to play what we call football (and other people call soccer), you don’t have to ask God for the rules, do you? You sit down and think out the rules yourself. Of course you all then have to agree to play by the rules of soccer, and you appoint a referee. He has to decide whether you are keeping the rules or not; but you and the others you are playing with made the rules, and you agree to them. If, later on, you think the game could be improved by changing the rules a bit, well you change them, as long as everybody agrees. And people say, ‘That is how it is with morals. We make up our own rules for life. If, now and again, they seem to need to be improved a bit, well we change them, but that’s all there is. There is no God behind them. We don’t need a God.’

And what about those people who play that other thing that Americans call football, but we call rugby, which developed in England at one stage when people were not content with soccer and some chap picked up the ball and ran with it? Thereafter, in the game they invented, what is forbidden in football (soccer) is okay in rugby. There you may handle the ball. In football (soccer) you mustn’t.

‘And there you are,’ you say. ‘Any set of rules would do, as long as they’re sensible. You don’t like my rules? Well I’m playing a different game from you, old chap, so it’s no good saying your rules are the right rules and my rules are wrong. You can keep your own rules if you like and let me keep mine. We are playing different games.’ It’s like cricket. The rules of cricket are vastly different from soccer or football or rugby, and certainly from hockey. Well, what does it matter? It’s just a different game, that’s all. You may think cricket is a bit stupid (a lot of people do) but it’s a game with its own rules.

That is what people say about morality. ‘You can’t say your morals, your set of rules, are the only right rules. Perhaps the Hindus have a different set of rules and the Eskimos a third set.’

All right, let’s try that on morality. You don’t believe in cooking your next-door neighbour, I suppose, and putting him in a pot and eating him. But here comes an ancient man from some island in the middle of the ocean. He does think it’s good (and very tasty) to cook his neighbour. You might say, ‘We don’t like you doing that; you shouldn’t do it.’ What if he replies that he’s playing a different game?

‘We have different rules you see. Who are you to say that our rules are bad? You stick to your own rules if you don’t like to eat people’s bodies for meat. But we do.’

How will that work? That can’t be right, can it? Is there no higher authority than just ourselves making up the rules to play whatever particular game in life we want to? If not, then what is this feeling of right and wrong that we have deep down inside us? Is it a matter of taste? People with refined taste like caviar. Other people don’t like that; they like tomato sauce. Well, if you like caviar and I don’t, it’s no good saying to me, ‘You don’t like caviar? Well you’re *wrong* then. What do you like?’

‘I like tomato sauce.’

‘Oh, how vulgar! No, you *should not* like that.’

Well that’s no question of should or should not. It is just a matter of taste, and it’s neither right nor wrong when it comes to taste.

This feeling of right and wrong can't be just a matter of taste. Pol Pot, that infamous dictator in Cambodia, didn't like intellectuals, so he slaughtered about two million of them. He's now dead of course, but what if we had gone to him and had a conversation? 'Look here, Pol Pot, slaughtering intellectuals is bad.'

And he replied, 'Oh, don't you like slaughtering intellectuals?'

'Well of course not.'

'Well don't do it then, but I like slaughtering intellectuals. They are not to my taste.'

Would you think that were an adequate answer? You say, 'Well of course not. Morality cannot depend on taste.'

Well what does it depend on then, and who decides what morality should be?

A social contract

Some philosophers, having thought long and hard about the topic, come up with the idea that the best way in life to decide what's right and wrong is what they call a *social contract*.

I remember when in my university at one stage some of us got together and formed an informal forum for discussion. It enabled us to invite people of all sizes, shapes and beliefs and non-beliefs to come, one at a time, to talk to us and tell us about their beliefs and other matters. The only condition we laid down was that when they had finished talking, we would be allowed to ask them questions.

I remember one of our colleagues, a noble man and every inch of him a gentleman. He was a commando in the last war and blinded in it. In spite of that he rose to be a professor of philosophy in the university. A very brave man he was. He came and developed his theme to us that you did not need to have God in order to have morality, or as the authority behind it. All you need is people to form a social contract, one with another. And he illustrated it simply: 'If we just live, doing as we please, then if you put your finger in my eye, I shall retaliate by putting my finger in your eye. When we've done that a few thousand times, we shall find it's uncomfortable and silly. So we would then come to an agreement: you won't put your finger in my eye, and I won't put my finger in your eye. And that's all you need. If the nations did it in the same way it would work as well. Instead of fingers, talk about hydrogen bombs if you like: "If you send a hydrogen bomb at me, I shall send one back at you. If you won't, then I won't." If the whole world were to agree to a social contract like that, then that would be enough to set up morality.'

The question time came, and I put up my nervous hand. I said, 'I'd like to put a question to you. My name is Adolf Hitler, and I am proposing to put my finger in your eye in a very big way. I'm going to eliminate six million Jews to start with. If you then say to me, "If you do that, Adolf, we shall put our fingers back into your eye," I shall say, "No you won't, because you don't have the forces to resist me just now, do you?" So I shall continue putting my finger in your eye and ruin you, and then, when at last you get an army big enough to come and put your finger back in my eye, I shall shoot my brains out. So you will never put your finger in my eye. And, having shot my brains out, according to you atheists, there is no life to come anyway, so I got away with it. I got away with millions of murders. What would you say to that?'

I remember his reply very vividly: 'I should tell you to go and get lost.'

I thought it didn't adequately answer my question, really.

Justice after death

That raises another big point. If the rules of morality are merely those we invent ourselves, under whatever system, then when death comes the rules no longer apply. But see what that means.

I said just now Hitler got away with more than six million murders. Do you care for justice? Do you think that wrongdoing should be punished? How many millions have suffered gross injustice on this earth and never did get justice done for them?

I would say to my Russian friends from time to time, 'Let's have a thought experiment. Come with me in our imaginations, and we'll go to Auschwitz, the concentration camp where so many were gassed. We'll visit, in thought anyway, the huts where these men and women soon to be gassed are huddled together. Let's go and speak to them. I'll go first. And these weak, emaciated people, with what little breath and strength they have left, say, "What are you going to do for us? We want justice."'

What can you say? Has everybody got a right to justice?

I'll reply first. I say, 'I'm deeply, deeply sorry. This is heinous, outrageous injustice. I'm sorry, but you are never going to get justice on this earth. You will be gassed the day after next. But I tell you in the name of God and Christ and all that is holy, that won't be the end of the matter. There is a God, and behind your sense of right and wrong and your cry for justice is the authority of God himself; and God will see to it that one day these injustices are rightly dealt with. There is hope for you, therefore. And as far as your own sins, whatever has occurred, Christ died for you so that you may never suffer the eternal penalty of sin; and if you trust him now, death for you will be immediate entry into God's heaven.'

I say then, 'Come on, my Russian atheist friends, you come and talk to them. Watch their emaciated forms; see the terror in their eyes; hear them as they plead with you: "Why don't you do something? We want justice." What will you atheists say?'

And they will have to say, 'I'm sorry, but you're not going to get justice in this life. You'll be dead by Tuesday.'

'Go on,' I say, 'tell them the truth of what you believe.'

For now the atheists will have to add, 'And since there is no life to come, you'll not get justice there either.'

And they will reply to you, 'Are you telling us that all we were taught about your Marxist claim for justice, has all been hot air and a rope of sand, and justice ultimately is meaningless?'

If injustice and wrong were merely crime and offence against the state, then we must reconcile ourselves to the fact that, in spite of all the injustices that have been perpetrated, there will be millions who will never have any justice done, and all their hopes throughout life of seeing it done were futile.

A majority decision

If you say, 'But shall we not decide what's right and wrong by the majority in each country? Let the majority decide.'

Well, I ask you, with your knowledge of history, has the majority always been right? Haven't majorities sometimes been guilty of the most awful perpetrations of injustice upon minorities?

God and the moral law

We come back to the Bible's account, which says justice is not such a fragile thing as that. The hope that justice will be done starts here. But that sense of right and wrong that you have in your breast, and I have in mine, is implanted by God. He is the authority behind the moral law.

Conscience

You will notice another thing. You not only have inside you that sense of right and wrong, you have a faculty called *conscience*. You didn't put it inside you, did you? It can sometimes be highly inconvenient for the businessman who is fiddling the books for the income tax inspector, for example; and its gnawing keeps him awake some nights, lest he is found out.

Of course, conscience is a little bit like an alarm clock. I have to confess to the way I treat my alarm clock sometimes. I set it to go off at the hour when I should get up and (good alarm clock that it is) it goes off at that time. I reach out and bash it on the head, and it stops! Then it doesn't trouble me, and I go to sleep again. Of course you can do that with conscience when it's troublesome. You can practice bashing it, but that is a very dangerous thing to do, because you can put it almost permanently out of action.

Where did this apparatus of conscience come from? It's like a pilot stepping into an aeroplane and finding on the dashboard there is an indication of what is going wrong with the engines, and that is useful. He didn't put it there himself; the designer and builder of the aeroplane did. Nor did you or I put the conscience in our beings. It was put there by the God who wrote the works of the law on our hearts, says the Bible. God put within us this apparatus of conscience to alert us to our wrongdoings and, if need be, to keep us from doing wrong.

Then there is another thing about people. They have another system built into them that when they get discovered doing something wrong, some people, depending on the colour of their skin, blush up to the roots of their hair. That is very embarrassing. You can deal with that and stop it as well if you care to. One of the Old Testament Prophets complains of some people, saying that they've got so used to sinning that they can sin and not even blush (see Jer 6:15). Isn't that interesting that such a physical reaction is put into our bodies? We didn't invent it.

The Bible's view of sin is that sin is not merely a crime; it may not even be a crime against the state. Sin is an offence, personally, against our maker. And because he is eternal, our sins against him have the potential of eternal consequences. Certainly it means that we must give an account of ourselves to God.

Genes and sin

Somebody will say, 'But that's unfair because I couldn't help sinning; it's in my genes.' That is a modern escape route, isn't it? And it is all the more influential because there is a tiny bit

of truth in it. We are all damaged goods. According to the Bible, we belong to a race estranged from God and therefore are defective in many ways. It is true that some people are so seriously affected in mind that they get overwhelming urges to murder people. They deserve sympathy for their serious mental defects. Still, nobody is going to say it doesn't matter if they murder.

But it is commonly said that we have genes that control us. For instance, some homosexual activists will say that they have a gene that makes them homosexual and, therefore, it is perfectly natural and right to practise it, even if the Bible says it is sin. But it is not true. The more research that is done on the genes, the more the experts will tell you that there are very few single genes that are responsible for defects. There are one or two. Homosexuality is not among them. And when, just the other month, the Genome Project announced the full results of its investigation of a human genome, there was a gigantic surprise, was there not? The experts had thought that the DNA and the genes would be tremendously more than they turned out to be. The difference between the human genome and that of some other curious insects and beings was comparatively very small, and that showed at once that the notion that certain genes are one-to-one related to certain defects is not true, and cannot be true.

In England, we have a professor of zoology whose name is Richard Dawkins. Now listen to this bit to find out what you are, according to him. You as a human being are nothing but genes. In fact, you are just a mechanism that genes use to replicate and pass themselves on to the next generation. So everything about you: your mind, intellect, emotions, desires and everything else is controlled by your genes. All you are is a machine that genes use in order to replicate and perpetuate themselves forever. It's like saying that an oak tree is nothing more than a machine for making acorns.

If we are nothing but genes, then of course we can't help what we do, can we? We are not responsible. If we are nothing but genes, I could murder you and your wife and then say, 'Well I can't help that, because I'm nothing but genes. My genes did it.' I don't think you'd agree, would you? You wouldn't like it anyway.

Professor Dawkins sees the difficulty, so he says we must learn to fight against our genes. That is marvellous advice, but if I am *nothing but* genes, how can I fight against my genes? What bit in me is not genes and can fight against the genes? It is sheer piffle. And if I'm nothing but genes, my view of morality is just as good as anybody else's, and no one's view matters at all because they are the products of mindless cells and genes in our bodies.

What fragile escapes people do make for themselves in trying to avoid the fact that our sense of morality is put there by God, and that we are accountable to God for all the sins that we have committed against his law.

Somebody says, 'Well I think that is horrible and hard. I do my best to do what's right. Like everybody else I fail, and if God is going to judge me for that and I'm going to be condemned to some horrible eternity, that isn't fair; I've done my best.'

So let us turn to the other side of this topic. What is our relationship to God's law?

The purpose of God's law

God has not only put the works of the law into our hearts; in his Bible, God has written out his law in words and in detail. What is our relationship to the law?

Here I want to point out a view about God's law that is very common and widespread, and also completely mistaken. People say that God gave us his law, but then they fall to the idea that says, 'God gave us his law so that we should do the best we can to keep it and thus, in the end, qualify if possible for final acceptance with God and entry to God's heaven.' According to them, the way to get to God's heaven, so to speak, is ardently to do your best to keep his law. If you manage to keep it to, let's say seventy-five percent, God will have mercy on the fact that you came a bit short and will let you into heaven. Of course, you can't know until the end whether you'll get into heaven or not, just as you wouldn't know whether you are going to pass an exam.

In my country, in the universities that I served for some years, we had a slightly different system from what perhaps you have. Our students would only take two lots of exams in three years, and at the end of three years were the finals that decided everything. Therefore, if they were ever going to get a degree, two things had to be done. First, they had to get the qualifications and get into the university. That was moderately easy. Then they had to study their subject, say chemistry, and learn the laws and be able to practice it in the laboratories. And the teachers would help the student to do it, for we were a very kindly bunch, and we would help him in his experiments and encourage him by saying, 'You're the best student we ever saw!' Well, we wouldn't always say that, but we'd help him as best we could to face the final exams. But of course when it came to the final exams it was he who had to take them, not us; and he never could be absolutely sure that he was going to pass, until he had got through his finals.

You know, a lot of people think of getting to heaven like that. They think, 'Well if you're going to ever get to heaven, you have to join a church or something to start with. That sort of puts you onto the course. Then you have to do your best to keep God's laws. And God himself, or Jesus, will help you to keep those laws. But whether you eventually do it well enough to qualify to get into heaven must remain uncertain.' And people who believe like that will tell you straight, 'But nobody can be sure of ever getting into heaven until the final judgment.'

I am delighted to be able to tell you, on the authority of God's word, that that view is both mistaken and cruel. God is more loving than you think, and the Bible itself tells us that you never could possibly get to heaven and have God's final acceptance by your effort to keep God's law. That cannot be done. I'll read it to you so you see I'm not making it up. This is the Bible itself in the Epistle to the Romans in the New Testament. It says 'by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin' (3:20). No one will ever be justified, that is, regarded as being right by God, on the basis of their trying to keep his law. Why is that? Because every time you go to God's law and see what God's law says you've got to do, and then you set about doing it, and then you come back and measure your results by the law, the law will tell you that you have fallen short. By the law comes the knowledge of sin. The law demands one hundred percent perfection of course. It could ask no less and, therefore, whenever we consult God's law, as we should, it will show we have come short.

You say, 'I thought God gave the law in the Old Testament so that people had to keep it to lead a decent life.'

Well yes, it is certain that if you try to keep God's law, it will lead to a better lifestyle than if you disregard it. The law says you shall not tell lies and bear false witness. If you disregard God's law in daily life and you and everybody else tell lies, then nobody trusts anybody and it results in confusion, injustice, uncertainty, worry and insecurity. The law as a guide to life is an excellent thing; God gave it for that reason. But God never gave his law so that by keeping it we could earn acceptance with God and entry into his heaven. If that sounds strange to you, let me read to you again from the Bible. Let's read what God himself gives as the reason he gave his law.

Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law,

For what purpose? For what reason?

so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God.

(3:19)

It was not given so that we should keep it and gain a place in heaven. The law was given to us to shut our mouths and bring us to the point where we confess we have broken God's law and deserve its penalty. That's what it was given for. It was not so that, by keeping it, we could attain salvation.

The law is a little bit like a thermometer. And what are thermometers for? Well, they show people's temperature and therefore how ill they are. Here is Mrs O'Flaherty, and she is a very kind woman, and the family depends on her. She's running a high temperature but of course, as mother, she cannot afford to go to bed. There are her little children and there's her husband and she must keep on her legs, but she can scarce stand up. And at last her husband insists that the doctor comes. The doctor gets out his thermometer, and he pops it in her mouth and reads it and then says, 'My dear woman, you are dangerously ill. To bed you go and you stay there.' The good old thermometer has shown the dear lady how ill she is and prevailed upon her to go to bed. And if she hadn't gone to bed, she'd have been dead by next Tuesday. That is the proper use of the thermometer.

But now here is an improper use of a thermometer. One of these days you hear this Gooding man is sick and in bed so, in your tenderness of heart, you think you'll come and visit him to cheer him up. And you arrive in my bedroom, and there I am sitting up in bed with a thick blanket round my shoulders and a thick hat on my head. I've got a thermometer in my mouth, and I'm sucking it for all I'm worth. And you say, 'Gooding, what is wrong with you?'

'Can't you see? I'm ill.'

'Yes, I can see you're ill, but what are you sucking that thermometer for?'

I say, 'Don't be silly. The doctor said that I've got a high temperature, and I must somehow get it down, or else I shall be dead. And I'm doing my best. I'm sucking it as hard as I can to get the temperature down.'

What would you say? You would say, 'Well, Gooding, you are ill, and you're more ill than you think you are!'

Thermometers are for showing how ill you are, not for making you better. Unless God can convince us how ill we are, we shan't be ready for his remedy. What is his remedy? When God has brought us to the point where we see we have sinned in the past and, even if we live to one hundred and one years old, it will still be true that we come short of God's standard, and there is nothing we can do, and we are prepared to repent and agree with God that we deserve the just punishment of his law; then, if we do that, God has his answer. His provision is that he will then point us to the Lord Jesus Christ his Son, 'whom God has put forward', this passage says 'to be a propitiation', to be the sacrifice that meets the just requirements of God and his holy standards that have satisfied the wrath and indignation of God against our sin (see vv. 25–26). He has given his Son that his Son might bear the pain and penalty that our sins deserved. For 'All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way' (Isa 53:6). If we will come to that Saviour and accept him as our only way of salvation and forgiveness, in that very moment God will receive and accept us for Jesus Christ his Son's sake, and not only grant us forgiveness, but declare us to be right with him and guarantee us a place in his heaven. He will not only assure us but have us know already that, whatever happens in life, we are accepted by God—not because of what we have done, but because of what Christ did for us when he died to bear our sin at Calvary. And we can know it now and go through the rest of life absolutely secure in the knowledge we have been accepted by God and shall be forever.

Why doesn't everybody who hears that wonderful news accept it? Well, in many cases it is that, harsh though this might sound, people are not prepared to repent.

Rejecting repentance

I remember years ago in the city of Cambridge in England there was an evangelistic tent mission on the outskirts of the city, and a friend of mine and myself did what we could. I was a young student in those days. My friend was older; he was in business in Cambridge city, and one day after this tent mission, my friend was invited by a business friend of his to tea and took me along with him. Our hostess was a chemist in the town, and she was sizeably rich. She invited us to tea, and our feet sank into the pile of the carpet, and the silver tea service and all of that was very pleasant.

Then she turned to my friend and she said, 'William, what do you tell the people in your missions?' (She never came, of course.) He told her this and that and the other, and in the course of his remarks, he happened to say that he himself was saved through faith in Christ and was sure of heaven. She said, 'William, nobody can be sure of heaven.' She then turned to me and said, 'Young man, what about you? Are you sure of heaven?'

I said, 'Yes, madam.'

'Now, come now,' she said. 'You are a very young man, aren't you? I'm sure you're a very good man, but you know you might do something bad later on, mightn't you? Then what would happen to your being saved and sure of heaven?'

I said, 'Madam, you see my salvation depends not on what I do, but on what Christ has done, and because his sacrifice is perfect, God gave it for me, and I trust in that. I'm sure of heaven, because it depends not on my works, good or bad, but on Christ.'

She said, 'Oh, no, young man. No, no, that's impossible. We all have to work for our salvation, and that must remain uncertain until the final judgment.'

I was very young and, I suppose, very brash and not too courteous like some young people are (but not all of course). I said, 'Madam, tell me, what do you think God is going to say to you when you come to the final judgment?'

'Well, I don't quite know. What I think is that God will say, "Now, my dear, you did do one or two things that weren't too good. They were rather bad but, you know, your heart was good." And he'll say, "Never mind," and he'll have mercy on me and let me in.'

I said, 'Madam, he won't say anything of the sort.'

She said, 'How do you know?'

I said, 'If you come to God on the grounds of your good works and keeping his law, I can tell you already what God will say, because he has already said it in his word.'

'What is that?' she said. So I read this verse to her that we have just read,

Now we know 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. (3:19)

I think I can see her face now. It went deathly white. 'God would never damn me!' she said.

I said, 'Madam, it's no good knocking our heads against Gibraltar. This is what God says. If we come to him on the grounds that we have done our best to keep his law, then God has already told us his law has no option but to condemn us. We know that whatever it says, it says so that our mouths might be shut and we can be brought to the observation that we deserve the penalty of that law.'

By the law comes knowledge of sin, and God gives us this law to bring us to be realists and to agree with God, and to confess ourselves sinners, with many sins or few, but deserving of God's displeasure. If only we will repent, not just of being jealous of our mother-in-law or something, but to repent in this basic sense, that unless Christ saves us we are lost eternally, then God has a salvation to offer at once and immediately. And because it depends not on what we do but on what Christ has done, we can enter into its benefits forthwith and at once and enter into peace with God and utter certainty of God's heaven.

Conclusion

So then, we have talked about sin and its seriousness and the authority of God that lies behind the moral law. They are serious things, but they are serious only in the sense that a medical diagnosis is serious.

Here is a man, and he comes to a doctor. He has been a smoker all his life. He is now choking, and the doctor examines him and says, 'You've ruined yourself by smoking. The only cure now is that I shall have to remove one of your lungs. That is the only cure.'

And the man says, 'No, doctor, it can't be as bad as that. I promise to give up smoking as best I can.'

And the doctor says, 'Yes, but you could give up smoking from now on and forever; it won't undo the damage.'

The man thinks it's enough just to say, 'I'll give up smoking,' but what he must do is to face the reality and say he is damaged, and the only hope is to give himself into the hands of the surgeon to conduct the radical surgery.

And Christ is waiting. We face the verdict of God's law. We have already sinned enough to deserve its penalty. It is no good promising to do better in time to come; the damage is already done. If we will face the reality of the situation, then God has a Saviour waiting to throw his arms around us and kiss us with the pardon of God and grant us peace with God on the basis of his sacrifice. Why should we not repent in that radical sense and fly into the arms of the Saviour?

Can Love Be True Without Justice?

Finding the Way to Peace

I would like to rehearse for you a very ancient story. It was written some three thousand years ago and, if you're interested to read it yourselves later on, you will find the reference in the Old Testament in the book of Second Samuel. It concerns the king of the united tribes of Israel and Judea, the famous king by the name of David. We shall find it concerns problems that he met as the king of that nation in dealing with justice for the population at large, and thorny and difficult problems about justice that related to his sons and daughters. Though the story is some three thousand years old, we read it still, because for us in modern society it raises the same kind of questions. It will raise the question at the level of public justice in our countries, because it deals with the problem of punishment for crime.

Theories of punishment

Let's talk about that for a moment. I suspect you have followed debates in recent years on what might be the purpose of punishment for crime. Why should you lock people up in prison, for instance? Why should you sentence them to hard labour? Traditionally, people who have thought about these issues have said there are three purposes behind punishment.

Retribution, deterrence and rehabilitation

The first and most important is what is called retribution. When somebody commits a crime, the government, the law of the land, would take the view that they *deserve* to be punished. They must satisfy the law and suffer the penalty that the law lays down. Whether the punishment does anything else worth doing is, in the first place, beside the point. According to the traditional view, a man or woman who has broken the law and committed a crime is worthy to suffer the penalty of the law and must be punished.

But then, if somebody has committed a crime and deserves to be punished, the traditional view said that you could use that punishment as a warning to somebody else, so that somebody else doesn't commit the same crime. In other words, you could use the punishment to *deter* other people from doing that crime. If you find that shooting your next-door neighbour means that you are executed, then people hearing of that will perhaps be deterred from shooting their next-door neighbours. That is the theory of deterrence.

Then, in more recent times, another reason has been added to explain what punishment is for. This idea says that when the prisoner is serving his punishment, the authorities should so arrange things that what he suffers is also educational and geared to helping the man improve

and to change his attitude to life and to society, so that when he has finished his punishment and comes out of the prison, he is a better man than when he went in.

That was, for many centuries, the traditional view. In recent times there has been a very wide protest against the idea of retribution. Many people say you shouldn't punish a criminal just because he has broken the law, just to satisfy an arbitrary set of rules. 'That's savage', they say, 'that's taking revenge. It is primitive, and we should stop it.' The only two things that punishment is supposed to do therefore, according to critics of retribution, is first of all be a deterrence to the prisoner himself, so that once he gets out of jail he won't do the same crime again; and it can be a deterrence to the general public. Then people can say, 'You see what's happened to him or to her? Don't you do the same thing, or else you'll land in the same place.' And the other theory that is now popular and almost supreme is that the point of punishment, in prison or elsewhere, is to improve the prisoner so that, when the prison sentence is finished, his or her attitude may have been changed to reflect society's, and they come out and no longer want to commit evil deeds against society, but are able to live a decent life. But popularly, at any rate in the west, the idea of retribution—that people deserve to suffer for their wrongdoing, whether it does them any good or not, whether it deters them or anybody else or not—simply because they have committed a crime and broken the law and done damage to others, is vociferously opposed in many sections of British society.

Retribution and justice

Now that raises some very important things. The late C. S. Lewis used to point out that if you get rid of the idea of retribution, which says you deserve to be punished and you must suffer the penalty that the law inflicts on you, then society gets itself into a very dangerous situation. If a man doesn't deserve to be punished, then how can you use his punishment as a deterrent to others? Society could say, 'You haven't done anything wrong, sir. You did see a beautiful TV and, for a flicker of a second you were tempted to steal it when no one was looking, but you didn't steal it, so you don't deserve to be punished. But would it be okay to take you and put you in prison and punish you anyway? Then we can say, 'Well now, you see what's happened to him. Anybody that steals TVs, the same will happen to them.'

Would that be okay?

You say, 'Surely not. If the man doesn't deserve to be punished, then you've no right to punish him just to make him an example to other people.'

It would be grossly unfair, wouldn't it? And what about the idea that people don't really deserve to be punished by the penalty of the law, but they ought to be put in prison to improve them? That also is very dangerous. If they don't deserve to be put in prison, should they be in prison just to improve them? That is, of course, what the Russians did for many decades. They put people in prison, but what wrong had they done?

'Well they hadn't done anything wrong, except they disagreed with the Communist Party. That must mean they were mentally sick.'

That is how they argued. If anybody disagreed with Stalin or anybody else in charge, he must be mentally sick, so he must be put in prison or a hospital to cure him. And so they were, so to speak, 'cured' by being given drugs and all kinds of things.

Another serious thing resulted. If you committed a crime and the law sentenced you, the law would fix the amount of punishment and the time to spend in prison. When you had fulfilled the punishment, you would be let out. But if you were seriously mentally sick, you wouldn't go to prison; you'd go to a doctor. The doctor was the one who decided whether you were sick or not, and would be the one to decide if you ever recovered and when you had recovered. There would be no date fixed. You wouldn't come out until you were healed. And that, in Russia, meant sometimes you never came out, because the authorities decided you had not been cured.

Retribution and the gospel

Getting rid of retribution then is a very dangerous thing, but I do not wish to stay upon that, because we have more important matters to discuss this evening. Why should we bother about this business of what punishment is and whether retribution is right? It is because this question goes right to the heart of our Christian gospel, for as you know, the gospel is not that Christ lived to give us an example, though he did that. The gospel is that 'Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures' (1 Cor 15:3). He died 'the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God' (1 Pet 3:18 KJV).

When we think about Christ dying, we have to ask ourselves what exactly was happening when he died on the cross. He wasn't simply dying as a martyr, was he? The Bible says,

But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. (Isa 53:5–6)

That lies at the very heart of the gospel. That is the fundamental significance of the cross of Christ. We sing it with the children:

Wounded for me, wounded for me,
Wounded for me, He was wounded for me.
Gone my transgressions and now I am free,
All because Jesus was wounded for me.¹

God's purpose, his decision, was to bruise Christ. 'He has put him to grief' (Isa 53:10). Why? Because we had broken God's holy law and come under the threat of its penalty, and there could be no way of release until that penalty was paid. We could not pay it; therefore God gave his Son. He 'was delivered for our offences' (Rom 4:25 KJV). The law said, 'Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them' (Gal 3:10; Deut 27:26). That was a very high standard. 'Cursed be everyone who does not abide by *all things* written . . .'

Some people regard God's holy law as a kind of university examination. I've told you before, and you still won't believe it when I tell you again, but we who taught in such

¹ W. G. Ovens (1870-1945), 'Wounded for me.'

institutions were very kind and generous-hearted people. If a student got seventy percent, we crowned him with glory and honour and said he was the most brilliant student that ever came through the doors of the university, and we gave him a first class degree. If a student got sixty percent we said that was marvellous. That was worth a 2:1. And if he got, say, just fifty-five percent-ish, we said, 'Well that's respectable.' He got a 2:2. And if he got about forty percent, we gave him a third, but he got through. And there were some people who the examiners had mercy on. If they got thirty-nine percent, we said, 'Well what's in a one?' Some people have that idea about the law of God. They think that if they do their best to keep it and keep it seventy percent of the time (which is a high figure, isn't it?), well, on the whole that will do.

That cannot be. The standard of God's law is that if you don't continue in everything written in the book of the law, then the law curses you. James says, 'whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it' (2:10). At first that sounds like a hard saying, but perfection is a whole; anything less than perfection is not perfection.

I remember in my student days when china and mugs and things were very rare just after the war, and someone had given me a beautiful china milk jug. I was very proud of this jug. There weren't many about, you see, to make afternoon tea with. And one day when I went to take this beautiful jug of mine out of the cupboard, it hit against the side of a saucer or something, and the sound was rather dull. I said, 'Hello, is that cracked?' So I got it out and put it up to the light and there, to be sure, all the way down the side of this beautiful jug was a crack. I said, 'What a pity, but it's only one crack.' But then the milk came through. So, sentimentally, I got it and put it back on the shelf. But then I said, 'Don't be so sentimental, old boy.' I took it out, pulled it apart and put it in the bin. You only need one crack like that in a jug, and you've ruined the jug. That's how it is. If a crane is lifting a very heavy weight, pulling the engine out of a ship in the water, and one link in the chain goes but all the others are okay, what happens?

Well you say, 'The old engine falls down.'

Of course it does. And God's law is like that. If you break one commandment, the law is broken. And the standards of perfection are so high and realistic that the law says if you don't continue to do all things written in the law, then the law's curse descends on you.

God is a realist when it comes to sin, and in our hearts I suspect we agree with God. We wouldn't like the concept of a heaven that is ninety-nine percent perfect, would we? Still less one that is seventy percent perfect. We look forward to a heaven that is one hundred percent perfect! And since we have all fallen short and the law curses us, hear the gospel of God! To deliver us from the curse of the law, Christ was made a curse for us (Gal 3:13). To put it in crude language, he was punished instead of us.

'Ah, but,' people say, 'I can't believe that. I thought God was a God of love. If God is a God of love, how could he punish anybody? Surely punishment is inconsistent with love?'

People say that, don't they? And they hope against hope that God is so loving that, in the end, he will say that our sin didn't really matter after all. So I would like us to think about the relation between love and punishment. And that is the reason why I want now to recount to you the story in the Old Testament about King David, because as we proceed with it, you will begin to see that it raises this very same problem: the relationship of love to punishment.

Love and punishment

The story is given at length in 2 Samuel 14. I cannot go through every verse, but if you'd like to check my accuracy, then have your Bible text open to that chapter.

To put it briefly, the story is this. King David had a number of sons and one day, for reasons we need not now consider, one of those sons, by the name of Absalom, tricked a brother of his called Amnon to go to a party where Absalom had him murdered. And the murder being done, Absalom skedaddled and fled into exile, which of course was evidence that he had a guilty conscience and that he feared what the king would do to him for having murdered his brother.

So Absalom ran off and was gone two or three years in a foreign country. Perhaps you parents understand better than I what happened next. Little by little, the king, who was terribly distressed at the beginning over the murder of one of his sons, began to forget. The thing was softened in his memory, and the wound healed a little bit. And his commander-in-chief of the army was a man named Joab, and he saw that the king was beginning to soften towards Absalom, so Joab concocted a scheme in his head for persuading the king to let Absalom come back home.

The wise woman of Tekoa

He found a woman of Tekoa, who had the reputation of being a very wise woman. Being a wise woman was a kind of profession in those days (I think a lot of them still have it) but anyway, she was a wise woman and Joab went to her and said, 'Now, I'd like you to do something for me.'

'And what is that?' she said.

'I want you to dress up all in dark, mourning clothes, as though you'd been a widow for years, in heavy mourning. And I would like you to go into the king and say to him what I am now going to tell you to say.' So he rehearsed to the woman what she had to say and how she had to say it. And she was going in to plead with the king, and to tell him a tremendous yarn.

The woman's story

Now we'll follow the woman. Are you ready? We'll come into the court. There will be David, the king, sitting on his throne of justice to decide the cases that come before him. Can you see him on his throne, with his crown and all? And in comes this woman, all dressed up in black. And you'll have to watch her, because if you don't, she'll pull the wool over your eyes. So she came into the king. (I think she had a little onion in her pocket, ready to produce the tears when they had to be produced). And she said, 'My Lord, my Lord.'

And he said, 'What ails you, woman?'

She said, 'My husband's been dead a lot of years, and I was left with two sons; and the one son rose up and he murdered the other one.'

It was all put on, of course, and she managed some tears. Now she says, 'The townspeople have risen up, and they say I must hand over the living son, and have him executed for murdering the other boy. And if they do that, Your Majesty, they'll put out my coal completely.'

In Hebrew she's using that vivid language: 'You'll put my fire out'; that is, 'You'll destroy my family.'

She went on, 'My husband's gone. Now one boy's been murdered. I'm left with another boy, and the townsmen are saying this other boy has got to be killed too—executed for murdering his brother. And it will destroy me, Your Majesty. What good does this punishment business do?'

The king said, 'I hadn't thought about that. Ah, but you go home, it will be all right.'

But the woman said, 'I know it's a bit risky, Your Majesty. I mean, guilty people ought to be punished, but in my case I'll take all the blame for it. If anybody says this is wrong, I'll take the blame for it, and you'll be innocent, King.'

'Oh,' he said, 'well go home and I'll see that nothing bad happens to you or your boy.'

She was a wise old woman though, and she said, 'Ah, but let the king fear the Lord and swear to me *by the Lord* that you won't let my boy be executed.'

Now she is bringing God into it. She wanted God on her side to say that the criminal should not be executed.

And the king said, 'Yes, all right. I swear to you by God. That's okay.'

The woman's argument

And when the woman saw she was now safe, because he'd sworn by God that he wouldn't execute her son (nor her either), then she began to put the pressure on the king: 'So you're going to save my boy, are you? Thank you, Your Majesty. And you say God agrees with you, and you have sworn on oath in the name of God. That is marvellous. But tell me, in saying that, you are making yourself guilty, aren't you, Your Majesty?'

David sat up in his seat, 'Me, guilty? Guilty of what?'

'Well why doesn't the king bring back his banished son?'

And David began to see a trap closing.

'For in refusing to bring back your banished son and pardon him, you are guilty yourself, aren't you?'

Well David hadn't thought about that, so then she plied her really powerful arguments.

'You see, Your Majesty,' she said, 'all this punishment business is silly. We are as water spilt on the ground that cannot be gathered up together again.'

In England, we have a similar saying. We don't talk about water being spilt. We say, 'It's no good crying over spilt milk.' I don't know if you have that in your sophisticated society here. Well, it isn't worth crying over that, is it? You've spilt the milk on the ground; it's no good trying to gather it up. A little child might say, 'I've just spilt the ice cream. It's on the ground. The ice cream has gone.' And he might want to gather it up, and mum will say, 'Well it's no use. You can't gather that up anymore. It's gone, isn't it? So grow up.'

And that's what the woman was saying to the king, only she spoke of water: 'We are as water spilt on the ground, aren't we, which cannot be gathered up again anymore? I mean, my son is dead; he got murdered. But if you execute the other chap, it won't bring back my son to life, will it, Your Majesty? So what's the point of executing the other chap? It won't do any good. It won't bring back my other son, will it?'

'Well I hadn't thought of that,' said the king.

And then she had two more things to say. One was absolutely true, and the other was a big whopper of a lie. That is a skilful way of arguing, you know – to get a lie and wrap it round with some truth, and the people will look at the truth and bite into it and swallow the lie at the same time. She said, ‘For God does not take away life.’

Incidentally, if you read that story in the Authorized Version, you will have to be careful about their translation. It is not true to the manuscripts, but that is by the way. What she actually said was, ‘God does not take away life but devises means so that his banished should not forever be exiled from him’ (see v. 14).

The second bit was beautifully true, as we shall see later. God has devised a way of bringing back guilty sinners. God has found a way of forgiving guilty sinners and reconciling them to himself, and welcoming them to his heart and his home, and guaranteeing them they will be in heaven with him forever. That is perfectly true: ‘God has devised a way so that his banished be not permanently exiled.’

But the first thing she said was not true. ‘God does not take away life’? Didn’t her Old Testament tell her otherwise time and time again? What happened at the flood, for instance? What happened to Korah, Dathan and Abiram? What happened to Pharaoh and his armies at the Red Sea? That bit of her statement was a lie. The law says, ‘The soul who sins shall die’ (Ezek 18:20). That is God’s law and right at the very heart of the Christian gospel is the principle: ‘without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness’ (Heb 9:22).

Yes, God has devised a means of bringing back his banished. I can’t resist telling you now what it is. God’s way for bringing us back as sinners to his arms and his home and his heart cost the death of Jesus Christ, God’s Son, our Saviour. *That* is the *means* that God has devised.

But in that moment, David was flummoxed by the unexpected arguments. He hadn’t learnt to think it through, and he was convinced by it. So the woman went on to say, ‘Now, David, you’d better devise means to bring back . . .’. What she meant was Absalom, but she put it all in difficult language, so that the king didn’t see the point too quickly. At length he saw what she was at and realized the whole story was a put-up job.

He said to the woman, ‘Tell me, my woman, did Joab put you up to this?’

And now the woman felt nervous. If the king in that moment found out she’d been acting a part and none of it was true and this was all a ruse, she was afraid the king might do something disastrous to her. So when the king asked if Joab was behind this ruse, she said, with her skill, ‘You know, Your Majesty, you’re like an angel, aren’t you? Nobody could hide anything from you.’

And what do you say to a woman when she looks at you and says, ‘You’re an absolute angel’? She knew her tactics! You can’t get angry with a woman who says, ‘You’re like an angel for wisdom; you’re a marvellous man. You’ve seen through it? Well you’re wonderful.’

‘All right,’ said the king, ‘go and tell Joab I’ll bring back Absalom. Go and tell him, and bring Joab to me.’

The murdered son’s argument

So off the woman goes to call Joab; but, by your leave, I’m going to stop here, and I’m going to have a word with the murdered boy. Or at least I’m going to pretend to as a kind of thought experiment. Can you imagine it? Yes, he was only part of her story, but imagine I find him

lying on the ground, and he has been murdered. I want you to imagine that he can hear what I say and can reply to me.

So here I am. Can you see me walking along when, oh, there's a corpse on the ground. It's a young man too. I say, 'What are you doing here, old fellow?'

'I'm dead,' he says.

'Well I can see that.'

And he says, 'And what are you going to do about it?'

I say, 'What do you mean, what am I going to do about it?'

'Well,' the dead man says, 'I want justice; that's what I want.'

I say, 'Old boy, you can't get justice now.'

'I've a right to justice,' he says. 'My brother went and took away my life. I had the right to live just as he has the right to live, and he has illegally, cruelly taken my life away. Is he going to carry on living the rest of his life, enjoying himself, and I be robbed of my life? And you don't do anything about it? I want justice.'

What would you say to him? Well, I've got an argument; I learnt it from his mother. 'Now look here, my boy. We are as water spilt on the ground. You are very much on the ground; and it's no good crying over spilt milk or anything else. You're dead now, old chap. Nothing will bring you back again. Grow up. Don't behave like a child. I mean, it's done now.'

What do you think he'd say to that? 'It's jolly well not fair,' he'd say.

'Well that's what your mother says.'

'My mum says that?'

Tell me, what would your view be? Let me ask, when his mum said, 'The lad's dead; it's no good crying over spilt milk,' was she *loving* him?

'No,' you say, 'she loved the other son, and she didn't want him to die.'

Why didn't she?

'Well because she would be robbed of both sons if that happened.'

So who was she really loving? I can't bring myself to think she was loving the boy who lay on the ground dead. That is the thing about love, isn't it? God is love. He loves the criminal, but he also loves the victim.

For example, I am an ungodly man, and you have warned me not to drive my car when I'm under the influence of drink and come roaring down the road. You say, 'You'll run somebody down one of these days.' But I continue to do it, and one day I swerve and knock down your daughter. She was a lovely seventeen year old girl, and I've killed her. What will you say? Well the women of the place might all come out, armed with knives nearly, to get at me: 'He's rotten! He deserves to be punished!' But ten years from now they will have forgotten all about it. I want to tell you this. That if that happened, God wouldn't forget about it. If I don't repent of it, God will have that against me for all eternity.

'How is that?' you say. 'Because he's savage?'

No, it's because he loves that girl. Because he loves her, he values her. And because he values and loves her, if I damage her and don't repent, he'll have it against me for all of eternity, for God's love is eternal. He will never say sin doesn't matter. Is God being severe, or is that God being loving? Far from punishment being inconsistent with love, punishment

is an expression of the love of God *for the victim*. If I will repent, there is forgiveness, but those are the terms.

Absalom and the cost of forgiveness without repentance

Now the woman is back once more, and Joab has come.

‘All right,’ the king says to Joab, ‘you win. You can bring Absalom home, but he is not to see my face. He can come back to the city. He is not to come to the palace and meet me. I will not meet him. I will not accept him. But, yes, he can come back.’

Now, tell me, was that real forgiveness? Would you say David had forgiven Absalom just because he let him come back, but then would not let him see the king’s face and would not give him access to the king? Was that love? Of course it wasn’t. If David had really forgiven Absalom, he’d have let Absalom come in right to the king’s presence and see the king’s face. But, persuaded by Joab and the woman, David tried to compromise and let Absalom back but not let him into his presence.

I can’t resist breaking off on that story. You see, the forgiveness God offers us is such a forgiveness that, the moment we repent and believe, God not only forgives us but invites us right into his presence and into his heart, right this very moment now. And how can God do it? It is because God was *not* prepared to compromise with sin. God can forgive us if we will come in repentance and faith and can on that basis receive us, because God’s law has been upheld, his character has been upheld, by the fact that his Son was given to bear the penalty for our sin. The price has been paid, and the way is open to complete forgiveness and access with God.

But David had compromised, hadn’t he? So Absalom came back, and he wasn’t allowed to see the king’s face. Absalom got tired of that, for Absalom was one of those young gentlemen who was used to getting what he wanted. He wasn’t going to have anybody stand in his way, so he was not content to stay in the city but not enter the palace. He was going to enter the palace and defy the king, so he set light to Joab’s crops. And when Joab said, ‘What do you think you’re doing?’ Absalom said, ‘Why haven’t you got onto the king to bring me back into his presence?’ So Joab one day came with Absalom, and brought him right into the king’s presence, and the king *kissed* Absalom. There was not a word of, ‘I’m sorry, I wish I hadn’t done it.’ Absalom brazenly came into the king’s presence without repentance, without apology. It was a sad moment when David kissed the unrepentant sinner.

God will never do that. In the parable of the Prodigal Son, the father kissed the prodigal, but only when the prodigal had come to himself and repented and returned in repentance to the father (see Luke 15). Isn’t that so? But when the king kissed Absalom without Absalom’s repentance and said, ‘Right, I won’t punish you,’ you will remember the next thing Absalom did. He prepared troops; he prepared chariots; he prepared to turn his father off the throne and knife him in his heart. That is sin—unrepented of. If God allowed sin to go unrepented of and yet forgave it, it would turn the very God of heaven off his throne.

So Absalom rebelled. He had no gratitude to the king for sparing him. In the war that followed, the king’s armies defeated Absalom’s armies, and the king told his commander-in-chief: ‘If you get Absalom, do not kill him.’ But Joab and the army found Absalom with his

neck caught in the branches of a tree and his mule gone from under him, and Joab got his warriors around him and said, 'Kill him.'

And they said, 'No, the king said, "Don't kill him".'

'Ah, get out of the way,' Joab said, and he went up to Absalom and put a dart right through his heart. When the news was brought to David, he went up into the room over the gate of the city and broke his very heart: 'Oh, Absalom,' he said, 'my son, my son, Absalom. Oh, Absalom, my son, my son.' He was a broken-hearted father. When the people heard the king wailing over the death of Absalom, they began to feel ashamed. And Joab ran up the stairs and virtually booted David down the stairs. 'You foolish man!' he said. 'Get down and talk to the people. You're making all this fuss about Absalom. These people down here have stood by you. They have risked their lives in battle, all because of Absalom's rebellion. They have lost their fathers, sons, brothers and uncles to support you, the king, and here you are, grieving for Absalom and not grieving for them. You have more concern for the criminal than you have for his victim.'

And in some countries in the West today that would seem to be true. The courts have more concern for the convicted criminals than they have for their victims. That is beside the point. But who can listen to King David's lament without being moved to the heart? What a predicament he was in. If he had just been a king and not Absalom's father, he could have issued the command for execution and he need not have thought twice over it. But he wasn't just a king; he was Absalom's father. If he had been Absalom's father and not a king, he could privately have forgiven Absalom. The king cannot do that. The king is responsible for universal justice in his kingdom, isn't he? There was the cleft stick: 'Oh, Absalom. Absalom, my son, my son. Would God I had died for you.'

And as we read that ancient story, we come to the very heart of God, upon the throne of God. What a window it opens into God's heart and the situation that faced him. He has made every one of us. He loves every one of us with a Creator's love, and will be loyal to us. Yet he is not only our creator; he must be our judge. He is the judge of all the universe and cannot show favouritism. God is the author of the law; he is the author of the penalty that the law demands. He cannot change that without changing his own very character. He cannot deny himself.

How shall he solve the problem? We, his creatures, have sinned against him, offended the very character of God, broken his law and deserve his punishment. God cannot say it does not matter. How shall he enforce the law and yet pardon us? That is the marvellous story of the gospel!

You say, 'What did God feel when his Son, Jesus Christ, on the cross cried, "Oh, my God, why have you forsaken me"?' Here is God's own darling Son, given up to suffer the penalty and curse of the law on our behalf. But what David could not do: 'Would God I had died for you'; that God's Son has done for us.

Can you believe it? Think a moment. This is the creator of the vast universe, and here we are, we who are made to do his will, we have gone our own way like sheep; the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

I am a backyard astronomer, though a very feeble one, and sometimes I put up my Celestron telescope and find the Andromeda Nebula. It's not a nebula really; it's a galaxy with

billions of stars. And that is only one amongst billions and billions of galaxies. And, as I look at it, I think, 'How can it be true that the God who made those galaxies became man for me and died in my place?'

What a fantastic gospel that is! And it is true. Because of that death, to put it in Bible terms, God can be just (remain just) and the justifier of him who believes in Jesus (see Rom 3:26). It is enough to begin saying, 'Hallelujah,' and never leave off, to the remotest part of eternity.

And the Bible says because Christ has died for us, upon repentance and faith we are not only forgiven and reconciled to God, but we are invited to come near. We have access unto the Father, or to change the terms, we have 'boldness to enter into the holiest of all' (see Heb 10:19). And, my good friend, if you are repentant and you believe in Christ, God's Son who died to save you on the tree, then this very moment you can come in spirit and enter the very throne room of God and know yourself welcome and at home.

Here is the problem of the universe solved: a God who is love and a God who is light; a God who is holy and must condemn sin; a God who is loving and who has found a way to save the sinner. And they who are thus saved and know themselves welcomed into the very presence of God and have felt the kiss of God upon their foreheads will say with Paul, 'The Son of God . . . loved me and gave himself for me' (Gal 2:20).

Can We Ever Have Certainty?

The Implications of Christ's Death

We were thinking together upon the central function of the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, for we had been thinking about a problem that lay before God Almighty. The dilemma is how to resolve the demands of his justice and yet how to satisfy the longings of his love that he might find a way to forgive us sinners without implying that sin does not matter, without doing injustice to those whom we have wronged; and, above all, without going against his own holy character that declares that offence against his holy law must be visited with his own righteous indignation and wrath. And so we found the solution to this problem in the death and cross and sacrifice of our blessed Lord Jesus.

Punishment and justice, access and assurance

Punishing a third party

Some have said that our doctrine of atonement is not just. They say, 'How is it just to take an innocent person like Jesus Christ and make him suffer for the sins of the ungodly? We would never think of making an innocent third party suffer for the sins of a criminal. How could it be just of God to make his innocent Son suffer the penalty of the law on behalf of guilty men and women?' The question, though apparently real, is based on a false supposition.

Not a third party—because the believer is in Christ

In the first place, our Lord Jesus Christ was not a third party. He was and is our Saviour because the salvation he offers and the forgiveness he has provided are given solely to those who actually receive him through repentance and faith. As it is written in Scripture, to 'as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God' (John 1:12 NASB). The Bible makes it clear that when a man or woman receives the Saviour, in a very real sense he or she ceases to be a separate person. When we receive the Saviour, he comes to live in our hearts and we are joined to him. That is a wonderful thing that the New Testament tells us, that all who believe the Saviour are *in Christ*. Here the New Testament is, of course, absolutely distinct. The world has had many philosophers before, Socrates for instance, to name just one, but the most ardent follower of Socrates never claimed to be *in Socrates*. That wouldn't have made any sense. The most ardent admirer of the Buddha would never claim to be *in the Buddha*. And no Muslim that I ever heard of would claim to be *in Muhammad*. And yet you find the early Christians speaking in those terms: 'If anyone is *in Christ*, he is a new creation' (2 Cor 5:17). There is the wonder of it (and we shall return to it again); when we receive the

Lord Jesus and the eternal life he gives us, we become united with Christ. God puts us *in* Christ. Therefore, Christ ceases to be a third party. He bore our sins. What happened to him—his death—God graciously counts as ours.

Not a third party—because Christ is God

Christ also wasn't a third party, as far as God is concerned, because Jesus Christ is not just a prophet sent from God. Jesus Christ our Lord is himself God. As the Gospel of John relates it, 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God' (1:1). All that God was, the Word was. For the sake of our salvation, it is also written 'the Word became flesh' (v. 14). In the death of Jesus Christ our Lord, God the lawgiver who laid down the law and prescribed its penalties, paid the penalty himself and bore it in the person of his Son, out of love for us. The result, as we saw in our previous session, is that now God can be 'just and the justifier of the one who [believes] in Jesus' (Rom 3:26).

Saved by God's justice

I remember as a young man being taken out for a walk by a senior Christian. He had told me of his own conversion to Christ, and then I think he thought it worthwhile examining me to see how far I had got and whether I had understood salvation. So turning to me he said, 'Now, David, in what is your hope for salvation?'

Do you know what I nearly said? I nearly said, 'In the grace of God.' It would have been true, wouldn't it? For the Bible declares 'For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God' (Eph 2:8). But, you know, sometimes my brain runs a little quickly, and just before I answered I thought, 'This is a rascally old man trying to catch me out.' So I said, 'I'm trusting in the justice of God, my good sir.' And I passed his examination with ten out of ten.

It is marvellous, isn't it, to be saved by the grace of God, freely as a gift? 'For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast' (vv. 8–9). Of course we are saved by grace, but not at the cost of justice. God's grace does not mean he brushes the guilt of our sin under the carpet and agrees to forget it. That would deny the very character of God who cannot compromise his holiness. We are saved through the justice of God, because his justice demanded that his wrath against sin be met and suffered. The penalty of the law had to be paid. And that penalty has been paid by the Son of God himself, so God can be just and yet the justifier of the one who believes in Jesus.

Access to God

We saw that God, having solved the problem of forgiveness (how he can forgive and yet be just), is able to offer us, upon repentance and faith, immediate access into the presence of God. We have immediate 'access . . . to the Father' as the New Testament puts it (Eph 2:18). We thought about King David who let Absalom, the murderer, come home without any repentance or any confession of sin, without the penalty being paid; but he wouldn't let Absalom come home to the king's house, because the king had a guilty conscience about

accepting an unrepentant murderer. When God has forgiven us in Christ, and the whole thing is just, then the Bible talks in these terms:

Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. (Rom 5:1-2)

That is worth noticing, for it is a common view that if you would be good and accepted into God's presence at last, then of course you have to be as good as you can possibly be here on earth in your attempt to qualify for access into God's eternal heaven. And so you cannot possibly know for certain that you will ever be in heaven for, as a gentleman in this city told me just the other day, it will all depend on the state of your works, your heavenly bank balance so to speak, when you come to die. That is the popular notion. I am pleased to remind you it is not what the New Testament says. The moment we have put our faith in Christ we have access 'into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God.'

The overwhelming love and logic of Calvary

How can we be utterly sure that we shall at last be saved from the wrath of God through Christ? The answer to that, as given in holy Scripture, is this: that upon believing in the Lord Jesus Christ, we receive from God the Holy Spirit of God. Scripture says he pours out the love of God into our hearts. Just as I might take this glass of water and pour it onto the ground, and you would see it land and go here and go there as it began to spread, when we receive the Lord Jesus, the Holy Spirit takes the love of God and pours it out in our hearts until gradually it floods our hearts, convincing us in the deep well of our being of the love of God.

Yet it is not just a sentimental, emotional experience, because when the Holy Spirit sheds abroad God's love for us in our hearts, he does it largely by argument and logic and teaches us to reason. Let me read the passage of the Bible that talks about this. It says,

hope does not put us to shame, because God's love [that is, God's love for us] has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

Now here comes the argument:

For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life. More than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation. (Rom 5:5-11)

From that you will perceive, I trust, the logical argument of the Holy Spirit. If I might paraphrase it, it goes like this. Talking to those who have trusted Christ, it says, 'Now, tell me this, what is the biggest thing that God will ever do for you?'

And when you have scratched your head a while and come up with the answer, you say, 'I hope he'll take me home to heaven. And when I get there, he'll give me a crown and a galaxy or two.'

No, those are small things. The biggest thing that God has ever done for us is to give his Son to die for us. Everything else is small by comparison.

Here comes question number two. When exactly did God give his Son for you? Was it after you had begun to improve somewhat in your style of living? Was it that God said, 'I wouldn't begin to think of giving my Son for them in their present condition; wait until they've improved quite a considerable amount; then I'll give him'? No, it wasn't that. 'While we were still sinners', says God, 'Christ died for us'. Well if God has given his Son for us while we were sinners, now that we have trusted Christ, and now that we have been justified, do you suppose that God would cast us out? That wouldn't make sense, would it? It would mean that God was being inconsistent. If, while I was a sinner, God gave Christ, and Christ died for me, now that I have trusted God's Son and I have been justified before God through faith, I may be utterly certain, even more certain if possible, that I shall be saved from the wrath of God through him.

And just in case the argument being stated once isn't sufficient, the Holy Spirit repeats it: 'For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life' (v. 10). The words are written exceedingly carefully:

while we were enemies we were reconciled . . .

How?

. . . by the death of his Son.

When I read the phrase, I cannot help remembering a parable the Lord Jesus told to the Jewish authorities, the religious leaders, in Jerusalem. He said there was a man who had a vineyard, and he let it out to tenants to farm it for him. Presently, at the time of the grape harvest, he sent his servants to get the produce from his vineyard, and they repudiated his servants and beat some and drove them away. Last of all, he said, 'I'll send my son. Surely they will reverence him.' And when the son approached the vineyard the men cowered behind the glasshouses and picked up slates and stones and attacked him, and eventually murdered him and threw him out of the vineyard (see Luke 20:9-18).

It was a parable of our Lord's own making, of course. He was the son, the Son of the Creator of the universe, sent by God for our salvation. And the hostile human heart, in its rebellion against God, took him and nailed him to a cross. What was God's response to his very enemies? If they would repent, God loved them still, and he would take the death of his Son as a sacrifice for their sin. We were reconciled to God 'by the death of his Son'.

There is one place on earth where sinners burdened with a sense of guilt can come and meet God and be unafraid to confess their sin and find salvation. That place is in the dark shadows of the cross of Christ. In the moment when I see what my sin has done to God's Son

when he bore my sin in his body, I am aware that God loves me in spite of my rebellion and sin, and is prepared to forgive and accept me for the sake of his dear Son.

Then how can I still rebel against God and reject him? How can I still maintain my pride and suppose I don't need a Saviour or his sacrifice? It is at the cross of Christ where we can meet God, be unafraid to confess our sin, and find a Saviour and forgiveness and peace with God.

The certainty of eternal life

Now let me take the story a little further. When we receive Christ as Saviour through his death at Calvary, then the Bible says we receive eternal life, for though 'the wages of sin is death . . . the [free gift] of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord' (Rom 6:23 KJV). So I wish to examine with you the claims of Jesus Christ our Lord in connection with eternal life, for when he was here he claimed in the first place to be the *source* of eternal life and then secondly, he claimed to be the *means* of eternal life. So let me pause a moment and explain the terms I am using.

What is the difference between *source* and *means*? Let's use the analogy of physical life. How did you get your physical life? Did you get it by eating bread and butter, by any chance?

You say, 'Of course not. You don't get life by eating bread and butter. You get life by a different process altogether. We get our physical lives through our parents. We get it as a gift without doing anything ourselves. Our parents are the immediate source, and God is the ultimate source of physical life.'

I see. So, once you have your physical life, you didn't ever need to eat bread and butter, I suppose?

'No,' you say, 'don't be so silly. We got our life from our parents but, once we'd got it, it had to be maintained and for that purpose we had to eat bread and butter and milk and all sorts of other things.'

Yes, so with physical life you need a source of life and then you need the means of life to maintain that life. So it is of course with eternal life. We need the source of life, and we need the means of life. And in the Gospel of John chapter 5, we have the record of our Lord Jesus claiming to be the sole source of eternal life. Let me read you the words.

For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself. And he has given him authority to execute judgement, because he is the Son of Man. (vv. 26–27)

When the Bible says that as the Father has life 'in himself' it does not just mean that the Father is alive; of course the Father is alive. It is saying that God is the *source* of life: he has life 'in himself'. When he made this vast universe, he didn't have to get physical life from some other source to make it with: 'The Father has life in himself.' And our Lord said, 'so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself.' So we see Christ, the source of life, and we shall see in a moment how that affects us. Then, in the next chapter, he says as follows:

As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever feeds on me, he also will live because of me. (6:57)

Here is Christ, the living bread to maintain the life that he has given.

Let us ponder this marvellous claim of the Lord Jesus to be the source of life and the means of life.

Christ is the source of eternal life

To help us understand the significance that he is the source of life, our Lord did an initial miracle. There was a pool in Jerusalem and round it there would assemble large numbers of sick, weak people. They were waiting, the Bible says, for the waters to be disturbed. Some manuscripts say it was an angel that did it. Others do not offer an explanation. It could have been a stream that runs into that pool that conveys mineral-laden water. Whatever it was, it was a means of healing that God in his grace had given to people and, when this disturbance of the water happened, those who went in first were benefitted and healed from their diseases. Then the value, the effectiveness, of the water would be gone until the next disturbance.

Healing without any visible means

Around this pool then were many sick people, but on this particular occasion, there was one man who was paralyzed, and for the last thirty-eight years (just imagine it) he had been trying to get into that pool to benefit from its beneficial waters. And for thirty-eight years he had tried in vain. I imagine him trying to ease his way into the pool, but he was paralyzed and, before he could get in, swarms of other people got in and the virtue in the water was dissipated. It was to that man the Lord Jesus came one day. Coming up to him, and knowing he'd been in that state for thirty-eight years, he said to the man, 'Would you like to be well? Would you like to be made whole' (see 5:6).

Like so many others, the man wasn't listening to the question. Instead of saying, 'Yes, of course I would,' what he answered was 'But, sir, I've no one to help put me into the water.' He had so got it into his head that the only way he could get cured was to use the means provided, that he merely answered that he couldn't get into the water. And our Lord replied, if I may be allowed reverently to paraphrase him: 'My good man, I don't need to use any means whatsoever. I don't need the pool. Get up!' And with that word came the word of authority, and the man sprang to his feet.

Christ the source of eternal life

Our Lord was illustrating at the physical level that he does not have to use means, like our noble doctors use, whether health spas or whatever else. Our Lord is the source of all physical life and, because he has life in himself, if he chose he could impart physical life to that man there and then, and he did so. But when he had performed that physical miracle, and demonstrated that he was a source of life, then he proceeded to use it to illustrate this far more important thing, that our Lord is the source of *eternal* life. He said, 'An hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live' (v. 25). He was not speaking of the physically dead, but the spiritually dead.

We pause to notice that diagnosis. The Bible says that men and women without God, without the Saviour, are spiritually dead. When they are conscious there is a gap between them and God, many people have the notion that they must spend great effort to try and close

that gap. It was so with the Jews at the time. They regularly kept the Sabbath, which is a very good thing, but they were indignant when our Lord healed this man on the Sabbath. They thought he was breaking the Sabbath.

Why, we ask, did our Lord do this miracle on a Sabbath anyway? The man had been ill for thirty-eight years. He could have waited one more day, couldn't he? Why would our Lord go and do the miracle on a Sabbath and upset the Jews like that? Well, it was for a very good reason. The Sabbath was ordained of God that, after men had worked six days in the week, they should rest on the seventh from their own works, that they might contemplate God, the source of all physical life, and life's burdens be eased and man's natural strength recuperated.

It was a very good institution, but the Jews, like many more, had turned the whole thing on its head. They thought now that, by keeping the Sabbath and many other religious works, they would now earn eternal life. They turned this matter of trying to get eternal life into a large system of religious works and merit and, of course, they knew no rest of soul. Show me a man who is hoping to gain God's heaven by his religious works, and I guarantee what I can say about him: he has no rest of soul and no certainty that he'll ever be in heaven. If you ask him, 'Are you certain of heaven?' his very religious modesty will make him answer: 'No. No one can be certain, but I do my best.' And he will turn the whole matter of gaining eternal life into a system of meritorious work, which is the very opposite of the Sabbath.

So now, on this particular Sabbath, our Lord Jesus comes and demonstrates that he is the Creator incarnate, able to impart physical strength to this man. But listen now to the additional lesson:

Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgement, but has passed from death to life. (5:24)

You will notice its present tense: '*has* eternal life'. Upon believing, a person receives eternal life from the Saviour. Secondly, 'he does not come into judgement'. Such a person can be certain that he will never face ultimate condemnation by God. And thirdly, he '*has* [already] passed over from death to life.' That is such a magnificent statement that we had better ponder it for a moment.

What is eternal life?

Some people, if they think of eternal life at all, think it is going to heaven when you die. Well certainly all believers go to heaven when they die, but that isn't exactly what the Bible means by *eternal life*. Eternal life is given to us here and now in this life. When we are born from above, when we receive the Saviour and he gives us a spiritual life that we never had before, that is eternal life. If ever we are to receive it, we must receive it in the here and now. If we wait until this life is ended, it will be too late.

Listen, therefore, to our Lord's statement. Mark the tenses of the verbs. 'Whoever hears my word and *believes* him who sent me *has* eternal life [*now*]'. And as to the future, 'he *shall* [*never*] come into condemnation' in the future. Why not? Because he has [*already*] passed out of death into life.'

You say, 'How could Jesus Christ ever say any such thing—that we have eternal life, the life of the ages?' The answer is simple. He gives it when he says, 'he has given him authority

to execute judgement, because he is the Son of Man' (v. 27). Or again, 'the Father judges no one, but has given all judgement to the Son, that all may honour the Son, just as they honour the Father' (vv. 22–23). These are mighty words. You will notice that Jesus Christ is not claiming just to be a prophet in the line of thousands of prophets. He is not only claiming to be the source of all life, as God is, but when it comes to the final judgment of men, 'the Father judges no one, but has given all judgement to the Son, that all may honour the Son, just as they honour the Father'. And if you should ever stand before the throne of final judgment, the one you will see enthroned is Jesus Christ our Lord. He is to be the judge, and his verdict will be final. There is no appeal against the verdict of the judge. That being so, what would you give to know in the here and now on earth what the verdict that the judge will give concerning you?

Perhaps your reaction is to say, 'But that's impossible. You can't know until you arrive there.'

That is mistaken. Allow me to tell you, and tell you with certainty and with joy, for this is what the Lord Jesus was saying as he stood here, with his two feet upon this earth: 'the Father judges no one, but has given all judgement to the Son . . .'. So he is speaking as the one who will be judge, and here is his verdict on those that, in true repentance and faith, receive him. The verdict is this: 'He who hears my word and believes on him that sent me has eternal life, the life of eternity, and has it now.'

'How can he give us eternal life now?' you say.

It is because he is the source of life, and he can give us that life now. It is because that life is a gift and does not have to be earned. The free gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. Because eternal life is a free gift and not earned or bought by us or by our behaviour, but given to those who in true repentance and faith receive the Lord Jesus, he has the authority, here and now, to give it to us.

And what about the next part? 'Whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgement'. How can a judge possibly say that? Well the answer is this: he bore for us the condemnation that we deserved and the penalty that we rightly would have suffered. Scripture says, 'He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree' (1 Pet 2:24). God 'made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God' (2 Cor 5:21). 'While we were still sinners, Christ died for us' (Rom 5:8). 'There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus' (Rom 8:1).

Are they not glorious words? No sweeter music has ever sounded in the ears of men. And the Bible throws out the challenge.

What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? (8:31–33)

Suppose somebody laid a charge. Who is he that will condemn? Shall Christ Jesus? Well of course not. Christ Jesus, who died for us, is risen and now is at the right hand of God and makes intercession for us.

Oh the wonderful certainty of the implications of the death of Jesus Christ our Lord: 'whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come

into judgement, but has passed [already] from death to life' (John 5:24). Notice the perfect tense. From being under the wrath of God and, so to speak, as good as dead, such a person has now passed from under that sentence out into abundant and never-ending life.

Jesus Christ is the source of life, and he stands among us still and bids us come to him. Happy are those men and women who, in the course of this life, come and meet Jesus Christ and receive from him, instantaneously in that moment, the gift of pardon, the gift of peace with God, the gift of new life—even eternal life, and the guarantee that they shall not come into condemnation, but shall enjoy God and his heaven forever. Jesus Christ is the source of life.

Christ is the means of eternal life

But then Jesus Christ is not only the source of life; he is also the means of life. We agreed that you didn't get your physical life by eating bread and butter. You got it by altogether a different process. One moment you didn't exist; the next moment, when the zygote was formed, you received life and began to be. But after you had received life you needed bread and butter, or other such means of life, to maintain the life. So our Lord Jesus is not only the source of life who, when we first come to him, gives us eternal life. Thank God, he also says, 'I am the bread of life' (6:35), to maintain our life and maintain it eternally.

To help us understand that, the sixth chapter of the Gospel of John, which preaches Jesus as the means of life, the bread of life come down from heaven, points out that just at this time, the Jews were about to celebrate Passover. And that would remind them, and may remind us, that at the original Passover, Israel were in danger of being destroyed by the destroying angel that went through to destroy the firstborn in Egypt. They were told by God to slay a lamb, to put its blood on the lintel and the doorposts and to shelter behind that blood-stained door. And for all those who obeyed what he said to do, the Lord said that he would 'pass over the door', that is, he stretched himself over the door, so that the destroying angel could not come in (Exod 12:23). They were saved, redeemed by the blood of the lamb. But then that began a journey.

On that very night when they were redeemed by the blood of the lamb, they started a journey that would take them from Egypt to their promised land. On that journey, as they journeyed through the Sinai desert, they would need a food supply. Where were they to get the food in that wild, howling wilderness? And so we are told how God did a miracle, and he rained down bread from heaven on them daily in the form of the manna, to maintain them in the wilderness until they got to their promised land. And the analogy holds for us too, doesn't it? We are redeemed, Peter says, 'with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot' (1 Pet 1:19). We are saved from the wrath of God, and now we begin a journey. And for a believer, life is not just muddling through life to some unknown destination. For a believer, the moment he or she puts faith in Christ then life becomes a steady journey, deliberately taken and constantly pursued. It is a journey that is going to take us from this temporary world to God's eternal world, 'to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for [us]' (v. 4).

So we too are on a journey, but how shall we be maintained on our journey? To maintain Israel, God rained down bread from heaven upon them daily. The analogy holds again. Christ said, 'I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will

live for ever' (John 6:51). Christ is the means for the maintaining of our spiritual life right through life's journey, to bring us safe to heaven.

At which point a thought might occur to us. If you read the ancient history books about Israel's journey through the wilderness and how they got the manna from heaven, it makes for stimulating reading, but the sorry fact is that in spite of the manna coming down from heaven, most of them who came out of Egypt never got into the promised land; they died in the wilderness. The reason they died was because of their sin. They sinned and rebelled against God, and they died in the wilderness and never got into their promised land. And perhaps we say, 'Wait a moment. I'm on a journey too. I'm journeying from this world to the eternal world. Jesus Christ is the bread come down from heaven, but can I be sure I will enter in that glorious inheritance, or might I stumble and fall and lose it after all?'

What is the answer? We may be heartily glad that Christ has not left us to think it through ourselves but has given the answer in words of simple syllables that we may be utterly sure. Listen to what he says:

Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes has eternal life. I am the bread of life. Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. (vv. 47–49)

Yes they did. Now notice the contrast:

This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. (v. 50)

And if once is not enough to say it, listen to him again:

I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live for ever. (v. 51)

Here is a glorious personal guarantee from Christ that for all who have trusted him and have begun the journey from earth to heaven: the bread of life shall sustain them and they shall never die, in a spiritual sense, but live forever.

See how sustaining this bread is. When the Jews said, 'You say you are the bread of life. Well, Moses gave us the bread from God—the manna on the ground. Where is your bread that you are giving us?' (see vv. 30–31).

Our Lord graciously replied, 'I myself am the bread' (see vv. 32–33). He is a person. I say it respectfully, but the bread that came down from heaven was so much stuff; the true bread is Christ. That is why he used a very vivid metaphor and said, 'he that eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life' (see v. 54). He didn't mean it literally, of course. He later on said, 'It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all' (v. 63). Even if you could eat the literal flesh of Christ and drink his literal blood it would do you no good whatsoever. It was a vivid way of saying, however, that if your food is going to do you any good, you must *ingest* it. So Christ says, 'I am the bread of life. If you would benefit, you must not just know about me; you must receive me, so that you and I become one.'

The Father's will for the Son

There is a difference between the manna that came down from heaven and what Christ offered. The manna was bread, full of vitamins doubtless, but it was not alive. Christ says, 'I am the living bread' (v. 51). When the living Christ comes to take up his residence in a human heart, that human who belongs to him will last eternally. And to enforce it, our blessed Lord said,

I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. (vv. 38–40)

When it comes to these things, I find it profitable to do as our Lord said and adopt the attitude of a trusting child (see Matt 18:3). Here in John 6 he tells me he came down from heaven to do the will of his Father. The will of his Father was that: 'everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day' (v. 40). Forgive this personal reference, but unashamedly I say that I do receive Christ. I believe him to be the Son of God incarnate—truly human, truly divine. I believe and say with the Apostle Paul: 'The Son of God . . . loved me and gave himself for me' (Gal 2:20), and I have received him as my only hope of salvation.

Again I hear him saying, 'this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.' And when I hear that, I picture the blessed Son of God coming to stand before the Father and to introduce the redeemed, as the Bible has it: 'to present them before the presence of his Father with exceeding joy' (see Jude 24). And the blessed Lord, as he presents the redeemed to the Father says, 'Father, this is Abraham.'

'Wonderful. Abraham—a great believer of the Old Testament.'

'This, Father, is David, king of that name. This is Martha and Mary. And this is Peter.'

What a day it will be when the risen, glorified Lord presents us before the presence of his Father with exceeding joy! And when, as I imagine it, Christ has presented all the many thousands: Paul and Peter and Luther and Wesley, and everybody else, and comes to the last one and has finished, then the Father will say, 'Very good, my Son, but what about that chap, Gooding? You haven't mentioned him. Is he here?'

'You mean David Gooding?'

'Yes.'

'He isn't here.'

'Why not? Didn't he trust you?'

'Well yes, he did, but he was a poor excuse of a thing, so I lost him.'

Will that really happen? No, my friend, the very thought is almost blasphemous! For if Christ loses one soul that has fled to him for refuge, then he shall have failed to do the will of God, and heaven itself would turn to darkness. It shall never be! He is the bread that came down from heaven, and he shall lose none that have put their faith in him. And I sing with

the simple heart of the people of God: 'Oh! shall I be among that throng . . . | I shall, for I have been redeemed.'²

God grant that as once more we have heard of the wonderful salvation effected through the cross of Christ; God grant that as we have heard of him as the source of eternal life that can meet us this very night, if we will have him, and impart to us the gift of eternal life here and now, and guarantee that we shall never come into condemnation; God grant that, as we have heard of him as the bread of life on whom we may feed as we journey from this world to the next—the bread of life that is given to sustain us, and will sustain every believer, and bring him through to glory at last; we shall examine our hearts quietly afresh and ask ourselves that inevitable question: have I met, have I trusted and have I received the Christ of God as my Saviour, as my sacrifice, as the source of life and the means of life that will bring me home to glory?

² M. S. Sullivan, 'O Shall I Be Among That Throng'.

How Good Can We Be?

Realistic Holiness

It is common knowledge that the Bible calls on all those who confess Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour to lead a life of holiness. I have subtitled our consideration 'Realistic Holiness' because I want to enquire what exactly is the nature of this summons by the New Testament to lead a holy life. Is it simply an exhortation that says, 'Now you have become a Christian and have been forgiven your sins by God's grace, pull your spiritual socks up and try your hardest to lead a holy life'; or is it more than that? Has God made some provision for us to live a holy life? Is it an addition to salvation, or is it an integral part of our salvation? And, if so, is it really practical and down to earth? Does it really work, or is it a lot of old theory that breaks down the moment you try to put it into practice?

We are thinking of realistic holiness for those who have become believers, but of course it has relevance to any who may not yet be believers. Perhaps even in these previous lectures, as you have listened to the gospel saying that we are justified by faith without works, you have had your suspicions: 'How can that possibly be true? Because if God saves us and forgives us and justifies us and guarantees us heaven at last, and it's altogether and simply by faith, and we don't have to do our best to earn it, doesn't that mean that once you are saved by grace, apart from your works, you can jolly well live as you like and it doesn't really matter?'

Therefore, it is of extreme importance for those who are debating whether they can trust this gospel to find out what God's word has to say on this topic. It says that those who have been forgiven by Christ are expected to live a holy life, and God has made provision for it, and that if they come to accept forgiveness of sins, it will make a real change in their lives and they shall find new powers to live as Christians ought to live.

Why we need to be saved

For this purpose then, I want in your hearing, publicly, to address a question to the Christian Apostle Paul and then to let him answer the question in the words of that tremendous book about salvation that is his Epistle to the Romans. When I turn the first pages of what he has written, I hear him almost boasting. He says, 'I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ.'

Why not?

'Because,' he says, 'it is the power of God unto salvation, and because it works by faith, it really works' (see 1:16-17).

And I say, 'I hear what you say, Paul, but it begs a prior question, doesn't it? You are not ashamed of the gospel because it is the power of God unto salvation; then tell us, sir, why do we need to be saved anyway?'

Saved from the wrath of God

If we pose that question to Paul, he will come up not simply with one answer, but with two. The first answer he gives is that we need to be saved because, until we are, we stand with the wrath and indignation of God over our heads. Our sins have offended the divine majesty and holiness, and Paul says, 'the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness' (v. 18).

In previous sessions we have considered how the sacrifice of Christ comes to our rescue. The guilt we have incurred before God is real; it is not just some psychological feeling. The Bible says we are not only sinners; we are guilty sinners. We are guilty because we have not merely sinned, but we have committed sin knowing it was sin and we have done it in spite of knowing that fact. Paul says we have done it in the face of the evidence of God's power and his holiness. The evidence of creation around us is that there is a God, and we have gone on living in sheer ingratitude to God, independent of him, and gone our own way, sinning against the evidence for his existence and against the light of conscience that he has placed within us (see vv. 20–21; 2:12–16). So time and again, when we have proposed in our hearts we are going to do a particular thing, and conscience has warned us this is not right, we have done it nonetheless—sinning against God, in spite of the light of conscience. And others, like the Jews, who have had the Bible within reach, or even in their hands, and know from the text of the Bible that this or that is sinful, have gone and done it—not only sinning against the light of creation but the light of conscience and the light of holy Scripture (see vv. 17–24). So we are not just sinners; we are guilty sinners. We have sinned when we need not have sinned. We have sinned on many occasions when we cannot claim, 'I couldn't help it.' Therefore we stand under God's displeasure, under that great Sword of Damocles, so to speak, which is the coming wrath of God.

And just there Christ meets our need, for the Bible says that 'while we were still sinners, Christ died for us' (5:8). Not waiting for us to improve, but coming alongside us just where we are, while we were yet sinners, while we were still enemies of God, then God loved us and Christ died for us.

Coming to where we are

I wonder if you ever read that book entitled *The Climb Up to Hell*.³ It's a little ancient now. It was written by a mountaineer, and the story, briefly told, is that in the Alps in Switzerland, the guides had grown very tired of foolhardy mountain climbers trying to climb the north face of the Eiger in the winter, and then when they got stuck, expecting the guides to risk their lives to rescue them. So they issued a general public notice that if anybody tried to climb this mountain in wintertime and got stuck, the guides would not come and rescue them. They would hang and freeze to death. In spite of it, a couple of Italians came and began to climb

³ Jack Olsen, *The Climb Up to Hell: Tragedy on the Eiger*, 1962.

the face of the mountain in winter and got two thirds of way up and got stuck, dangling on a ledge. The guides remained impassive: 'We told them if they did it, we would not come to help; let them die.' But a French mountaineer heard of it and, as quickly as he could, raised a team of volunteers to rescue the men. They arrived at the spot and took the mountain railway up the shoulder of the mountain, then went by foot the rest of the way until they were, as they thought, over the place where at least one of the mountaineers was. But they couldn't see him because of the overhang of the snow, and they had to rely upon signs from the hotel opposite the valley as to where the man might be. They had a big winch, and they got it as near the edge as they dared. They called for a volunteer to be tied to the winch and take a mountain stretcher with him. Then, little by little, they lowered him over the edge, down to where the man sat on his ledge. As the rescuer reached the spot, alas there was a gap between him and the man, and he thought to swing himself, but he couldn't. He had to signal to the people above to haul him back up again. The man on the ledge was almost frantic, but he couldn't jump the distance between the two, so they pulled the rescuer back up to the top. They moved the winch and, once more the rescuer went down, this time right where the man was. He stood on the ledge and picked him up and put him on his back and tied him on. The man was half-crazy with fear and cold. The rescuer put his feet to the mountain face and leant back on the rope and gave the signal and, little by little, as the crew on top pulled him up, he walked up the face of the mountain until he had brought the man to rescue and eventually to life and recovery.

The story stuck in my mind as a brilliant example of the realism of God's gospel. He comes to us sinful men and women who deserve his wrath and indignation for our wilful sinning, and he has salvation realistically geared. He comes to exactly where we are, while we were still sinners and still sinning. While we were still rebels and kicking God in the shins, then God loved us. It was then Christ died for us. He comes exactly where we are, not asking us to provide some self-help but prepared to do the saving, because he died that we might be forgiven and reconciled to God. And in the virtue of his sacrifice for us he can make peace between us and God, so that God can accept us just as we are. As a famous Christian hymn puts it:

Just as I am, without one plea,
but that thy blood was shed for me,
and that thou bidd'st me come to thee,
O Lamb of God, I come, I come.⁴

Forgiveness, reconciliation and justification are altogether of God's grace and not dependent on our works, but solely dependent on our repentance and faith, that is, grabbing hold of the Saviour as ours, personally.

So that is the first reason why we need to be saved, and there is God's provision for saving us. Paul concludes that part of his book by saying, 'Because that is so, then it is absolutely certain that we who have trusted Christ shall be saved from the wrath of God through him' (see 5:9-11)

⁴ Charlotte Elliott (1789-1871), 'Just as I Am, Without One Plea.'

Saved from the wreckage of sin

If that were the only part of salvation, it would have a very serious lack, wouldn't it? Our salvation is not merely an entry ticket into God's heaven. There is another reason why we need to be saved, and from the middle of chapter 5, Paul discusses it with us at great length.

The reason is, not merely the bad deeds that we have done, but the way sin has damaged us as people and twisted us and made parts of our personality crooked. It is not merely then that we have done sins; it is the fact that we are sinners. There is something very wrong with us. The old preachers used to illustrate it this way. They would ask if the fact that a tree grows apples is what makes it an apple tree. Is it that before it grows apples, it isn't an apple tree, but after it has grown apples it is? Well of course not. The reason a tree grows apples, if it does grow them, is that it is an apple tree. And if this year it goes into a huff or something, as apple trees are known to do, and doesn't grow apples at all, it is still an apple tree. It grows the apples because of its essential nature: it is an apple tree.

And God's word points out that we do sinful things because of our fallen *nature*: because we are sinners. But it follows that when the Bible urges us who have found forgiveness through Christ to live a holy life, the Bible is being realistic. He knows the damage that sin has done to us, and it points to the marvellous and realistic provision that God has made for believers in Christ, so that we can live a holy life and learn and be schooled and be trained to progress in holiness.

The reasons for salvation are given in order

I would like you to consider for a moment the order in which the Apostle Paul tells us of these two parts of our salvation. First, he tells us how to be saved from the wrath of God, because of our guilt. Second, he tells us how to be saved from the power of sinning.

Some people get the order the wrong way round. People come to the conviction (some of them very soon in life and others rather slowly) that not all is well with them. Their life is ragged, undone, broken and unsatisfactory. As they think of God they feel they ought to try to put their lives right. Then they hear of Christ, and they hope that Christ somehow will help them to put their lives right; and if they try hard enough (with Christ's cooperation of course) eventually their lives will be put so right, or so nearly right, that God in the end might consider accepting them into his heaven. This is a big mistake, for Christ isn't in that kind of business.

Let me illustrate it to you by an analogy. It's a simple analogy, so don't force it too far. I want you to imagine a young gentleman who has been lent a beautiful Lincoln-Zephyr or some modern equivalent of it. It's an absolutely beautiful thing but, as occasionally you might find in the case of a young man (none of you of course), he's a bit stupid in the head and he likes showing off and driving at seventy miles an hour on the motorway and putting it in reverse to see what happens.

One night he's driving it, having had too much to drink, and he bashes the thing against a concrete wall and shatters it. And the shock and the cool of the evening clears his head a bit and, as he gets out and sees the wreckage, suddenly he remembers the car isn't his anyway: he borrowed the thing! Now what shall he do? And frantic ideas run through his skull: 'What will the owner say if he sees his car like this?' So he hits upon a scheme: he'll keep out of the

way of the owner as long as he possibly can, and he'll find himself a clever mechanic, an engineer, who will put the car right (or nearly right anyway). So, at long last, when it's nearly right, he'll meet the owner. And the owner will say, 'How are you getting on?'

'Oh, I love the car.'

'What's that little scratch there?'

'Well I had a little incident, but not much. It's just a scratch there you see.' And he will hope the owner will accept his excuses.

Many folks are like that with salvation. They know their life is not right; and they have heard of Jesus Christ, and they want Jesus Christ to help them make their life better. Meanwhile, they're going to keep as far away from God as they possibly can and hope they have a long time to live before they are summoned before his judgment throne. And they hope that will be a long while, because they want to try and improve enough at least (with the help of the Lord Jesus) so that when at last they appear before God, he will say, 'Well, you're not perfect, but reasonable; I accept you.'

It is not like that. What is Christ's salvation? Well, to use my analogy, Christ will come to the young man as he stands in the wreck of his car, that is, in the wreck of his life. The young man has now got a clear head, and he knows there is a God and that one day he must meet God. He is hoping to keep clear of God until he gets right. Christ will say, 'No, young man. We don't start first with putting the car right. I must bring you, and you'd better come and meet God right now. As you stand in the mess that is your life, you must come and meet God and let God deal with the matter of your guilt and your sin. The glorious news is that if you will admit your sin and confess it, God is prepared to forgive you right now, as you are, and guarantee you that you will never be cast out.'

And if you will come like that and receive God's Saviour, God will accept you here and now.

'What about the wreck?' you say.

That is the second stage. First he will embrace you and give you the kiss of his pardon, and assure you that you are forgiven and accepted even as you are, but then he will take your hand and Christ will say, 'Now we will start putting the wreck right.'

I say it again: it is a realistic provision for realistic holiness.

Is it our fault we are sinners?

The first point Paul makes in *this* part of his great exposition of the gospel is that the fact that we are sinners is not our fault. How did we become sinners? The Bible says as follows: 'For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners . . .' (5:19). That is how it happened.

Someone says to me, 'Do you believe the story of the fall in Genesis?'

I believe it with all my heart. If you went into an orchard and found one or two trees with blight, you will say it's just an accident. If every year, after year, after year, every tree in the orchard and every fruit on every tree was blighted you would say, 'This is not an accident. There is something wrong with this kind of tree.'

And that is the human state, isn't it? Some are better than others, but for these long centuries, we have never come across anybody completely sinless, except Jesus Christ our Lord. And for a universal effect, there is of course a universal cause. By the disobedience of one—the forefather of our race—the race suffered a catastrophe, and the many that followed were constituted sinners in their very nature (see v. 19).

Oh, somebody objects, 'You're not going to tell me that I'm going to be damned for what somebody else did, some Adam or other?'

No, of course you never will be. It wasn't your fault that you were born a human being. It isn't mine either. I don't know about you, but nobody asked me whether I wanted to be born. You will not be damned for being born of a fallen race. What you would be damned for, at last, is for rejecting the salvation that God offers you. If it is true that through one man's disobedience we were constituted sinners, then the glorious truth of the gospel is that through the obedience of one, that is Jesus Christ, we can be constituted righteous (see 5:19). We were born sinners by what somebody else did; we can become children of God through what somebody else did, namely Jesus Christ our Lord.

So now we are separating two things in our minds, aren't we? The first lesson was that we are guilty sinners, because we have deliberately sinned and we are to blame for it. But now we are thinking about the possibility of becoming holy, and we have to face the realistic state of affairs. We have sinned in the past, ultimately, because we are sinners—broken, wounded, screwed up. God is offering us a way of salvation and a way of holiness. And Paul will point out to us that among the effects (the damage that sin has done to us) is that it has brought us into three slaveries, what the Bible calls *dominations* or dominions: the slavery of sin, the slavery of the law and, ultimately, the slavery of death. The question is: how can we be delivered from these slaveries?

Salvation from the slavery of sin

The main passage we have to consider is a little bit complicated when you first hear it, so I'm going to read it to you. I am reading from an old translation, because I am a very old man, as you see. You probably have a better modern translation. Never mind, check it out if you want to. I am going to read to you the first fourteen verses of chapter six of the Letter by Paul to the Christians at Rome. I warn you, it will contain a number of technical terms. We shall try to explain them later.

What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? God forbid. We who died to sin, how shall we any longer live therein? Or are you ignorant that all we who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him through baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we also might walk in newness of life. For if we have become united with him by the likeness of his death, we shall be also by the likeness of his resurrection; knowing this, that our old man was crucified with him, that the body of sin might be done away, that so we should no longer be in bondage to sin; for he who has died is justified from sin. But if we died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him; knowing that Christ being raised from the dead dies no more; death no more has dominion over him. For the death that he died, he died

unto sin once: but the life that he lives, he lives unto God. Even so reckon you also yourselves to be dead unto sin, but alive unto God in Christ Jesus. Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, that you should obey the lusts thereof: neither present your members unto sin as instruments of unrighteousness; but present yourselves unto God, as alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness unto God. For sin shall not have dominion over you: for you are not under law, but under grace. (6:1–14 RV)

I concentrate your attention for the moment on that last verse, because here you meet the first slavery that I mentioned: ‘Sin shall not have dominion over you’, that is, sin shall not lord it over you; sin shall not keep you down captive. Why is that? What is the secret of breaking the domination of sin?

Now we must be careful here to notice exactly what the Bible says the reason is, for if we were not looking too clearly at the text, we might come up with the kind of answer that says, ‘The reason, my dear fellow Christian, that sin shall not have dominion over you is that God has given you his Holy Spirit to strive against your sinful flesh, so that you might, in the power of the Holy Spirit, rise above the temptations.’

And do you know what? That is perfectly true, and because it is true let me now tell you again that the ultimate secret of overcoming the power, the drag, of sin is that when we come to Christ for salvation he receives us. He not only receives us but by his Spirit he comes to live within us, so that we have the living Saviour with us to strengthen us. We still have to take the decisions, but he is with us to support us, to strengthen and to guide us in our ongoing search for holiness. That is perfectly true. But we need to start by thinking of the other reason why sin shall not have dominion over us.

Freedom from the dominion of sin

Listen to what Paul says, ‘For sin shall not have dominion over you: for you are not under law, but under grace’ (v. 14). What does that mean? How is that the secret of overcoming sin? Does that mean that you can say, ‘Bother the law, I don’t need to listen to it, I can do as I like’?

No, indeed not.

Then what does it mean?

Well, let me tell you what law is in the Bible and what God’s law is. The Hebrew word for law is *torah*, and it means ‘instruction’. God’s holy law is marvellous instruction on how to live our lives, but it is more than that. God’s law is not just instruction; it is command plus penalty if you break it. God’s law is prohibition plus penalty. It is not just advice; God’s law comes alongside us and says, ‘Now this is the sum total, this is the principle of the law: you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your mind, all your strength, all your soul, and your neighbour as yourself’ (see Deut 6:5; Lev 19:18). ‘And if you don’t,’ says the law, ‘I curse you in the name of God.’

Well I am a Christian, you know, and not a very good one, but I am a Christian. And I have come to Christ for salvation, and I do trust him. I have his assurance that I shall never perish; I shall never come into condemnation, but now I really want to please the Lord and lead a holy life. For Christ’s sake I want to do it. Don’t you? You don’t take his salvation, his forgiveness and then say, ‘I don’t care what I do’, do you? You want to please the Saviour,

surely? Now therefore, imagine that I am here in bed on Monday morning, and when I wake up there is the law by my side.

The law says to me, 'Gooding, get up! Today is Monday, and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength. And if you don't, I shall curse you.'

What do you think I would do? I think I know what you would do. You would get out of bed and have a go at it. I've lived too long for that. I should say, 'Sorry, that's a standard I would love to attain to, but experience has taught me that, try how I will, I still come short. If you're going to curse me for coming short, well then I shan't make the attempt. I shall stay in bed.'

And then the law would say, 'Well I curse you for staying in bed then!'

What practical possibility would there be for me, under those conditions, to begin the pathway that leads to holiness? I might as well give up before I started, for when I made the first mistake and said, 'I'm sorry about that. I'll do better next time'; the law would say, 'No, you won't; there won't be another time!'

The whole thing would be unpractical if, as Christians, we were under law. How is it then that Paul says, 'Sin shall not have dominion over you, because you are not under law'? How did we ever get out from being under the law? That is a big point.

Baptism: a symbolic burial

To illustrate that, Paul uses our Christian baptism. I suspect you have seen many a Christian baptism. You should go and see the next baptism if you've never seen one, because Christian baptism is a very interesting symbol. If you haven't, let me tell you what happens. It is, in the first place, a symbolic *burial* where the candidate who confesses Christ as Saviour, is placed under the water. They are placed right under, like a burial. But it is a very happy occasion (unlike most burials) because it is immediately followed by a resurrection, and the person is brought up out of the water. That too is symbolic. It is symbolic of a resurrection.

A Christian who gets baptized is not proclaiming he's rather specially and super-duper good. No, to be baptized, you have to be super-duper bad. For what are Christians saying when they get baptized? They are saying: 'Not only did Christ die for me that my sins might be forgiven, but since I have now received him, and he and I are one, then God counts me one with Christ and, as far as God is concerned, when Christ died, I died; and when Christ was buried, I was buried. I died to the law.'

The law considered my life, from first to last, and the law (being realistic) said, 'There's no hope for this Gooding chap, for if he lives until he's ninety-nine and a half, he'll still come short of God's holy standard. He is a failure. He deserves the penalty of the law. All talk of improvement, as far as the law is concerned, is nonsense. He already deserves to be dead, buried and executed.' And Christ came alongside and God, in his grace, has joined me to Christ. Now God counts it that when Christ died under the sentence of the law—the law's sentence against me—he bore it for me. Because of that, I died with Christ and I was buried with him.

Imagine you could go up to the throne of God just now and ask permission to look at the record books. You would find it very interesting, wouldn't you? You'd turn to the page headed 'G' and ask to find out the record of this Gooding that has been preaching here. You

say, 'What kind of a chap has he been? He's been telling us to be good, well what's happened to him then?' And if you were allowed to see the record book, you would see red ink all over the place marking sins against God. And then you would see the pen through the whole lot and underneath: 'Account closed. The accused has died'.

You'd say, 'That's funny, because I saw him preaching the other day.'

Ah, yes, but as far as God's law knows (the law that condemned me to death), I have died. 'How?' you say.

When Christ died under the curse of the law, I died. He paid the penalty from first to last. He was buried and, in symbol, I take my place with him. I am buried with him.

That is marvellous, isn't it? That is how I got out from under the law, and sin shall not have dominion over me, because I am not under law; I am under grace. All the cost, the penalty of my sin from first to last, has been paid by Christ, and I am free. That means that when, as a believer, I try to please God and I fail, of course I can confess it to the Lord. And Scripture has it: 'If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness' (1 John 1:9), and I can get up and have another go. Thank God for being such a realist as that. You see, to make me holy has taken a long while, and I'm far off it yet, but I am learning. And all of the failures and the faults have been paid for by Christ in advance.

I went to a very old fashioned school and, in the third form, we all had to start learning some physics and chemistry. Mind you, it was very Dickensian and crude in those days, but the school had much experience. They were afraid that if some of these boys were to get into the chemistry laboratory, they'd blow the whole place up. So if our parents wanted us to learn chemistry, they had to pay a lump sum in advance. And if we blew the place up in the course of learning our chemistry, the price had been paid already.

I want to tell you, my dear fellow believer, God is determined to make you holy. The process will take longer or shorter. We shall not be perfect overnight. It will mean a lot of education in the family of God, and God's correction and chastening hand, and patience. It will involve the learning of his will, learning how to cooperate with the Spirit of God. In the course of it we shall make progress, but there will be many failures. I want to tell you God has paid for your education in advance. Oh, praise God for it! God is a realist! The plan he has is realistic. But because he is realistic, he can't say that my sins as a believer don't matter. My failures still matter, but Christ has paid for them in advance; and I shout 'Hallelujah!' in my heart. The education of God, educating me to live in a holy fashion, is realistic. God knows the material he is dealing with. Christ has paid the expense of it in advance.

Baptism: a symbolic resurrection

Baptism, we are told, has another effect. It is put in this way: 'we are to know this that our old man was crucified with him that the body of sin might be done away, that we should no longer be in bondage to sin' (see Rom 6:6). And of course when people read that, they are all agog to find out who this 'old man' is who was crucified with Christ. Who is this old man?

Now here we shall have to go slowly, for if we don't, we shall make a mistake. I find a lot of people are convinced that they are not just one person but two. There is the old man, and that is the bad bit. Then there is the nice new bit, and they like to think that the nasty bit has

been done away and has ceased to exist; and now they are left with the new bit. They like to look upon themselves as a nice rosy red apple that has just a bit that has gone bad on one side there, with just a speck of badness. If only they get the little badness out then they'd be left with a nice rosy apple. And so when people make a mistake they say, 'That's my old man that did that.' They like to think the old man is crucified, but he has a way of living on somehow. Funny, isn't it?

No, that's not true. The old man is not a nasty piece inside us alongside of the nice new man. The old man is the complete me. Have you been baptized? If you are a believer, of course you should be. So let me ask you a question. When, as a believer, you were baptized, which part of you did they baptize? They baptized the old man and left the nice bit standing on the side of the baptismal water, did they?

'No,' you say, 'when I was baptized, the whole lot of me was baptized.'

Quite so. You died with Christ, for you were crucified with Christ. The old man was crucified with Christ, not just a nasty bit but the whole lot.

God's law takes that view you know. There is a man and he's going home from work, and the traffic is heavy, and he's late, and he's fearing his wife's wrath, and he's getting impatient because of the traffic and, at last, when he gets the chance to get in front, he puts his foot down. And he's doing one hundred miles per hour along the road when the police get him on their speed guns. So he's summoned before the magistrates, and the magistrate says, 'I must fine you one thousand dollars because you were speeding.' And the man says, 'Please, sir, it wasn't me; it was my old man.'

Well what will the magistrate say? Will he say, 'I'll fine the old man; I won't fine you'? No, he'll say, 'I can't help whether it was the old man or who it was. You shouldn't have let the old man do it anyway; I'm going to fine you.' And that is what the law says. It's no good squealing before the law: 'That was my old man that did it!' That is nonsense. *You* did it.

That old man, therefore, is me from first to last. As the theologians put it: 'I, in Adam.' I, as a mere human being, am a failure. The law surveys me from start to finish and says, 'He must disappear. He must be executed.' And when I was buried in baptism, that, in the eyes of the law, was the whole of me gone. The glorious thing is, however, that baptism isn't just a burial of a dead person. It is a symbolic resurrection.

We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. (v. 4)

And here is the wonder of it. We rise from the water of baptism. There is no virtue in the water; it is simply a physical demonstration that, though the law commanded our death and execution, God has given us new life in Christ—his glorious resurrection of life. And when the Bible says, 'just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life', it is not exalting us. It is stating the fact: in Christ, God has given us new life, the life of his Holy Spirit, the life of the risen Lord. And the conditions upon which we get that life are not that we deserved it; it is a pure gift, given to us freely by the risen Lord.

My, that is wonderful to my heart. With Christ, there is hope for me that I shall become holy; and one day, as the Bible puts it, I shall 'be conformed to the image of his Son' (8:29),

and I shall be like him eternally, because of this gift of the very life of Christ to me. And, if you will, this gift will be given to you as well.

Reckon yourself dead to sin

Then Paul says, ‘Even so reckon you also yourselves to be dead unto sin, but alive unto God in Christ Jesus’ (v. 11 RV). What does that mean? Does that mean that when sin knocks at the door and you feel strong temptation, you try to say over and over again: ‘No, no, I’m dead to sin. I’m dead to sin. I’m dead to sin,’ until the sin goes away? Well it may be good practice, but it isn’t what this verse is saying. Let me read it to you again:

Knowing that Christ being raised from the dead dies no more; death no more has dominion over him. For the death that he died, he died unto sin once: but the life that he lives, he lives unto God. Even so reckon you also yourselves to be dead unto sin, but alive unto God in Christ Jesus. (vv. 9–11 RV)

When the Bible tells me to ‘reckon myself dead to sin and alive to God’, it says to do so *in the same way as Christ*. How did he do it? He died to sin once. Now that he lives, he ‘dies no more; death no more has dominion over him’.

What does it mean that ‘he died to sin once’? It does not mean that Christ had to struggle against sin, and so at last he died and escaped the power of sin. That would be blasphemy almost to think it. It means that when Christ died for me (and for you) and bore my sins in his body on the tree—all my sin, past, present and future—he died, and he died once. And if tomorrow, as a believer, I fall, I confess my sin to the Lord and he forgives me of course. Does Christ have to die again?

‘No,’ you say, ‘he only needed to die once. That covered the whole of my debt to God’s law.’

Yes, and now that he lives, he lives in ‘the power of an indestructible life’ (Heb 7:16). So reckon yourself to be dead to sin and alive to God. Therefore present your members, not to sin, but present your members alive to God, for God, by his grace, to use and empower you.

The practical importance of the legal side of holiness

You say, ‘Mr Preacher, we are disappointed in you tonight. We thought you were going to give us some practical advice on how to live a holy life, and all you’ve done is to tell us about legal things. We were hoping to hear about practical things.’

Well, come to the next session then, and there will be a cure for that. But why bother about the legal side? Actually, it is exceedingly important, and I close with one analogy, if you’ll allow me.

I remember when I was a boy, my father used to tell me the way the army used to recruit soldiers. Now, this is going back into the times of Queen Victoria in the 1800s. I come from Suffolk, and in those days, the sergeant major or the recruiting sergeant would visit the pubs in our town, where you would see a lot of Suffolk people—country yokels we used to call them. They had a lot of brawn; they did not have excessive brain. And the recruiting sergeant used to come round the pubs, and he’d buy the men drinks of course, and when they were a little bit confused, he would offer them a shilling. And they thought he was a very nice chap,

and they took the shilling, not really realizing that they had taken 'the Queen's shilling' and thereby had enlisted in the army. Now, if they tried to get out of the army, they were breaking their contract and would be prosecuted in the courts and put in prison.

So here they were, bound by the Queen's shilling and in the army. And in those days the army was pretty tough. They had them on the ground marching, with the sergeant major bellowing in their ears and beating them for the slightest provocation, until they were more afraid of the sergeant major than they were of the Germans or any other enemy. They had a pretty tough time.

Well suppose this particular soldier had taken the Queen's shilling, and he was in the army and couldn't get out, and didn't have the money necessary to pay to get out. But his lovely Great Aunt Matilda came from Canada, and she said, 'Where is Willy?'

'Oh, he's in the army.'

'How did he get in?'

'Well he took the Queen's shilling and didn't know what he was doing, poor chap, and now he's in the army and having a rough time.'

And coming from Canada, of course his aunt was very wealthy and went along to the army and said, 'Now look here, you've got my Willy here, and I'm going to pay to get him out.'

All right, she could do that. It would cost her a pretty sum of money, but Aunt Matilda bought him out of the army.

'There,' she said, 'Willy, you're free, my boy.'

He said, 'Thank you, Auntie, I could kiss you.'

So for a while he was enjoying his freedom. He was free of the army and Auntie went off back to Canada. And Willy was walking down the street one day and turned a corner and there was the sergeant major. The sergeant major said, 'What are you doing here? Get back to the army, do!'

And Willy was flabbergasted. He'd been so trained, and the pattern set up in his brain, that when the sergeant major shouted, you did what he said. And the sergeant major was threatening him with I don't know what, and back to the army he went!

Psychology is a funny thing, isn't it? The patterns and habits we form are strong things. And sometimes the habits are so strong that you fear you'll never break them; and the sense of guilt only reinforces the chain of the habit.

Well I have to tell you the end of the story. Aunt Matilda came back again, and she found Willy performing military drills. She went up to Willy and said, 'What are you doing here, Willy?'

And he said, 'The sergeant major said I'd got to come back.'

'Nonsense!' she said. 'I bought you out. I paid the price. You are free! You don't have to listen to the sergeant major anymore.'

And Willy can scarce believe it, but he is legally free and, being legally free, it broke the power of the habit of always giving in to the demands of the sergeant major.

Oh, the wonderful freedom the believer has. This is absolutely basic. On another occasion, we shall look to the practical side of it, but this is the legal side of holiness. You have been bought out from sin. My dear fellow Christian, you have been bought out, and Christ has paid

for all of your shortcomings. It is realistic. You *can* begin to live a holy life. And when Satan bullies you and says 'You'll never break the habit, and now you've failed again, and you're no good', well then remember what your baptism signified. Remember that Christ has paid the price. You are legally free. The law is satisfied, and you can get up and (excuse the crudeness of the term) have another go, and start again with Christ and confess your sin. And he is faithful and just to forgive you your sin, and will remain with you and lead you in the powers of righteousness for his name's sake, and never desert you until, under his good training, he has prepared you for the heaven that is above. This is the legal side of our sanctification.

In our next session we shall deal with the practical, positive side of our sanctification.

Why is Holiness Practical?

The Freedom of Holiness

We have begun to explore the provision God has made to make those who believe in Christ, holy. It is the glorious fact that God is not only interested to forgive our sin, so that we may escape the penalty of God's wrath against our sin. Thank God he has made that magnificent provision for us in the death of his dear Son. He loved us 'while we were still sinners' (Rom 5:8). God says, 'while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son' (v. 10). And holy Scripture says those who put their trust in Christ can be absolutely sure that they shall be saved from the coming wrath of God through him (see v. 9). That is the place where we all have to start. There is no possibility of becoming holy until we have become right with God. So if we have not trusted the Saviour and have no peace with God in our heart, the first question that we ought to address is how can I be reconciled to God? How can I be sure my sin has been forgiven? How can I be sure that I shall never come into the coming wrath? But for those who have trusted Christ, then God has made provision to make them holy.

God's desire for our holiness

The forgiveness of sins that we get from Christ is not a ticket that says we can now go on sinning and do as we please, and it doesn't matter because Christ has died for us. God has a magnificent salvation, and God's longing is that he shall not only forgive our sins but make us holy. And we shall not finish this present study before we are reminded that God's goal for those he redeems is nothing short of this. He is going to conform us to the image of his dear Son, and one day take us that we might be glorified with Christ, and that we may reign with Christ over a creation that God will eventually restore to its redeemed glory.

God is ambitious. We may think ourselves as worms in the dust, and so in one sense we are, but God's ambition for us is not only to forgive us but to glorify us and conform us to the image of his dear Son.

Freedom from the dominion of three great tyrants

So we began to explore in our last study the provision that God has made for making believers in Christ holy. What we noticed at once was the realism of God's provision. He does not forget we are sinners. He does not overlook the fact that we who have trusted Christ are not practically perfect overnight. We shall not be perfect, completely, even if we should live to be one hundred and five. God is aware of our weakness and failing. He nonetheless sets about

making us holy, and Romans 6 will tell us that by God's provision we can be freed from three tyrannical despotisms.

The dominion of sin

The first is the dominion of sin that will otherwise keep people enslaved in its grasp and in despair that they would never overcome it.

The dominion of the law

Secondly is the dominion of the law. When some people wake up to the fact that they are sinners and they have some undesirable habits in themselves and are not what they should be, they think the answer to that is to try and keep God's law. It is a very noble motive, but they find by experience that, instead of making things better, the law makes things worse because, being holy and its standards being perfection, the law always criticizes us when we try to keep it. Even as believers in Christ, when we try to keep the law by our own strength, we find it always criticizes us.

The law is exceedingly critical. If you don't keep it one hundred percent, it curses you. Isn't it frustrating when you have tried to keep it the best you know how, and yet you find you keep coming short of it? And that is why God doesn't simply come along with cheap exhortations, such as, 'Try and be good.' God's programme for making us holy realizes the trouble. So not only is there provision to release us from the dominion and domination of sin but (somewhat startlingly you may think) we find in holy Scripture God's provision for releasing us from the dominion of the law.

The dominion of death

Then finally we shall read how God's provision for making us holy will release us from the dominion of death itself. What a marvellous God he is and how exciting his programme. You may not believe what I'm now going to say, but if you could see that Christian woman sitting beside you, not as she is now (good enough by ordinary standards of course) but as she shall be when God is finished with her and has conformed her to the image of his Son, you would be tempted to fall at her feet and worship her. The Bible tells us that when John the apostle was given to see an angel in his vision, he was so overwhelmed with the glory of this exalted being that he fell at the angel's feet and started to worship the angel. And the angel had to pull him up by his hair and say, 'No, no, John, you don't do that kind of thing. I'm only an angel, a fellow servant of yours' (see Rev 19:9-10). The Lord Jesus is of course above angels. And oh, this is the exciting news! One day God is not only going to bring believers home to the Father's house, he will have them conformed to the image of his Son! I repeat: this is not an empty promise. This is realism.

Freedom from the dominion of sin

In our last study we found it explicitly stated in Romans 6 that God delivers us from the domination of sin. You might like to look at a Bible and read with me where God says, 'For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace' (v. 14). And we thought about the connection of thought between the two parts of that sentence. How is it that sin shall not have dominion over us, *because* we are not under law? The answer is that it

is addressing believers who are trying now to please the Lord and being educated by him that we might partake of his holiness, but God is realist enough to know that we shall not be perfect overnight; in many things we shall come short. If we were still under the law and the threat of its penalty when we offended, the law would say, 'Finished.'

You say, 'Now, I'm going to improve.'

'Well,' says the law, 'do it if you can, but you've already done enough to deserve the penalty of the law.'

It's no good saying, 'I did make a mess of it in the past, but now I promise I'm going to be all right in the future.'

If I get in debt to the bank for one million dollars, and I say, 'Well I have been a bit stupid, but I promise after this to pay you on the dot, every cent and every dollar' the bank manager will look me in the face and say, 'That is a very good resolution of yours, but what about the one million dollars you already owe?'

That is how it is with sin. If as believers we were still under the law when we fell short, the law would condemn us to eternal perdition. Promising to be better in the future would be useless. And it will still be true of us no matter how many years we live. 'All have sinned in the past and still do come short of the glory of God' (see Rom 3:23). If we were still under law, then our struggle to be holy would be frustrated at every turn, and sin would keep us down for we would deserve the penalty of sin, which is exclusion from God forever.

Oh, thank God for deliverance from the power of sin to keep us down! When they make mistakes and fall and do something unworthy, yes, believers confess their sins. It is no good denying we have sinned, but, 'If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness' (1 John 1:9); and he can do it justly because he has already paid the penalty of our sins, including the particular sin for which we are asking forgiveness.

Incidentally, that does not mean that when believers sin it doesn't matter, or that it makes no difference, for in Romans 6:15-23, Paul reminds us believers of a very important principle. There is no condemnation to those that are in Christ. You can be eternally sure of your salvation. You will never come into condemnation, as the Lord Jesus said (see John 5:24). Therefore believers will not suffer the penalty of God's law, but they can suffer its consequences.

There is a difference between the *penalty* of sin and the *consequences* of sin. When as believers we sin, there can be consequences. If as a believer I don't listen to the word of God, and I let myself become drunk and get involved in a brawl and fall out of the window of an upper floor of wherever I am in a hotel and smash my leg up so it has to be amputated, then of course I can ask for God's forgiveness, and he will give it. Will he put my leg back the next day? That is a consequence, isn't it?

Here is Farmer Giles, and he has made a commitment to a buyer to grow wheat in his field. And this farmer is a believer, so he says to the Lord, 'Lord, I am going to keep my commitment to this man.' Then he discovers that the price of barley is better than the price of wheat, so he sows barley. Presently, the barley comes up and he looks at it and says, 'That is beautiful barley.' But then he remembers that he had made this commitment and told the Lord that he was going to sow wheat. So now he gets a very bad conscience, and he goes to the

Lord and confesses his sin and his disobedience. And the Lord reminds him through his word: 'If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness' (1 John 1:9). So as he kneels on the ground there, the dear farmer thanks the Lord for forgiveness. But what about the barley? Do you think it would be good if the man said, 'Now, Lord, please, do a miracle and change this barley into wheat'? Would the Lord do it? I think not.

There are consequences of disobedience, as distinct from the penalty. And Paul uses it as a humble illustration when he says, 'I am speaking in human terms. Before you were believers, you yielded your members as instruments of sin, going your own way and doing your own desires. Now as believers, yield your members to God as instruments of righteousness. And bear this in mind: if you constantly yield your members to someone or something, it will form a habit and you will become the slave of that habit' (see vv. 13–19). There are consequences if, as believers, we disobey the Lord and keep on doing it. There is no penalty, but there are consequences.

So what are we to do? We are to present our bodies: our hands, feet and all about us, and our brains, as servants to God. If, as believers, we use our brains independently of the Lord, we shall come to grief. We shall make all kinds of intellectual mistakes and dishonour the Saviour. We are to present all of our members to God and make the habit of doing it. And there is a great virtue in godly habit—to keep the Lord's ordinances, to make a habit of reading his word and making a disciplined habit of prayer—thus is character built up by habit.

But that aside, now we come to consider the breaking of the dominion of the law.

Freedom from the dominion of the law

A new motivation

Let's read from Romans 7:1.

Or do you not know, brothers—for I am speaking to those who know the law—that the law is binding on a person only as long as he lives? (v. 1)

Now, he gives an example of that principle—the law of marriage.

For a married woman is bound by law to her husband while he lives, but if her husband dies she is released from the law of marriage. Accordingly, she will be called an adulteress if she lives with another man while her husband is alive. But if her husband dies, she is free from that law, and if she marries another man she is not an adulteress. (vv. 2–3)

That is used as an illustration, as one incident of the binding power of the law. Now then, verse 4 says,

Likewise, my brothers, you also have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead, in order that we may bear fruit for God.

This is deliverance from the dominion of the law, not now to do as we like, but to adopt a completely different, positive principle for making us holy. It is not that now we are, with our own resources, trying to keep the law in which we had failed. The death of Christ has paid the penalty of that failure and set us free from the law. What for? It is not to go our own way, but that we should (to carry on the metaphor) be joined to another, even to Jesus Christ who is risen from the dead.

What a lovely concept and reality that is. For a believer, holiness is based on a love affair with Christ. Instead of the law saying 'you shall do this', and we try to and fail, and it criticizes and condemns us, the basic principle of a believer's developing holiness is that we are joined to Christ, as husband is to wife, that Christ through us might bring forth fruit to God. It is marvellous, isn't it?

I am a backyard astronomer, and sometimes when I consider the heavens and the galaxies and their tremendous distances and their vast, incalculable numbers then I think 'God must be so big, how could he take notice of me?' And then I discover something about the bigness of God. Do you know he is so big that he will *even* take notice of me? If he were not so big, he might forget me amongst the ants and the worms but, being so big, he is able to take notice of me. And the marvellous thing is that God's own Son loves us individually and wants to embrace us. Here is Christ, taking us in charge, loving us and making something of us. That is the positive way to holiness. Listen to what Paul says happens.

For when we were in the flesh, the sinful passions, which were through the law, wrought in our members to bring forth fruit unto death. But now we have been discharged from the law, having died to that [which held us captive]; so that we serve in newness of the spirit, and not in oldness of the letter. (vv. 5-6 RV)

Now when we are joined to Christ, and he is setting about making something of us for God, the motivation is not arbitrary rule that we sometimes resent; it is the love of a veritable bridegroom. We sense he not only loved us and died for us, but he loves us now and is keen on perfecting us. It means now we serve God as Christians on a different principle. It is what is called in chapter 7 the 'newness of the spirit, and not in oldness of the letter'.

The new way of the spirit

We shall have to pause over that lest we misunderstand it. Words and expressions sometimes have a way of meaning something that people didn't think they meant.

What it does not mean

In English we have the idea of keeping the spirit of the law and not just its letter. Well, that is a very good principle, but I want to tell you now it is not what this verse is saying. This verse has nothing to do with that whatsoever. Some people think it is, and they say, 'Oh you know, all those commands of Christ, I don't carry them out myself, not literally. I just think of what the spirit of them is and so, sometimes, I don't carry them out at all. I think you can keep in the general spirit of Christ, and being good, so I don't have to attend to the commandments of the Lord.'

That is desperately wrong. When the Lord commands us, we as Christians are expected to do his commandments. 'If you love me,' he says, 'you will keep my commandments' (John 14:15). What does it mean then?

Let's first take an example of what I say is the wrong meaning. I notice you have speed limits on your road (though I'm not sure that every car I have observed this week has been keeping them, but that is by the way). The spirit, the reason behind the speed limit, is of course to save lives. Folks will disobey the speed limit and speed along the road, and they are in danger of killing people. So the speed limit is there to preserve lives. But here is an ambulance, or a private car maybe, and somebody has had a heart attack and is in danger of dying. You have got to get that man to the hospital as soon as you possibly can, and the road is clear. Shall you obey the speed limit and arrive at the hospital when the man is already dead? Or, should you break the speed limit and get the man to hospital so that he can be saved? You would break the speed limit, I suspect, and get him to the hospital. If you were criticized for breaking the law regarding the speed limit, you would say, 'But come, come, I kept the spirit of it, if not the letter. The spirit of the law said you were to save lives. This time to save a life, I had to disregard the actual letters and numbers on the sign that said, seventy kilometres an hour, or whatever it was, but I performed its *spirit* to save a life.'

It is a good argument, but that is not what this verse means. I am sorry to have spent so much time telling you what it does not mean, but unless you tell people what things do not mean, they carry on believing what they do not mean, instead of coming round to see what they do mean.

What it does mean

What does it mean then, that when we are joined to Christ we serve in newness of the spirit and not in the oldness of the letter? This is a reference to one of the fundamental doctrines of Christianity. It is the difference between the old covenant and the new covenant. The old covenant was the covenant that God made with the nation of Israel when they stood at the foot of Mount Sinai. God gave them the law, and the people promised, 'All that the Lord has commanded, we will do' (see Exod 19:8). That was the old covenant. Some centuries after Mount Sinai, the prophet Jeremiah in the name of God announced in his prophecy that one day God was going to make a new covenant, not according to that old covenant. And why not?

It was because that old covenant proved unsatisfactory.

Oh, really, why?

Because Israel couldn't keep it, that's why. So Jeremiah promised that God was going to make a new covenant. It was going to be on different terms (see Jer 31:31-34). Now, when our Lord called his disciples to the Upper Room on the night in which he was betrayed, he took bread, we remember. He gave it to the apostles and said, 'This is my body, which is given for you. All of you are to eat of this in remembrance of me.' Then he took a cup, a cup of wine, and as he handed that cup to the apostles he said, 'This cup is *the new covenant* in my blood, which is shed for you' (see Luke 22:17-20). This morning, here in this very place, Christians have done what the Lord Jesus asked them to do. They have met together. A plate with bread on it and a cup with wine in it have been central; and they have remembered the Lord, as he

told them to. As they have taken the cup, I suppose they will have remembered what he said about that cup: 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood.'

Someone will say, 'But what is the difference between the new covenant and the old covenant?'

If you are interested in that, you should read another letter that Paul the apostle wrote called the Second Letter to the Corinthians; and you should read chapter 3. I only have time to point out some of its major remarks.

The old covenant was given by God — written by the finger of God. It was written on tables of stone, and everybody could see it written clearly. There were the rules, so to speak, and people were supposed to keep them. The trouble with that was just this. Although the rules were clear and commanded you to do certain things, those rules on that bit of stone couldn't give you any power to do the things they commanded. That was the trouble. And, likewise, the things that it prohibited were very clear — chiselled onto the stone by the finger of God. Those prohibitions told you what not to do, but they couldn't give you any power to refrain from doing it. If God is going to be realist, and we are going to become holy and keep his commandments, then God will have to have some other system, not only informing us by rules chiselled in stone about what to do and what not to do, but supplying a new power. And that power is described in the new covenant.

Let me rehearse some of its terms. God says, according to this new covenant, 'I will write my laws on their hearts and in their minds will I inscribe them' (see Jer 31:33; Heb 8:10). That is the difference. In that lovely chapter that I have referred to, Paul uses these terms to describe what happened when he came to Corinth. Corinth was a wealthy city and far gone in sin and profligacy. Many of the people there who later became Christians had been involved in all kinds of perversions, but they had repented and trusted the Saviour. They had been cleansed; they had been washed; they had been justified (see 1 Cor 6:11). And now Paul is telling them in 2 Corinthians 3 what happened when he came to Corinth. He says, 'My ministry is different from that of Moses. Moses, directed by God, wrote the laws on the tables of stone. That's pretty easy if you've got a sharp enough chisel. But what I did was that I wrote God's laws on your hearts' (see v. 3). That is another story altogether, isn't it? Writing laws on people's hearts is a rather different operation from chiselling them onto a bit of stone. I don't know about your heart, but mine is so changeable with its ups and downs and ins and outs. Getting God's laws written on my heart takes nothing less than the power of the Holy Spirit, and Paul, in describing what happened when he came and preached the gospel there at Corinth, uses this lovely metaphor. He says, 'The living Lord Jesus took me as a pen; and the equivalent of the ink was the power of God's Holy Spirit. As I preached to you and you listened to God's word, and it convicted you of sin and you sought the Saviour and repented and believed, though you may not have known what was happening at the time, the risen Christ was writing the laws of God on your very heart by his Holy Spirit.'

That is another way of describing what the Bible calls being 'born of the Spirit' (see John 3:6). A new life is put there, a new life with its different principles and its new potentials. It is the very life of the Spirit of God.

That is a magnificent gospel. It doesn't any longer say, 'Do your best,' though we are to do our best. It is realist for the believer born of God's Spirit with a new life and new potentials

for holiness. It doesn't mean that God thereby turns us into automatic computers, and presses the right buttons, and we do what we've been told. We still have a free will, but what a believer finds, if he is walking with the Lord, is that he now has within him the Holy Spirit. And the Spirit desires against the wrong attitudes — what the Bible calls *the flesh* — and the flesh against the Spirit, so that we may not do the works of the flesh.

Excuse a crude analogy for an illustration. I once had a shower in my bathroom. It meant well, but it was one of those you had to twist various knobs. You twisted one knob and you got the cold water and you twisted another knob and out came the hot water, and you tried to get them balanced, and then, all of a sudden, as you stood there enjoying the warmth, the thing went freezing cold, and then you turned the knob and it nearly scalded the flesh off your bones! It was the hot striving against the cold, and the cold against the hot. I scrapped that, but that's another story.

To come back to serious things, God is a realist. Believers still have their infirmities and difficulties, but they do have God's Holy Spirit, and he strives against the flesh. And we have to be trained to side with the Holy Spirit and think the thoughts of the Holy Spirit and seek his gracious power to carry out the laws of God ('side with' is actually the phrase Paul uses in the next chapter). My brother, my sister, don't say it is impossible or impractical. When God made this universe, we read the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters (see Gen 1:2), and God gives the Holy Spirit of God to every believer. God grant us to be evermore aware of his presence. It doesn't turn us into robots, does it?

But believers come (or should come) to the Lord's Supper. Why do they come?

You say, 'To worship the Lord.'

Of course. How marvellous to remember him who died for us. And he commands it anyway. But as he hands us the cup he still says, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood'; promising to write his laws evermore deeply on our hearts. So we come to do business with the Lord, don't we? That is why we are told that when we come to the Lord's Supper, we must prepare ourselves and say, 'Lord, if there is any wicked way in me, show it to me,' and confess our sin. To come lightly to the Lord's Supper and take the bread and the cup that reminds us he died for us, that he bore our sins in his body, and all the while carrying on sinning without repenting and doing the things that murdered Christ? 'No, if you do that,' says the apostle, 'then God himself, in his faithfulness to you, will discipline you as a father disciplines a wayward child, in order to bring you to repentance and agree with God that sin is sin' (see 1 Cor 11:29–32). But if coming with chastened hearts and repentance and knowing the Lord's forgiveness we take the cup of that new covenant, then listen to its final terms, 'and their sins and iniquities I will remember no more' (see Jer 31:34; Heb 8:12).

Oh, hallelujah! And thank God for the regular meeting with the risen Lord, to receive from him the cup: the new covenant in his blood, and to know he persists in his writing his laws on our hearts. As we confess our sins, he reminds us that, legally speaking, our sins and iniquities he will remember no more. And if you can't help it, keep shouting 'hallelujah' (in your hearts at the moment, so as not to disturb anybody), and tell the Lord how marvellous he is and how wonderful his salvation is and how wonderful his provision of the Lord's Supper is, that we might come regularly and in business-like fashion to have dealings with him, as we take and eat the bread and take and drink from the cup.

The breaking of the dominion of the law then is by a different spirit, a different principle, of leading a holy life.

The goal of holiness

What is the goal of holiness? I pick out a verse from chapter 8.

For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, 'Abba! Father!' The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him. (vv. 14–17)

The goal of holiness is the development of our character so that we, being children of God through faith in the Lord Jesus, learn to grow up and develop as grown-up sons and daughters of the living God.

Of course, a baby boy is a son, legally speaking. But a baby boy, while he looks like his father (or some people say he looks more like his mother) looks very funny indeed, with a wrinkled nose and things when he's first born. But, whoever he is like, growing up and developing the character is another thing. And I repeat: all of us who have trusted Christ are children of God. The Holy Spirit's intention is to have us grow up and mature and grow into responsible sons and daughters of the living God, so that in character and behaviour, we rightly represent and resemble God our Father. That is his work and we have not received 'the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear,' Paul says. We have received the Spirit of God, whereby we cry, 'Abba, Father'.

When I was a little boy and we lived in a country place, I would go out to play, but I'd forgotten something in the house. I'd run in the house and all over the carpet with mud on my feet, and my father thought that was not fair to Mother and others who were supposed to keep these floors clean, so I was duly admonished (in a way that parents know how) to observe the rule. It was a nuisance to have to stop and obey the rule when you were intent on something and having a good game. Do you know what? Now that I have grown up, I don't normally run in from the garden with mud on my boots and get it all over the carpet.

You say, 'You don't?'

No.

'Why not? Are you afraid you'll get the cane or something?'

No, I've just grown up, and now I can see my father and mother's set of values. And, do you know, I want to keep them.

Growing up is the thing, becoming evermore like our Father. The goal is one day that we shall be conformed to God's own Son and be completely like him. And this will be the finishing stage:

Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. (1 John 3:2)

We are not left to ourselves. As we go along the pathway, we know what the goal is. Those God has predestined to be like his Son he has called. He has justified them. He is in the process of sanctifying them. He will one day glorify them (see Rom 8:29–30).

Suppose I were to ask you: how long have you been a believer? Two years?

'No,' you say, 'fifty.'

Well then I take it you are well on the way to becoming like the Son of God. What would you say would be the next step you would need to take in life to develop the next bit? Would you profit from being put through a big test to mature and purify your faith, or would you profit from a time of comparative ease and sunshine after the storms of life? Do you know which it should be? What do you think is the best thing to ask for? Well, ask away, for the Lord hears your prayers and knows how to interpret them; but thank God it is not left to us. The Holy Spirit intercedes for us, according to God, for he knows what the mind of God is. And he who searches our hearts deeply and knows the mind of God and God's purpose for us, intercedes for us with the Father and plots and guides the pathway of our development—be it rain or sun, storm or calm, as is necessary on the next step to bring us home to God (see 8:26–27). God thinks of everything, doesn't he?

You say, 'What is the purpose of it all in the end? Is it to be conformed to the image of his Son?'

Yes, but there is another side to it. Paul says the creation around us groans and travails in sorrow even until now. It has been made subject to frustration—just going round in circles and apparently getting nowhere, with groanings and diseases and what have you. It shall not always be like that. One day, creation itself is going to be delivered from its bondage to corruption and be delivered and put into the glory of the children of God (see vv. 20–22).

You say, 'If that is the purpose, why doesn't God hurry up and start? What is he waiting for?'

He's waiting for you, my brother, my sister, and waiting for me. He is waiting for enough believers.

You say, 'What for?'

Well when God transforms nature and there comes the new nature, delivered from her bondage, he will still need people to run it. The present universe is run by angels you know, though we don't see them, but,

it was not to angels that God subjected the world to come, of which we are speaking. It has been testified somewhere, 'What is man . . .?' (Heb 2:5–6)

The age to come is going to be ruled by our glorified Lord, and all the choirs of earth and heaven and beyond shall sing his worthiness to receive the honour, the power and the riches in the economy, and run it as it should be run. The exciting news is this, that when the Lord Jesus reigns, those who have trusted him and received him and been trained and eventually perfected by the work of his Holy Spirit, are going to be glorified with Christ and reign with him.

Can you imagine it? Well I find it difficult, but I try sometimes, because sometimes I get a bit down in my spiritual progress. I get a bit frustrated and feel, 'Shall I ever be what I should be?' Then I remember what these chapters say: that one day every believer is going to be like

the Lord Jesus and reign with him when he reigns. And creation is waiting for that revelation of the children of God (see Rom 8:19), and we live in hope.

It is real, you know. I trust that when I get home at last and see the Lord, I don't have to look back upon my Christian life and say to myself, 'Oh, my good man, what time you did waste, what energies you did use on worthless things. Why didn't you take God, his salvation and his training in holiness more seriously than you did?'⁵

⁵ For more on this section of Romans and the dominion of death, see David Gooding's series *God's Power for Salvation*. <https://www.myrtlefieldhouse.com/en/resource/1579/gods-power-for-salvation>.

Is it Worth All the Trouble?

The Problem of Pain

For our final study, I wish to discuss with you the problem of pain. When I so describe it, I mean it somewhat strictly. There is a related problem, and that is the problem of evil, which generally refers to man's abominable cruelty to man. It asks why, if there is a God of justice, he allows so many hundreds and thousands and sometimes millions of people to suffer at the hands of their fellow men, and in particular at the hands of ruthless dictators. We shall not have time to consider that aspect of the problem at any great length this evening. The problem of pain is somewhat different. As generally phrased, it runs like this: if there is a God who is all powerful and, at the same time, all loving; so that, being powerful, he can do exactly what he wishes to do, and being all loving would never do anything contrary to love, then why do so many people suffer such bad things? In my experience, this is a question that crops up in the minds of those who are not yet Christians. Some of course use it merely as an excuse for not repenting when they know they ought to. Some, and particularly those in Eastern Europe who have been brought up in atheism, when challenged to believe in God will reply in this fashion: 'But how can I believe that there is a God who is all powerful and all loving, as you say, and yet allows so many people to suffer such bad things?'

It is a problem that comes home to the hearts of many Christians as well, and not only to recently converted Christians, but those whose lives and families are distraught by severe suffering. They ask: 'Why me? Can God really be loving me?' This then is the problem of pain.

Addressing the problem

I say at once that I have no slick answers to the problem of pain. What I shall do is to try and put forward some grounds of hope. I certainly do not have final answers to all the many problems that pain raises. In the second place, I am aware that when it comes to the problems of pain, two kinds of answers are necessary. There is, of course, what you might call the intellectual problem that pain raises, such as I have enunciated. If there is a God, and he is loving and powerful, why does he allow pain? This is a doctrinal, theological and intellectual problem; but when people are suffering and in the middle of pain, intellectual and theoretical answers tend to be not too helpful. They need something to comfort their hearts, to nerve their courage, to make them feel that somebody cares and that the suffering is not merely destructive.

I had a colleague at one stage whose daughter of about seven or eight years old was diagnosed as having some problem with her spine such that if it were not treated, the surgeons

said she would develop very serious curvature of the spine in later life. They advised an operation but warned the parents it would be very painful for the child for some months. The child was not in any particular pain to start with, but the parents decided to have the operation done. You can imagine the problem when the child, after the operation, began to feel the pain for many months. It would not be intellectual answers so much that could help her, though Mum and Dad would do their best to explain why the operation had to be done. What would be more necessary is the sense in the child's heart that Mum and Dad had not betrayed her and had allowed it for her good, and through the experience she could still trust her mother and father.

So it is with the problem of pain with us adults. We need answers of both kinds. We need intellectual answers that can satisfy our minds, and we need other answers that will fortify our hearts. So let us face the problem now and see what we can find. The problem, once again, is this: if there is a God who is all powerful and all loving, why do so many people suffer such bad things?

The atheist alternative

I say to my atheist friends, 'All right, we'll get rid of the problem, shall we?' You can do that by rejecting the whole idea that there is a God. Become an atheist; refuse to believe there is a God. Then you don't have any problem, do you? Because if there is no God, the only way to account for things that I know of on the market, is to hold to atheistic evolution. And since evolution is a blind process without any purpose in its head, and is dependent largely on chance permutations, what else would you expect but a huge amount of pain and suffering? If that is the correct account of how the world has come to be and how we have come to be in it, what else would you expect? So now get rid of God and you have no problem.

Well, but you do have a problem. I once had a colleague, and we lived near each other, and of a morning we would walk together to work. Very often we would walk through the park, and at springtime with the shrubs coming out so beautifully and wonderfully, my friend would start baring his heart, so to speak. He was an atheist, and he often used to pull my Christian leg (pretty unmercifully) for my beliefs; but this morning he said, 'David, you know, I do sometimes have a problem. You needn't talk to me about a mother's love. I can produce that in the science faculty by injections and one kind of a thing or another; but look at this tremendous beauty of creation around us. How does nature manage to put on such a wonderful show every year?'

I said, 'My boy, I don't know how it manages to do it on your presuppositions. How would you account for the good things if there is no designer?'

Oh, yes, we complain when our stomach goes out of function, but sometimes we forget the marvellous contraption that is the human body. And to suppose it could have happened by chance borders on an absurdity. But, anyway, let's cede the point. You get rid of the problem by denying there is a God. Now what would you expect but a lot of suffering? And that is my point. You solve the problem by getting rid of belief in God, but you don't get rid of the pain that way. You still have the pain, and now you have made the pain ten thousand times worse. How is that? Well I cannot speak for you. I have had my little share of pain in life (more than some and a lot less than others), but when I face pain, one of the great fortifiers

to be able to bear it is *hope*; and not merely hope that one day a cure might be found, but hope that pain is not ultimately meaningless, that it is not simply destructive and that there is some ultimate good to come out of it. And if indeed there is a God, then here we do have abundant cause for hope that he will do what the Bible says he does for all who trust the Saviour. In one of his letters, Paul says our 'light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison' (2 Cor 4:17). If there is a God, then there is hope even in our suffering.

Not all pain is bad

Let's think together for a moment. As we face pain, what grounds of hope are there? I look first at ourselves. Forgetting the Bible and (just for the moment) God, let's look at our own attitudes.

Benefits to body and character

We don't regard all pain as bad, do we? If you are cutting the bacon with a very sharp knife and accidentally cut your finger, you are glad of the pain because the pain alerts you to the fact that you have cut your finger, and you automatically withdraw it. If you had no pain, you'd carry on cutting your finger and mixing it with whatever you were making. That wouldn't be good. People with leprosy, for instance, because they can't feel pain, will go on doing something with their hands and not notice that their very fingers are falling to bits. Pain is good, isn't it? And the gentleman who suddenly finds bad pains in the chest doesn't like them, but he is glad for the warning that he might have trouble with his heart. Better that than dropping dead without any warning. So some pain can be good, but of course pain can get out of hand.

Then there is another thing. I wonder if you have noticed the marvellous effect that pain has on people. Take the nurses or the doctors who devote their lives to helping people in hospital and the responsibility and the experience, the noble character it will produce in them. We admire them for it far more than we admire the layabout, self-indulgent, bright young thing who is going to have pleasure and not help anybody in pain.

Pain in human achievement

You will scarce believe it, but some people I know are prepared to endure an extraordinary amount of a pain just to kick a football. We have them in our country playing rugby, you know. Fifteen of them come out of the scrum, and they come off the field hobbling and with black eyes and twisted noses and wrung ankles, and all the rest of it. No one makes them do it; that's the extraordinary thing. You say, 'Why on earth do such idiots do that?' Well they're not idiots, some of them are getting millions of pounds, but that's another thing. They are doing it for the fun of the game! Isn't that interesting? If the game is interesting and worthwhile doing and enjoyable, we think the pain is worthwhile. We admire the intrepid explorer who goes across the Atlantic, more than we do the person who sits at home by the fire who never went out of his back garden.

Danger in developing earth's forces

Let's come to more serious things. The development of earth's natural forces has been a marvellous story, hasn't it? Wonderfully exciting were the days when man discovered how to make a boat with sails that could float on the waters and defy the wave and the wind, and in fact use the wave and the wind to get him to his desired haven. You will remember, of course, that it has cost thousands of lives in the course of history. Would you say man ought never to have invented boats and sails?

Take electricity. It took mankind a long while to discover it. Are you grateful for it? Do you light your home by electricity, by any chance? You've never thought of banning the stuff as bad and wicked, have you? You do know, don't you, that the discovery and the development of it has cost thousands of lives?

You say, 'But yes, the benefits have outweighed the costs.'

What about aeroplanes? What marvellous benefits they have conferred upon us, and on the mission field particularly, getting people who otherwise would die excruciating deaths to the hospitals and saving their lives. We are, however, aware of the thousands of deaths and injuries involved in discovering aeroplanes. Do we count it worthwhile? I think we do. That is just us. For the moment, I am not now talking about God.

Then, when we do come round to thinking about God and the way he made this universe, and our world in particular, the book of Genesis says that when God made it all, he looked at it and said it was 'very good' (1:31). I'm not sure myself it means it was very safe. Did God make electricity?

'Well of course he did,' you say.

Is electricity safe? If you use it properly, it is safe and very beneficial. If you make a mistake with it, it will slaughter you as soon as it will do anything else.

Take laser beams. They can destroy human tissue, can't they? It is precisely their ability to destroy human tissue that makes them such marvellous means of correcting faults in your eyes. You cannot have fire that does not burn, nor laser beams that do not scorch.

And what about aeroplanes? You are sitting in your comfortable seat and something goes wrong with all four engines and the plane crashes because of the power of gravity. What would you have God do, put gravity out of effect for those few moments? Well if he did, the world would be in a funny condition. We need gravity to keep our atmosphere on earth. If God switched off gravity, so to speak, the whole lot of us would die because we would lose our atmosphere. You can't have it both ways, can you?

The cost of God's project

So, as I ponder those kinds of things, I say to myself, 'Well we men and women, left to ourselves, think that if the project is valuable enough and confers enough benefits, we are prepared for the cost in terms of pain and even death.' And when I think like that, then I begin to remember, according to the Bible, what project God had in mind when he created our world. And I ask myself, was the project big enough and worthwhile enough so that, left to myself, as I benefit from this divine project, I would myself be prepared to say, yes, thank God for it? In spite of all the pains that life's experience can throw at me, would I say, 'Praise God for his project; it has been worth all the trouble'?

God's project, its cost and its benefits

What then is that project? Why did God create our world and us in it? According to Paul's Letter to the Ephesians in the New Testament, the project is described like this.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace. (1:3–6)

And you notice the central project. What God had in mind was to produce what the Bible calls here 'sons of God'. When the Scriptures say that he chose this and decided it before the foundation of the world, it is not merely saying he chose this a long time ago. It was a long time ago of course, but this is a logical priority.

Creatures and children of God

Sir, one of these days you will find your wife, I won't use the verb *nagging*, because wives don't nag but, you know, sometimes they can be insistent! And it is gently suggested, and then the pressure is put on, that you do really need a new oven in the kitchen—one of these super-duper ovens that goes whizz-bang and shows up lights and hums and all that kind of thing. And at last, in the interests of international peace, the oven is installed. Then one day you go out into the kitchen and you will see your darling wife, and she is surrounded by flour up to her eyebrows and currants and orange peel and all sorts of funny things. And you say, 'What are you doing that for, my dear?'

And she says, 'You've forgotten, haven't you? Your lovely, charming daughter comes of age next month.'

'What's that got to do with it?' you say.

'Well I've got to make a cake suitable for the occasion. It has got to be a super-duper cake, candles and all!'

And then the penny drops, 'Oh, I see why you wanted to buy a new oven.'

Yes, the dear lady, for ladies are very thoughtful, first of all thought of the daughter's coming of age party and, having thought of that as the objective, she worked backwards: 'What shall I need? Well I want a cake. What shall I need if I'm going to have a cake? Oh, I need a new oven.' She is working backwards from the goal she is aiming at.

It was God's eternal desire to have sons of God and, if speaking humanly I may talk about God's *planning*, when God decided he wanted sons then the question arose, how could they be achieved? That meant, among other things, starting with creatures who could then become sons. But if you are going to start with creatures, you will have to have a world to put them on. So you will have to create a world then. Even before the foundation of the world the purpose of having a world at all was that God might eventually have sons.

We had better stop and ask what it means to be a child and a son of God. Here we shall have to be careful in our thinking, because popular religion will say, 'Now we are all children of God, aren't we? Every human being on earth—we are all children of God.'

We know what they mean. They mean that God treats all his creatures in a fatherly fashion. But in the terminology of the New Testament, let it not shock you when I say that not all human beings are *children* of God. All human beings are *creatures* of God, and he loves them, but not all human beings are children of God. That can be readily seen if you allow the New Testament to tell you how people become children of God. For instance, the first chapter of the Gospel of John puts it like this. Our Lord Jesus, the Creator himself, became flesh. He was in the world, and the world was made by him. Unfortunately, the world knew him not; it did not recognize its Creator. He came to his own things (that is, to his own creation) and to his own people, the Jews. They did not receive him. That is, the majority did not receive him. Now listen to what it says next: 'to as many as received him, to them he gave authority to *become* children of God' (see 1:10–12).

Now comes a little bit of logic. You cannot become what you already are. I cannot become a human being: I have been one for the last seventy-five years. You can only become something that you are not already. Did you hear what the verse said? 'To as many as received him, to them he gave authority to *become* children of God, even to them who believe on his name'. Then what is the difference between a creature of God and a child of God?

Let's examine the difference at the ordinary human level. Here is an absolute expert in computers—dotcoms and all the other business—and he has made a computer. It is an absolute wizard of a thing, a semi-robot, and he is very proud of his creation. He can press the switch, and off it goes here. He can bombard it with laser beams and I don't know what, and it comes back here. It's marvellous, and he has made it. You'd almost think the thing was intelligent, though it isn't. Then this expert computer engineer gets married and presently with his wife produces a child. Tell me, what is the difference between the computer and the child? Is the child just a super-duper computer? No, there is a very big difference, isn't there? The engineer made the computer. He didn't, in that sense, make the child. The child has the engineer's very own life; the computer doesn't. That child, because it has the life his father the engineer, will grow up and, we hope, love the father. The computer never will. There is a whole category of difference between the computer that the engineer made and the child which he begat.

All men and women are creatures of God, because he made them. Not all human beings are yet children of God because, to be a child of God, according to holy Scripture, you have to be begotten by God and receive the very life of God. 'To as many as received him, he gave authority to become children of God, even to those that believe on his name who were born, who were begotten, not of the will of man nor the will of flesh, but begotten of God' (see 1:12–13). That is the marvel of salvation. We begin life as creatures of God, and God makes it possible (for that was his design and purpose all the way along the line) for us as his creatures in the course of human life to rise in the universe to that enormous height of becoming children of God, born of God, begotten by him, and possessing the very life of God.

The personal choice involved

At this point it is worth pausing a moment to ponder this big distinction, and for each of us to ask ourselves, 'Have I become a child of God?' You see there is also this difference. We didn't have any choice as to whether we were brought into the world as creatures of God, did we? I

don't know about you, but nobody asked me whether I wanted to be born, because God can make creatures without their consent and does so regularly. He is God. Why shouldn't he do what he pleases? I say it humbly before God: God cannot make sons of God, children of God, without their consent. Listen to the terms: 'as many as *received* him'. There lies the crux. I repeat, God made us as creatures without asking our permission or consent. We find ourselves here. We find we have a moral sense that God has put in us. But now, if ever God is going to achieve the desire of his heart and we are to become children of God, then it will ultimately depend on whether we are prepared, voluntarily, to receive Jesus Christ as Saviour. At which point, if we do, God fathers within us his own very life, and we have eternal life; we are born from above as children of God. But if we use our free will not to receive the Saviour and remain as creatures, that brings us to the other observation.

You see, this world was never intended as anything more than a temporary stage. The laws of thermodynamics tell us that the universe is running down anyway. This was never meant to be permanent. This was the temporary stage in the fulfilment of God's gracious eternal purpose, a world where he could put creatures on, far enough away from him so that they are not overwhelmed by the glory of his majesty and reduced to snivelling little worms, but a world where they might discover God, where they might learn something of his moral character and what he is like, and then be free to accept or reject God's offer. Those who receive it not only receive eternal life already in this world and come to know their Father and, by God's love, grow in grace and in the knowledge of the Lord Jesus, but when this fleeting world is done, there will be the eternity that God designed for those who have become his children. And what if people will not receive the Saviour, and thus thwart God's intention? Well, the world was only temporary anyway, and our lifespan on earth is temporary, and when it finishes, what then? To miss the purpose, to go against God's objective, to live independently of the Saviour and to pass from this temporary world into the eternal is not to cease to exist but to enter an existence that the Bible calls 'the second death' (Rev 21:8). It is to find God turn his back on you and know an existence of frustration and eternal anguish.

In a sense it is good that we discover that this world is but temporary. This is not a paradise, not now anyway. There are lovely things in it, evidence of God's handiwork, but we are a fallen human race. Ultimately, it is loving of our Father to remind us this is a temporary world and to point us to the great eternity, so that we will enquire what the purpose of life is and come running to the Saviour to be born of God's Spirit and have eternal life. That was the plan. It involved man's free will, as it must. You cannot have morality without free will. If a person is made to work like a machine, you cannot hold them guilty for whatever they do, because they have no real choice. And to have us as moral creatures was important so that we might come to understand the character of God: his holiness, his righteousness, his love and his grace. And if our love for God was to be real, it could never satisfy to make us like machines. If you are clever enough to make a robot so sophisticated that when you come home at night and you sit down on your chair, it comes and puts its arms round your neck and, in its grotesque voice says, 'I do love you,' what would you do? You'd kick it in the shins and say, 'Don't be so daft. You're just programmed to do that.' Love, to be love, has to be free. God does not force anybody to love him.

Forgive my saying it, but you don't have to go to heaven.

You say, 'What do you mean?'

Well, God gives you the choice. It is awesome beyond description that God gives us the choice to say 'No' to him if we please. Oh, don't say 'No', for God is the sum total of all good and apart from him there is no good, and to say 'No' to God would spell everlasting disaster.

Somebody will say, 'Did God know when he created the world and us in it, and gave human creatures free will, that men would abuse it, that the scheme could go wrong and result in endless pain?'

Yes, of course he knew it.

'He went on with the scheme? What kind of a God is he? He had this elaborate scheme to have what you call sons and knew the effecting of it would cause a lot of damage, if people rejected it, and he went ahead with the scheme anyway? What kind of a God is he?'

Well I can tell you. I can tell you what kind of a God he is, because of what he has done. If creatures turned against their creator and disobeyed him and went their own way, if they got deceived by the devil and engaged in sin and perversion, was there a safety net? Oh, wonderful story; yes, there was a safety net. The God who foresaw what would happen determined, even before our world was built, to provide what is called the Lamb of God to be the safety net, to be the rescue for disobedient and fallen and rebellious men and women. That is the gospel that Christ preaches. He came to seek and to save that which is lost. And when man's rebellion and sin threatened him with destruction according to the law of God, just listen to the story! God had a safety net and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins, to make a way back to God that we might be forgiven! Which brings me to my final point.

The suffering of God

Why pain? There are many problems I have not even discussed, as you see. There will be many questions that occur to you. We could spend many hours discussing them. But I come to this. When I survey the cross of Christ and perceive who it is that, for my sake, hung on it, then there is a marvellous thing. Why pain? In order to achieve these eternal glories for us, God himself, in the person of Christ, has suffered for us more than any one of us, and more than all of us put together; and God knows what pain feels like. He was prepared, in the person of his Son, to suffer so that wilful and disobedient creatures might be redeemed and brought to the glory that God had designed.

So you will find that when pain assaults them, believers are trained by God's Holy Spirit to argue, 'He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?' (Rom 8:32). 'In all their affliction' says the Old Testament, 'he was afflicted' (Isa 63:9). Why do Christians suffer? There are all sorts of reasons, and it often raises questions beyond our solution, but God assures us that the suffering is not merely destructive; it is aimed at the purifying of our faith. 'If need be', Peter says, 'you are in heaviness because of suffering, that the proving of your faith, faith that is much more precious than gold, might be found to praise and honour and glory at the appearing of our Lord Jesus (see 1 Pet 1:6-7). The faith that is necessary in our knowledge of God is the faith that will be necessary to trust God for all eternity.

Some people think when they get home to heaven, faith will disappear and they will walk by sight. Fancy that. I don't think they really mean it altogether. We shall then see things that we do not see now and must take on faith now, but surely when we get home to heaven we shall not be at liberty to disbelieve what God says, shall we? I think not. And since he will always be almighty and bigger than anything that we can comprehend, we shall still trust him and believe him; and God is fashioning and purifying and strengthening our faith in the course of life.

Disproportionate suffering

One final question. One of the difficulties in facing pain is that it seems to be distributed disproportionately. Some people, some families of believers, seem to suffer an enormous amount, and others of us get off lightly. I have not time to answer that question, even if I could. I am interested to notice, however, that God had a whole book written on it. It is called the book of Job. But I use a humble analogy. In some walks of life, some people have to be tested more than others. Airline attendants are a charming bunch, and they have to be trained on all sorts of things that we, the passengers, never dream of. They need to know how to help us if the plane gets wrecked, and all those things. The airline pilots have a far more severe training; and every now and again they are tested too, aren't they?

I remember talking to a friend of mine who is an airline captain about the testing they have to go through in the simulators every so many months. He said, 'Some of the men who run those simulators are absolute bullies. When you get into the simulator, they will pile onto you all kinds of emergencies, one after the other, until it reduces strong men to tears. They can reproduce the sound of the engines going and the wings being damaged and violent storms. And if the captain does the wrong thing in the simulator, they can simulate the crash. And some pilots can't stick it.' Why do they test them so severely? Well because of the weight of responsibility that they must shoulder.

When we get home to glory, all shall be saved, but some will have bigger responsibilities than others.

You say, 'What will make the difference?'

Well it is not necessarily knowledge, good though knowledge is. 'If we suffer with him, we shall also reign with him' (see 2 Tim 2:12). And if we think of the responsibilities of an eternity serving Christ and reigning with Christ in the particular capacities he will give us, then perhaps the bigger the capacity, the bigger the responsibility, the bigger the test that he will allow us to go through now, and so we must trust him.

But even as I say these words, my mind goes back to my own assembly of a few years ago, when a good man would rise to his feet at the Lord's Supper to give thanks, or to talk to us. He could neither read nor write, but he knew the Lord. He had been a sterling witness for him in his time and now, in old age, was crippled with excruciating arthritis. He would hobble to his feet and would say, 'My brethren, it will be worth it all when we see Jesus.' That is true. He wasn't putting a brave face on it. Countless Christians would agree, even those who would have to arise from their graves to do so.

Becoming a Christian can involve you in more suffering than if you were not a Christian. It is still the case in some countries that when Muslims get converted to Christ and get

baptized, they can be rejected and sometimes executed by their erstwhile family and friends. Thousands of Christians have gone to the lions and have been tied to stakes, simply because they were Christians. Christ does not hide it from us. Become a believer, and he will ask you to take up your cross and follow him. You may find more suffering than you had before. Ask any Christian about it who has suffered thus for the Lord and they will reply, like my friend, 'Oh, but it is an honour to suffer for him, and it will be worth it all when we see Jesus.'

So may God use this humble meditation, first of all to help us explain the purpose of creation, this possibility to rise from becoming mere creatures of God to becoming children of God. And, if I may, I would ask you personally and sincerely, as your departing friend: Have you become a child of God? Have you personally received the Saviour?

And may God use our meditation to speak not only to our heads, but both to our heads and to our hearts, to comfort us in our sufferings that we might bear them, to the glory of God.

Thirdly, God grant us a compassion for the people around us. It is hard enough for those of us who know the shepherd before we suffer. It is hard enough then sometimes to endure life's sufferings. It is very hard for those who do not know the shepherd to pass through life's sufferings and wonder whether there is a God of love at all. God give us a heart of compassion and words of wisdom to speak from heart to heart and from mind to mind that men and women might be brought, even through life's apparent disasters, to find the Saviour and, with him, eternal glory.

Shall we pray.

Our Father, as fellow travellers through this temporary world and towards the great eternity, we do bless thee for our creation and all the joys it has brought. We thank thee now for its troubles that make us seek the true purpose of life. How we bless thee tonight for the coming of thy dear Son. Thou hast not remained hidden in the darkness. He has told thee out and never more fully and wonderfully than when he suffered for us on the cross.

Bless then our meditation on these things tonight, we pray. Grant that none who have sat before thee tonight here shall pass through life without receiving the Saviour. Grant that all of us who have received him may be given grace to trust thee, and trust thee understandingly, while life shall last, knowing that thou dost cause all things in the end to work together for good, for eternal good, for those that love thee and are called according to thy purpose.

So may thine evening grace and peace be upon us all through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

About the Author

DAVID W. GOODING was Professor Emeritus of Old Testament Greek at Queen's University, Belfast and a member of the Royal Irish Academy. He taught the Bible internationally and lectured on both its authenticity and its relevance to philosophy, world religions and daily life. He 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.