

# **The Trinity**

*God's Revelation of Himself*

*David Gooding*

A Myrtlefield House Transcript



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## God's Self-revelation in the Gospel

You have asked me to speak on a topic that I've never been asked to speak on before, so it's a matter full of interest for me. I've been preaching ever since I was about sixteen years old, and you can see how old I am now. Your request came to me with a number of possible topics and included in them was the topic of the blessed and Holy Trinity. So in this coming week I propose to speak about some of the topics you have suggested but to take our direction from this one, the blessed and Holy and undivided Trinity.

### **The revelation of God**

It is the most awesome topic that you could possibly talk about. Just you imagine for a moment this vast universe and the whole question of its meaning and where it is going to, if it's going anywhere. I had to attend a meeting of the Irish Academy just the other week with a lecturer who is the director of one of the great astronomical institutions in the States. Her topic was 'This Runaway Universe'. She adduced the evidence and gave her view of it, which at least some other astronomers hold, that, as far as we can measure it, this universe is now speeding up. In her words, 'it is a runaway universe'.

We can't live in this world without wondering where it all comes from and where it's going. If we start thinking like that it won't be long before we're thinking of ourselves. What about us? What is our significance in this vast universe, and how can we know? The marvellous thing that our blessed Lord Jesus has brought to us is this: he has come to tell us, not merely that God made the world; he has come to let us know what God himself is like—not merely what he has said, not merely what he has done, but what God is like in himself.

It is a marvellous condescension of God, isn't it, to allow us little mortals to peer into his own inner being and to know what God is like? It is the biggest subject that any human being could ever possibly give himself to contemplate. He is our Creator and it is important that we get to know him; for one day we must stand before him, and the question arises: 'This God that one day we must meet and stand before, what is he like and what will he say about us, and what will he do with us?'

### ***Our topics for study***

So we are to give ourselves to thinking about the Holy Trinity: God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit, and their relations one with another. Tomorrow we shall begin to think about our Lord Jesus, because it is only through him that God has shown us what God

is like in himself. We shall think of his deity and what Jesus Christ, the Son of God, was before he became incarnate, before he came to our world.

On Tuesday, God willing, we shall think of the deity of Christ in his incarnation here in this world. According to the Bible, the Word of God that eternally was with God and was God, wonder of wonders, 'the Word became flesh and tabernacled among us' (see John 1:14). It is not that the Word ceased to be God and became a man but, marvel of marvels, the eternal God took on manhood and became what God never was before: God become man. And the wonder of it—we shall think of him in his life here on earth, in his death for our sakes, what he is in resurrection and what he will be for all eternity.

On Wednesday night, God willing, we shall talk about our Lord's humanity. Being God, he was truly human. That will be a vastly moving topic, to think that God has become like one of us, 'in all things like his brethren', yet without sin (Heb 2:17), so that he might not merely tell us about God but tell God about us and be our representative before God. The Bible says that he was sinless, and we are sinful, but he bore our sins as the perfect man—perfect God: our redeemer and the mediator between God and man. And, representing us, he bore our sins 'in his body on the tree' (1 Pet 2:24).

On Thursday, God willing, we shall turn to think of the other member of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit. I don't know about you, but sometimes we are inclined to think about the Holy Spirit as though he were some force or power, and we forget that the Holy Spirit is a person. He is God as much as the Father is God, as the Son is God. And the marvellous thing is this (for the Bible never ceases telling us marvels, you know. Astounding, extraordinary things does the gospel tell us!): not only in Christ did God become human and the Saviour die for us, but we are told that God the Holy Spirit, being a person, comes to dwell in the hearts, in the lives, of those who have trusted the Saviour. So we're not left to find our way to heaven the best we can, but we who trust the Saviour have within us that blessed guide and comforter whom the Lord Jesus said he would send to us to be our intercessor with God and to guide us and strengthen us as we pass our pilgrimage life, home to glory.

On Friday night, God willing, we shall try to put all those things together and come to think about the Holy Trinity and the relations of the divine persons to each other and to us.

Now I don't pretend that this will be anything other than a detailed study, so do come by all means and where I get it wrong or don't explain as I should, well, do collar me afterwards and tell me frankly, 'What you said just . . .', and, 'Is that really right?' and all those kinds of questions. You'll find my skin is fairly thick; my manners, I hope, are moderately polite. But we shall need to be studying a Bible. How else could we know what God is like in himself? And we shall have to turn to a number of passages, so do bring your Bibles, if you will, because I shall not be preaching so much as talking but turning to various Scriptures on this exalted theme. Above all, this is such an awesome thing that we must come prepared to take the shoes off our feet, so to speak, for the ground we shall be standing on is holy ground, and the true attitude that we should bring with us is an attitude of worship to almighty God, for his grace in making himself known to us.

Next Sunday, God willing, if God leaves us here until then, I shall be talking about God again, but this time God and the problem of pain. There are many folks that I meet around this world, some of them atheists and agnostics, and they have a difficulty. They say to me,

'You talk about God, but how can you believe in God when you consider all the pain that there is in this world: people dying in their midlife with cancer and little children with cancer? There are all the difficult things: the floods, the tempests, the volcanoes, the epidemics. And you say this is God's world, and there is a God, and he's a loving God? How do you square it? How can you possibly believe in the existence of a God who created everything and is supposed to be a God of love?' And many of the people I talk to here and in Russia, are not trying to be funny or difficult. The problem of pain is a real problem. We shall think what God's word has to say about this problem that all of us, from time to time, have met or will meet.

So these things will be a trifle complicated. Come prepared, as you normally do, to think and to think hard with me. But tonight we're to talk, not about something complicated, but about the gospel by which we are saved.

### **The gospel of Jesus Christ**

It is a marvel of the grace and wisdom of God that when it comes to the gospel by which we may be saved then the gospel is so simple that a child could follow it. It can be and is condensed, as we know, as stated by Paul in his Epistle to the Corinthians. He writes like this:

For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how 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: And that he was seen of Cephas, then of the twelve: After that, he was seen of above five hundred brethren at once; of whom the greater part remain unto this present, but some are fallen asleep. (1 Cor 15:3-6)

This is the gospel, therefore, in all its directness and simplicity: 'How that Christ died for our sins'. The emphasis is not so much that he lived as an example for us to try and follow, though he did provide us with an example to follow, but when it comes to salvation it's not Christ's life that saves us; it is his death at Calvary that saves us. The gospel is that 'Christ died for our sins'.

'And that he was buried'. That's gospel too! He was buried as literally as many of us will be one day. So we want to know what the gospel says about this. And the good news is that he who died for our sins that we might be forgiven and was buried: 'he rose again the third day according to the scriptures'—the firstfruits of the mighty harvest! So that all who trust him will be raised. And those who are alive when he comes will be caught up together with him to spend an eternity in God's heaven.

### ***Receiving the gospel***

The gospel is simple then, but how do we come into the good of it? If the fact is that Jesus died, was buried and is risen, very good, but what does a person have to do in order to come into the good of this gospel? And here the Bible is even more simple and direct. I now read you one or two verses from what Paul wrote in Romans 10: 'The word is near you, even in your mouth and in your heart' (v. 8). Oh, how near is the word that you must speak if ever you would be saved! It's not something far off. You don't have to climb up to heaven to make

sure. You don't have to go down to hell to make sure. There's a someone who has died and come back again. He assures us there is a heaven, and there is of course a hell. This is Jesus Christ our Lord. And the gospel is this:

The word is nigh you, even in your mouth and in your heart, the word of faith which we preach; that if you shall confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and shall believe in your heart that God has raised him from the dead, you shall be saved. (Rom 10:8-9)

Magnificent simplicity, isn't it? And I bear my public testimony to it. As a boy of ten, with my boyish mind and what little I understood at that early age, yet God illuminated that verse in my mind, and I trusted the Saviour. I believed him and have lived a further sixty-eight years through many experiences in life and proved that the Saviour who gives us his word: 'that if you shall confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God has raised him from the dead', that Saviour is real! And faith that is put in him will never let you down.

### **Witnesses to the resurrection**

Perhaps you say to me, 'Yes, but you say we have to believe in our hearts that God has raised him from the dead, and then we shall be saved. But what does it mean, and how does the fact that he was raised from the dead affect me at all? What difference does it make?'

Well, of course, I can't exactly tell you how it affects you, but what I am proposing to do here for a few moments now is to call some witnesses. The witnesses I'm going to call for what the resurrection means are some of the people that actually saw Christ when he was risen from the dead. And I'm going to ask them in your presence what it meant to them. What did this resurrection of the Lord Jesus do to them? How did coming in contact with the risen Lord change them?

Now I wish I could call them down, back from heaven. They won't come, even if I called them, not to here they wouldn't, nor anywhere else. They're in heaven with the Lord. So I shall have to rely on the written record about them as I interview them in your presence and put some questions to them.

#### ***Paul and the risen Lord Jesus who died to save us***

The first one I'm going to call is the one that we call Paul the apostle. He began life as Saul of Tarsus, and a very clever and learned and religious man he was. So we're going to call him:

'Hello, good evening, sir. You are Paul the apostle?'

'Yes.'

'Ah, do you believe and preach that Jesus rose from the dead?'

'Yes, that's so.'

'What does it mean to you, sir? We understand that perhaps it was because of the resurrection you changed your religion, didn't you, because you were a Jew and then you became a Christian?'

And I think if we said that to Paul, he would smile graciously and say, 'Well that's not too bad a shot at it, but actually it isn't really true. You see, I didn't change my religion. Before

I trusted Christ I was a Jew, and I'm still a Jew. Before I trusted Christ I believed there's only one God Creator. I still believe that. Now I've trusted Christ and I tell you, assuredly and definitely and dogmatically, that there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus. So it wasn't so much a question of changing my religion.'

'Well, Paul, tell us what did happen then? For obviously it made a colossal change. What was that change?'

And he would say, 'Yes, indeed it did. It made a revolution in my attitude towards God. Let me explain. You see, I was brought up a Jew, a Pharisee. I believed in God with all my heart, mind, soul and strength; so I thought. And I thought the way that you pleased God and gained acceptance with God was to do the best you possibly could to keep God's holy law. And, to be honest with you, I thought really I had succeeded and I was better at it than a lot of people, and my neighbours in particular. I thought I had really done very well and got a good score in keeping God's holy law, and that was the thing that troubled me when I heard these Christians.'

'I could not make head nor tail of them,' he says. 'They seemed to me to be utterly wrong. Here they were going around saying that you can't be saved by doing the best you can; you have to be saved by faith and not by works. It seemed to me that they were denying God's holy law and telling people they can live as they like and still be saved, if only they say they believed. And worse than that, they started to say that this Jesus of theirs was God. That to me was hideous blasphemy! How could he be God? And then, worse still, this Jesus of theirs was hung up on a cross, and our Scriptures tells us straight, "Whoever hangs upon a tree is cursed of God" (Deut 21:23). And here were these Christians turning round to me (they surely didn't know their Scriptures) and telling me that someone who died under the curse of God's holy law was the Saviour of the world! It seemed absolutely hideous to me, and I was doing my best to blot out the name of this Jesus and all who followed him. I was on my way to Damascus to arrest and to torture some of them.'

'Well,' he'll say, 'you know my story, for Luke wrote it in the Acts of the Apostles. I was travelling up the Damascus road when all of a sudden there shone a light out of heaven, above the very brightness of the sun, and a voice out of the heavens said, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"'

'I knew it instinctively. This wasn't ordinary sunlight. No one needed to tell me this was the very Shekinah glory of God Almighty come down to meet me. And I said instinctively, "Lord" (that is the word that they would use in Judaism for Jehovah), "Lord, who are you?" And the voice said, "I am Jesus, whom you persecute."'

'It had me prostrate on the ground,' says Paul, 'but it absolutely turned my life upside down and inside out. For now I was faced with it: this is Jesus Christ risen from the dead, demonstrated to be the Son of God by the resurrection of the dead. How then can I account for the fact that he died on a cross under the curse of God's law? There I was, having tried to do the best I could to keep God's law, to earn salvation. And there was this Jesus, dying under the curse of that law? Why? And if he is God's Son, why was he there?'

'I came to see,' says Paul, 'he was there because, for all my effort to keep God's law for salvation, I had broken that law and deserved its curse. And Jesus was bearing the curse for me. That destroyed all my boasting about my efforts to do the best I can. I do the best I can

still, yes, but not to be saved. For if, when I'd done the best, God's Son needed to die on a cross to save me then it's time I stopped talking about my goodness and started looking to Christ for salvation. This is what I'd come to; it's what it means now: I, through the law, died to the law (see Gal 2:19). That is, I came to see that I came short and it mattered. The law said, "Cursed is everyone that doesn't continue in everything the law says, and does it" (Deut 27:26).

It's not good enough to do ninety per cent and then hope for God's mercy for the rest. God's law demands one hundred per cent or it curses us. Years and years and years ago, more than I like to remember, I was a student just after the war. We had to get our own tea and things, and some kind person had given me a few cups and plates and a jug. I rather liked the jug. It was a nice sort of china jug, and it had a certain style about it, do you see, and since things were very difficult to come by in England just after the war I was very proud of this jug. One day I went to get it down from the cupboard and it hit against the side of a plate or something, and there was a dull note that came out. I thought to myself, 'Wait a minute, it's not cracked I hope.' I took it down and lifted it to the light and there, right down the side of it, was a crack. 'Pity,' I said to myself, 'nice jug like that,' and I put it back on the shelf. Then I said, 'Gooding, don't be such a fool. Do be a realist. It isn't any good, it's got a crack. You'd never use it as a jug again, would you?' I took it down and pulled it apart and put it in the bin. And if we keep the whole of God's law, and we offend in one point, that's the law broken and it brings us under the curse of the broken law (see James 2:10–11).

Oh, the marvel of God's salvation that God, the very lawgiver who gave the law, saw us in our impossible struggles to try to keep it perfectly and sent his Son to take our place and die on Calvary, bearing the curse of that broken law.

'And this is my principle of living now,' says Paul, 'if you want to know: "The life I now live, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal 2:20). It's what the resurrection of Christ did for me, when I discovered it.'

Have we discovered God's declaration of the significance of the cross of Christ, in that he's raised him from the dead and shown him to be the Son of God, hanging there on that cross? Whatever was that for? Well, if righteousness could have been achieved by our keeping the law, then he had no need to die. But we couldn't save ourselves, and God's Son suffered to save us. You know, if you shall confess Jesus as Lord, like Saul did, and 'believe in your heart that God has raised him from the dead, you shall be saved' (Rom 10:9).

### ***Peter and the risen Lord Jesus who maintains our faith***

Oh, but here comes another witness. I must call him. His name is Peter. I address him, and I say, 'Now, you are Peter?'

'Yes, indeed.'

'The Apostle Peter?'

'Yes, the Apostle Peter.'

'Ah, so let's ask you, what did the resurrection of Christ mean for you? What did it do for you? You, I believe, were a believer in Christ, even before Christ died.'

'Yes,' he says, 'that's true.'

'What did the resurrection do for you?'



I think Peter would say, 'Well, I expect you've heard the story, haven't you? I was a believer in Christ before he died, and I thought I was so strong. I really loved the Lord, and I left home and gave up my job, and I followed him. I preached for him and I served him and I loved him. And, as I thought, I would have given my life for him. But I messed it all up. When Jesus Christ was arrested and was in court, I went to see it, and the people standing around began to question me. I lost my nerve, and I denied the Lord.'

'Yes', we say, 'and it must have been embarrassing for you to have to meet the Lord then, after he rose from the dead. What was he like when you met him? Did he face you with it?'

'Ah, well,' says Peter, 'you know, even before he died, he warned me, but I wouldn't listen. He said, "Peter, you're going to deny me three times", and I said, "You've got it wrong there, Lord. You see, some of these others might, but I wouldn't. I'm ready to go to prison and to death for you. I'd never deny you." He said, "Peter, I'm telling you now that before the cock crows twice you shall deny me three times." And I wouldn't believe him, but it happened. That night when I denied him for the third time, the cockerel crew, and Jesus turned from his accusers and looked me in the face, and he said nothing. But I knew what he was thinking, and now I believed him. I had no choice whether I believed him or not; it had come true. What a fool I was not to have believed him before! But then I remembered something else he said. On that occasion he said, "Peter, Satan has desired to have you—all twelve of you—to sift you as wheat. I've prayed for you, Peter, that your faith should not fail. And when you're restored, Peter, strengthen your brethren."'

'And in those moments,' says Peter, 'in all the confusion of my emotions because I'd made a mess of my Christian testimony, then I remembered his word. It had come true. I had denied him; the cockerel crew. But he'd said, "Peter, *when* you are restored", not, "If ever you are," but "when". And he'd said, "For I've prayed for you, that your faith shouldn't fail." I'd made a mess of everything else. My testimony was spoilt; my courage had gone. Thank God for a Saviour who interceded and prayed for me that my faith was not destroyed, and he brought me through.'

'And when I saw him in resurrection he talked privately to me, and nobody ever knows what else he said then, but later on he said, "Peter, do you really love me?" and I said, "Well, Lord, you know really." He said, "Feed my sheep, Peter."'

'Oh, the marvel of the Saviour,' says Peter. 'That's what it meant for me: a Saviour who rose again from the dead and ever lives to make intercession for me that my faith shall not fail!'

Who knows but, in a congregation of this size, there might be somebody who, some years ago, made a profession of faith, and you really meant it. You wanted to please the Lord, but somehow life has been difficult and you've wandered and made a mess of your Christian profession, and your mind nowadays is in turmoil and you feel there's no way back and you've had it. Well listen to Peter's experience. He found a Saviour who rose again from the dead and ever lives to make intercession for us. The Bible puts it this way: 'Because he makes intercession, he is able to save to the uttermost those that come unto God by him, seeing he ever lives to make intercession for us' (Heb 7:25).

Shall we not grasp it tonight? This is a Saviour who not only died for us but lives to intercede for us and, for those who have genuinely repented and put their faith in him, lives to maintain their faith.

You say, 'Mr Preacher, you don't know much about the temptations of real life. You've lived in an ivory castle of a university all your days. You don't know what it is in the rough and tumble of everyday life.'

No, I may not. I do know what spiritual battles are and battles for the mind and battles for the heart. Yes, and I thank God that I know a Saviour who, when my faith gets wobbly, and when I have come across intellectual difficulties, I've been able to say, 'Please, Lord, over to you. You know the evidence I need. Please give me the evidence to establish my faith.' And so he does, as he did for Peter.

### ***Mary Magdalene and the risen Lord Jesus who brings us to God***

I must call another witness of a very different kind. This time it's a dear lady. Her name is Mary Magdalene, and she came to the tomb on the morning of the resurrection. Like a lot of the other Christian women who came to that tomb, she came with her spices. Our Lord had been crucified; he'd been now in the grave during the Sabbath day and they could do nothing as Jews. But on the first day of the week, when they were free to come, they brought their spices because they were going to embalm the body. They couldn't let him go.

Now I'm no expert on female psychology so, ladies, if I say inappropriate things now, you'll have to forgive me. It is a charming feature about many ladies that they like to cling (but then I was brought up after Queen Victoria died and that's a long while ago). I've been shown by some ladies in their middle and late life an envelope or a piece of tissue paper, and in it is a golden lock of hair: 'And that's my Albert when he was two', they'll say. 'He had a lovely head of hair.' What about her Albert now? He's about fifty-two and as bald as they come! But this is Mama.

Yes, there is that desire to cling. It's natural, isn't it? And when it has been allied to religion it has been responsible for making shrines by the thousands and the hundreds of thousands, if not the millions, all round this world. They're shrines to dead, loved, religious leaders. And people will go still in their thousands to visit those graves, for they think there's some power in them, or in the relics they have.

I was in Italy the other month and went to the great treasury in one of the big cathedrals there, of the Medici, the rulers. They had magnificent vessels of silver! It was most elaborately made. There was a glass in the middle, a monstrance, to show relics, and they had bits of toenails and bones of saints or something. How the heart does cling.

And these women were thinking to honour Christ. Christ had meant so much to Mary Magdalene. He cast out seven demons from her, and she was going to perpetuate his memory. Had nothing happened, she would have built a shrine there with the other women, and they would have beautified it and put spices round the body to stop the body going to corruption, if they could. And they would have come there frequently to pray, because they felt it was holy.

What happened? We know the fact is that, not just Mary but all the women abandoned the place and never did turn it into a shrine and never made pilgrimages to it. And you will

read the whole of the New Testament and the letters that were written to young converts and you will never find any advice from the apostles: 'Now what you converts need to do, at least once in a lifetime, is to go to Jerusalem and seek out the garden and visit the tomb of Christ and pray there.' Never once is that said. Why not? What changed these women and Mary in particular?

Ah, she'll tell you. When she got there the body was gone, and it was very distressing. She thought someone had come to steal the body away, and then she turned and saw what looked like a gardener. And she said, 'Sir, if you've taken him away, tell me where you've laid him, and I will come and fetch him and take him away.' She would have buried him and embalmed him and made a shrine of the tomb. But the stranger said, 'Mary.' And in that moment, she recognised the voice! For it is said by the Lord himself that his sheep know his *voice*. She realised it was the Lord and started to cling and take hold of him, so as to never lose him again. Gently he said, 'Mary, stop holding me for the moment. I'm not yet ascended to my Father. But go and tell my brethren, "I ascend to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God"' (John 20:17). He not only spoke it but as she listened to him say those words, it formed in her heart a personal, living relationship with the living Lord Jesus.

They didn't make a shrine to him. You don't make a shrine to somebody that's alive do you? They abandoned the grave. She had found the living Lord, and he spoke to her heart and satisfied her and made her aware, as only God can, of the reality of a personal relationship with the Saviour, with God his Father. So that his God has become our God, Christ's Father has become our Father.

Oh, what a wonderful thing that is! It's called eternal life, you know; it is to know God in that personal sense. It is one thing to believe that Christ is risen from the dead, but may I enquire of us all, have you heard the voice of Christ? I don't mean voices out of the blue, but in your heart of hearts, have you heard him say, 'My Father is your Father. My God is your God. I'm the living Lord, and you have me as a living Saviour'? That's what it meant to Mary.

### ***Thomas and the risen Lord Jesus who gives us evidence to strengthen our faith***

There's one other man I must call briefly to your attention. His name is Thomas. So let's just have a word with him. It won't take us long.

'Are you Thomas?'

'Yes.'

And Thomas, being rather a brusque man, is liable to say, 'Well I expect you've heard the story, haven't you? Everybody around calls me "Doubting Thomas."' "

'Well, we had heard that. You're the man that doubted, aren't you?'

'Yes, I'm the man that doubted! But I was at least honest. It wasn't any lack of courage like Peter. When our Lord, at length, suggested going to Jerusalem and Judaea, and we knew it would spell death for him, I was the one that said, "Let's go with him that we may die with him" (John 11:16). I was prepared to die for the Saviour, and I didn't duck out; but when they came and told me that Jesus was risen from the dead? That was no good. I just couldn't believe it. I said to the others, "Well you believe it if it gives you comfort. That's okay; I won't find fault with you. You believe it. I can't believe it. I mean, what evidence is there? I should need evidence if I'm going to believe."' "

And the Bible says, 'Yes, of course you need evidence.' Faith in Christ is not a leap in the dark, you know. The fourth Gospel says this, 'These signs that Jesus did are here written in this Gospel to be evidence for you that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God' (see 20:31). Evidence comes first and then, believing this evidence, you take the next step and believe in his name to get eternal life. Faith in Christ is not a leap in the dark! God offers us evidence. The trouble is that many people don't believe because they haven't spent any time reading the evidence or thinking about it. They just decide that Jesus couldn't be alive from the dead. But that's not scientific; that is prejudice and being a little bit of an ignoramus.

'Anyway,' says Thomas, 'I said I couldn't believe, but I went along with them the next Sunday, and I said to them, "Look, I couldn't believe unless I see the print of the nails in his hands and where the spear was thrust into his side." That Sunday, just as it had happened the first Sunday when I wasn't there, suddenly the Lord appeared and, without anybody saying anything to him, he said, "Thomas, reach here your finger and put it in my hands, would you? Reach your hand and put it into my side."

'And I said to myself, "How did he know? How did he know what I said? It's the other apostles have gone and told tales about me, I suppose!" But wait a minute. If he wasn't risen from the dead, how could they tell him any tales? I daresay they'd prayed about it. But then, it is because the Lord is alive that he hears our prayers. If he weren't alive, they couldn't have told him anything, could they? But he knew anyway.'

What a marvellously gracious thing it was. Our Lord didn't say, 'You foolish man. You oughtn't to have doubts!' He said, 'Thomas, you wanted evidence, didn't you? Here's evidence, and be not faithless but believing.' And in that moment Thomas discovered a risen Lord who's not only alive but knew the very thoughts that Thomas had been thinking (see John 20:24-27).

And if tonight I speak to somebody not yet a Christian, and you say, 'The evidence isn't enough', and you want evidence, well, be bold enough to say it, would you? And if you must say it, say it into thin air: 'I would believe if . . .' But be careful what you say. You'd better be honest and mean it when you say, 'If I had the evidence, I would believe', because the Lord hears you right this very moment and knows your thoughts. If you are honest and wanting genuine evidence, he will supply it. He may not do it the way you think he'll do it, but he will do it. 'For they that seek me shall find me,' said the Saviour (Matt 7:7).

'Because you have seen, you believe, Thomas. Blessed are those that haven't seen, yet have believed' (20:29). If we had to *see* some great miracle, then blind people would never get saved, would they? There's a something more reliable than sight, and that is the conscience and the heart and the communication of God's Spirit directly to our hearts. And when he gives us the evidence, we shall know it.

Do you dare seek it sincerely? For our Lord says, 'If you seek me, you shall find me.'

## The Deity of Christ in Incarnation

There is no more exalted or more awesome topic that is possible for the human mind to contemplate than the question of the blessed and Holy Trinity. In studying the Trinity we are not studying so much what God has said, though of course we are extremely interested in everything that God has said. Nor are we concerned exactly with what God has done, though of course studying the Trinity will involve us in much consideration of what God has done. But in studying the Trinity we are being allowed to peer into the very heart of God, to consider what God is in himself. It is altogether a mark of his extraordinary grace that he should allow the likes of us to peer into and consider and discuss what God is in his very self.

### *So far in our studies*

When we began our meditation last night, we observed that our knowledge of the Trinity is only possible because God, in his superb grace and condescension, has chosen to reveal himself to us. He has done so most splendidly, first and foremost, in sending his dear, beloved Son—his one and only Son—to communicate, to express, to reveal to us what God is in himself.<sup>1</sup>

Secondly, God has done this to reveal what he is in himself by sending the Holy Spirit in the name of the Lord Jesus, as he did at Pentecost, to abide with us and to be in all those who trust the Saviour. So not only has Christ declared what God is, but the Holy Spirit has been sent to be within the believer, to help the believer grasp what Christ has revealed about the Holy Trinity, so that we are not left to our own devices, for which we thank God.

Let us secretly in our hearts at this very moment, as we begin our study, praise God for the Holy Spirit. God the Spirit, knowing all the deep things of God, has come to reside within the believer so that we may know the things that are freely given to us of God. Otherwise, and without him, we would grasp nothing.

### *The Son of the Father*

On our last occasion we looked at and listened to the Son of God incarnate. We listened to his inspired apostles who had the authority to tell us all that he said, and we listened to our Lord telling us what he was before he became human, before he became incarnate. So when we are thinking of him as what he was, we are not yet involved in thinking about his manhood and the question of how, being God, he could simultaneously become man; because before his

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<sup>1</sup> The series was originally seven talks, but the audio of the second, 'The Pre-Incarnate Son of God', is not available. The summary noted herein provides the main points covered in that talk.

incarnation he wasn't man. There was a time when the Son of God was not human. What was he then?

We learnt of his eternal existence from the opening words of John's Gospel: 'In the beginning was the Word'. He existed with an eternal, timeless beginning—without beginning of life or end of days. We learnt that he was with the Father and therefore, in some sense, distinct from the Father. But he was with the Father, which indicates that he enjoyed with the Father an intimate, living, glorious and marvellous fellowship with the Father. He was that eternal life that was with the Father for the Father's eternal enjoyment.

#### *Fellowship in the Son*

We learnt from that same clause of Scripture that God—the supreme God, the Holy Trinity—is not a monolith but is a fellowship, a communion. And our hearts were very warmed when we later read that this life has been manifested, so says John in his Epistles, for this very purpose—that we might have fellowship with God: 'Surely our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ' (1 John 1:3). It is a thing to be pondered, my fellow believers that, as we sit or stand here on this planet this evening we can, and do, have fellowship in the very intimate things of God. We have fellowship with the Father. We share with God the Father this eternal life that is his Son.

#### *The one true God*

Then we were told that the Word 'was God'. Though the Word can be viewed as distinct from the Father, yet we must try to apprehend that there are not two Gods; there are not three Gods; there is only one God. For the Word of God—the Son of God—has and shares the very basic essential life and being of God. The Son is as much God as God the Father is, and that is true also of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is as much God as the Son is or as the Father is—all three persons of the Godhead being equally God.

### **Introduction: the deity of Christ in incarnation**

Now tonight in our meditation we must move forward to consider what happened when the Word, who eternally existed and was with God and was God 'became flesh', as the Bible puts it, took to himself humanity and became a human being (John 1:14).

This we can say at once, that it certainly happened! Verily, God though he was, he became truly human. He became a real man, not a pretend man, not just superficially man, not just looking like man; he became thoroughly human. He was made, says the Bible, in all points like as we human beings are, except for this only—except for sin (see Heb 4:15). He was truly human.

But if he became truly human then what, we ask, did that do with his deity? And the Bible's answer that we're going to consider this evening is that he remained God to the full extent; just as ever he was God. The Bible says, 'The Word became flesh'. Notice it does not say that the Word became flesh and ceased to be God, or that the Word suddenly changed and became something different from what it was and ceased to be God. No, the Word, being God, became human.

Now that raises a problem in many people's minds, does it not? Even the truest believer will sometimes wonder how it could possibly be that our blessed Lord could really be God and man simultaneously. For instance, Psalm 121:4, talking of God the Father, says, 'Behold, he who keeps Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep.' So God doesn't go to sleep, (mercifully, for he it is that looks after us and cares for us and keeps us) and yet we're told in the Gospels, for instance in Luke 8, 'That presently when Christ said, "Let's cross the lake to the other side," they took him in the boat as he was and, as he sailed, he fell asleep' (vv. 22–23). If God neither slumbers nor sleeps, how can our Lord fall asleep in a boat, if he were simultaneously God? Or again, the famous verse that says, 'the everlasting God, the Lord, the Creator of the ends of the earth, he does not faint or grow weary' (Isa 40:28). What a marvellous thing it is when we come to our Father, wearied with life and its toils and its troubles and its labours and its works and its problems, and we wait on the Lord who reminds us that the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth, he doesn't faint, neither is weary! And yet, John 4:6 tells us that, 'Jesus, being wearied with his journey, sat by the well at Sychar in Samaria.' God doesn't grow weary, so how could Jesus Christ our Lord be weary, if he was simultaneously God?

These then are some of the questions that arise as we consider this wonderful mystery. I'm going to say, therefore, that I'm not going to try to solve the problem, or even to comment on it at any length. We'll reserve that to a later session in our series. What I want to do is to show that when our Lord became flesh, when the Word became flesh—became a man, Scripture asserts and makes it abundantly and unmistakably clear that he remained what he always was, not only in eternity past, but here in this life. He was and remained God.

### **Fully God, having become man**

So we shall tonight look at the facts and the Scriptures that tell us this: that in his life on earth, Jesus is said to be God; in his resurrection, he is hailed as God; in his ascension to glory, without ceasing to be human yet is he acknowledged as God. And when he comes again, we shall greet him, says Paul to Titus, 'As our great God and Saviour' (2:13). We shall see him, that is Jesus Christ—our great God and Saviour. The New Testament will add that Jesus Christ, who came according to the flesh after the tribe of Judah in Israel, nevertheless is God overall, blessed forevermore (Rom 1:1; 9:5).

This then I wish to emphasise, that not only in eternity past was it true of him, but that the man, Jesus Christ, become flesh, never ceased to be God. Tomorrow, God willing, we shall consider the other side: that he became truly human. We shall begin to think how, being God, he could become a real man.

### ***Rightly interpreting Philippians 2***

First let me come to a false explanation, a false solution to the problem that we have posed. How could Christ, being really a man, simultaneously be God? There is a solution offered. It is a very common solution to this problem, and I want to make abundantly clear that it is completely false. Only it seems to some people to be convincing because this explanation, they claim, is based on Scripture.

So now turn to your Bibles, if you will. It will help to keep you awake. There's an advantage in having to turn the pages of the Bible and this, after all, is a study of the Bible. This is the Epistle to the Philippians and chapter 2. It's a very well-known passage, but we must give special attention to its terms: 'Have this mind in you which was also in Christ Jesus who, being [or existing] in the form of God, counted it not robbery to be on an equality with God, but made himself of no reputation.' Or at least 'no reputation' is what the good old King James, the Authorised Version, will say if you have that in front of you. 'Being in the form of God, nevertheless, he made himself of no reputation' (2:5-7).

#### *A wrong interpretation of the word*

Now a little Greek to season the food. The word here that is translated 'made himself of no reputation' is a very simple word in Greek. It simply means 'emptied'. He emptied himself. It's the plain, straightforward meaning of a very simple Greek word. Of course the translators, when they came across this phrase that tells us that our blessed Lord emptied himself, paused to think, 'Whatever could that mean?'

'He existed in the form of God, and thought it not robbery to be equal with God, but emptied himself and became a man.'

'What does it mean,' they said to themselves, 'that he emptied himself?'

So the translators of the Authorised Version decided it meant that he humbled himself and made himself of no reputation, which is a very good translation, and that is true indeed. But here comes the false interpretation that I warned you of, so do notice it's false. There are people, and have been multitudes of them, who when faced with this question of how Jesus Christ can be both God and man, say, 'Ah, but look what it says, "He emptied himself."'

Emptied himself of what?

'He emptied himself,' they say, 'of his divine attributes and simply emptied them, put them away and thus became man, and while he was man he no longer possessed his divine attributes.'

In other words, he wasn't God; for if you take away God's attributes, God ceases to exist. This false interpretation gained much currency, particularly in theological circles. Do be warned: it is not true. If Christ, being the Word of God and equal with God, emptied himself of divine attributes, I repeat, he would no longer be God. You can't be God and yet have no divine attributes.

#### *The right interpretation of the word*

What is the right interpretation? The right interpretation is to take the words simply as they stand. He didn't empty himself of anything. What he did was, 'he emptied himself'. That is, 'he poured out himself'. Ah, that's another thing altogether, isn't it? He poured himself out into a life of a servant that he might serve others; he poured himself out in obedience to his Father. He poured himself out to the point of death, and that is the death of the cross (2:5-8). As it said in Isaiah the prophet, 'He poured out his soul unto death' (53:12).

Oh, what a marvellous thing that is! Pause in our study just for a moment to let your heart turn in worship to the Lord—he for whom all things are made and by whom all things are made. All things are made to serve him in the countless, unnumbered galaxies of ten thousand times ten thousand billion of stars. Oh, what a story this is! He emptied himself,



poured himself out, for God his Father of course, but also for us. Don't you find your heart responding right now, this very moment, 'Oh, how could it be, my Lord and God, that you should empty yourself out for me?'

We are used to tracing these stages of his self-humbling, the stoop that he took. Oh, let's enjoy it and not just use this Scripture to prove a false theory wrong! Let's enjoy the positive side. What a stoop it was: 'existing in the form of God, he thought it not robbery to be equal with God.' Or as that might be translated, 'considered that being equal with God was not a reason why he should grasp everything for himself.' You know there are some men who, once they become dictators of their country and have all the power in their hand, regard it as the opportunity to grasp everything for themselves. He, being equal with God, didn't count equality with God as a reason for grasping everything for himself but the very reverse. Instead of grasping for himself, he poured himself out.

*He became a servant, a man, and obeyed*

The first step of humility was to become a servant. Notice that, won't you? The first step was not being a man; the first step was *becoming* a servant. And he whose it was to command, obeyed as a servant and served. And you may think of it this way: it was certainly a vast stoop for God to become a servant, but then angels are servants, aren't they? And angels are higher than men. Gabriel and Michael and company, they have a notion that you are somewhat lower than they are: 'made a little lower than the angels' (Ps 8:5). And yet the vast angels who are mighty and excel in power, they are servants. When our Lord humbled himself and poured himself out, he was not content simply to be a servant, for angels are that, but he took on himself 'the form of a man'. And men are lower than angels, aren't they?

Verily God, yet become truly human,  
Lower than angels, to die in our stead<sup>2</sup>

'And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient'. Not all men obey, do they? The great Augustus Caesar, emperor of the Roman world—emperor of the world he considered himself—he wasn't given to obeying anybody. Man though he was, he regarded it as his right to command. And yet our Lord, being a man, humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, and then even that wasn't a hero's death. Your Lord didn't die surrounded by admiring onlookers, marvelling at the courage of his hero's death. No, indeed not. The death he died was the death of the cross with all its shame and the curse of God's law and the mockery of his creatures.

He poured himself out, but the glory of it is who he was. Who was it, I ask, who poured himself out like that? And the Bible's answer is that he who poured himself out like that was God, eternal God, who never ceased to be God. It was God who thus gave himself. What a story it is!

So now let us look at a few Scriptures that state explicitly that when Christ was here on earth, he was fully God.

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<sup>2</sup> H. D'Arcy Champney (1854–1942), 'Jesus our Lord, with what joy we adore Thee'.

### ***The fullness bodily—Colossians 2:9***

The first Scripture I appeal to is the Epistle to the Colossians and chapter 2: ‘For in him [that is, in Christ] dwells all the fulness of the Godhead bodily, and in him you are made full, who is the head of all principality and power’ (vv. 9–10).

‘In him dwells all the fulness of the Godhead’, but in case we were tempted to think that was true of him in his pre-incarnate state, but wasn’t true of him when he took a body and lived on earth, the apostle adds: ‘In him dwells all the fulness of the Godhead *bodily*’. He was truly God and fully God.

### ***God dwelling among us—John 1:14***

Or come back once more to the Gospel of John:

The Word became flesh, and dwelt among us (and we beheld his glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father), full of grace and truth. (1:14)

It’s a lovely verse; we know it well. But many scholars, and I among them, believe that when John uses the verb ‘dwelt among us’, he is deliberately using it so that it shall act as an allusion to the book of Exodus, for the verb is an unusual verb to be used in this context. It means of course, that he dwelt among us: ‘The Word became flesh and dwelt among us’. But the word it uses reminds scholars, at least, of that tent that God commanded Moses and the Israelites to build for him as a sanctuary for him to dwell in.

They made the tabernacle in the course of their journey from Egypt to Canaan, and with great excitement, eagerness and interest the historian records how they built it. The women worked the wool and the skins and they made the curtains, and the men worked the woodwork and the gold. They made it all exactly as God had said and as Moses had commanded. They brought it to Moses, and Moses inspected all the material, and then he erected it. And when they had done so, then we are told that the glory of God descended and filled the tabernacle (see Exod 25–40).

I wonder if you can imagine it. Can you visualise it and see all those thousands of Israelites: the men with their hands a bit calloused now with hard skin where they’ve been doing all that work, and the women seeing the curtains that they made? All is now put into place with trepidation and awe and wonder. And they see the very glory of God and the cloud of his presence come and fill that tabernacle and dwell among them! ‘It was like that,’ says John, ‘when we saw the blessed Lord Jesus, and it dawned on us who he was—the one and only Son of the Father. And he came and dwelled in a human body and we saw his glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.’

Now consider the words, ‘he was the glory of God’. As the Epistle to the Hebrews puts it: ‘God has spoken unto us in his Son, who is the effulgence of his glory’, meaning the outshining, the radiance of his glory (see Heb 1:2–3). Just as a sunbeam is of the same substance as the sun, so was the Son of God of the same substance as the Father and was able to tell out his glory.

***In the bosom of the Father—John 1:18***

John 1:18 adds, 'No man has seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has declared him', meaning he has expounded him, told him out fully. But notice what he is called: 'the one and only Son who is in the bosom of the Father'. When we read those words, he's 'in the bosom of the Father', we shouldn't think of a place. Where is he? What place is he in? 'Oh, he's in the bosom of the Father.' No, it is, as in English, a metaphorical term meaning that the one and only Son of the Father ever dwelt in intimate, personal, immediate relationship with the Father. He dwelt in personal, immediate communion with the Father, in such intimate communion with the Father that you could say he was in the bosom of the Father. Dwelling in the bosom of the Father, knowing the Father's heartbeat, so to speak, and all the secrets of the heart and being of God, he came down here in human form and expounded God to the full. Marvellous, is it not? But let's go further.

***Making himself equal with God—John 5***

Let's turn over to John 5 to see now what the Lord himself says about himself. John has told us that our blessed Lord has healed a man on the Sabbath day, and the Jews are accusing him of breaking the Sabbath, and therefore our Lord answered them:

Jesus answered them, 'My father is working even until now, and I work.' For this cause therefore the Jews sought the more to kill him, because not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but also called God his own Father, making himself equal with God. (vv. 17–18)

You'll notice that this is an accusation hurled at Christ by Christ's enemies. They are telling us that, in their estimation, this Jesus made himself equal with God because he called God not only Father but his own Father, claiming to be related to God in a special way. He said that God was his own Father; that he was indeed 'Son of God'. This, they held, was blasphemy on the part of our Lord, and they sought to kill him.

Therefore his enemies are witness to the fact that when he was here on earth he did claim equality with God. Of course the Jews' concept was that, in claiming to be equal with God, he was setting himself up as a competitor, so to speak, with God—another God—so that there are now two Gods. That they held to be blasphemous. But our Lord, in claiming to be equal with the Father, is not claiming to be independent of the Father, not another God distinct from the Father. Listen to what he says, 'Verily, I say unto you, the Son can do nothing of himself but only what he sees the Father doing. What things so ever he does, the Son does also' (v. 19).

***A question of relationship***

Pause now with me, if you will. Have you got the place in your Bible, and you see what our Lord is saying? He says the Son can do nothing of himself. 'From himself' is the literal translation. He does simply what he sees the Father doing. In this, our Lord is saying he is not independent. He is in fact asserting that he does nothing *from* himself. He simply does what he sees the Father doing. We ponder that. It will be important when we come to sum up our understanding of the Trinity. The Son of God is equal with the Father but not independent of

the Father. Secondly, it is always the Father within the Godhead who takes the initiative. The Son doesn't take the initiative, nor the Holy Spirit either. It's the Father who takes the initiative. Just ponder with me a moment these very terms: Father and Son. Two persons in the Trinity, and the Bible calls one of them 'Father' and it calls the other one 'Son'. Think that through in your mind.

Notice what it doesn't call them. It doesn't say it's 'brother' and 'brother', does it? It's 'Father' and 'Son', and the two terms are not interchangeable. For instance, you will find the Scripture saying 'The Father sent the Son to be the Saviour of the world' (1 John 4:14). You will never read that the Son sent the Father, will you? Our blessed Lord, the Son of God, obeyed the Father. You will never find it said that the Father obeyed the Son. Let's ponder that, and we shall come back to it on another occasion.

Here is our Lord telling us of the relationship between the Son and the Father. He's claiming to be equal with God; he's just as much God as the Father is God. But within the persons of the Trinity there is this relationship, and the Father is the Father. He takes the initiative and the Son does act, not from himself, but he does whatever he sees the Father doing. That's interesting, isn't it? We must ponder that and pray about that. Here is our Lord telling us of relations within the Trinity.

#### *Whatever the Father does*

But unless you should think, or anybody else should think, that he is less than the Father, look what he goes on to say. He says, 'For what things so ever the Father does, these does the Son also *in like manner*' (John 5:19). Do consider what that means. Whatever the Son sees the Father doing, the Son does it (as well as the Father doing it), and the Son does it *in like manner*. You just imagine that. Does the Father cause the sun 'to rise on the godly and the ungodly' according to according to Matthew (5:45)? Well then the Son of God causes the sun to rise. Is God Creator? Then the Son is Creator. Whatever he sees the Father doing, he doesn't only do 'also himself', but he does in exactly the same way and to the same extent. How could he do that if he were not God himself?

In the verses that follow, our blessed Lord tells us how the Father has committed to him the divine functions in two respects. First, 'As the Father has life in himself, so has he given to the Son to have life in himself, so that the Son is able to give life to whomsoever the Son wills' (John 5:21). And then, 'The Father judges no man, but has committed all judgment to the Son that all should honour the Son as they honour the Father' (vv. 22-23).

Let's pause again. Have you got that? The Son does what he sees the Father doing. The Father has given him life in himself, so that he can give life to whomsoever he will, and he is the judge. Ponder it, my dear brother, my sister. When you came to Christ for forgiveness and received forgiveness and eternal life from him, from whom were you receiving it? Does it matter to you who he was?

Well you say, 'Of course it matters. How could he give me life, eternal life—the very life of God—if he were not God himself?'

Amen. That's how it is.

You say, 'He's given me spiritual life.'

Yes, as he said, 'The hour is coming, and now is, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God; and they that hear, shall live' (5:25).

And you say, 'Mr Preacher, I know what that is. I once was dead in trespasses and in sins, and I came to the blessed Lord Jesus. I didn't know much about him then, but I trusted him, and he gave me life! I feel the throbbings of eternal life grow stronger as the days go by.'

Yes, he did give you life, but ponder who he must be to do it. He does it because the Father has given him to have life in himself, just like the Father has.

You say, 'Yes, and I tell you what's more, he's given me life not only here, but life eternally.'

Read that lovely verse, 'He that hears my word, and believes on him that sent me, has everlasting life and shall not come into judgment, but is passed from death unto life' (5:24). You believe it, of course, but how can this Jesus tell you what the outcome of the final judgment is going to be? How can he so confidently assert that, 'He that hears my word and believes on him that sent me has everlasting life and shall not come into condemnation?' How can he say what's going to happen at the final judgment? And the answer is, because the Father doesn't judge anybody. He's committed all judgment to the Son, 'that all should honour the Son as they honour the Father' (v. 23).

Oh, shout 'Hallelujah!' in your heart, even if you're afraid to do it out loud in public! You have the word of God incarnate. You have the word of the final judge. There is no appeal against his judgment. All judgment is given to the Son. Think what he must know to judge everybody, and all the secrets of every human heart of everyone who has ever lived on this earth or ever shall live. He would need to know it all to be *just* as judge, wouldn't he? How can he do it? Because he is God incarnate, and you'll rest tonight easy in your bed, I trust, though the final judgment were to be tomorrow, because you have the word of the incarnate Son of God that if you trust him and believe him that sent him, you have eternal life and shall not come into condemnation.

### ***Before Abraham was—John 8***

Look, if you will, at another Scripture, this time in the same gospel and chapter 8:

'Verily, verily I say unto you, if a man keep my word, he shall never see death.' The Jews said unto him, 'Now we know that you have a devil. Abraham is dead and the prophets; and you say, "If a man keep my word, he shall never taste of death." Are you greater than our father, Abraham who is dead? And the Prophets are dead: who do you make yourself out to be?' Jesus answered, 'If I glorify myself, my glory is nothing: it is my Father who glorifies me . . . ' Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day; and he saw it, and was glad. The Jews therefore said unto him, 'You are not yet fifty years old and have you seen Abraham?' Jesus said unto them, 'Verily, verily, I say unto you, before Abraham was, I am.' (vv. 51–54, 56–58)

He does not say, you will notice, 'before Abraham was, I was', but 'before Abraham was, I am.' Our Lord is claiming absolute deity—timeless, eternal existence—as God: 'I am.' He's using a word that, in the Greek translation of the Old Testament, is used of God himself: 'I am God. There is none beside me. I am the first and the last. I am he,' says God, in Hebrew (Isa

45:5–6, 21). And when the Jews translated that passage into Greek, one hundred or more years before Christ was born, they translated God's phrase by the Greek words 'I am', so they have God saying, 'I am the first and the last, beside me there is no one else; I am.' And our Lord is quoting it when he says: 'Before Abraham was, *I am*.' He was standing there with his two feet on this ground, talking to the Jews, claiming to be the eternal God.

### *Shall not see death*

What comfort there is in this. Our Lord said, 'He that follows me, shall not see death' (8:51). That has had people worried sometimes. Some preachers say publicly, 'You know, if you're a real Christian, you wouldn't be afraid of death.' And we know what they mean, but it isn't true of course. When I hear preachers say that, I feel very wicked, and I'd like to take the preacher and put him in the middle of a twenty-acre field and let him hear a mad bull: head down, horns pointed, coming roaring at him behind at twenty miles an hour, and see whether the man feared death or not! I fancy, preacher though he was, that he wouldn't stop to think. Nature would take over, the old adrenalin would come on so powerfully that he'd be running across that field and jumping across the gate, however high it was!

Yes, because God has put into nature a fear of death. Of course we fear physical death, and our Lord is not saying that if you are a true believer, you won't fear physical death. What he's saying is, 'He that follows me shall not *see* death.'

How can he say it? Why because he is the eternal God, 'I am.' He existed before Abraham and before us. He exists eternally, and you have trusted him. If you are a believer, when you come to die, you'll feel the pain of death maybe (or not; it depends how it happens) but what Christ assures you is this: you'll not see death, for 'to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord' (2 Cor 5:8). It is to step out of time and immediately into eternity and to be with him who is your eternal God—the 'I am'—and know yourself to be forever with him, never to go out again. It matters, my dear friend, who this Jesus is, doesn't it? He is truly human, yet he is divine, and what he was as he walked this earth, so he was in his resurrection.

### ***Receiving worship and service***

As John comes to the end of his Gospel, he reports how Thomas at first doubted whether Jesus was alive at all. He couldn't bring himself to believe it and said, 'I must see the mark in his hands and the sword thrust in his side, else I won't believe' (20:25). The risen Lord appeared to him and said, 'Thomas, bring your finger and put it into the wound and your hand into my side, and be not faithless, but believing.' And Thomas, so overwhelmed with the reality of our Lord's resurrection and his omniscience, bowed at his feet and said, 'My Lord and my God,' and Jesus did not rebuke him (vv. 27–28). If Jesus were not God, then to accept Thomas' adoration would have been blasphemy, but our Lord accepted it. He was Thomas' Lord and God.

He is now exalted to the right hand of the Father. God has given him 'the name which is above every name'. That is not the name of 'Jesus' of course. The name which is above every name is 'Jehovah', and God has acknowledged the man Jesus as being Jehovah (see Phil 2). Yes, and at his second coming, how shall we greet him? Paul is exhorting Titus to train the

believers in Crete to be zealous for good works. He says, 'The grace of God would train you and teach you to be zealous for good works and to live a godly life. Please, do that while we wait for the appearing of the glory of . . .' now notice what the true translation is, not, '. . . of our great God and [in addition] our Saviour, Jesus Christ'; the true translation of that passage is simply this: 'We wait the appearing of the glory of our great God and Saviour.' And who is our great God and Saviour? He is none other than Jesus Christ (see Titus 2:11-13).

One day we've got to see our great God and Saviour, and when we see him, we shall remember, as we should remember now, that our great God and Saviour gave himself that he might purify to himself a special people, cleansed from all impurity and absolutely zealous for good works. And he who wrote those words, the Apostle Paul, showed us in his own life what the deity of Christ meant to him. To think that, for all his law keeping, he was a bankrupt sinner and on his way to perdition, and the very one he mocked and blasphemed and persecuted was none other than God incarnate—the Son of God—who hung upon a tree, cursed by God's law, to save Saul of Tarsus! He says, 'I've given up trusting my own righteousness, but I'll tell you, if you want to know, what my principle of living is. The life I live, well I live, yet in one sense not I, it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me' (see Gal 2:20).

How can we consider the Trinity without considering the deity of our blessed Lord? How can we consider the deity of our blessed Lord without feeling our hearts deeply and profoundly moved? If he is God, and he did this for me, how shall I not give him in return everything I am and have?

## [The Humanity of Christ](#)

This is now the third of our short series of meditations in which we are engaged in exploring, by the help of God's spirit, the limitless wonders and the glories of the Holy and blessed Trinity. We are privileged indeed, as creatures of clay, to be allowed and encouraged by the Lord to peer into what God is in himself; not merely what he has said and what he has done, but what he is in himself: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

### *So far in our studies*

In a previous meditation, we listened to the Word of God incarnate and to his authorized apostles as they told us what the Word of God was before ever he became incarnate. We learned of his eternal existence: 'In the beginning was the Word'. We learned of his eternal, intimate fellowship with the Father: 'and the Word was with God'. And we learned that 'the Word was God.' Though he can be regarded as distinct from the Father: for 'the Word was with God', yet at the same time we are told and must try to grasp that the Word was, and eternally is, equal with the Father in his being and in his essential nature—'the Word was God' (John 1:1).

In our next study, we turned therefore to consider what happened to the Word when 'the Word became flesh', and we noticed that the New Testament emphasises everywhere that though the Word became flesh, he did not cease to be God. He is called God in the days of his flesh here on earth. He is adored as God, for instance by Thomas, when he rose again from the dead (20:28). At his ascension, God saluted him with the words: '*Thy* throne'. He said to his beloved Son, 'Thy throne, O God, is forever and ever' (Ps 45:6; Heb 1:8). And when he comes again, according to Titus 2, we shall see the appearing of his glory, the glory of our blessed Lord, who is described there as 'our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ' (v. 13).

He is no less than God, though he became incarnate! He is, as Paul states it in Romans 9, he who came of the line of Israel according to the flesh and of the patriarchs, nonetheless, he is 'over all, God blessed forever' (v. 5). This is our Lord Jesus Christ.

### **God became human**

We follow this therefore with a study of our Lord's humanity, for the Word was 'made flesh' (John 1:14). Here is a superlative wonder that perhaps we shall never fully understand. The Word, who was God and never ceased to be God, took on himself humanity and became a man. To help us in our meditation, let's begin by reading a passage of Scripture from Hebrews 2:



For not unto angels did he subject the world to come, of which we speak, but one has somewhere testified saying, 'What is man that you are mindful of him, or the Son of Man that you visit him? You have made him a little lower than the angels; you have crowned him with glory and honour, and did set him over the works of your hands. You put all things in subjection under his feet'. For in that he subjected all things unto him, he left nothing that is not subject to him. But now we do not yet see all things subjected to him. But we see him who has been made a little lower than the angels, even Jesus, because of the suffering of death, crowned with glory and honour, that by the grace of God he should taste death for every man. For it became him, for whom are all things and through whom are all things, in bringing many sons unto glory, to make the author of their salvation perfect through sufferings. For both he that sanctifies and they that are sanctified are all of one: for which cause he is not ashamed to call them brethren, saying, 'I will declare your name unto my brethren. In the midst of the congregation will I sing your praise.' And again, 'I will put my trust in him.' And again, 'Behold I and the children which God has given me.'

Since then the children are sharers in flesh and blood, he also himself in like manner partook of the same; that through death he might bring to nought him that had the power of death, that is the devil; and might deliver all them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage. For verily not of angels does he take hold, but he takes hold of the seed of Abraham. Wherefore it behoved him in all things to be made like unto his brethren, that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For in that he himself has suffered being tempted, he is able to help those that are tempted. (vv. 5–18)

God use his words to lead our hearts in worship.

Let's begin our meditation by considering for a moment the utter un-changeability of the character of God. As God states it in Malachi 3:6, 'For I the LORD, change not; therefore, you sons of Jacob are not consumed.' What a blessed doctrine and a blessed fact this is, that God's character is utterly unchanging and unchangeable. On that unchangeability depends our salvation and our present and eternal bliss. We rightly sing in our response to the character of God:

Great is thy faithfulness, O God, my Father;  
There is no shadow of turning with thee;  
Thou changest not, thy compassions, they fail not;  
As thou has been, thou ever wilt be.  
Great is thy faithfulness!<sup>3</sup>

While, of course, the character of God is unchangeable, on the other hand we should remember that God is not a static God. God is a living God and because of his infinite power and life, mind and purpose, being the living God, he is constantly doing new things. I can tell you now that you'll never get bored with eternity, for God will always be doing new things. You can almost catch the excitement of the prophet Isaiah when, through him, God says,

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<sup>3</sup> Thomas O. Chisholm, 'Great is Thy Faithfulness' (1923).

'Behold, I will do a new thing. Now shall it spring forth; shall you not know it?' (43:19). Let's take a few examples of the new things that God has done.

### ***The God of new things***

There was a time when God wasn't a Creator, because he had not yet created. And when he became Creator and created this vast universe, including the angels, then it was a spectacularly new thing, and we are reliably told by Job that at the foundation of the universe, the morning stars couldn't contain themselves and sang for sheer joy, and the sons of God clapped their hands in amazement (38:7). What it would have been to be alive then, when the universe was new, and everywhere there was abundantly appearing the manifold wisdom and ingenuity of God.

This same universe is growing old. Some tell me the sun itself is running down. The Bible predicts that the world is but temporary. One day, it shall wax old and God shall wrap it up like a man wraps up a worn out pair of pyjamas and puts them in the bin (Heb 1:10–12). And then what? God is going to make a new heavens and a new earth, spectacularly different from this one!

And I think some of you are saying in your hearts, 'Go on, Mr Preacher, but for all that you're saying, God has already done something exceedingly new, for "if any man be in Christ, he is a new creation"' (2 Cor 5:17). And you say, 'I'm one of them! I am a new creation.' Yes, and the Lord has taught you a new song, hasn't he? He's the God that constantly loves to do new things.

But we are thinking now of the astonishing new thing he did that changed the face of the very Trinity when the Son of God, who hitherto had not been human, was made flesh. Let us not take it for granted as though it were something usual like the running of the eight o'clock bus. This is something to be mentioned with baited breath. As our Lord expounded it when he was talking to the Jews of the greater works that the Father would show him: 'Greater works than these shall he show the Son of Man that you all may marvel' (5:20). God forbid there should ever come a time when we can contemplate the incarnation of God the Son, the Word made flesh, without our hearts being stirred to wonder and to worship.

### ***Not just any creature***

Someone will say, 'But, theologically speaking ...' (Oh, these dear theologians, they sometimes get in the way, don't they?) And they will say, 'Doesn't it border on the unthinkable that God, as we define him, should become man? Such is the contrast between divinity and humanity, how could God become man? Is the very idea not a bit grotesque and incredible?'

But no, indeed it's not. If the doctrine were like a Hindu doctrine that God had become a cow or a bull or a donkey or something, that certainly would be incredible and grotesque. But that God should become man is not grotesque, for when God designed and created man, he created man in such fashion as man is the very thing that God could become. For man, we are told, was made in the image and likeness of God (Gen 1:26–27). And as God created man in

that way, God already had it in mind that, one day, his blessed and beloved Son would be able to become man.

That surely makes our hearts beat a little faster. What a wonderful thing man must be. Psalm 8 captures the wonder of it, as you will remember, when the psalmist thought of man. First of all he looked towards the skies, and he said, 'When I consider the sun, the moon and the stars that you have ordained, what is man that you are mindful of him? Or the son of man that you visit him?' (vv. 3–4).

#### *What is man?*

Have you never felt it? Have you never occasionally found a clear sky over our beloved Belfast or elsewhere and looked up into the sky to see the uncountable myriads of stars and galaxies beyond them and thought of yourself as a tiny infinitesimal speck, and felt yourself saying, 'What is man?' 'When I consider the moon and the stars, the works of thy fingers, Oh what is man?'

At that point in the psalm, you might have expected the poet to have gone off and said, 'Man? Well, man is a little speck, a worm of the dust and insignificant.' But he doesn't; he goes in the other direction: 'You have made him a little lower than the angels, you have crowned him with glory and honour. You have made him to have dominion over the works of your hands. You have put all things under his feet' (vv. 5–6). Man: God's great viceroy in this planet, and one day beyond it too! That was God's idea of man and, I repeat, the incarnation of the Son of God was not some sudden notion that God thought up to meet an emergency when man fell. It had always been in God's design that the Son of God should one day become man.

#### *If man will try to be God*

We cannot hide it from ourselves that man fell, can we? For man fell at the very beginning. Listen to the lie and slander and deception of the devil who counselled Adam and Eve that, if they really wanted to live, then they should turn their back upon the word of God and stretch out their hands and take the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil so they would be like God. And God would never be allowed to keep them down anymore (see Gen 3). This is man trying to be God.

Much of man's nobility has survived the fall. His powers of intellect, his ever-increasing understanding of the universe and how it works—these things are God's gifts, and we praise God for them. But man's foolish attempt to be God and to live independently of God has landed man in interminable and insoluble problems and turned life into a meaningless enterprise. For those who know no God, there is no hope—no ultimate meaning in living. When man succumbed to Satan's lie and in his folly sought to be God, then God's answer was this: 'Well, if man is destroying himself by trying to be God, I, God, will become man.' Oh, I like that! Here is God's unparalleled wisdom and his strategy.

#### *The seed of the woman*

You will remember that in the book of the Revelation we are given visions of what shall yet be when 'the man of sin' arrives on the scene. This will be the final harvest of the seed that Satan sowed in the garden of Eden when he suggested that man shall be God. What a

desperate tyranny that will turn out to be for this world when that great beast, that ruler of the earth, sitting in the temple of God, giving himself out to be God, tries to ape God and to be God at Satan's suggestion. But before John gives us the vision of that beast in chapter 13, he has another vision to give us in chapter 12 that gives the lie to all that follows.

John bids us see a great wonder in heaven: a woman with the stars beneath her feet. She is a woman with child. And we hear the voice saying that her child is destined to rule the nations with a rod of iron. I bid you for a moment to fix your eyes on that woman. You see she is with child and about to be delivered. Whose child is this? What child is it in that virgin's womb? And the answer is, of course, the one who is to rule the nations with a rod of iron. There's no doubt about who he is. He is 'the seed of the woman'—God's answer to Satan's lie that man should attempt to be God. This is God become human. Shall I restrain your hearts from silently giving praise and worship to God?

Verily God, yet become truly human,  
Lower than angels, to die in our stead.<sup>4</sup>

### ***A real human who learned***

We don't forget his deity, but we observe he was and is a real man: 'born of a woman, born under the law' (Gal 4:4). He was sent to the same school that all the followers of Moses had to be educated in. His birth was normal, surrounded by the pain that is normal in birth; it was his conception that was miraculous. Luke tells us that, 'Jesus advanced in wisdom and stature and in favour with God and men' (2:52). He grew; he was a real child, and he learned. What a sacred task that was that Mary and Joseph had, as doubtless they fulfilled the instruction of Deuteronomy to parents that they were to teach their children the word. When they came in, when they went out, when they rose up, when they sat down: it was the parents' charge and responsibility to teach the children holy Scripture (Deut 6:7).

Can you see it in that home at Nazareth—Mary and Joseph teaching the young lad his Scripture? He learned it. And when he came, at the beginning of his ministry to be tempted of the devil, the devil said, 'If thou be the Son of God, make these stones bread' (Matt 4:3). For him it was a real temptation, because he was Son of God and had the power to turn the stones into bread. It's never been a temptation to me, as you will understand. I've never been tempted to make stones bread. Satan could suggest it one thousand times; it wouldn't make a difference to me. I can't do it; he could. But he answered Satan's temptation, 'It is written . . .' He was taught his Scriptures in the home.

You say, 'How could it be that he had to learn anything if he's God incarnate?' We shall think about that, God willing, in our last study, but Scripture positively and explicitly tells us that though he was God incarnate yet he had to learn. Hebrews 5:8 reads in the older versions, 'Though he were a Son, yet learned he obedience' (KJV). That is a good translation but not as good as it could be. Because if you say, 'Though he were a Son', it might sound as if he were one son among many. But Hebrews here is talking about his unique sonship. It is better to translate it therefore: 'Son though he was', meaning: 'Son of God though he was, yet

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<sup>4</sup> H. D'Arcy Champney (1854–1942), 'Jesus our Lord, with what joy we adore Thee'.

he learned obedience by the things that he suffered.’ That doesn’t mean he learned to obey, but he learned what it cost to obey. And he did not learn it from his divine omniscience, but he learned by experience as a man in this ungodly world what obedience to the Lord can entail by way of suffering.

### *Joys and sorrows*

As a real man, a real child, he grew and he learned. Among other things, he learned a new joy of course. From time to time, we’re told that Jesus ‘rejoiced in spirit’ (Luke 10:21). His first miracle was done at a wedding breakfast where he made the wine that was better than any they’d had before. Joy? Yes, but then he learned sorrow too.

Of that Christmas carol that says, ‘the little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes’, I’m tempted to think it is sentimental nonsense. If he were a real child, I expect he did quite a lot of crying like normal children do. That is a healthy thing that children do. Certainly at later times, he wept, didn’t he? Remember his tears at Lazarus’ funeral. They were tears not only of grief at the corruption that now his friend Lazarus was in, but grief that the people questioned the love of Christ: ‘How could not this man who opened the eyes of the blind have saved his friend from dying, if he really had loved him?’ (John 11:37). He shed tears when he couldn’t at once answer the question of the problem of pain and suffering.

Hebrews speaks of him, ‘who in the days of his flesh, after he had offered up prayers and supplications with strong crying and tears unto him that was able to save him from death’ (5:7). Mighty Son of God he was and yet truly human, ‘with strong crying and tears’. He cried to him that was able to save him from death. He was no Stoic but a real, living human being who longed for company, as we humans do. He said to his apostles at the Last Supper, ‘You are those that have continued with me in my temptations, and so I appoint you thrones’ (Luke 22:28–30). That is marvellous generosity, but so did he value their friendship and company. And whose heart has not been moved to hear him come from his agonising prayers and say to his apostles, ‘What, could you not watch with me?’ (Matt 26:40). Here speaks a true, real human being.

### ***Two words concerning God’s purposes***

Why did he have to go through all this suffering as a human being? Let me repeat: his life was not all suffering; there was much joy in his living. But in the end suffering loomed large, didn’t it? We come back to that Scripture, which we read at length in Hebrews 2, and I ask you to notice two of the verbs that are used in the course of that chapter. ‘It became him, for whom are all things, and through whom are all things, in bringing many sons to glory, to make the author of their salvation perfect through sufferings’ (v. 10). And the other verb that is used: ‘Wherefore it behoved him in all things to be made like unto his brethren’ (v. 17).

### *It was fitting*

When it says ‘it became him’, it is talking about God the Father, ‘for whom are all things and by whom are all things’ — who is of infinite and unlimited power (Heb 2:10). You might think that, having unlimited power, he could do just as he pleased. Well, so he did have unlimited power, but God has observed what is *fitting*. It ‘became’ him — it ‘was fitting’, so ‘became’ in

that old English sense. Some man might say to a lady who's bought a new hat, 'You know that hat really becomes you', meaning: 'it suits you, it's fitting for you.' Or someone might say, 'Oh, that wasn't becoming', meaning 'that was not really good for you to do, that wasn't fitting to you.' So it was *fitting* for God. And your heart should miss a beat at that! When he has all power to do as he pleases, does God concern himself to do only what is fitting? Fitting in what sense and why? It was fitting for him 'in bringing many sons to glory, to make the author [the pioneer] of their salvation perfect through sufferings' (v. 10).

Note the scheme. God's intention is to bring many sons to glory. And I bid you think, because it's your glory the passage is talking about. God is intending, and has long since intended, to bring you to glory. I haven't the words for the glory he has for you! When John saw an angel in his vision, John fell at his feet. The angel said, 'You mustn't do that; I'm only a servant!' It is God's good pleasure to raise you above angels, and that you shall be conformed to the image of his Son and join his Son in the administration of the world to come and any other world there shall be. That was God's plan, to bring you to glory!

The question was, what was the fitting way to go about it? The only fitting way that God himself could think of was to provide them with a pioneer—the file leader—to go on in front and mark out the way and, in another sense, to be with them all the way. Because the way from earth to glory is not measured in miles; it is measured in experience: some joyful and some very painful. The only fitting thing that God could do was, not just to wave a wand and remove us from this world and seat us on thrones in the heavenlies all unprepared; he must school us on life's journey. And God knows the cost of it to you and to me.

'The only fitting thing I can do,' says God, 'is provide them with a file leader and to make him qualified to help them through sufferings.' The magnificence of God defies description. That God should become man that he might walk alongside you to glory and, knowing what you feel and what your pains are, be able to succour you and help you and maintain your faith and bring you through to glory! That was God's necessity. He had to do it the fitting way.

#### *It was a necessity*

Then Hebrews 2 talks about our Lord and says, 'Wherefore it *behoved* him in all things to be made like his brethren' (v. 17). And here the word is not 'fitting', but 'necessity'. It was a necessity upon him. You say, 'How could our Lord be under any necessity?' Well he wasn't under any necessity to redeem us. He could have stayed in his heaven, but once he put forth his hand to help us, then the very doing of that, the very beginning of the task, involved a necessity. 'For verily, he did not take hold of angels to help them; he took hold of the seed of Abraham' (v. 16). And the very fact he put forth his hand to do it meant there was no drawing back. The necessity was upon him 'in all things to be made like his brethren'.

'Since therefore the children were partakers of flesh and blood, he himself likewise took part of the same' (v. 14). What for? That he might die. It was necessary for him to die 'that he might destroy and disable him that had the power of death, that is the devil, and deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage' (vv. 14–15).

Oh, if you could, my brother, my sister, read the hearts of millions who still sit in darkness and the shadow of death with no hope beyond the grave! We have hope. The power

of Satan in this regard has been overcome. Death for us is no longer a dread finality; it is the anteroom to glory with the Saviour. This brings us again to the things that we have read in this chapter about our Lord's suffering and his death.

### *The Son prays to the Father in the garden*

Come with me to Gethsemane, take your shoes off your feet, and hear our Lord pray. Here are the mysteries of his being, in part, revealed, as the Son of God kneels on the ground and the stones cut into his kneecaps. He prays to the Father. We watch to see the relationship between Father and Son. (We shall have to remember it when we come to sum up our thoughts about the Trinity in our last study.) Listen to him pray: 'Abba, Father, all things are possible to you. Let this cup pass from me, nevertheless not what I will, but what you wilt' (Mark 14:36). A few words that are vastly full of meaning. 'Abba' is the child's word to his Father; 'Abba, Father!'

'You love me, Father! You loved me before the foundation of the world. By your love, I implore you, let this cup pass from me. Abba, Father, all things are possible to you. All things are within your power. By your power, I pray, let this cup pass from me.'

Oh, my brother, my sister, pray don't say that this was histrionics—just play-acting and he didn't mean what he said. These were the 'strong cryings and tears'. But he added without pause, 'nevertheless, not my will, but yours be done.'

You should remember Matthew's account, for that will help us see that this obedience of the Son was not forced; it was completely free. Our Lord rebuked Peter for taking the sword and warned him that they who take the sword shall perish with the sword. 'Or do you imagine,' said our Lord to Peter, 'that I couldn't now call to my Father and, if called, he would give me twelve legions of angels?' (26:53). So said our Lord.

We must take care not to deny what he says. He could have called and, if he had called, his Father would have given him what he asked. So he said. It is not for me and my little theology to deny what he said. But he didn't call, and the Father didn't send, and he gives us the reason why he didn't call. He said to his apostles, 'But if I called and the Father sent them, how then should the Scripture be fulfilled that thus it must be?' (v. 54). What an example the blessed Lord is to us, even from Gethsemane. He could have called; he didn't. Why? It was because of his loyalty of obedience to the word of God.

### ***The Son of God and the atonement***

We come to the atonement itself, and if ever there is a place in our Lord's life where we see perfectly clearly that he must have been both God and man, it is when he was making atonement for sin. For had he been merely man, how could he have borne the sins of the world in his body? How could a mere man, however just he was, bear the penalty of the sins of the world? No, he was God. For if he wasn't God, my dear fellow believer, if Jesus was not God when he hung upon that cross, then you're not saved to start with. For the sacrifice of a mere man, one among the millions, could not have sufficed. He was the Son of God, who in Paul's words, 'loved me and gave himself for me' (Gal 2:20).

See the wonder of his cross, for he was God the Son and, in that cross, was revealing the very heart of God to men! Oh, what a wonder. Only one who was himself God could do it.

'God commends his love towards us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us' (Rom 5:8). We remember the words of the king in the parable. He had yet one son. He said, 'I will send my son; surely they will reverence my son' (Matt 21:37). But they took God's Son and nailed him to a tree! And God? He loved them still, and we've been reconciled to God by the death of his Son (Rom 5:10).

But then he was man as well. For how could he be our representative if he weren't man? He stood in for us, all sinless himself. He indicated that symbolically when he came to John's baptism and was baptised. John said, 'Oh, Lord, it's not for me to baptise you. You ought to baptise me', but our Lord insisted (Matt 3:13-15). Why? Not that he had any sins to confess; he was utterly sinless. But he had come to stand with sinful man and identify himself with sinful man. Indicating what his mission would be, he went down into the mud of Jordan and stood shoulder by shoulder with the prostitutes and the tax-collectors and the filthy and abominable, as well as the proud, self-righteous men. He had come to identify himself with mankind. Oh, the marvel of it. Not man trying to be God, but God becoming man and that man identifying himself with us!

How else could our sins be reckoned to him? How else could his death be graciously accounted by God as our death? Because the person who believes in Christ becomes one with him, blessedly united with the man Christ Jesus. Shout 'hallelujah' in your hearts for the wonder of the humanity along with the Godhood of Christ!

#### *A human still*

And in resurrection (what a lovely story it is) he's a man still on the other side of the grave. But when he appeared in the upper room at first the apostles were frightened. They thought it was a ghost or a spirit or something, and he said, 'Don't be afraid. It is I, myself. Handle me and see. A spirit has not flesh and bone as you see me have' (Luke 24:39).

I love those words: 'It is I, myself.' How do we recognise him? How can we see it's he himself and not just a spirit? Well he says, 'It is I, myself. Look, I have a body!' To be 'I, myself', he had to have a body. He became man; he's not ceased to be man. 'Handle me and see. A spirit has not flesh and bone as you see me have.' In resurrection, he remains human, and one day you're going to have 'a body like his glorious body' (Phil 3:21). It will be a human body: changed, glorified with different powers, but a human body, like his.

And so it was at his ascension. Who shall describe to us or explain the wonder of it? He's gone into heaven as a man! That the Son of God should return to heaven and sit on his Father's throne is in a sense nothing to be wondered at. But that the man, Jesus of Nazareth, should have risen into heaven, above the angels, principalities, powers, mights and dominions, and sit at the very right hand of God, what new thing is this? I think the angels, Michael and Gabriel, haven't got over it yet! How astonished they were when they saw the man, Jesus, the Son of God, put himself lower than the angels for the suffering of death. Well I'm not sure they've got over the astonishment at seeing that same Jesus of Nazareth raised above them, and a man seated on the throne of God.

The fact is, whether we can explain it or not, Christ has carried manhood into the very heart of the Trinity. Oh, what a *new* thing it is! And when he comes again, he shall be this same Jesus. As the disciples stood watching him go into heaven, they had known him.



They'd felt him, and he had flesh and bones; he was not just a spirit. He was really human with a human body. The angels said as they saw him go into heaven, 'Why look you to heaven? This same Jesus shall so come in like manner as you have seen him go into heaven' (Acts 1:11).

Let's pause then for a moment from our detailed thinking and contemplate this blessed person. And, as we see him in the days of his flesh, in his agony and blood at Calvary and in resurrection and ascension, let's ask with the hymn writer, 'Who is he?'

Who is he in yonder stall,  
At whose feet the shepherds fall?  
Tis the Lord! O wondrous story!  
Tis the Lord! The King of glory!  
At his feet, we humbly fall,  
Crown him, crown him, (Saviour) Lord of all!

Who is he on yonder tree,  
Dies in grief and agony?  
Tis the Lord! O wondrous story!  
Tis the Lord! The King of glory!  
At his feet we humbly fall.  
Crown him Saviour, Lord of all.

Who is he that from his throne,  
Rules throughout the worlds alone?  
Tis the Lord! O wondrous story!  
Tis the Lord! The King of glory!  
At his feet we humbly fall,  
Crown him Saviour, Lord of all!<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Adapted from B. R. Hanby, 'Who is He in yonder stall' (1866).

## The Deity and Ministry of the Holy Spirit

We have been considering the three persons of the Trinity. That the Father is God is so obvious in the whole of Scripture that we needn't take the time to read the numerous verses that state this glorious fact. We have spent our previous sessions considering the Son of God (or the Word of God) and have noticed in particular how Scripture points out that before he became flesh, before his incarnation, he was not only with God but was God. Because this is so important, we spent one of those sessions discovering from Scripture that in the time that he lived here on earth, though man, he was no less God, just as he always had been. In resurrection and ascension and at his coming again, he is said in Scripture to be God and presented as God.

Then we spent our last session looking at his humanity. The New Testament asserts his humanity as clearly and constantly as it asserts his deity. It asserts that he was a real man, made in all points like as we are, apart from sin. We didn't stay to discuss the problem that that raises in many people's minds, namely: How can Jesus Christ be both God and simultaneously man? But, God willing, tomorrow we must discuss that particular problem.

Now we turn to the third member of the Holy Trinity. We shall see in this study that the Holy Spirit is not an impersonal power or force. The Holy Spirit is God and as equally God as the Father and the Son.

### **The Holy Spirit**

So let us introduce ourselves to the topic by reading in the Gospel by John:

But these things have I spoken unto you that when their hour is come you may remember them, how that I told you. And these things I said not unto you from the beginning, because I was with you. But now I go unto him that sent me; and none of you asks me, 'Where are you going?' But because I have spoken these things unto you, sorrow has filled your heart. Nevertheless, I tell you the truth; it is expedient for you that I go away: for if I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you; but if I go, I will send him unto you. And he, when he is come, will convict the world in respect of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment: of sin, because they believe not on me; of righteousness, because I go to the Father, and you behold me no more; of judgment, because the prince of this world has been judged. I have yet many things to say unto you, but you cannot bear them now. Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he shall guide you into all the truth: for he shall not speak from himself; but whatever things he shall hear, these shall he speak: and he shall declare unto you the things that are to come. He shall glorify me: for he shall take of mine and shall declare it unto you. All that the

Father has is mine: therefore, I said that he will take what is mine, and declare it unto you.  
(16:4–15)

Now I must make you work very hard. Perhaps you thought I had made you work hard on previous occasions, but if you have thought so then tonight you will decide I have worked you harder, because I must ask you now to turn to a whole succession of verses of Scripture and actually to read them with me in the course of our study. Perhaps you think I'm a little bit like one of Pharaoh's taskmasters, but our Lord Jesus himself told us that we are not to work so much for the food that perishes, but we are to work as hard as we possibly can for the food that endures unto eternal life (see John 6:27). So I have our Lord's permission to make you work hard.

### ***The Holy Spirit is personal***

So now we begin our first selection, and these Scriptures will tell us that the Holy Spirit is a person. Many Scriptures of course talk of the power that he exerts in various ways, but the Holy Spirit himself is not just a force or an impersonal power; he is a person.

#### *Another Comforter: John 14:16–18*

Just as the Father and the Son are persons, so the Holy Spirit is a person. How do we know that? Well let me ask you to read from John's Gospel where the Lord Jesus says,

And I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another comforter, that he may be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth. (14:16–17)

That is a lovely title of the Holy Spirit. He is 'the other comforter'. But that immediately asks us to enquire: If the Holy Spirit is another comforter, who was the first comforter? And the first comforter, of course, was our blessed Lord himself. And he was about to leave them, as he was telling his disciples on this occasion (v. 3), but he wouldn't leave them orphans (v. 18). He wouldn't leave them worse off than they were before when he was with him, for he would send another comforter, a comforter like himself who would be with them.

The very fact that the Holy Spirit is the second comforter shows us at once that he is a person just as our Lord was. For if our Lord went away from his apostles and only sent in his place an impersonal force, then certainly they would have been in a worse state than they were when the Lord Jesus was with them. But, no, he is the other comforter. In that sense, like the Lord Jesus, he is a person.

#### *To convict the world: John 16:8–11*

Then we noticed in that passage that we read from John 16: 'And he, when he is come, will convict the world in respect of sin and of righteousness and of judgment' (v. 8). The Holy Spirit's ministry, said Christ, is that of a person. He, personally, 'will convict the world of sin and of righteousness and of judgment', and he will do so on the basis of an argument and a demonstration.

First comes the argument. He will convict this world of sin, but of what particular sin? Does their conviction come because they have murdered or stolen? No, he will convict the

world of the sin, *par excellence*. He will convict the world of sin, 'because they believe not on me' (v. 9). The fact is that our Lord was here and revealed the Father in this world, and the world refused to believe him. Now comes the Holy Spirit to convict them. As you heard the Lord say, 'I will send him' and on the day of Pentecost he came and began his personal ministry to convict the world of sin because they did not believe on the Saviour.

In the second place he will convict them of righteousness, 'because I go to the Father', said our Lord. Meaning what? He will convict the world that they were wrong in refusing to believe the Saviour. He will convict the world that Jesus Christ was right, that he was righteous. As it is said in the prophet Isaiah, where Messiah speaks prophetically, 'He is near that justifies me, that vindicates me' (see Isa 50:8). On the day of Pentecost, the Spirit came to convict the world. The world was wrong in refusing to believe the Messiah and denying his claim. Jesus Christ was right, and God has raised him to his own right hand in heaven.

Then comes the demonstration. The Spirit will convict the world of judgment, 'because the prince of this world has been judged' (v. 11). The resurrection of Christ sounds the eventual death knell of his satanic majesty. Christ has triumphed.

Therefore, this ministry of convicting the world depends on a demonstration and an argument, and it is performed by the Holy Spirit because he is a *person*.

#### *To convict the world: John 16:13*

Talking about the Spirit, our Lord says, 'When he the Spirit of truth is come, he shall guide you into all the truth, for he shall not speak from himself, but whatever things he hears, these shall he speak' (16:13). Now notice that verb, if you will: 'whatever things he *hears*'. An impersonal force couldn't hear anything, could it? Have a go at speaking to the lightning or the thunder. The thunder won't hear you, nor the lightning either. Watch an atomic bomb explode, if you dare, and speak to it. It won't hear you; it is just an impersonal force. But the Holy Spirit, 'will not speak from himself'. He'll not take the initiative, but 'what he hears, he speaks'. The very verb shows that the Holy Spirit is a person who can, of course, hear.

Somebody will say, 'Hears what and from whom does he hear it?' Well, from our blessed ascended Lord of course: 'He shall take of my things and show them to you' (v. 14).

#### *A mind and feelings: Romans 8:26-27; Ephesians 4:30*

Romans 8 will tell us:

And in like manner the Spirit also helps our infirmity: for we know not how to pray as we ought; but the Spirit himself makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered; and he who searches the hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit. (vv. 26-27)

Here we notice that last phrase. The Spirit then has a mind, and only persons have minds in that sense. The Holy Spirit is not just a force therefore. Moreover, the Holy Spirit is said to have what we may call in human terms, feelings. Look at Ephesians 4:30. Paul says, 'Grieve not the Holy Spirit of God, in whom you were sealed unto the day of redemption.'

Can he be grieved, therefore? Alas, he can be. It is possible for believers who have the Holy Spirit so to behave as to grieve the Holy Spirit. But again the very words point to the

fact that the Holy Spirit is not an impersonal force. He is a person who has, as we humans call it, feelings, and he can be grieved.

*He speaks as a person: Acts 13:2*

And as they ministered to the Lord, and fasted, the Holy Spirit said, 'Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.' (Acts 13:2)

Here is the Holy Spirit speaking to this gathering of elders and apostles, and he speaks in the first person: 'I'. It makes no difference that the Holy Spirit may have been speaking through a prophet. Who knows how he spoke, but notice, I say again, he spoke in the first person: 'I have called them.'

Let that suffice for Scriptures, and there are plenty others that tell us that the Holy Spirit is not just a force; he is a person.

### ***The Holy Spirit is distinct from the Father and the Son***

Now another few Scriptures that will tell us that, within the blessed and Holy Trinity, the Holy Spirit is distinct from the Father and the Son. You will remember how we noticed in our first study that, according to John 1:1, the Word existed eternally: 'In the beginning was the Word', but he was distinct from God in the sense that the Word 'was *with* God'. He was distinct therefore from God the Father. He was of course God, as the next phrase says: 'and the Word was God', but the Word is to be distinguished in our thinking from the Father.

#### *Distinction between the Father and the Son*

The Father and the Son were two persons in divine communion, the one with the other. And when you read in Scripture: 'The Father loves the Son' (John 3:35, 5:20), you will see how the verb itself implies duality. The Father loves, and the one he loves is the Son.

'God is love', says Scripture (1 John 4:8), and that shows us that the Holy Trinity, the Godhead, is not just a monolith. For if God were love but he was merely a monolith, whom would he love? Whereas being a Trinity of persons, the Father loves the Son and loves the Holy Spirit. Indeed the Holy Spirit, as we'll see eventually, is the love that passes between Father and Son.

#### *The Father sends both the Son and the Holy Spirit*

So the Holy Spirit then is to be distinguished in our thinking, both from the Father and from the Son. Look again at John 14:

But the Comforter, even the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he shall teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said unto you. (v. 26)

We quote it simply to show this distinction. The Father is said to send the Holy Spirit. Just like the Father sent the Son to be the Saviour of the world, so the Father sends the Holy Spirit and, in particular, sent him on the day of Pentecost. Or again, in John 16:

Nevertheless I tell you the truth; it is expedient for you that I go away: for if I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you; but if I go, I will send him to you. (v. 7)

And you notice the distinction. 'At the moment,' says Christ, 'I am with you, and if I don't go away, the Holy Spirit will not *come*, but if I go away I will send him, and he will come.' There is a distinction therefore, between the two persons: the Son on the one hand and the Holy Spirit on the other.

#### *The coming of the Son and the coming of the Holy Spirit*

While we're at those verses, let us notice again that term 'come'. In the Old Testament, you will remember, there were occasions when the Angel of the Lord appeared, to Abraham for instance, and to Manoah and his wife. The Angel of the Lord appeared, and the Bible students will tell us that that angel of the Lord was the one whom we call the Word of God in a pre-incarnation appearance. But when he came to Bethlehem, then the Bible uses the term 'come'. 'Jesus, my Saviour, to Bethlehem, came', as the hymn says. He came in the sense that he came to reside here—to be here—and was here for all of those thirty-three and a half years. And when he went away, then he said, 'The Holy Spirit will come.' So the Holy Spirit didn't just visit from time to time; the Holy Spirit came and resides still. And it is interesting that, according to our Lord, the two divine persons would not be present here personally at the same time: 'If I don't go, he won't come.'

The Holy Spirit therefore is distinct from the Father, and he's distinct from the Son. We see it easily and need not spend too much time on the fact that the Holy Spirit, unlike the Son of God, never became incarnate; he never took a human body. He's different from the Son, therefore, but the difference is very interesting. While he personally has not taken a human body, he lives in your body if you are the Lord's, and he is the divine occupant of the temple of your body. He gives sanctity to your body. The Spirit did not die for us at Calvary, anymore than the Father died for us. He is distinct therefore from the Son who did die for us.

#### ***The Holy Spirit is God***

Let's take those simply as preliminaries and think now about the substance of our present study. It is our third observation that, though the Holy Spirit is distinct from the Father and the Son, the Holy Spirit is God, no less than the Father and the Son.

#### *The Lord is the Spirit*

To show this, let's read together in 2 Corinthians 3:

Having therefore such a hope, we used great boldness of speech, and are not as Moses, who put a veil upon his face, that the children of Israel should not look steadfastly on the end of that which was passing away: but their minds were hardened: for until this very day at the reading of the old covenant, the same veil remains unlifted; which veil is done away in Christ. But unto this day, whenever Moses is read, a veil lies upon their heart. But whenever it [that is, Israel] shall turn to the Lord, the veil is taken away. Now the Lord is the Spirit: and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty. But we all, with unveiled face reflecting as a mirror the

glory of the Lord, are transformed into the same image from glory to glory, even as from the Lord the Spirit. (vv. 12–18)

So first let me fasten your attention on that phrase in verse 17; it is key: ‘The Lord is the Spirit’, and at the end of verse 18: ‘from the Lord the Spirit.’ Now to find out what that means, I shall have to take you back to an Old Testament story. If you want the reference, it is Exodus 34, and this is the record of how Moses went into God to hear him speaking, as God was writing the renewed tablets of stone. When he came out from the presence of the Lord, Moses was not aware of the fact that his face shone brilliantly; so that when he drew near the Israelites to talk to them, and they saw the brilliance on his face, they were afraid! Eventually Moses took a veil and put it on his face because that brilliance was gradually getting less and less. It was diminishing, and so that they should not see it diminish, he put a veil upon his face. But then it says:

But when Moses went in before the Lord to speak with him, he took the veil off, until he came out; and he came out and spoke unto the children of Israel that which he was commanded; and the children of Israel saw the face of Moses, that the skin of Moses’ face shone. (vv. 34–35)

So what has happened? When he came out he spoke to the Israelites, then he would put a veil on his face. But when he went back into the Lord (when he turned back to the Lord) he took the veil off. And being in the presence of God without a veil on his face, his face began to shine again, because he’d gone into the Lord with an ‘open face’, that is, unveiled. So that when he came out the next time, the Israelites could see his face all aglow with the very glory of God. Then he spoke to them and eventually put the veil back on. So the phrase we notice is that when he ‘went into the Lord’, that is, when he ‘turned to the Lord’.

Now I shall have to give you a little lesson in Hebrew and Greek. (No extra charge of course.) The word ‘Lord’ in that phrase, ‘when Moses went into the Lord’, in Hebrew is ‘Jehovah’, or ‘Yahweh’. But of course the Jews to this very present day when they come across the name of God, Jehovah, in the Bible, will not read it; they won’t pronounce it for fear lest they take the name of the Lord God in vain. So what they do when they come across the name of God—Yahweh—Jehovah, they say instead, not Yahweh, but ‘the Lord’—Adonai.

Then when the Jews, many years before Christ, translated their Old Testament into Greek, they were faced with the question: ‘How shall we translate “Jehovah”?’ Well since in Hebrew they called him ‘the Lord’, when they translated it into Greek they used the Greek word for Lord—‘Kyrios’, and so the Greek translation there reads that, ‘when Moses went into the Kyrios’, that is Jehovah. Have we got those points? When he went into Jehovah (Yahweh, the Lord), then the veil was taken off and he saw the glory of God, and his face shone.

With that we come back to 2 Corinthians 3 to see the tremendous implication of what Paul says:

But unto this day, whenever Moses [that is, the Old Testament] is read, a veil lies upon their heart [that is, on Israel’s heart]. But whenever it [Israel] shall turn to the Lord [like Moses went in to the Lord], the veil is taken away. Now the Lord is [Jehovah is] the Spirit (see vv. 15–17)

Paul is translating and quoting Exodus 34: 'Jehovah is the Spirit'! In other words, when Israel turns to the Spirit of God (to God the Spirit) the veil shall be taken away. This is a marvellous thing. You see, when the Lord was here on earth, he did his marvellous miracles by the power of the Spirit, but there were many who didn't understand and didn't see it and didn't believe him. But when the day of Pentecost came, and the Holy Spirit came down from heaven, and the apostles preached in the power of the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit worked his miracles, then multitudes in Israel turned to the Lord, that is, to the Spirit! And they saw the glory of Christ and were converted to him and baptised in his name. It was the coming of the Lord the Spirit—God the Spirit, Jehovah the Spirit—that brought Israel illumination and therefore faith in the risen Christ.

It's not only them of course, but look at the next verse:

But we all, with unveiled face reflecting as a mirror the glory of the Lord, are transformed into the same image from glory to glory, even as from the Lord the Spirit. (v. 18)

### *Changed by God the Spirit*

I pause to think what could be happening even in these humble studies, but it is happening daily as well. God has shown us his dear Son and revealed him in the world, and we have the record of it. But how shall I ever be like him? Where can I turn so that my character may begin to glow with the very glory of the Lord? Well you can get preachers to help you and pray for you, but our resource is here: 'Whenever we turn to the Lord the Spirit . . .', for it is the Spirit who will take the veil from our hearts and our eyes and reveal the glory of the Lord to us as we 'behold' it. For the Greek word here can be translated both ways: 'beholding as in a mirror', or 'reflecting as in a mirror'. If you get a mirror and turn it to the light, the mirror beholds the light. At the same time it reflects the light. The two are joined, and if we behold the glory of the Lord, at the same time we shall reflect the glory of the Lord, and in that process are transformed from glory to glory as by the Lord the Spirit.

Oh, let's pause here to worship! Because the Holy Spirit is not just a force; he is a person. Consider the wonder that God has done, the extreme to which God has gone! God wanted to manifest himself so he sent his dear Son, because 'no one has seen God at any time'. Nonetheless, 'the only begotten Son who is in the bosom of the Father he has told him out' (see John 1:18). He has told out the glory of God, 'and we beheld his glory', says John, 'glory as of an only begotten from the Father' (v. 14).

Well how shall I take it in? How shall I bear the sight of it? How shall I be turned into that same glory and become like the Lord Jesus? It's good that I read of him in the Scripture and contemplate him, but God has done more for us than that. God has given us his Spirit, and that Spirit is God himself. The Son came to reveal God, and I see that glory. Yes, but God has given me the Holy Spirit of God. When I turn to the Holy Spirit for his illumination, then he reveals to me the glory of God and helps me to see it.

The question has often been raised in Evangelical circles as to whether we are to pray for the Spirit or not, and the view has generally been: 'No, we don't have to pray for the Spirit, because we have the Spirit. The moment that we receive the Lord Jesus as Saviour, we receive the Holy Spirit.' That is absolutely true, but we need to pray for his work in our hearts, don't we? Listen to Paul, bowing his knees daily for the believers: 'that God . . . will give you a



spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him' (Eph 1:17). Paul is praying for the believers at Ephesus, for the work of God's Spirit in their hearts, revealing God to them!

We do well to copy Paul and pray it often as we live, that the work of God's Holy Spirit may be carried on in our hearts—a Spirit of wisdom and revelation. This is not revelation of new truth but revelation of the glories of Christ to our hearts so that, gazing on him, we gradually become like him 'as from the Lord the Spirit'. And again Paul prays:

that [God] will grant you . . . to be strengthened with all power by his Spirit in the inner man; that Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith. That you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be strong to apprehend with all the saints, the length and breadth and height and depth of this great mystery, and to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge. (3:16–19)

Yes, our hearts need to be strengthened if we are going to comprehend the love of God and be rooted and grounded in that love. And it's not us who do the strengthening; it's God the Holy Spirit, ministering to us in our hearts to give us the strength to know the Saviour, and to be rooted in his love and thus to be joined with all believers, to form for God a habitation of God through the Spirit (see 2:11–22).

### ***The Holy Spirit reveals truth***

We can make a fourth observation about the ministry that the Holy Spirit does for us because he is nothing less than God. Let's read now in 1 Corinthians 2:

Yet we speak wisdom among the perfect: yet a wisdom not of this world, nor of the rulers of this world, which are coming to nought: but we speak God's wisdom in a mystery, even the wisdom that has been hidden, which God foreordained before the worlds unto our glory: which none of the rulers of this world knew, for had they known it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory: but as it is written, 'Things which eye saw not, and ear heard not, and which entered not into the heart of man, whatsoever things God prepared for them that love him.' But unto us God revealed them through the Spirit: for the Spirit explores all things, yea, the deep things of God. For who among men knows the things of a man, except the spirit of the man, which is in him? Even so the things of God no one knows except the Spirit of God. But we received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit which is of God; that we might know the things that are freely given to us by God. (vv. 6–12)

These are marvellous words. Though sometimes when they are quoted out of context they give us a slightly distorted view. Look at verse 9: 'Things which eye saw not, and ear heard not, and which entered not into the heart of man, whatsoever things God prepared for them that love him.' And I've heard more than one of my fellow Christians say, 'Ah, yes . . . marvellous things. Isn't it going to be wonderful when we get home to heaven that we shall be given to know and see those marvellous things that God has prepared for them that love him?'

Well you shall see a lot of such things when you get home to heaven that God has prepared for you who love him, but this verse is saying something in addition. It's saying that you don't have to wait before you begin to get to know these wonderful things. For the

human eye has never seen them, nor can this world see them, but God has manifested them to us by his Spirit—the Spirit sent to reveal these things to us.

Let me put a question to you. How on earth did you ever come to even believe that you, at this moment, are seated with Christ in heavenly places? Or perhaps you don't believe it. Oh, you do? Well, how did you come to know that? Because if it's true it is the most extraordinary thing that, in God's sight, you are seated in Christ at the right hand of God, above principalities, powers, mights and dominions! We know it because the Holy Spirit has revealed it to us through inspiring the Apostle Paul and others to talk about it. He has taken of the things of Christ and showed them to us here.

And someone says to me, 'But I find it difficult to grasp it, you know. I find it difficult even to imagine. It doesn't mean anything to me.'

Well, no, how would we grasp it? For these are the great secrets of God. This is precisely why the Holy Spirit has been sent to us: that we may know these things that are freely given to us of God. And Paul makes the point. If it comes to men's things: 'Who knows the things of a man except the spirit of a man that is in him?'

You can get a very intelligent dog if you like, and it knows a lot about you. It knows you have a stomach, and you like beefsteaks, and other such things. But if you took your favourite book to the dog and said: 'Read this, Fido', Fido might lick the page or sniff it, or do other funny things to it, but he'd never know what it was about. If you took him to your favourite picture in your drawing room and showed it to him: 'Now look at that, Fido', Fido couldn't make head nor tail of it. He knows things about stomachs and eating and running and things like that, which he shares with human beings, but things that are typically human, Fido doesn't understand and never will understand. You can take Fido to a course in fine arts and aesthetics; he'll never get his BA. He won't understand the first word about it. And never would he understand it, unless somehow you could put your human spirit in him.

That's how the things of God are. How will we know the things of God and appreciate them? Well the only way you'll know the things of God ('for no one knows the things of God except the Spirit of God') is when the Holy Spirit, living in your heart and mind, shows you those things. Because he is God and can give us to understand them. 'He *explores* all things'. I love that word! It sounds to me exciting, like some explorer exploring things. The Holy Spirit explores all the deep things of God and revels in them, in that sacred fellowship that is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Just you imagine that: the Holy Spirit being God, coming into my poor heart and mind to give me the benefits of his explorations of the mind of God.

### ***The Holy Spirit pours out God's love***

The Holy Spirit, being God, performs another ministry for us. We are told that he pours out the love of God in our hearts (see Rom 5:5). We have such restricted ideas of the love of God, don't we? But God has given us his Holy Spirit and, because he's God, he knows the love of God. The old hymn says, 'God only knows the love of God'<sup>6</sup> and it's perfectly true. The Holy Spirit has been given to us to pour out the love of God in our hearts. He comes alongside with

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<sup>6</sup> Charles Wesley, 'O Love Divine, how sweet Thou art' (1749).

an argument and says, 'Now look here, my dear, haven't you trusted Christ, and been justified?'

'Yes.'

'Well then even more so is it sure that you will be saved from the wrath of God through him. For while we were yet sinners, while we were yet weak, Christ died for the ungodly, how much more shall we be saved from the wrath of God through him?' (see Rom 5:1–11). In this way the Holy Spirit begins to pour out God's love in our hearts, for he knows God, and he knows the love of God.

### ***The Holy Spirit gives us access to the Father***

This too is a lovely thing. According to Ephesians 2:18, 'We have access in one Spirit to the Father.' God has not only forgiven us, not only saved us, not only shown us what he's like in his Son, but he bids us 'Draw near'. And how shall I draw near to God? Who would conduct me in?

I confess before you, I don't go to Buckingham Palace very often. Well, I haven't been asked. I've never been at all. I don't know if I'd want to go, particularly on the great banquets that the Queen gives. For to be asked to go and sit with her Majesty with all that glory and paraphernalia and to know what to say and how to behave in the presence of all the high persons and nobility of earth—wow! It would be hard work and penal servitude for me to have to try and rise to it.

What must it mean to have access to the Father? Well one day, you shall be there bodily. You imagine being introduced to the Father in the midst of all the high intelligences of the universe: the principalities, powers, mights and dominions, and the vast congregation of the firstborn in him. You say, 'How shall I do it? How shall I even endure it?' Because, within you, says the Scripture, is God himself, the Holy Spirit, through whom you have conduct into the very presence of God.

### ***The Father's house and the Father himself***

Our Lord Jesus said to his apostles, 'I'm going away, and I shall come again and receive you to myself because in my Father's house are many mansions, and I shall take you there.' Then he said to them, 'And you know the way there, don't you?' And Thomas, being the character he was, said, 'Sorry, Lord, I don't even know where you're going, so how shall I know the way there? You say you're going to the Father's house. Wherever is the Father's house? And the way there? I've not got a clue!' (see John 14:1–5).

What is the way to heaven anyway? How do you get there? Our Lord answered Thomas, but as he answered him he changed the phrase. He said, 'I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes *to the Father* but by me' (v. 6). It's one thing to come to the Father's house; it's another thing to come to the Father.

I've been round many stately homes as a pastime, both in Ireland and England and elsewhere, but very rarely have I ever come across the master of the house. He doesn't bother to come and talk to the tourists when they're going round his stately home. So it's one thing to come to the stately home, another thing to come to the master of the home. It is one thing to get to the Father's house; what about coming to the Father? 'And the way there,' says Christ,

‘well, he that has seen me has seen the Father.’ You will never see more of God than you see in Christ, but if you see him, you see the Father. He is the way to the Father.

And then he says, ‘I’m the truth, and I shall send you the Spirit of truth’ (see 14:6, 16), because that is the way to the Father too, isn’t it? I once knew a good man who did Christian work in one of the orphanages for abused children in Glasgow. He told me on one occasion how he went into the home and there was a nurse with a little boy. The boy screamed his head off and the nurse asked my friend to go out while she comforted the child. She called him in when the child was pacified; she took the little boy’s clothes off and his body was all scarred and burnt. And the little lad told my friend: ‘My father always burns me.’ The father used to take a red-hot poker and hit the child with it. Now if you tell that child that God is a *father*, what do you suppose the child will think about *the* Father? It’s only the one kind of father he knows.

What about us? Are you like me and sometimes you’re enjoying the marvellous grace of God, and then things happen in your life, and you begin to wonder and you have doubts about the Father’s good intention? Whether he’s forgotten you? Whether he’s treating you too harshly?

How shall we come, not just to the Father’s house, but to the Father? And the provision our Lord has made is to send the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth, to be in us and gradually to teach us the truth about the Father, undoing our nervous knots and all our complexes and false ideas about the Father. The gracious Holy Spirit of truth within tells us the truth about the Father and then enables us to realise our potential as children of God.

#### *Abba Father*

Galatians 4 says that, ‘Because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, whereby we cry, “Abba! Father!”’ (v. 6).

Ponder it. ‘Abba, Father’ is how the Lord Jesus addressed God. Jews hadn’t heard anybody address God like that. ‘Abba’ is almost a child’s word. It’s not ‘Daddy’, but it’s a word a child respectfully would use of its father. And the apostles heard the Lord Jesus pray with that tremendous intimacy with God: ‘Abba, Father.’

Here, Paul says that the Holy Spirit of God’s Son has been put into your heart so that you likewise cry, ‘Abba, Father!’ Now you are talking to God like the Lord Jesus talked to God and enjoying the relationship with God as Father just as the Lord Jesus did. Why? It’s because you have the Spirit of the Son in your heart. He is the power to sanctify us. He is the power to guide us. He is the blessed Holy Spirit that dwells in the temple of our bodies and thus makes us holy.

#### ***The Holy Spirit intercedes for us***

The final thing I want to say for now is that the Holy Spirit is our intercessor within. ‘We have an advocate with the Father in heaven, that is, Jesus Christ the righteous’ (1 John 2:1). Not content with that, God has given us an advocate within, an intercessor *within* us. ‘The Holy Spirit makes intercession for us,’ says Paul, ‘with groanings that cannot be uttered; and he who searches the heart knows what is the mind of the Spirit’ (Rom 8:26–27).

Why do I need the Holy Spirit within me, to intercede for me? Well, because he makes intercession according to the will of God. God's will is that those whom he has justified, them he proposes to glorify, and he will bring us home to glory until we are completely like our blessed Lord (see vv. 29–30). That is a long pathway, and Paul says, 'We don't always know what to pray for as we should' (v. 26).

What are you praying for now, my dear brother, my sister? What are you specially praying for in your life? Do you know the best thing to pray for? What would help you at the stage you have reached? What would most help you to progress according to the Father's purpose, which is to become more like the Saviour?

Would you say, 'Ah, I need some pain and suffering'? Or would you say, 'No, what I need is a season of clear shining, a sense of the love of God and easy circumstances and feeling that God is smiling upon me'? Would you pray for good and healthy children? You wouldn't pray for prodigals, I suppose. Do you know what best to pray for, in the sense of the next thing that is necessary to help you forward to God's purpose of becoming completely like Christ?

So very often we don't know what to pray for, as we should, do we? Thank God we're not left to our own devices and decisions. The Holy Spirit within intercedes; he interprets to God all our moods and our voices and our prayers and desires. Yes, but, he has his mind on the purposes of God and how they shall be reached in this particular person, and he intercedes with God accordingly to take us and guide us and develop us on our way home to glory.

And when I think of the Holy Spirit as our guide on the road home to glory, our intercessor within, I think of that lovely story of how Abraham sent his servant to get a bride for Isaac. So the servant went, and in the providence of God he arrived at the very home and found the exact young lady that God had prepared for his master's son. He gave out the jewels and the raiment to the dear lady and told her the story of his master's son. He told her how wealthy his master's son was, because his father loved the son and had given everything into his hand. And the proposal was whether this dear young lady would like to consent to be the wife of his master's son. She was called upon to make her decision, and she answered, 'Yes, I will go with this man and be the wife of his master's son.'

And what happened then? Is it so that the servant said, 'Well now, my dear, now that you have decided, here's our visiting card, and here's our address, and if ever you should get across the desert and find your way there, come and visit us, and you'll be very welcome?' Well of course not. When the dear lady said 'Yes', then the servant took her back. He provided the camels, and as she rode he walked step, by step, by step, until he brought her home to his master's son.

So we are not left on our pilgrimage to find our own way. God has given us God the Holy Spirit within to bring us home to glory to meet him who for all eternity shall be the bridegroom of our hearts.

## Relations between Divine Persons and Us

Now we must begin to try to put together in our understanding what we have learnt thus far about the divine persons. That the Father is God is self-evident and needs no demonstration, but that Jesus Christ his Son is both God and human naturally raises many questions in thinking minds. And that the Holy Spirit, sent forth by the Father, is also described as God, raises the big question of what is known as the Trinity. We have to think this evening, by God's grace and help, how we may learn to speak properly about the divine persons, and I pray God that I shall be kept from saying anything that is unworthy and incorrect about those illustrious persons.

### **The importance of the doctrine of the Trinity**

There are many Christians known to me who are loyal to the Lord Jesus and devoted to God and dependent upon the Holy Spirit, but who nevertheless feel in their hearts that all talk about the Trinity is perhaps unwise and certainly unhelpful. 'Trinity', they say, is not a biblical word. You will not find it anywhere in the Old Testament or the New, and they also say that the great creeds of Christendom, such as the Athanasian Creed and the Nicene Creed (from which we have all learnt a lot, even if we're not aware of it) are nevertheless couched in very philosophical and theological terms such as *substance* and *being* and *hypostatic union* and other such terms that are beyond most people's familiarity and are difficult to comprehend. They say that the creeds tend to make the Trinity sound like some complicated, almost impersonal, philosophical and theological conundrum and distant from the blessed Lord Jesus whom we have learnt to love and to trust.

'So,' these people say, 'is it not better just to take holy Scripture as we find it, and where it tells us of God, we believe it; and where it tells us that Jesus Christ, his Son, is God, we believe that too; and where it indicates the Holy Spirit is God, well, we accept that and say "hallelujah" in our hearts, without trying to put it all together in some theological scheme, and work it all out how these three persons are related to each other? Should we not leave it there and learn not to probe too far because the divine persons, by definition, go infinitely beyond our understanding? Therefore it is wise to learn to trust, rather than to probe more than we are intended to into these matters. And, since the Trinity is not a biblical term, therefore on the whole it is unhelpful.'

Well I confess I have a certain fellow feeling with those who hold that point of view. I remember being in Russia and being invited to address a small group of people, many of whom were sheer atheists brought up under Marxism and Communism. I was invited to

expound the Christian gospel to them, and I did it to the best of my small ability and came nowhere near talking about the Trinity whatsoever. I simply preached the simple facts of the Christian gospel. When I'd finished the time for questions came, and one good lady who I later discovered was a brilliant physicist, fixed me with her first question: 'Why do we have to believe in the Trinity?' For she lived in a land where Christians emphasised the Trinity perhaps beyond all else. And she added, 'The Trinity doesn't make sense to me anyway.' Well what would you have said? I said, 'Well, perhaps the best way to start thinking about the Christian gospel is not to start with the Trinity. It's better simply to start reading about the Lord Jesus and hearing what he has to say and letting him convince you that he is the truth: the truth about God, and the truth about man, and the truth about salvation.'

I suspect that the dying thief—the terrorist brigand who was crucified on a cross next to Christ and went home to paradise that very day with the Lord Jesus couldn't give any sensible interpretation or explanation of the Holy Trinity if you had asked him. Would you agree with me? He got to paradise in spite of it.

So, yes, I have a certain amount of sympathy with those who feel that trying to understand the deep things of the Trinity is not always helpful. Perhaps it isn't always reverent and perhaps therefore not wise. But when I'm tempted to think that, I can't fail to observe what Scripture itself says.

### ***The three Persons together in Scripture***

While I grant you the word 'Trinity' is not a biblical term, we read in more than one place in the New Testament of Father, Son and Holy Spirit mentioned in the very same breath. Let's look at one or two of those places.

#### *Theological importance—Matthew 28:18*

And Jesus came to them and spoke unto them, saying, 'All authority has been given unto me in heaven and on earth. Go you therefore, and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit'. (Matt 28:18–19)

We notice at once the three persons named together: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. We notice also, for it is significant, that the term 'the name of' is used but once. Not 'the name of the Father and the name of the Son and the name of the Holy Spirit', but 'in the name of the Father and of the Son and the Holy Spirit'. You can't deny that there are three. What would you call it, if not a Trinity? It's three, isn't it? But mark this more important thing, and try a thought experiment in your mind.

How would it sound if we added another name or two to go along with the three? What if we said, 'In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and the angel Gabriel'? You who are Christians would all protest at once: 'You can't join that name onto those three!' Why not? 'Well because Gabriel, for all his exaltation, is only a creature. You can't join his name to those names, for they are names of the uncreated persons of the Godhead.'

Alright then, add a Christian name to it: 'In the name of the Father and the Son and of the Holy Spirit and the Apostle Paul.' How would that do? 'No,' you say, 'you can't do that!'

There is an absolute gulf between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit on the one hand, and even the Apostle Paul on the other.' And if you didn't see it at once, Paul would be after you and say to you what he said to the Corinthians: 'What are you doing, calling yourself after Peter and Apollos and Paul? Was Paul crucified for you? Into what name were you baptised? Into the name of Christ and Paul, or the name of Christ and Peter?' (see 1 Cor 1:10–13). Well of course not. Mercifully, though the Christian church has done some funny things all down the centuries, it has never got to that length of baptising people in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit and the Apostle Paul or the Apostle Peter.

These three are the Holy Trinity. They are God overall, blessed forevermore, ever distinct from creation and created things. But lest you should think that that is too theological, let's come now to something that is devotional.

*Devotional importance—2 Corinthians 13:14*

Let's look at 2 Corinthians, the last chapter and the last verse, commonly known as 'the grace':

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. (13:14)

What a lovely benediction that is to be spoken to us in the name of God this very evening as we sit here before him. This is no mere theological doctrine. This surely is the Trinity. We have mentioned the Lord Jesus Christ, God and the Holy Spirit once more in the same clause. You may care to notice in passing that this time the order is different. In Matthew it was 'In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit'. This time it's in a different order. First comes the Lord Jesus Christ, then God, then the Holy Spirit; which shows us, incidentally, that not one of these persons is more God than the other. They're never to be read as though Father, Son and Holy Spirit were in a descending order. Each is equally God as the other. In that sense it doesn't matter which way round you put it.

Please do see how this is not just abstract theology. This is the very blessing of God on your head tonight: 'The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you'. You know the grace of the Lord Jesus, don't you? How 'he was rich, yet for our sakes became poor that we, through his poverty, might be made rich' (see 2 Cor 8:9). The grace of the Lord Jesus in his overflowing riches be with you!

And the love of God. You know it, don't you? 'Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins' (1 John 4:10).

And there is the communion, the fellowship of the Holy Spirit (himself God). God was not content to reveal himself in Christ, and to atone for our sins through the sacrifice of Christ, but sent God the Holy Spirit to dwell within our hearts and minds so that we may understand the things that are freely given to us of God (1 Cor 2:12) and create genuine fellowship. Oh, what a magnificent thing it is! Let's not ever let it become something ordinary. We, here on this planet (and long before we get to heaven), have real, actual fellowship with the divine persons through the grace and operation of the Holy Spirit of God.



*Practical importance—1 Corinthians 12:3*

The Trinity is bound up with our devotions, but it's not just devotional; it is a practical thing in the running of the Body of Christ, the church. Let's go back to 1 Corinthians 12 where Paul is beginning to discuss spiritual gifts:

Therefore I want you to understand, that no man speaking in the Spirit of God says, 'Jesus is *anathēma*'; and no man can say, 'Jesus is Lord', but in the Holy Spirit. (v. 3)

What we notice at this point simply is that when it talks about 'Lord' here, it is talking about Jesus, that Jesus is Lord. But now notice the next verses. Paul is going to discuss the various spiritual gifts that God has put in the church:

Now there are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. And there are diversities of service, but the same Lord. And there are diversities of workings, but the same God who works all things in all. (vv. 4–6)

Do you see the three names coming again? The Trinity, my brothers and sisters, is a reality. It is not merely a theological doctrine on a page. It is the whole Godhead, practically involved with his people, giving the gifts and administering them and working through them.

What a thing it is, to be gathered with the people of God in assembly and to realise that we are the object of the whole Godhead—the Trinity—in the operations of the gifts that he has given.

*The importance for our redemption—Hebrews 9–10*

You will say to me perhaps that I've omitted the one that comes nearest your hearts, and that is what the Epistle to the Hebrews says about the great atonement that Christ has achieved for us. In Hebrews 10 it tells us that God prepared that body: 'A body thou hast prepared me,' says the Messiah to God the Father (v. 5). We are sanctified by 'the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all' (v. 10). He took the body that the Father had given him and offered it without spot to God. And God the Holy Spirit was involved in it, as chapter 9 says, speaking of Christ, 'who by the eternal Spirit, offered himself without spot to God' (v. 14).

Allow yourself a little imagination, if you will, to ponder in your mind's eye and in your heart's worship the whole Godhead gathered (if I may use the term), focused on the cross of Christ to accomplish our redemption. Magnificent, isn't it? What a God we have! Let us not say it again that the Trinity is an unhelpful thing to talk about. Never mind the term; please observe the three divine persons involved with us from start to finish. It therefore matters for us that when we come to think of the divine persons, we should learn to *speak* rightly about them and to *think* rightly about them.

**The importance of thinking and speaking rightly about God**

In some part, it's a matter of growing up. A little child will say things about its dad that an adult boy or girl wouldn't dare to say, I suspect. Because the little child doesn't yet know all the wonders and the implications and the complications of even human relations. Similarly

as children of God, we know the Father. A child in a human family learns to say 'Daddy'. It's one of the first things it learns. As young believers, we know our sins are forgiven. By contrast, the fathers in John's first epistle are said to know 'him that is from the beginning' (2:13–14). And since God has revealed himself to us, then it would be churlish on our part not to be interested, wouldn't it?

We ought to be thinking about the divine persons and learning the importance of thinking properly about them. Therefore now I beg your leave that I give a little demonstration by inviting you to turn to the First Epistle by John to notice sundry features about what he says to us about the divine persons and how he urges upon us the importance of speaking and thinking correctly about them.

There are three major parts to this Epistle, and I want to concentrate your attention on the last verses of each of those three major parts.

### ***Part 1—The Son of God and his relation to the Father***

Little children, it is the last hour: and as you heard that antichrist is coming, even now have there arisen many antichrists; whereby we know it that it is the last hour. They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us: but they went out, that they might be made manifest how they are all not of us. And you have an anointing from the Holy One, and you know all things. I have not written to you because you know not the truth, but because you know it, and because no lie is of the truth. Who is the liar but he that denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the antichrist, even he that denies the Father and the Son. Whosoever denies the Son, the same has not the Father: he that confesses the Son has the Father also . . . If that which you heard from the beginning abides in you, you also shall abide in the Son, and in the Father. (1 John 2:18–24)

Two things stand out here, before we move on. One is that direct and powerful statement: 'Who is the liar, but he that denies that Jesus is the Christ [the Messiah]?'

Let me tell you two stories.

#### *Denying that Jesus is the Christ*

In my student days, I once gave a series of talks in a town in England called Newmarket (famous for its racehorses). After one of these lectures a gentleman came up to me and asked if he might speak, and his story was that he had been out with the RAF in India. While there he had got himself interested in yoga, and beyond yoga into the spiritism that is practiced in theosophical circles in that country. Now he had come back to England and was in civilian life and had gone along to the theosophists in Cambridge. He told me he was getting discontent with it all and wondered how he could be saved. He was making no moral progress, and some of the things that he had come across frightened him. He said he'd asked his mother what he was to do, and she said, 'Don't be worried, just say the Lord's Prayer.' But he didn't find that helped, so eventually he came to see me in my student rooms.

When he came he was convulsed and heaving in his chest. He said, 'I have had an enormous struggle to come here.' But he managed to come. There followed a long story and many meetings. He eventually told me, 'I have found peace through the written word.' But

on one occasion he asked me if I would come with him, because he had borrowed books from the theosophists and he wanted to give them back and was afraid to go back by himself. And so I went with him, of course.

I said to him at one point, 'Tell me, what do these people tell you about the Christ? Who is the Christ? Do they tell you he's Jesus?' And of course, the good man didn't know his New Testament whatsoever. 'Oh, no,' he said. 'No, no. They don't say that the Christ is Jesus. The Christ is the great world spirit who once upon a time filled Jesus. The Christ is coming again, but it won't be Jesus. The world Christ will fill someone else.' And, when I heard the good man say that, I read him this verse of Scripture and showed it to him: 'Who is *the* liar but he that denies that Jesus is the Christ?'

Another incident took place somewhere about the mid-1970s. At that time there was a man from India who travelled the streets of Belfast in a lorry, all decked out with various things. His followers would come round the door to present to anybody that would listen, 'the Divine Light Mission'. So one afternoon a nice Irish girl came to my door, and she told me how I could go to London and see the great light. She said she had seen this great light, and I could if I wanted to. I said, 'I've no doubt you've seen a great light. The question is which light it was, whether it was God or the devil, because "the devil transforms himself into an angel of light"' (see 2 Cor 11:14).

Well she was soon out of her depth, but the man in charge of the group came up rather angry. Why was I continuing the conversation? And anyway, you Evangelicals here in Belfast are bigoted; we all preach exactly the same thing! Why can't you agree with us instead of arguing with us? I believe Jesus is the Christ,' he said.

I said, 'You don't, do you?'

'Yes, I do.'

'No, you don't,' I said. And there happened to be two milk bottles standing on my doorstep. (You can tell how long ago it was, back when people delivered milk.) I said to him, 'Now see those two bottles there?'

'Yes.'

I said, 'If you filled them both with milk, you wouldn't say there were 'two milks' on the step, would you? There would be two bottles but just one substance: milk. You don't believe that Jesus is the Christ, do you? You believe "the Christ" is the great world spirit, and he filled Jesus when Jesus was on earth, and now he fills the leader of your Divine Light Mission.'

'Well, yes,' he said, 'that is what I believe!' And he went away, like Naaman, in a rage!

We need to know how to speak rightly of the divine persons. Jesus is the Christ, but notice what the next thing says. It's the relationship between him and the Father that is important: 'He that denies the Son, the same has not the Father' (v. 23). How is that? Well we're not thinking here of God as the great Father of mankind; we're thinking of the persons of the Trinity. In the Trinity there is the Father and there is the Son. If you deny the Son, you haven't got the Father. He couldn't be 'Father' unless he stood in relation to one who is 'Son'. Even in our little planet, when a man is married to his wife he isn't a father yet, unless he has a son or daughter. And if there wasn't such a thing as the Son of God, then God wouldn't be 'Father', would he? If you deny the sonship of Jesus Christ our Lord, you automatically deny

the fatherhood of God. It is vastly important that we learn to understand the relationships between the persons of the Godhead.

### ***Part 2—Recognising God the Holy Spirit***

Turn over the page to chapter 4. This comes at the end of the second big section of the First Epistle by John:

Beloved, believe not every spirit, but prove the spirits, whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God: and every spirit that confesses not Jesus, is not of God: and this is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard it comes; and now it is in the world already. (vv. 1–3)

And now it is a question of the Holy Spirit and how you identify him, and how you distinguish the Holy Spirit (himself God) from false spirits: ‘. . . prove the spirits, whether they are of God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world,’ says John. How do you recognise the genuine Spirit of God? You know it by what he says and testifies about the Lord Jesus: the spirit ‘that confesses that Jesus is come in the flesh’.

If you want an example of those who deny that Christ is come in the flesh, go and listen to the Christian Scientists. With them too the Christ is the great world spirit, and he never would have come in the flesh. There is nothing but spirit, according to Christian Scientists, and you may take it from John that the spirit behind them is not the Holy Spirit but a false spirit.

### ***Part 3—Speaking rightly about the Son of God and his relation to the Father***

We come then to the very last verses of 1 John:

And we know that the Son of God is come, and has given us an understanding, that we know him that is true, and we are in him that is true, even in his Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life. My little children, guard yourselves from idols. (5:20–21)

Idols are false gods, and false gods need not be made of metal or wood. False gods can be ideas we have in our heads. So keep yourself from idols.

‘This is the true God . . .’ How would you know who the true God is? And how would you understand him? John says, ‘We know that the Son of God has come and has given us an understanding that we might know him that is true, and we are in him that is true, even through Jesus Christ, his Son.’ If you want to understand the true God, then Jesus Christ is the one who can give you that understanding.

Three persons of the Trinity therefore: the Son, the Spirit and the Father. We must learn to speak properly and rightly about them.

## **False ways of thinking and speaking about God**

What lay behind the very big creeds of Christendom over which Christians thought and thought and struggled to try and get a form of words that is true to Scripture and speaks rightly about the Son of God, the Holy Spirit and God himself? It was because, from the very earliest days, Christians were assaulted by the world.

### ***Assaults from outside the church***

The early Christians didn't live in a world in which they were surrounded by Christians miles deep and so never came anywhere near pagans. They had to meet with pagans every day, and some of those they met with were highly trained philosophers. And when the Jews heard the Christians speaking and talking about God and the Son of God and the Spirit of God as though there were three Gods, they of course protested: 'We were taught in the Old Testament that the Lord our God is one Lord. What are you saying, that the man Jesus is God? You seem to believe in three Gods, don't you?'

So what would you say to them?

And then eventually, the Muslims came along, and to this very present day one of the big things that they have against Christianity is that, to their eyes, Christianity seems to be idolatrous. It says that Jesus Christ is God, and with them there is only one God. Incidentally, the best way to deal with them, once again, is not to argue about the Trinity and the deity of Christ. Get them listening to Christ, for Christ is so lovely, far more lovely than Mohammed ever knew how to be. Tell them the stories of Christ and let Christ capture their hearts, and then let the Lord lead them into the wonders of his deity and the wonders of the Trinity.

### ***Assaults from inside the church***

Then there were within Christendom what became to be known as heresies, because some people, when faced with the claims of Christ and the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, suggested they had an explanation of these things.

There was Arius, for instance, author of the Arian heresy, as it came to be known, who said that Jesus (or Christ) was not equal with God. He was a creature, a very exalted creature, but not God and therefore was inferior to God. True believers had to fight it and expose it and show that this was utterly false, according to the revelation that God has made to us through Christ and in his word.

Why does it matter? Well, as I said a lecture or two ago, if Jesus Christ were not God, then you are not saved. Who less than God could have taken away the sins of the world as the Lamb of God? What creature could do it, highest archangel though he was? It is important.

Then not only Arius, of course, but there were others who went to the other side, and said that Jesus was not a real man; he only appeared to be a man. He was God and that's that. Why was that wrong? Well, yes, it wasn't true, but why does it matter? Because if Jesus was not a man then you're not saved. Because for Jesus to bear our sins, he had to be a man like us so that he could be our representative and bear our sins in his body on the tree. So that, just as by one man's disobedience sin entered into the world and the many were constituted sinners,

so by the obedience of one (that is the blessed man Jesus Christ), shall the many be constituted righteous (see Rom 5:19).

There were those who said that Jesus wasn't God to start with; he was an ordinary man. But at his baptism the Holy Spirit came on him and, so to speak, transformed him into God, at least for the time being. That of course is nonsense. The word of God says that the Word, the Son of God, was eternal (see John 1:1).

Our modern world is full of denials of the truth of the Trinity, even in theological circles. Some twenty years ago by now, there was a book published by a number of clerics and professors of theology in some of our universities, and the title of the book was *The Myth of God Incarnate*. They told the world there's nothing in the doctrine of the incarnation, that it is a nonsense; and they said it in the name of Christian theology. And the faith of multitudes and generations of students has been corrupted because their teachers taught them that Jesus was only a man; he was a very special man; he was a kind of window into God. If you looked at him you might, sort of, see through him to God, but that's all he was. And, because he was only a special man he didn't know what scholarship now knows about the Old Testament. So he quoted the Old Testament but got it all wrong and didn't know who the author was, and you can't accept necessarily what he said about the Old Testament. Through that teaching, the faith of generations of students has been destroyed. It is exceedingly important therefore that we talk rightly and think rightly about the persons of the Godhead and their relations one with another.

### **Difficulties in thinking and speaking rightly about God**

Let's come to two big difficulties that people feel. The doctrine of the Trinity is that there is only one God (we do not believe in three Gods), but there are three *persons*. That at least is the word that is normally used, three *persons*. Let's pause and think about that for a few moments, because there comes a difficulty.

#### ***Difficulty 1: Persons***

In modern English if you talk about a person it's equivalent to using the word 'people', as in:

'How many *people* were there?'

'Oh, there were three *persons* there.'

The two words are very often interchangeable, and therefore when people hear the statement 'one God but three persons', it sounds to them as if you're saying, 'one God but three people in the Godhead.' And that seems a contradiction and somewhat absurd. The reason is that we are using the old word that was used by the early Christians. Originally the word was a Latin word: '*persona*'. A *persona* was a mask used when plays were put on in the theatres of the day. The actor would come onto the scene in these big amphitheatres and wear a mask that would immediately tell the audience, even the people at the back, what character this person was playing. Early Christians then took that word and developed it, and when they talk about three persons in the Godhead they don't mean three people. They mean that, in the Godhead, there are three *relationships*, three substantial relationships: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

You say, 'That doesn't help very much. How can I begin to visualise it?'

Well, forget the Trinity for a moment. I'm going to use a human example. Please don't think I'm saying that the Godhead is like this human example. I'm just using it to get our thoughts thought through.

Have you ever sat down in a chair and begun thinking? Well I'm sure you have. Have you ever, as you sat thinking, thought about yourself? I expect you have. So there was *you* doing some thinking, and then there was *yourself* that you were thinking about, so two things. And then the next day, perhaps you sat down again and you reviewed the *thoughts* you had about yourself. So now you've got three things: you, yourself and the thoughts you had about yourself. Tell me, which of those three was you? You who did the thinking, or the you that you thought about, or the thoughts that you had about you?

You say, 'They're all me!' And yet, when you sat there thinking, I fancy that you saw very clearly that you were thinking about you and you weren't thinking about your next-door neighbour. You were the object of your thoughts, though you were the subject doing the thinking. And what you were thinking were thoughts.

Now please don't think I'm saying that this is exactly how the Godhead is. I'm merely saying that we know this kind of situation at our very lowly level. We mustn't be surprised if, at an infinitely higher level with many, many differences, there are three relationships, and the Father thinks about the Son and loves the Son, and the Son loves the Father. The love of the Father and the thoughts of the Father towards his Son are not just abstract thoughts; they are themselves a person, namely the Holy Spirit.

#### *What a relationship is*

Now, let's think about *relationship*. Let me try to get that across. Here I'm coming down to simple things once more, to our very lowly level. Again, please don't think I'm saying the Trinity is like this; it is infinitely above us.

Here are two people. There's a man and a woman and, though they are different (one is a man and one is a woman) they both have the same essential nature. They are human beings; the man isn't more human than the woman is and the woman isn't more human than the man is. But now the man and the woman get married, and the woman agrees to have him as her husband. Now what has been done? They are both humans, but what has now been added? Well, this human has now become a *husband*, and this woman has now become a *wife*.

And you say, 'Oh, I see. So a husband is something in addition to a man, is it? I could find a man here and a husband here.'

No, it's the man who is the husband, and now you should distinguish between his human nature (that is basic) and this *relationship* that he has taken on with this woman. And similarly with her, a human nature, yes, but now she has taken on this relationship. She's a wife. It adds something to her significance and his significance, doesn't it?

That's what the old idea of *person* is. It is a relationship. And the marvellous thing that God has revealed to us about the Godhead is that God isn't a monolith. He is a relational being: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. He is a person in that sense, sustaining a relationship. Except that the persons sustaining the relation in the Godhead are substantive persons, such

that the Father can send the Son and the Son can come to our world. He is one God then—one basic being and substance—but he is these relationships. That's what a *person* really is.

#### *What it means to be a person*

Let me come down to our own, humble level, if I may. What does it mean to be a person? You wouldn't call a rabbit a person, would you? I'm not asking what does it mean to be human, but rather what it means to be a person. Let me put it in practical terms. What does it mean to be a husband? As we've said, 'husband' is the name of a relationship, because the dear lady has consented to take him. He now has this status of being a husband, and he's known as a husband. And when it comes to us, we are persons. What does it mean that you are a person? Well you say, 'I've got all sorts of relations with my friends and family.' Yes, that's good. But what is the ultimate basis of personhood? Please do observe it: you and I were nothing. God created the universe, and ultimately us too, out of nothing!

How did we become persons? He chose to bring us into a relationship with him. 'We not only know God,' says Paul, 'we are known by God' (see Gal 4:9). But oh, my brother, my sister, please do think what it means that you are 'known by God'. What a person that makes you!

If you went to her gracious Majesty, Queen Elizabeth II and said, 'Do you know Gooding, your Majesty?'

She'd say, 'Who? Gooding? What? No, of course I don't know Gooding.'

If you went to God and said, 'Do you know Gooding?' God would say, 'Ah, I have a personal relationship with him. My Son died for him and he will be a person for all eternity. I'm the God of Abraham. I describe myself by my relationship. I'm the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob.'

What a wonderful thing this is, the personhood of the Godhead. He has created us out of nothing so that we may become persons, personally related to the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In this way we think of the persons of the Godhead, the relationships between the members of the Godhead.

#### ***Difficulty 2: Both God and Man***

Finally, the big question: how can it be that Jesus can be both man and God? The thing goes beyond our understanding; let's freely confess it. 'No one knows the Son except the Father,' said Christ (Matt 11:27). There are depths that we perhaps shall never know, but what we are told we can believe and know. 'The Word became flesh' (John 1:14). That is, the Word who was eternally God and with God, chose in the freedom of Godhood to take humanity to himself and so to take it so that 'he' and 'human' were one. We shouldn't talk of Christ as though he were God on the one side and man on the other, as though he were a little bit divided in his personality, or two people. He's only one person, but it's a one person based in the union of God and man.

The wonder of it we shall never fathom, even when we get home to glory. It belongs to our salvation, and I say it again: if Jesus were not both man and God, we would not be saved. He came and showed us the heart and love and holiness of God in human terms. I say it reverently: God himself discovered (by experience, that is) what it means to be human. And,



as human, God (being human in Christ) learnt what it is to obey God. So you'll find our Lord talking about the Father as 'my God' because Christ was verily human (e.g. John 20:17). Here is God as human, learning to obey God, and learning the cost of obeying, and telling out the heart of God, the holiness of God and the love of God for us sinners. At the same time he is representing mankind to God, standing with us and for us (sinless himself) as the God-man: 'Bearing shame and scoffing rude | In my place, condemned he stood'.<sup>7</sup> And as my representative he represented me to God and bore the wrath of God against my sin. Hallelujah, what a Saviour!

We are to share eternity with him. The wonderful thing is this: before our Lord left us, he made his union with the Father the model of our union with him. As once more we read his words, we shall have to be aware of the gulf. We shall never be God. When our Lord spoke to Mary, he said, 'I ascend to my God and your God' (John 20:17). Never once did he say, 'I ascend to our God.' Never. He told the apostles to pray, 'Our Father', because all believers can join in that and say, 'Our Father'. He never prayed it with them. With his disciples, he never prayed, 'Our Father.' He remains the God-man, verily God, truly human, but God incarnate. But his union with the Father becomes the model of our union with him.

Let me read you, as I finish, the words that he spoke:

I pray for those that believe on me through their word; that they may all be one; even as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us: that the world may believe that you did send me. And the glory which you have given me I have given unto them; that they may be one, even as we are one; I in them, and you in me, that they may be perfected into one; that the world may know that you did send me, and has loved them, even as you have loved me. Father, that which you have given me, I desire that, where I am, they also may be with me; that they may behold my glory, which you have given me: for you have loved me before the foundation of the world. O righteous Father, the world knew you not, but I knew you; and these knew that you did send me; and I made known unto them your name, and will make it known; that the love wherewith you have loved me may be in them, and I in them. (John 17:20-26)

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<sup>7</sup> Philip P. Bliss, "'Man of Sorrows", what a Name' (1875).

## God and the Problem of Pain

We have been engaged in thinking of the glories and the wonders of the blessed and Holy Trinity: the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Tonight I want to speak of a problem that I find many people have. It is a problem that makes them seriously doubt whether there is any God at all. Or, if there is such a God, then they say he cannot be a God of love as the Bible claims he is. We'll begin our meditation by reading from the Epistle to the Romans:

For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us. For the earnest expectation of the creature waits for the manifestation of the sons of God. For the creature was made subject to vanity, not willingly, but by reason of him who has subjected the same in hope, because the creature itself also shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groans and travails in pain together until now. And not only they, but ourselves also, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting for the adoption, the redemption of our body. For we are saved by hope: but hope that is seen is not hope: for what a man sees, why does he yet hope for it? But if we hope for that which we see not, then we wait for it with patience.

. . . And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are called, according to his purpose. For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he [the Son] might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom he did predestinate, them he also called: and whom he called, them he also justified: and whom he justified, them he also glorified. What shall we say then to these things? If God be for us, who can be against us? He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things? Who shall lay anything to the charge of God's elect? It is God that justifies. Who is he that condemns? It is Christ that died, yea rather, that is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril or sword? As it is written, 'For thy sake we are killed all the day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter.' Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us. For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (8:18–25; 28–39)

## The problem of pain

One doesn't have to live very long before one discovers that this world of ours is full of pain. It is not only the pain of individuals, of illness and disease, be it physical or mental, or the pain of bereavement as we lose loved ones. There is also the pain of the world at large. There are the volcanoes and the earthquakes, the tidal waves that in one fell swoop can destroy thousands of people. Pain is everywhere.

### *The reality of the problem*

For some people, and many that I have met, the existence of pain on this scale suggests to them that there can't be a God at all. They object to me: 'You Christians say that there is a God in heaven, a God who made this universe. Why then all this pain? If there's a God of love, as you say there is, why doesn't he organise things so that there isn't pain like this?'

I had a colleague in my university, a mathematical physicist, and we used to talk from time to time about spiritual things. He said to me on one occasion, 'You know, David, I believe there is an intelligence behind this universe. But I can't think that the intelligence is personal.'

I said, 'Why not?'

He said, 'Because look at all the natural disasters: volcanoes, earthquakes, tidal waves and all the rest of it. How could there be a personal God behind all that?'

That's how many people think, don't they? And when people raise with me the question of pain, I have to admit I don't have all the answers. I've suffered pain myself but nowhere near what other folks have suffered. I don't pretend to have all the answers, but I see the problem.

I was seated at dinner with a learned professor in Russia at one stage who was the head of a great psychiatric institute in Moscow. I can well understand that he had seen a lot of pain in the course of his years in that institution. Gently and graciously, and in a gentlemanly fashion, he said to me over the table, 'How do you say there is a God when there is so much suffering in the world?' And I said to him, 'Well I acknowledge it straight, sir; there is a problem. How can you reconcile a loving God with all this pain? You as atheists will solve the problem, won't you? You'll get rid of the problem by saying there is no God. And, certainly, if there's no God you don't have a problem with pain, do you? It's what you might expect. For if there's no God who created this world, then this whole universe has come together by some colossal series of colossal accidents, and there's no intelligence behind it. There's no purpose, no plan and ultimately no meaning.'

I continued, 'That's something to be observed, isn't it? If you get rid of God in your thinking, you get rid of the problem. You don't get rid of the pain, do you? In fact, if we tried to get rid of God, we make the pain ten thousand times worse because, not to be sad and dismal but, if there's no God, then life for every one of us is ultimately, absolutely meaningless. It will end in death, in the grave, and that will be the end. And some folks say, "Well never mind. Let's live and make merry for tomorrow we die." It's an easy philosophy for some to hold. What about the folks who get a terminal illness when they're twenty or thirty, and that ruins even this life? You will tell them, will you, that there is no hope for them

in this life and no hope in the life to come, because there is no God? You'll get rid of the problem, as you say, but you don't get rid of the pain.'

### *Hope and pain*

Now if there is a God (and there most certainly is) then there is hope. I don't know how you find pain, or how you personally cope with it. I find that it is *hope* that strengthens one to endure pain. For listen to the very words we read. Scripture is realist. Talking to those who are already Christians and so have the Holy Spirit, it says, 'we groan within ourselves'.

Pain is a real thing, but before us lies that splendid hope that, one day, God will redeem our very bodies, as he has redeemed our souls, and we shall have new, glorious bodies like the body of the Lord Jesus. What is more, the very author of creation tells us that one day creation itself—the whole of creation—shall be delivered from the bondage to corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. Oh, what a magnificent thing it is!

For a believer, life does not end in corruption and the worm and the grave. A believer doesn't write off this universe as absolutely meaningless. This universe has a glorious future and, when it's done, God will make a new heavens and a new earth. Oh for the joy of being there, present, when the Lord does that for his universe! Therefore when we believe in God there is hope.

### ***Finding meaning in pain***

So what grounds have we for thinking that pain isn't absolutely meaningless? I find, as I watch my fellow men and women, that we don't think that all pain is bad. There are hefty folks who get together, fifteen-a-side, and play rugby. You may not approve of that. I had to play it at school. They jolly well know that when they go to a game, they're going to get bruised, beaten, banged and come out with I don't know what state of sore knees and joints, but they do it nonetheless, in spite of the pain. And if you asked them, 'Whatever do you do that for?' They'll say, 'For the fun of it!'

Funny, isn't it? As long as the pain isn't too bad, they enjoy doing it. And other people climb Everest, just because it's there, and risk their very lives doing it, for the sheer joy and exhilaration of it. And then we notice that when nurses and doctors give their lives to tending those with pain and suffering, it produces in them a certain quality of character. Whereas the people who are out to just enjoy themselves become selfish in the extreme and we come near to despising them.

So pain has its uses, but let's think a bit more deeply.

### *Risks and benefits*

When God made our universe, the Bible tells us he saw everything he had made, and he pronounced that it was very good, and so it was. That didn't mean that the universe was necessarily safe. For the universe has to be treated with immense care and respect, doesn't it? What would you have God do? You're in an aeroplane and it's going along nicely when its engines fail. What would you expect God to do? Should he destroy the law of gravity so the plane can go on flying and not fall to the ground? But wait a minute, if God destroyed gravity the earth's atmosphere would disappear, and we would be left without the atmosphere

around the world, and we would perish. As we see from what God has done, the only way he could possibly invent a world like ours is the way he has done it, where gravity works. But we must be very careful how we use it.

I come to the conclusion that the ordinary person's attitude to suffering is as follows: when it comes to man's harnessing of the forces of nature, the risks are judged to be worth taking. Take electricity for instance. The discovery of electricity and learning how to harness it has cost hundreds of thousands of lives. What would you say about it? Should people never have tried to find out about electricity so they could use it to boil their kettles and heat their homes and all sorts of other things? You don't say that, do you? You say, 'It's a pity it cost so many lives, but look at the benefits that have come from it.' We ourselves seem to hold the view that if tremendous benefits come, in spite of the pain that it involves, then the pain and suffering have been worthwhile. Isn't that the view you take? If you don't take it, what are you doing sitting in here with the lights on?

*What is it all about?*

If we ask God why he has built this universe and put us in it, the answer God will give us in the Bible is that he made this universe with an exceedingly glorious future for mankind in mind, for those that would repent and trust him. I'll put that future first of all in Bible language and then discuss what it means.

Our blessed Lord Jesus talked to us about the possibility of human beings becoming children of God by being born again of God's Spirit (see John 1 & 3). That is the proposition that God our Creator is putting to each one of us tonight. If it should be that any of us doesn't know what that means, then let's listen with special attention. What God is offering you tonight is the possibility of being born again as a child of God. 'And if a child,' says the Bible, 'then an heir of God', an inheritor of all that God has and is, and not only so, but to be 'joint heirs with Christ' (see Rom 8:17). Then when Christ comes to reign, we are to reign with him and then, when there comes a new heaven and earth, to be part of his administration. I nearly said what fun it will be. Oh, what glory it will be, to be with Christ when he comes to reign! It is God's estimate of it that the glorious provision that he offers us is worth any and all of the pain that life on earth might ever involve for any one of us (see v. 18).

### ***Being born again***

So what does it mean to be born again, and what is it to become a child of God? Here we need to do some careful thinking because, in popular language, a lot of people mean something different. They'll say in their more sentimental moments: 'Oh, well we're all children of God, aren't we?' And we're not, but that's what they think. Of course it is true that God is the Father of all mankind, in the sense that he made everyone, and he looks after his creatures in what you might call a fatherly way. But when we come to the matter of the Christian gospel that our Lord taught us, then we have to get it straight in our heads that, in the sense that he meant it, not all people are children of God.

All people are creatures of God; not all are children of God. And you say, 'Well what is the difference between being a creature of God and a child of God?' Well let's take an illustration. Here is a computer buff, an absolute expert in computers. In fact, he is such an

expert that he could build a computer from the first screw to the finished product; he knows all about them. And here is a beautiful, complicated computer he has built, so he *made* that. And then the dear man gets married and has a son. I ask you to think of the difference between the son and the computer. What's the difference? Well a child could see the difference, couldn't he? The computer was something the engineer made. He created it. He didn't make the son. He had to generate, to beget the son, and that's altogether a different principle. The computer can do wonderful things; but it doesn't have the engineer's life. When we trust the Saviour and are born again then a veritable miracle happens. God gives us, puts into us, his very own life.

The Bible says that our Lord, who was the Creator of the universe, eventually came into our world:

He was in the world, and the world was made by him, and the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. (John 1:10-11)

Then it adds this:

But to as many as received him, to them he gave the authority and power to become children of God. (v. 12)

And you can see at once that if you're going to be a child of God, you've got to *become* one. You aren't that way automatically:

But to as many as received him, he gave the authority and power to become children of God, even to those who believe on his name, which were born and begotten, not of the will of man or of the will of the flesh, nor of blood, but of God. (vv. 12-13)

That is a miracle. And because it's real we would do well to pause this very moment and say to ourselves, 'Well, I am a creature of God; I didn't make myself. But have I become a child of God? Do I know what it means?' For this, according to Scripture, is the major purpose of our being on this planet. To miss it is eternal disaster.

This is what it is all about: being born of God, born again, entering the kingdom of God, becoming a child of God. And those who trust it know it to be the truth, because when we trust the Saviour, God gives us his Holy Spirit. We're told that the Spirit witnesses with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs of God and joint heirs with our Lord Jesus Christ. Oh, the wonder of it!

I've met multitudes of people who, if I said what I just have, would nod their heads because they know what it means. The Spirit within them testifies that they have passed from death to life. They have been begotten of God; they are children of God, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ and looking forward to a glorious eternity to come. Have we all?

### ***Why the new birth is necessary***

You say, 'Why do we have to become children of God, and how do we go about becoming children of God? And what's wrong with us that we're not already children of God?' Well to

ask that is to ask where our human race went wrong. It may sound extreme to you, but the Bible tells us that men and women outside of Christ are enemies of God. That doesn't mean they all go around blaspheming and cursing and swearing and murdering and everything else that's vile but, deep down in the heart, there is an opposition to God. And the Bible tells us how it all started.

God made man, and he made a beautiful garden, a veritable paradise for man to be in with every delightful tree in it. He warned Adam and Eve that there was one tree that they must not try to take from without his permission, and that was the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. And along came Satan and began whispering ideas into the head of Eve:

'My dear,' he said, 'I hear you're not allowed to eat of any of these trees here in this garden.'

'Oh, no,' she said, 'Satan, you've got that wrong. We're allowed to eat of them all except the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.'

'Ah, well I thought it,' said Satan. 'That's how God is, you see. God is mean and wants to keep you down; he wants to destroy your enjoyment. Look at the tree, woman,' said he. 'Don't you see it's beautiful?'

And the woman looked, and she saw the tree looked marvellously good for food. The fruit on the tree was beautiful to look at, and it was desirable to make one wise. Here is satisfaction, aesthetic satisfaction. The artistry of it was delightful. Then there was the physical satisfaction; the fruit was good to taste. Then it was suitable to make you wise, so there was intellectual satisfaction to be had.

And Satan said, 'My dear, good woman, don't you take any notice of God. Go in for living! This is life: enjoyment of the aesthetics, enjoyment of the knowledge, enjoyment of the food. Satisfy your appetites and you'll live. Don't take any notice of God who says you'll die.' And the woman listened to Satan and took the fruit (see Gen 3).

May I observe how many folks have yielded to that lie? Many of them have sat in a meeting of this sort, brought up to know the gospel of the Lord Jesus. And their parents crooned to them the very gospel of Christ from their babyhood onward: 'Yes, Jesus loves me; the Bible tells me so.' They've heard the voice of the Son of God offering them eternal life. And Satan comes and whispers in their ears, 'Oh, but there's a beautiful world out there. Don't you listen to all this preaching of the Bible; you want to go in for life.' And they go in for what they think is life.

It is not that God doesn't want us to enjoy life. Of course he wants us to enjoy life, but what they think they've got to do to enjoy life is to leave God behind and disobey his word, and then they will find life. Multitudes have listened to that lie. They imagine that God is against them. They don't want to hear about God. They think he will spoil their fun.

### *An ungrateful child*

That reminds me of the parable our Lord told about the prodigal son. The prodigal son left home, and he went into a far country and squandered his substance in riotous living. And, according to his elder brother (do notice that it was his elder brother who said so), he became a companion of prostitutes. I tell you now that wasn't the most serious thing he did. The most

sad and sorry and serious thing was not what he did in the far country, it's what he did when he was still at home.

He came to his father one day and said, 'Father, I want you to divide the inheritance and give me the half that falls to me.' Since he had an elder brother, it would have been when the father died that they would get half each. Of course, at the time when he was living, no one would ever think of demanding to have their share of the inheritance while the father was still living. They would, in all decency, wait until the man died and then put in for their share of the inheritance.

Mark then the enormity of what that boy did and said. He came to his dad, said, 'Dad, I want it now. Dad, you old fogey, you're standing in my way. If it weren't for you keeping on living like this, I could have my share of the inheritance, and I'm demanding you give it to me now anyway. You're living too long. Get out of the way, so I can have it and enjoy it.'

And the Lord who told the parable was thereby describing what multitudes of men and women have done and are doing with God, some maybe who have sat on these seats and heard the gospel many times. They don't say it with their lips, but they say it with their behaviour: 'God, get out of the way. I want all there is for myself.' The human heart, deceived by God's enemy, listens to the slander.

I wonder if I speak to somebody tonight, and you have listened to the slander too. You know the gospel, but you listen to the world, and you listen to his satanic majesty. You really feel that if you listened to God and his word, it will spoil your chances of enjoying life. That's a lie to start with; this is God's world anyway. You can't enjoy this world and this universe and life in general as God intended it to be enjoyed by getting rid of God himself out of your life.

#### *A confused creature*

I use the simple analogy (my friends will be tired of hearing it, but it's hard to think up analogies). Suppose you notice one of your friends, a dear young lady of twenty-one or twenty-two, and she's not trying to hide the fact that on a certain finger on her left hand there is a ring. And you enquire what this ring is, and you say, 'Is this an engagement ring?'

'Yes,' she says, 'it's an engagement ring.'

'Oh,' you say, 'do let me have a look. Isn't that beautiful! What is that now? Is that gold?'

'No, that's platinum.'

'Oh, marvellous! And real diamonds in it, and oh, how they sparkle. Diamonds for life!' And you go on with all this kind of thing. And she's very enthusiastic. Having praised the ring, you say, 'And tell me, if I may ask, who is the young man?'

And she says, 'What young man?'

'Well the young man that gave you the ring.'

'There isn't any young man,' she says. 'I don't believe in young men. I don't want any young men.'

'You don't? But that's an engagement ring,' you say.

'Yes, it's an engagement ring.'

'But you don't want any young man?'



What do you say next? What on earth is the sense of an engagement ring without a young man behind it? Think of all the lovely gifts of life, given to us by God and meant to draw our hearts to him, but if we reject the God who gave them, what then is the meaning of the good gifts? If we go on rejecting God like that, we shall find that those gifts grow old and decrepit and decay and pass away. And our very bodies and powers of enjoyment will decay and grow old and pass away, and then without God, what are we left with? Then there will be an eternity of pain, frustration, distress, consciousness of the displeasure of God and no end to the suffering of eternal perdition.

Alas for this enmity in the human heart, this prejudice against God—this lie that if we trust the Saviour and follow him and believe God it will make life a misery. How can we get rid of the lie? How will God convince us that it is a lie? The Bible puts it this way:

While we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son. (Rom 5:10)

In this is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. (1 John 4:10)

And this is the marvellous story. To counter that devilish lie and to show us what the truth of God's heart is, God himself became man, became incarnate. And mankind in the end not only rejected him but nailed him to a tree and plunged a spear through his side. And God? He loved them still. Our maker; he loves us.

There's a story told in the Old Testament of the wise King Solomon. When he came to the throne two women were brought before him to his court of law. They were two prostitutes. Each one of them had had a child, and they lived in the same house. They slept in the same room: one in one bed with her baby and the other in the other bed with her baby. In the middle of the night one of the women rolled over in her sleep and suffocated her baby, and it died. When she saw what had happened, she crept out of bed, took her dead baby and went across to the other woman's bed and gently took away the living baby from the other woman. She put her dead baby with that other woman and went back to her bed. And in the morning when the second woman woke up and looked at her baby, it was dead! Her shock was enormous. Then she looked at it again, and she said to herself, 'That's not my baby. This is the other woman's baby, and it's dead.' Across the room she went after the other woman and pulled back the sheets, and there was her own baby alive, with this other woman.

Well the case came to court: who was the mother of the child? And one woman said, 'It's my child.' And the other woman said, 'No, it isn't your child; it's my child.' And the king was called upon to decide which woman was the true mother of the child.

Presently the king called for an officer to bring in the executioner with his sword, and he said to the two women, 'I'm going to be utterly impartial and fair. If I give the child to this woman, the other woman will say that's unfair. If I give it to her, the other woman will say I'm unfair. So this is what is fair.' He said to the executioner, 'Take the baby and cut it in two, and give one half to one and one half to the other.' And the one woman said, 'Yes, you do that.' And the other woman said, 'Oh, king, don't do that. Let her have it. Let her have it! Don't kill the child. Anything to save the child!' And the king said, 'That's the mother. A mother would do anything to save her child.'

Oh, friend, how would you know who is the true God and who is the liar? You'll know it if you stand at Calvary. For I nearly said that God would do anything to save you, so that you wouldn't perish. For he made you and loves you with a Creator's heart. He would do anything.

The Bible says that Jesus Christ, his Son, 'bore our sins in his body on the tree . . .' (1 Pet 2:24). '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', rather than that we perish (Isa 53:6). But if we won't have him, if we still say 'No', then there is no alternative. Your portion will be in the lake of fire, prepared for the devil and his angels (Matt 25:41).

Oh, listen to the story and what it means to become a child of God. We can be certain of it. Talking to believers, the apostle says, 'Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed upon us, that we should be called the children of God: and we are actually that . . . We know not what we shall be, but we know that when we see him, we shall be like him' (1 John 3:1-2). What a future: heirs of God and all that his infinite ingenuity and love can provide for the countless ages of eternity.

#### *Pain for God's children too*

You say, 'Does that mean that those who trust Christ never have any pain anymore?' Well no, it doesn't mean that. This world has been out of joint ever since Adam rebelled against God. By God's own providence, this world doesn't run as it should. In one sense that's a good thing too. If man could live in a paradise without God when he was in this world, perhaps he would never seek the Saviour. That would be disastrous, for we'd end up in perdition.

This is a broken world. Let it remind us that life is only temporary and that here, in this life, we must decide what our eternal destiny shall be. Those who trust the Saviour don't necessarily get freedom from pain, but what happens is that there comes a new slant, a new attitude to it, even when that pain becomes almost unendurable. In their hearts they know that it is not meaningless. God says he can take the pains of this natural life and turn them for our eternal benefit so that we may be purified and our faith in the end strengthened so that we may be able to enjoy the joys of heaven even more.

One of the early Christians whose pain had been immense, particularly the pain that came from persecution for Christ's sake, said, 'Our light affliction, which is but for a moment, works for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory' (2 Cor 4:17). And if you want to know another opinion, ask some senior believer. Perhaps she's crippled with arthritis or something else and has come through many sorrows in life. But if you ask her, 'Are you a believer?'

'Yes.'

'You're going to heaven?'

'Yes.'

'What would you say about all this pain you've endured?'

As I raise that question, my mind goes to an elderly man in my home assembly. He could neither read nor write. He had a good voice and would sing for the Lord; he would sing the gospel. Occasionally he would rise in the assembly to pass on a word of encouragement and exhortation. And I remember him in his later days, struggling to get to his feet because of his

arthritis; he had it very severely, the poor man: it was a kind of torture. He ended his remarks when he said, 'But, brethren and sisters, in spite of all my pains, it will be worth it all when we see Jesus.'

Yes, that's the view that believers take. They know the pain is real, and the suffering is real. But they've caught a glimpse of God's eternal purpose. They're children of God, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ. They are heirs to the glories of eternity. The sufferings of this present time seem a small thing in comparison when we see that, when we discover what God has done and prepared for those who love him.

## About the Author

**DAVID W. GOODING** is Professor Emeritus of Old Testament Greek at Queen's University, Belfast and a member of the Royal Irish Academy. His international teaching ministry is marked by fresh and careful expositions of both testaments. He has published scholarly studies on the Septuagint and Old Testament narratives, as well as expositions of Luke, John 13–17, Acts, Hebrews and the New Testament's use of the Old Testament.