

Loving His Appearing
Proclaiming the Truth Against the Lie

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Loving His Appearing

A number of Scriptures will introduce us to our evening meditation. Let's begin to read them in, first of all, the prophecy of Isaiah and chapter 50, beginning at verse 4.

The Lord GOD has given me the tongue of those who are taught, that I may know how to sustain with a word him who is weary. Morning by morning he awakens; he awakens my ear to hear as those who are taught. The Lord GOD has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious; I turned not backwards. I gave my back to those who strike, and my cheeks to those who pull out the beard; I hid not my face from disgrace and spitting. But the Lord GOD helps me; therefore I have not been disgraced; therefore I have set my face like a flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame. He who vindicates me is near. Who will contend with me? Let us stand up together. Who is my adversary? Let him come near to me. Behold, the Lord GOD helps me; who will declare me guilty? Behold, all of them will wear out like a garment; the moth will eat them up. (vv. 4–9)

In these verses we recognize the voice of our blessed Lord Messiah. Notice again, will you please, verse 8, where he speaks of his confidence that, in spite of all the cruel and crude opposition of those that spit in his face, God would *justify* him. That is to say, in our modern terms, *vindicate* him.

Then we will read from the Gospel of John and chapter 18, beginning at verse 33.

So Pilate entered his headquarters again and called Jesus and said to him, 'Are you the King of the Jews?' Jesus answered, 'Do you say this of your own accord, or did others say it to you about me?' Pilate answered, 'Am I a Jew? Your own nation and the chief priests have delivered you over to me. What have you done?' Jesus answered, '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.' Then Pilate said to him, 'So you are a king?' Jesus answered, 'You say that I am a king. 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.' Pilate said to him, 'What is truth?' After he had said this, he went back outside to the Jews and told them, 'I find no guilt in him. But you have a custom that I should release one man for you at the Passover. So do you want me to release to you the King of the Jews?' They cried out again, 'Not this man, but Barabbas!' Now Barabbas was a robber. Then Pilate took Jesus and flogged him. And the soldiers twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on his head and arrayed him in a purple robe. They came up to him, saying, 'Hail, King of the Jews!' and struck him with their hands. (18:33–19:3)

When it says they struck him with their hands, it means as each one came to him to offer mock respect they slapped him across the face. And we remember the words of the prophet: 'I hid not my face from disgrace and spitting.' We are in the presence of the sufferings Christ was called upon to suffer when, as we have read, he stood for the truth in our godless and fallen world. We are thinking about the sufferings involved in standing for the truth.

Now, let us read on in the First Epistle of Paul to Timothy, chapter 6 and verse 12.

Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called and about which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses. I charge you in the presence of God, who gives life to all things, and of Christ Jesus, who in his testimony before Pontius Pilate made the good confession, to keep the commandment unstained and free from reproach until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ, which he will display at the proper time—he who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone has immortality, who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see. To him be honour and eternal dominion. Amen. (vv. 12–16)

And, finally, in the Second Epistle to Timothy, chapter 4 and verse 1.

I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word;

We too are called, not only to stand for the truth, but with great diligence and perseverance, to inculcate it, and to preach it at every opportunity. But listen to verse 2 and following.

preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths. As for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfil your ministry. For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing. (vv. 1–8)

The Lord be with us and speak to our hearts as we meditate on his word.

The appearing at Christ's first coming

It is, of course, a delight to be with you for, from past experience, I know that I can speak from my heart without undue inhibitions. You are not a people that would make a man an offender for a word. The more religious among you will know that today is the day of Epiphany, which, in the Western church, is the festival devoted to the remembrance of the story of the visit of the wise men to our Lord, and how God revealed to them, through that star in the east, that here was born a King of the Jews. In the Eastern church, of course, the festival of Epiphany is related to our Lord's baptism. The sense is, I suppose, that by the public baptism by John, our

Lord was *shown* to Israel. It was the time of his showing officially unto Israel. But tonight we are to think together on the epiphany of the Lord Jesus as it is mentioned and taught in our New Testaments. There are two occasions, or perhaps one more, where the epiphany of our Lord is spoken of as happening at his coming into our world at his first coming.

The word, as you know, means 'a shining forth'. There are several words used of our Lord's first coming, and of his second coming. We can think of the term the *apocalypse*, if you like, 'the revelation' of our Lord when he shall be revealed from heaven. The idea is that the heavens have concealed him like a curtain or a veil would conceal someone, and at a certain time in the future God will draw the veil aside, and the very heavens shall burst asunder, and what was hitherto hidden shall then be revealed. But when the Scripture uses the word *epiphany*, it is not so much that something has been hidden and now will have to be unveiled; it is more as if you were walking on a very dark night through moorland country without any signs or stars to guide you, and all of a sudden a searchlight was switched on, with all its dazzling power of light, exposing everything. So it is rightly used, not only of our Lord's first coming, but of his second coming.

It is used of our Lord's first coming in those delightful words in 2 Timothy 1. We are told of the promise and the appointment to our service:

which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, and which now has been manifested through the appearing of our Saviour Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel, for which I was appointed a preacher and apostle and teacher, which is why I suffer as I do. (vv. 9–12)

What a delightful passage, isn't it? 'In a world haunted by the shadow of death, there has burst in upon us,' says Paul, 'the appearing of our Lord Jesus, with the result that it exposed death for what death is. He has abolished death; he has put it out of action and brought life and incorruption to light through the gospel.'

The radiance of it comes down shining into our hearts today. And it is has relevance to this practical thing, doesn't it? Did you notice how Paul immediately refers to his witness for the Lord and his suffering for Christ? What nerved that man of lion-like courage to carry the word of God into the synagogues, into the temple if need be, before the rulers, before the Sanhedrin, or Nero himself—that lion, hungry for a few more victims to devour? What gave him the courage? And here he tells nervous Timothy, subject to stomach ulcers, perhaps, and other such things related to a nervous disposition: 'Ah, don't be afraid, Tim, my boy, for the ministry to which God has called you was given to you in times eternal, knowing all about you and your personality, and all your diffidence and hesitance. The purpose was given you and is now made real by the appearance of our Lord who has exposed death for what it is. It brought life and incorruption to light through the gospel.' That glorious deliverance from the fear of death is what stood by the martyrs all down the centuries, and who knows but that it may be called for from us before our time on earth is done.

The appearing at Christ's second coming

But tonight it is particularly the phrase 'the appearing of our Lord', as it is applied to our Lord's second coming, that is to engage our thought. And I want to ask what exactly we mean by the term 'the *appearing* of our Lord', and then what the significance is of his appearing, and what were the issues at stake, and shall be the issues at stake, at his appearing. Then I want to ask what it means for us to '*love* his appearing'. And, finally, I want to ask what it will mean for us in practical ways. If indeed we do love his appearing, what will be its practical implications?

We come to think about the appearing then of our blessed Lord Jesus Christ, his shining out upon this godless world. What will it mean?

Truth and power

The first thing it will mean, my brothers and sisters, is the vindication of our blessed Lord Jesus. What a wonderful thing that will be when the God of heaven vindicates the Lord Jesus, and the stand he took for truth. We read of it just now in the gospel, how eventually, in the greatest trial of the whole world, he stood before Pontius Pilate. When Pilate enquired whether he were a king, as Caiaphas had accused him of being, his answer was, in so many words, 'Yes, a king, but not in the sense that you understand it, for my kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight that I should not be delivered to the Jews, but my kingdom is not from here.'

He was testifying that this world is not a closed shop; that there is another world; there is another kingdom. He had been born, and not only born into our world (note the double description in v. 37). He had come into the world, *born* of the virgin (it was the conception that was miraculous; the birth was normal). He had been born into the world, therefore, truly human, but more than that, he had *come* into the world. 'For this cause, I *came* into the world.' This is God incarnate, second person of the Trinity, coming into our world to bear witness that there is another world. This is the truth of the matter.

It raises a very fundamental question of our existence. What is our planet? What is the significance of human life upon it? And amidst all the roaring of the waves, as the leaders of this nation and that nation and the other nation strive for power, what is the truth of the situation? Standing before Pontius Pilate (representative of his mighty majesty, Tiberius, Emperor of Rome) Christ says, 'Yes, I am a King, come to bear witness of the truth: there is another world, Pilate.'

Then he was given over to the soldiers for some moments as, mockingly, they arrayed him in a robe and slapped him across the mouth, and 'he hid not his face from shame and spitting' while they took him and scourged him, which wasn't a civilized thing to do, as the iron bits and bones in the leather thongs ripped his back. And when our Lord then refrained from answering Pilate's question, he said, 'Will you not answer *me*? You may have been silent in front of Caiaphas, but *me*? Don't you know, young man, that I have power? I could crucify you or I could release you.'

How this world is obsessed by power, is it not? And Christ, with a bleeding back, replied, 'You would have no power at all against me except it were given you from above. Therefore,

he that delivered me to you [that is, Caiaphas the priest] has the greater sin' (see 19:11). And we pause to think. Is it true that Pilate had been given power by God? Is it true that the very power that Pilate used to nail God's Son to a tree was given him by God? It is true. It didn't, of course, justify Pilate in using it in that way, but God gave him the power.

You say, 'That is a mystery in this world, isn't it? Why does God allow the little Pilates of this world, not to speak of the emperors like Tiberius, to use their power for the destruction of hundreds of thousands, including God's own dear Son? Can you believe there is another world? What is the truth about it? Is there a King, God, sitting upon his eternal throne? How can you believe that the very power of these kings is given to them by God? Yes, but in those next few hours there was going to be unveiled before Pilate, had he the eyes to see it, a demonstration, a speaking of the truth about our world.

Let me back off a moment and follow Pilate's thought and questioning. For when our Lord said, 'I am a King, you know, Pilate. Yes, not in your sense, but in the real sense I am a King. And for this purpose was I born and for this I came into the world, that I might bear witness to the truth.'

And with the sarcasm of a well-trained politician, Pilate said, 'And what is truth?'

Philosophers have been arguing about it for centuries, haven't they? What is the truth about this universe, the truth about you and me? Well, if you want to see the truth, come with us now as Pilate is allowed to use his God-given, delegated power to put Jesus Christ upon the tree. Look to him for a moment and see what the truth is. The truth is, there is a God who made us. The truth is that, when rulers with God-given power will take that power to crucify the very Son of God, then God still loves them. Why was it that at that moment Michael was not sent with his thunderbolts to obliterate our planet? Because the truth is that the God who made us is loyal to his creatures. In biblical language, truth is not merely accurate fact; truth is loyalty.

When the patriarch Jacob, reviewing his life, spoke to God about the difficulties that were now confronting him, and as a result of all his iniquitous ways, Esau was coming (as Jacob thought) to devour him, Jacob made his earnest prayer to God and he said, 'Oh, God, I'm not worthy of all the *truth* that you have shown me' (see Gen 32:10). What does he mean? Well, not just 'all the doctrine you showed me'. He means all the promises that God had made; and God would be loyal to Jacob. That is truth. Yes, it means accurate fact and speaking truth, but those things are not only truth but also loyal behaviour. That is truth. And each one of us may worship the living God in our hearts this evening as we contemplate the truth about our world and the truth about us. Yes, there is a God Almighty. He sent his Son into the world and allowed him to be crucified in that great act of rebellion, to demonstrate to us the truth. And we can know the biggest of all the things in this universe: the truth of God; and we can put it in the simplest of terms: Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Son of God shows me so.

But the day of the appearing is coming, and what shall that do? Why, the first thing is it shall vindicate the Lord Jesus, and the stand he took for the truth.

He will be vindicated

You know, one of the lovely things about the Prophet Isaiah is that, in the so-called 'servant songs', God allows us, so to speak, to come right inside the very heart of the Lord Jesus and

to discern his feelings, and what was going through his mind at the time when he stood so valiantly for the truth. He hid not his face from shame and spitting, and bore the lash and bore the cross for the sake of God's truth. What was going through his mind? Our Lord says, 'I hid not my face from shame and spitting. I had been like a scholar in the school of God. Morning by morning, he woke my ear that I might learn as one that is taught. And having been taught the truth, I stood for the truth, and hid not my face from shame and all the opposition and the vituperation and the blasphemies and the insults that came my way' (see 50:4–8). And while they were pouring it upon him and slapping his face, the Messiah in heart was saying that he is near: 'He is near that justifies me' (see v. 8).

He was not thinking of justification as we sinners think of it. 'How can we be right with God? How can we be forgiven our sin and be counted righteous by God?' That is how we sinners have to talk, isn't it? He never sinned. When he used the term 'justify', he meant what we mean in modern English by 'vindicate'. 'He is near that vindicates me.'

Blessed Lord, as he stood valiant for the truth upon which our very salvation would depend, amidst all his suffering, inside him, in his heart, was going the affirmation: 'God stands near me and will vindicate me.' In one sense he was vindicated on the day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit came to convict the world of sin because they did not believe in the Lord Jesus. That was marvellous vindication. So Peter could say to the crowds on the day of Pentecost, 'This that you see is God's Holy Spirit poured out, and not merely poured out after Jesus ascended. It is the fact that what is happening now is that Jesus of Nazareth has received from the Father the promised gift of the Holy Spirit, and Jesus is pouring it out' (see Acts 2:32–33). If, therefore, Jesus is pouring out the Holy Spirit, who must Jesus be? Here is marvellous vindication of our Lord.

Ah, but one day, oh, the wonder of it, one day shall come the *appearing*, and as that great light bursts onto our darkened world, it will be shown without any argument where the truth is by the appearing of our blessed Lord Jesus. For it is written that appearing will be staged. Who shall stage it? First Timothy 6 tells us that it will be the blessed and only potentate, the King of kings and the Lord of lords, the almighty creator of the universe. How does he contain his impatience to this point? But one day he will stage the appearing of our blessed Lord Jesus, and show the vindication of his Son.

My dear brother and sister, we are called upon to love his appearing, aren't we? Does your heart not respond from its very roots? From time to time, I like to express the wonder and the majesty of it, using the lovely words of Frances Ridley Havergal:

Thou art coming, O my Saviour,
thou art coming, O my King,
in thy beauty all resplendent,
in thy glory all transcendent;
well may we rejoice and sing:
coming! in the op'ning east
herald brightness slowly swells:
coming! O my glorious Priest,
hear we not thy golden bells?

And Frances has caught the imagery of Scripture, hasn't she? The high priest gone in, in his robes of white, and now he is coming out adorned in the garments of glory and beauty, and the bells on his skirt are tinkling as he walks out into the open. Hear we not the golden bells of his coming? And listen to this:

O the joy to see thee reigning,
 thee, my own beloved Lord!
 Ev'ry tongue thy name confessing,
 worship, honour, glory, blessing
 brought to thee with glad accord;
 thee, my Master and my Friend,
 vindicated and enthroned;
 unto earth's remotest end
 glorified, adored, and owned.¹

My brethren, we should have to have hearts of stone, shouldn't we, not to feel the wonder of the thing? So it shall be! Our chief and first words will not be, 'Lord, where's this mansion you've been talking about? Do give me the key to it. Don't keep me waiting at the vestibule of heaven at the receptionist's desk; give me my key to my room among the many!'

Well, he'd do that, my brother, my sister, but shall not the chief joy of we who have loved his appearing be to see the blessed Lord vindicated throughout the universe and throughout our world?

He will refute the lie

What shall he do when he comes, at his appearing? There are many things that our blessed Lord shall do. He shall come to take his church home to glory. You could think of many other things, couldn't you, but what will his appearing be for? Well, he who stood for the truth in front of Pontius Pilate will, at his appearing, nail the lie. That is what he will do. Second Thessalonians 2 says that explicitly:

For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work. Only he who now restrains it will do so until he is out of the way. And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will kill with the breath of his mouth and bring to nothing by the appearance of his coming. (vv. 7-8)

And what shall 'the lawless one' be doing? Well, he shall have been spreading the lie. *The lie?* He is sitting in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God, exalting himself above all that is worshipped (see vv. 3-5). Does that sound grotesque to you? Oh, but wait a moment. This is, of course, the full flowering of the original lie, spoken to our human forbears in the garden of Eden. It wasn't that Satan tempted Adam and Eve to some grotesque evil vice. What was it, then? It was the notion that you can live a beautiful, enjoyable, self-contained, satisfying life with all its aesthetic beauty, and all its intellectual challenges and enjoyment,

¹ Frances Ridley Havergal (1836-1879), 'Thou art coming, O my Saviour!' (1873).

and all its culinary delights satisfying the desires of the body and the flesh; that you can have all that and ignore God, and still enjoy it to the full. That is *the* lie.

He pointed to the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. 'My dear,' said he, 'don't you see how beautiful it looks? Lovely.'

And who made it lovely? Not Satan, anyway; God made it lovely. God is no dull bore. Art? Well, God is its author. Colour? He made it! Do you want to know his ideas on dress? Well, listen to his Son: 'Solomon, in all his glory, couldn't compete with the beautiful flowers in front of us, could he now?' (see Matt 6:28–29). It is a lovely universe.

'But you can enjoy it,' says Satan, 'without God.'

'But what about God? What had God said?'

'Oh, we don't bother nowadays about God's word, you know,' Satan said. 'You can enjoy it all without God.'

And Eve saw it was good to make one wise. Intellectual fascination is glorious. You don't like doing crossword puzzles or atomic physics? That isn't in your line? What do you like for intellectual challenge? I don't know what you like, but I hope you like something. Goodness me, peeling carrots all day and for all eternity can be a bit boring. I hope you like some intellectual challenge.

'You can have it better without God's word,' said Satan. 'And you can find satisfaction in life.'

What's wrong with the appetites of the body? Nothing. They can be indulged to an extreme, of course; we know that; but there is nothing wrong in them per se.

'Well, why then don't you go in for satisfaction?' said Satan. 'Ignore God's word!'

In other words, ignore the truth. That is the lie, as though this world were all there is: 'There's no God out there, there's no other kingdom.' Multitudes, and never more than now, have swallowed that lie. That lie will eventually come to its harvest. If you sew a pansy seed in the ground you mustn't complain if, in the end, you get a full pansy. And if you sew an acorn, you mustn't complain or think it grotesque if one day you get a mighty oak tree. And if you sew independence of God, you mustn't be surprised if one day you get the harvest: a worldwide political figure who will bring peace and safety, until all the nations rejoice and say, 'Peace and safety', and build a world that is not only without God, but in the end anti-God; and man sets himself up as God.

Don't say it can't be done. If you haven't read the philosopher Feuerbach, well, don't read him then. But Feuerbach was one of those philosophers that inspired Karl Marx, and Feuerbach's philosophy was this: that when we say that God is love, we are not saying there is a God out there. All we are saying is that human love is an absolute, and that is what we call 'God'. If you say 'God will save us,' Feuerbach said, 'notice what you are saying. You're not saying there is a God out there that can save you. "God" is simply the label you put upon the human race as a whole. If you say God will save us, you mean the human race will save us. Of course, each individual man and woman is weak, and we need a saviour, but the whole human race—mankind spelt with a big "M"—that can save us. For man,' said Feuerbach, 'man is God. Man's God is man.'

We know what it led to under Marxism, don't we? And we know what it cost our fellow believers to stand for the truth in those many countries.

It is coming again, my brothers and sisters. The end of this age will arrive at the point of the deification of man. He won't be a grotesque monster. Anybody who objects will seem the oldest, curious dinosaur of a survivor from the pre-scientific age, and positively anti-social now that man has solved his problems. And as the prophecy of Daniel 8 says, 'He shall cast down truth to the ground' (see v. 12). For what he will not tolerate is anybody who dares to get up and say there is a power beyond him, that there is a God in heaven.

Don't say it is grotesque. We have had enough of totalitarian dictators in this last century to show how real a thing it is. This is where the age is moving to. Oh, what a lovely thing it will be when the Lord Jesus appears and, 'by his appearing', by that very act, will expose the falsity of it and destroy the man of sin.

Loving his appearing

What then does it mean for us to *love* his appearing? Yes, it will mean, surely, our heart's devotion, as we ponder what our blessed Lord Jesus suffered for us in his witness to the truth. What will it mean on our part to love his appearing? Well, you heard Paul, did you not, writing to Timothy? And here he says,

I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom . . . (2 Tim 4:1).

You say, 'He'll judge the world; he won't judge us, will he?' Well, listen to the end of the paragraph,

Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing. (v. 8)

Rewards there will be, but it will be a *righteous* judge, and the crown will be given. It is said to be a crown of *righteousness*. He will award us *righteously*, justly, according to the way we have stood loyally for him and for the truth.

Preaching the truth

Paul says, 'If you would love his appearing, Timothy, then what must you do? Preach! Preach!'

Do you say, 'Why the emphasis on that particular activity?'

Because the thing at issue is *the* truth, that's why. That, in this context, is *the* interest of the whole universe. We stand to witness to him who stood before Pontius Pilate, witnessing for *the* truth, and died on Calvary's cross in consequence. To love his appearing is to stand with him for *the* truth!

My dear senior brothers and sisters, and you middle-aged ones (and for all I know a lot of younger ones as well), it will mean *preaching*. You don't have to do it all from a pulpit. Oh, bear the words of a curmudgeonly old man: preach the word! Do you not see what the issue is? This is the issue. You are loving his appearing, are you? Then you are looking for the

vindication of him who witnessed before Pontius Pilate the good confession about the truth. And if you love him, you will be standing for the truth and disseminating the truth. Preach it in season and out of season—when you’ve got opportunity, and when you haven’t.

Why? ‘For the time will come,’ he says, ‘when people will not endure the sound doctrine, but having itching ears, and they will heap to themselves teachers after their own lusts and will turn away their ears from the truth and turn aside to fables and myths’ (see v. 3).

Oh, my dear brethren, the time will come. But hasn’t it come already? Of recent times, we have had debates enough on BBC Radio 4, let alone all the other media, on how we should treat the fundamental truths. Do you believe in creation? Do you believe in the resurrection? Do you believe in the second coming? Now, many of the leading theologians have replied, ‘Well, not literally, but they are *myths*, in the technical sense of the term ‘myths’, but not historical events. The virgin birth is merely a story made up by the church to make the point that Jesus is somehow special. And the resurrection of Jesus, well, it didn’t literally happen: it’s a story made up by the church. It tells you that, if you stand for the truth, well, if you get beaten down, the truth will somehow prevail in the end. It’s a myth, not a fact. Christianity? Oh, but we wouldn’t like to say now, would we, that we have *the* truth?’

But we used to. We used to unashamedly announce him who said, ‘I am the truth. No man comes to the Father but by me’ (see John 14:6). But not now. The archbishop, the chief of the Muslims, plus the Buddhists, plus any others, all have something to contribute to finding the truth, so we are told. And don’t you dare say that yours is the only truth. That could well soon be an offence against the State, even in England, in order to keep people from fighting each other.

How clever the devil is, isn’t he? He gets Christians so departing from the commands of Christ that they take to the sword and the bomb and the Semtex, and fight out their disputes in Christian doctrine by the sword until the whole thing becomes the scandal it has been. And then Satan says, ‘Well, you know, I thought you Christians were for peace. You are, aren’t you?’

‘Yes, of course, we are.’

‘Well then, do you know what has caused all this fighting? It’s the doctrine, really. Yes, so get rid of the doctrine, and you’ll get peace, won’t you? And you’ll all be nice and live happily ever after.’

What a cunning tactic of the enemy it is. We shall be called upon, my brethren, to stand for *the* truth.

Listening to the preaching of truth

‘The time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine.’ I think I would like to nudge Paul and say, ‘But, Paul, do you know something? Of course, you’re a first-century man, aren’t you? And you were notorious for having preached long sermons. You preached in one place, didn’t you, Paul, until midnight, and the chap fell down out of the window and broke his neck? We use it as a joke now, Paul. Forgive us, you know, but we do because we see things in a different light today.’

It’s not that people won’t endure it. I fear that in many circumstances they *can’t* endure it. What do I mean? Well, ladies and gentlemen, I speak as some kind of an educationalist, but

there has been a colossal wrong perpetrated on our young people in schools in this last thirty or forty years. In Science? Brilliant. In the Arts? Criminality. For children have been brought up to believe that they shouldn't be taught to spell, that they shouldn't be taught to analyse a piece of English (or any other language) into its logical thought-flow. They can't be expected to listen too long, can they? Their attention span is, well, it used to be said it was ten minutes. The last broadcast I heard on the matter said it is two and a half minutes.

You say, 'But they're young folks.'

Yes, I know. Do you know, in Paul's day and before, in the days of the Greeks, the ordinary Greeks would sit in a theatre on hard stone seats all day long, and listen to three whole tragedies played out on the stage. There was no scenery, of course. There were no pictures—just words of some of the profoundest drama ever written. There were three plays, one after the other, plus a fourth one: a satire play. And nobody said then: 'But they can't take it.' What has happened? What kind of thing have we done to the minds of young people that now, in all genuineness, they can't stretch their attention span beyond five minutes?

If you are as old as I am, you'll remember the times when, even on BBC radio, the church service had a sermon in, and it lasted fifteen whole minutes. Not now, of course. There is a one-and-a-half-minute bit of speaking, then some music. Then there is another two minutes' bit of speaking, then some music. Why is that? It is difficult to get the thought-flow too well in that time. Then there is another two minutes and some more music. Why? They'll tell you it's because of the young people's attention span.

I have a good friend who was a lecturer in university somewhere. Do you know what he does? He makes his students attend to what he is saying by offering them, every now and again, a Mars bar if they can answer a question! I say; where has education come to?

And there was a learned discussion the other night on BBC radio 4 about lecturers who are having little multiple choice questions on a little device to keep students awake. What, students? Young men and young women who are going to be leaders in society? What have we done to their brains? And they can't listen to holy Scripture being preached too long because, poor young things, they can't take it in.

It is the preacher's fault very often, of course, but there has been a criminal act perpetrated on their brains. What a field it is for the sewing of that confusion of religions that is now becoming popular, and the letting go of the truth. And if God leaves us to a time when there shall be persecution for standing for the truth, oh God help us if, by that time, we haven't got a grasp of the faith. Yes, but the Lord is coming, and we have to face him. And the righteous judge, at his appearing, will award his crowns accordingly as we have kept his commandment loyally to him.

I close with a story. King David in middle life, I suspect, grew portly (like many of us who have had that tendency), but not only portly, somewhat self-indulgent. It is the danger of the middle-aged. They have fought their battles in life, haven't they? And now it's come to their turn to rest, with their feet up. Not too much hard study any more. Tired at the end of a day, aren't they? It would be easier in prison, wouldn't it, when you haven't other things to distract you? Anyway, that's beside the point. The people got discontent with David, and there arose a son of his by the name of Absalom. I have to say this about Absalom, he was—what is the word now? 'Cool', I think—he was cool. You should have seen the hairstyle! Oh, talk about a

film star! Beautiful, it was. Moreover, he was really down to earth and practical. He stood for justice.

Mark that; he stood for justice. Do you know, he pointed out that the king was getting old and feeble, and he didn't care for anybody or all the wrong things that were being done in the kingdom. 'If I were king,' he said, 'I'd see that justice were done.' He used to go up to the people as he stood by the court door. Here's the prince with his chariots. Oh, he'd got some chariots! I can't stop to tell you about them, but they were superb Jaguars and I don't know what else. But, anyway, he was there, and he would go up to the people waiting for the judge to come and said, 'Yes, what is your case?' Whatever the man said, he would reply, 'That's a very good case!' You can't say that to everybody, can you? But he did. Fortunately, the others didn't overhear him say it. To everyone he said, 'Yours is a very good case. Now, if only I were king, you see, I'd see you got justice.' And then he would take the man by the hand and kiss him. (I don't know what you'd think if you went to the court down town, and the judge, who is now going to ascend to the bench, came out and kissed all the defendants.) But he stood for justice, and hundreds of them fell for him, and he led the rebellion against the king.

And then the king came back. He *appeared* again, and the rebel was slain. But then there were a lot of questions asked. They had to be, didn't they? And there were a lot of red faces. Why did David's own countrymen and relatives up in Hebron side with the rebel? There were some difficult moments when David came back out of exile to be their manifest king again (see 2 Sam 13–19).

And the Lord is going to appear. 'You keep the commandment, Timothy, won't you,' said Paul, 'without compromise? Oh, Timothy, in view of the coming lie that should prevail, preach, Timothy! And see that all in the church are rigorously taught the faith! Fight the good fight of the faith.'

For in the final battle it will be truth that is at stake. Fight the good fight of faith. Keep the commandment without compromise so that when the Lord appears as the righteous judge, you will be able to say, 'I've finished my course. I have kept, and propagated, the faith in loyalty to the Lord.' And the righteous Judge shall then give us the crown of righteousness that we have been straight down the line for him and his truth.

The Lord bless our evening meditations for his name's sake.

About the Author

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