

Encouragement and Challenges

From the Gospel of Matthew

David Gooding

A Myrtlefield House Transcript



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[Afraid? Doubting? Worrying? – Why?](#)

Let us take three brief readings from the Gospel of Matthew.

‘Why are you afraid, O you of little faith?’ (8:26)

Jesus immediately reached out his hand and took hold of him, saying to him, ‘O you of little faith, why did you doubt?’ (14:31)

But Jesus, aware of this, said, ‘O you of little faith, why are you discussing among yourselves the fact that you have no bread?’ (16:8)

Tonight, I should like to give a practical and a pastoral talk on these three most unwelcome visitors that sometimes visit our hearts and minds, and sometimes lodge and outstay their welcome: fear, doubt and worry. Now I don’t know how it appeals to you, but when I read holy Scripture I find it an immense encouragement that God does not pretend that the early Christians and his great apostles were some kind of supermen and women, who never had a fear or a doubt or a worry in the world, but lived every minute of their Christian life in triumphal rejoicing. How glad I am that he doesn’t paint them so, or else I must have concluded years ago that I was never a Christian at all! I find it an encouragement, I say, that God in his word shows us the realities of Christian life, and shows us that even the greatest men and women of God were people with a nature like ours.

I think of that great hero of the faith, that tremendous example of faith that was Abraham. One moment, he was valiantly and courageously displaying his faith in God: ‘Abraham believed God and it was counted to him for righteousness’ (see Gen 15:6); and the next minute he was so frightened that he disowned his wife and nearly lost her, first to the Egyptians and then to the Philistines. Or I think of that great character, Elijah, standing on Mount Carmel and defying Ahab and Jezebel to their faces and taking on four hundred of the priests of Baal, and by his courage and faith bringing Israel back to trust in the true God; and five minutes after that, losing his nerve completely and running for his life away from Jezebel.

So here in the Gospel of Matthew, three times over, we find stories that let us see that even the apostles themselves were people like ourselves, of ordinary flesh and blood, and from time to time they suffered from fear and from doubt and from worry. And if sometimes we have found it so ourselves, here surely is encouragement from the Lord.

Jesus knows all about our struggles,
He will guide till the day is done.¹

¹ Johnson Oatman (1856-1922), ‘There’s not a friend like the lowly Jesus’ (1895).

Fear

So let's think of the first unwelcome visitor who comes to lodge sometimes, the visitor of fear. When I hear the Lord Jesus talking, it raises a question in my mind. He was with the apostles in the boat, with the waves lapping the gunnels and coming over, and the boat every minute seeming as if it were going down, and when they woke him, he said, 'Why are you afraid?' (see Matt 8:23–27). When I hear the Lord Jesus talking like that and I read this verse and apply it to myself, I hope you won't think I'm desperately wicked, but I feel like turning round to the Lord and saying, 'Well excuse me, Lord, but reverently and with due respect, why do you ask me why I'm afraid? Do you suppose I get afraid on purpose? That I deliberately set out to fear? I'd be as glad as anybody to get rid of my fears and have done with them. If there were some kind of switch in my brain that I could switch off and stop all fearing, well I'd do that forthwith. Fancy asking me why I'm afraid. Isn't it obvious? I'm afraid, because I can't help being afraid.'

And that's a good place to start our thinking. Why is it that sometimes we feel afraid? Well at the first and basic level, it is because God himself has put a machinery for fear inside our hearts—for fear is a very healthy thing, put there to preserve us. I remember some years ago, a student of mine who had come from Norway to take his courses in Queen's² and, at a reception, I was asking him about himself and what he did for his hobbies. He told me that one of his hobbies was jumping from aeroplanes on parachutes. I said, 'I suppose when you've done it a good many times, you lose your fear of jumping out on a parachute.'

'No,' he said, 'you don't, at least you shouldn't, for if ever you lost your fear of jumping out, it would be very dangerous. You'd then do something silly.'

It's good to have a certain amount of fear.

You watch little birds in the garden and, as you watch them pecking up the crumbs that you've put out, you remember the words of the Lord Jesus, 'Your heavenly Father looks after the birds' (see Matt 6:26). And you say to yourself, 'Why can't I be like them, without fear?' But wait a minute; the birds are not without fear. Haven't you watched them pecking at their crumbs in the garden, one peck at a crumb, a look over the left shoulder to see whether the cat is coming, a look over the right shoulder to see whether the dog is coming? Why do you think they do that, if they're not afraid? And if they weren't afraid of the cat and the dog, they wouldn't last five minutes! So God has put the mechanism of fear into the hearts of animals and birds, and in our hearts as well, as a healthy preservative thing.

Sometimes I hear preachers telling the public that if only they'd trust Christ, they would never again be afraid to die. And I wish I could have a word in their ears and say, 'Please explain yourself a little bit more. What do you mean you wouldn't be afraid to die?' In that wickedness that's inherent in me, I think I'd like to get them in the middle of a field and, when they weren't looking, put a mad bull behind them and see what happened when they heard his snorting and turned round to see two tonnes of a bull coming at them, head down, horns at the ready! I'd like to ask them then whether they were afraid to die or not! I think I know what would happen. Without a thought, they'd run as hard as they could for their very lives, jump the five-bar gate and be over it before they knew they were! Not afraid to die? What the good preacher means is that if you trust the Lord Jesus Christ, you won't be afraid of *death*.

² Queen's University, Belfast.

That's a very different thing, for it is true that when we trust the Lord Jesus, he removes the fear of death. For what is death? The sting of death, says Scripture, is sin (1 Cor 15:56). The sting of death is not in dying, however painful dying might be. The sting of death, the thing to be feared in death, is what happens next. To die unforgiven, to die with sins unremoved, not at peace with God, there's a terrible sting in a death like that.

And when we come to the Saviour and he forgives us, he removes the sting; and for a believer to depart is to be with Christ, which is very far better (Phil 1:23). A believer doesn't fear death, but most of us fear dying. Of course we do. God himself has put the mechanism and nature within us that we will fight to the very last in order to survive. We fear to put our hand in a flame, nature tells us; and if I were to poke my finger near your eye, you'd draw back involuntarily. You have no control over it, for God has put a mechanism of fear within to preserve us. And not only to fear physical death, but to fear for ourselves, our personalities, to fear rejection, to fear and to be ashamed of sin. It would be a very bad thing if we lost our fear for that, wouldn't it? There are people of whom God complains in the Old Testament that they not only sinned, but when they sinned, they couldn't even blush. People are ashamed of blushing, but it can be a very good thing. It shows that we still are human and that we still have some sense of decency. It shows that we have some respect for the moral order that when we sin, we blush and are afraid of people knowing about it. It's good, isn't it?

Why do we fear? Because God has put a fear mechanism within us to help to preserve us. And we should notice that the fear mechanisms God has put within us are not under our immediate control, mercifully. If you're walking down the road, jaywalking, and you step off the pavement and to your consternation you hear a double decker bus two feet behind you, what do you do? You don't even stop to think. Your fear mechanism takes over and you've jumped a yard on to the path before you know what you've done! Isn't that merciful, because if you had to stop and think, you might be too slow in thinking and that would be the end of you.

Why are you afraid? Well what do you think the disciples would be feeling—in a boat with the water coming over the sides and the boat nearly full and about to go down any minute? Why are you afraid? At one level, there's an obvious answer to it: they would have been an inhuman machine if they weren't fearful. But sometimes I shall have to learn that, while certain things make me afraid, I must do them, I must face them. When I was in Czechoslovakia just recently, they took me and showed me the places where the early Moravian believers first translated the Scriptures into the Czech language and showed me the pictures of their history and of the gruesome persecutions that subsequently they endured. Who of us, I wonder, called upon to suffer like that for the Lord, wouldn't be afraid? Yes, but what we mustn't do, says holy Scripture, is to allow that fear to dominate us.

Luke tells us that on one occasion, when the crowd had objected to what they heard the Lord Jesus saying, their leaders were whipping up the crowd into a frenzy against him and everything was beginning to look very ugly; and the crowd was so large and furious, they were beginning to trample on one another. And our Lord Jesus warned his disciples and said, 'Now beware of hypocrisy' (see Luke 12:1)—hypocrisy of the sort that pretends not to be what you really are. I think if I were in a crowd that was getting ugly, I would say to myself, 'You don't need to confess the Lord Jesus now. Perhaps you'd be wise to keep quiet and slip away and then you'll live to preach another day.' 'No,' said the Lord Jesus, 'it's no good trying to

cover up what you really are. That's a form of hypocrisy, and anyway, if you try it, it will come out in the end.'

'If you want to conquer your fear,' said the Lord, 'the way to do it is to learn to fear the thing that really should be feared, the biggest thing to fear. Don't fear those who can kill the body and, when they've killed the body, have no more they can do. Fear him rather who, when he has killed the body, could destroy both mind and soul in hell. Fear him and the bigger fear will cast out the lesser fear' (see Matt 10:28). Imagine you were on holiday in the Alps somewhere, or perhaps in the Tatra Mountains of Czechoslovakia, and you had come to a very high mountain and there was a chasm, going down a thousand feet, and there was just a plank across the chasm. And you stood there and you said, 'I can't possibly go over that. I can't stand heights. I would fall over.' You fear the height: it's a very natural feeling in many people. And suppose as you stood there quivering, you turned round and saw a great bear coming up behind; now what would you do? Well I think you'd make your choice and you'd be over the plank as hard as you could go. Why? Well not because you didn't fear the plank, but because you feared the bear more than you feared the plank, and the bigger fear overcame the smaller fear.

Says our Lord, 'If you're going to fear, now get your fear in good proportion and fear the things that really ought to be feared.' Of course, let me say in passing that sometimes the fear mechanism in our brains goes wrong, and in some folks it gets jammed. It's like a thermostat in a motorcar: when the engine gets hot, then this thing switches on the fans or something, and makes it all get cool again. But then sometimes it gets jammed and it doesn't work and the car overheats and you've got to stop forthwith until the thing is put right again. Sometimes that happens with our fear mechanism. Through some special shock or some kind of wound, your fear mechanism will come on when it's not supposed to come on, and it will get jammed on, so people fear all sorts of things that they've no real objective need to fear at all. If ever you come across anyone like that, do tell them, please, that it's not a sign that they've lost their salvation or something. It's simply a little wire has got crossed inside the fear mechanism. Tell them rather to go and seek some professional advice from someone who knows about that kind of thing, so that the crossed wire can be uncrossed if it's possible to do it, and the old fear mechanism shut off.

But granted that the fear mechanism is working healthily as God intended it, then here come lessons from the Lord Jesus himself about how we are to control it. 'Why are you afraid?' said he, to the apostles in the boat. You say, 'They couldn't help it, surely?' Well, they could have done. Even with what limited knowledge they had of the Lord Jesus at that moment, they ought to have been able to control their fear. They feared in the first place that the storm was going to have the boat at the bottom of the lake and the whole lot of them drowned. And to make it worse, the Lord Jesus was asleep and it seemed as if he didn't even know what was happening, and they were afraid that he would stay asleep and they'd all be drowned before he woke up. And then they were afraid that he was asleep and he not only didn't know, but he didn't really care. For one of the Gospel writers tells us that when they came and shook him, they said, 'Lord, do you not care?' (see Mark 4:38). That is a scary thing in life. To meet some grave problem that threatens disaster is bad enough, and naturally all our fears get moving. But if in that moment we feel that the Lord has gone asleep somehow and is not really aware of what's happening, that makes it more scary still. And then if the idea gets into our

hearts that he not only doesn't know, but he doesn't even care, then we would feel desolate indeed, as though we have been abandoned by God himself.

How could they have controlled those fears? 'Why are you afraid,' he said, 'O you of little faith?' Why didn't they realize who it was in the boat? You say, 'They didn't know him yet as the Son of God.' Well, perhaps so. But the Roman centurion of whom we could read a few chapters earlier, even he had begun to wake up to who the Lord Jesus was. For he said to the Lord Jesus, 'You've no need to come to my house. Speak only the word and my servant will be cured. I too am a man under authority. I say to this one, "Go," and he goes, and to that one, "Come," and he comes. You speak, and death itself will depart' (see Matt 8:5-10). And if a Roman centurion had been able to perceive that much of who the Lord Jesus was and act upon it, surely the learned apostles ought to have perceived even more who Jesus really was. And in believing it, they would have found the secret for overcoming their fears.

If they were afraid, we've even less excuse. Who do you really believe the Lord Jesus is? Do you suppose that even while he was here on earth, it would have been possible for him to get drowned and go to the bottom of the lake, because he happened to be asleep and didn't know about it? That the whole of God's work could come unstuck and the great plan of redemption never be accomplished, because he happened to fall asleep just when there was a storm and, before he had the chance to wake up, he got to the bottom of the lake? Well, of course not, the thing is ludicrous. We know a Saviour not merely who, being human, slept in the boat, but the one who is risen again and sits at the right hand of God. This is he of whom Scripture says that the whole vast universe was created by and for him, and he is before all things and in him all things hold together (see Col 1:16-17). Nothing ever takes him by surprise, not in the vast, great universe even.

You'll notice, or if you haven't noticed the scientists have told you, that our universe is so big that light from the sun takes eight minutes to get here. If we had eyes big enough to see any events on the surface of the sun, it would be eight minutes before we ever saw them, because that's how long it takes the light to get here. Some stars are so distant that it takes thousands of years for their light to get here and if there were things going on in those stars, and you could see them through some powerful telescope, what you would be looking at is not what is happening there now, but what was happening thousands of years ago. And it's not merely in the universe that we often are behind, it's in life. Here's a good wife and she's making her husband's dinner, for he's coming home as he always comes home, at 5:45 every night. She's expecting him any minute now, because it's 5:40 already. What she doesn't know is he's lying in hospital, following an accident. She won't find that out for another half an hour, perhaps an hour. We are often behind events: we find out after they've happened.

That never happens to Jesus Christ, our Lord. He is always before all things. Nothing takes him by surprise. The story of the storm on the lake is not told us to assure us that we will never suffer loss, never meet with an accident, never be killed. Yes, sometimes the Lord is pleased to intervene in our circumstances and save us from what looks like a disaster about to occur. But he doesn't always. I can never think of this passage of Scripture about the storm on the lake and the way the Lord Jesus saved his apostles, but that I think of my experience, thirty and more years ago, in Bury St Edmunds in Suffolk in England. After the Lord's Supper, a brother had got up and read this passage about the storm and exhorted us to trust the Lord, saying that if we trusted the Lord, we would find that the boat never went down. When he

sat down, a gaunt and lean-looking stranger, at least he was a stranger to me, got up and quietly said, 'My brothers, my sisters, sometimes the boat does go down.' It was Dr Tidmarsh, reporting for the first time that anybody had heard in our part of the world, that his five colleagues, young missionary men, had been killed by the Auca Indians.

I'll never forget that phrase, 'Brethren, sometimes the boat does go down.' You say it would have been impossible for a boat to go down with the Lord in it. Well perhaps so, until the time came when, even with the Lord Jesus, it was true. They took his body down from the tree and they laid it in a sepulchre. Sometimes, you know, the boat goes down, but why would you fear? Calvary itself did not happen without his being aware of it first. If he let it happen that was all right, and if he lets our boat go down, it's not because he doesn't care.

My brother, my sister, if he lets our boat go down, he is with us in that boat, for he himself has passed through death—that by dying, he might put out of action 'the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery' (Heb 2:14–15). 'Why are you afraid?' We could be afraid because of pain—the natural mechanism of fear inside us. But ultimately, our Lord Jesus assures us nothing will harm us. Death itself cannot ultimately harm a believer.

How can I overcome my fear? Well what would you do, mum? Suppose you've got a little toddler. He's just beginning to toddle around the place and he's following you as you do the housework, and this morning you've got the vacuum cleaner out. He hasn't known about these things before but, for the first time in his knowledge, you switch it on and it makes that hideous noise that vacuum cleaners make, and the child is thrown into convulsions of fear at the noise and this great monster with its snakelike tube going across the carpet. You know he doesn't need to fear it, but how would you help him overcome his fear? It might be a long process, but little by little, getting the little chap's confidence to see what this thing actually is and dare to come and touch it, and dare to look it in the face and dare to hear the noise and then find out that it doesn't harm him.

How can I overcome my fear? By asking myself again and again and again and again, who is this Jesus Christ who travels with me over life's sea in the same boat as I travel? Who is he? And I love the words of that hymn that says:

I leave it all with Jesus, day by day,
 Faith can firmly trust him, come what may,
 Worlds on worlds are hanging on his hand,
 Life and death are waiting his command;
 Yet his tender bosom makes thee room.³

Our Lord rose and rebuked the waves and the wind. He holds authority and power over them still. Why did you fear?

Doubt

'Why did you doubt?' says our Lord to Peter (Matt 14:31). And I feel like saying the same thing when I hear the Lord say that. I say, 'Well with all due respect, Lord, but did you suspect I set out to doubt then? I didn't set out to doubt. I wanted to believe, but these doubts assailed

³ Based on a hymn by Ellen H. Willis, 'I left it all with Jesus', written c. 1871.

me.’ And from time to time, doubts assail everybody. I suppose there are believers—though I’ve never met them—who’ve never been plagued with doubts ever. But my little experience suggests that more believers are troubled with doubt in their hearts from time to time than actually allow other folks to know.

Why do you doubt? Well some people doubt even before they come to the Lord Jesus. Doubt can be simply a smokescreen by which we deceive ourselves, because behind our doubts we have moral problems maybe and we instinctively recognize that if Jesus is the Son of God, then our behaviour has been wrong and sinful. Rather than face that, we’re looking around for things to doubt—holes to pick in Scripture, reasons why we shouldn’t believe—until eventually we forget the real reason why we entertain the doubts, why we almost welcome the doubts. The only way to get rid of those doubts is to face the original moral problem that gave rise to them.

It is not always that we’ve got some secret moral problem that we don’t want to face which gives rise to doubt. For instance, take that worthy man Nathanael. When Philip came dancing down the road to preach the gospel to Nathanael and said, ‘We have found him of whom Moses and the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth’, Nathanael was immediately filled with every kind of doubt. ‘Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?’ (see John 1:45–46). How could it possibly be true? The reason for his doubting was not his fault: it was Philip’s fault. Nathanael, knowing the Old Testament, knew that the Messiah should be born not in Nazareth but in Bethlehem. Why didn’t Philip think to tell him, ‘We have found Jesus of Bethlehem?’ It would have made it easy, instead of putting unnecessary difficulties in the man’s path and making it difficult for him to believe! It’s like presenting a message that was true in part and then all mixed up with mistakes in the other part. And we may be grateful that Nathanael solved the problem of his doubt. Instead of sheltering behind it, he said, ‘All right, Philip, you asked me to come and see, so I will come and see. I will meet the person himself.’

That is the number one tactic to be adopted in facing the question of doubt, to come and see. Come to the Lord Jesus, tell him your doubts and let him dispel them. It was so with that famous doubter, at least so he’s called, Thomas. Being absent the first Sunday that the Lord appeared to his apostles and being told by the apostles that they had seen the Lord, Thomas said, ‘Well if you believe that, that’s okay by me. You believe it if you get comfort out of it. But as far as I’m concerned, I couldn’t possibly believe that.’ Well at least he was honest. What is the use of pretending we don’t have doubts when we do have doubts? When Thomas had his doubts about the Lord’s resurrection, it wasn’t because he didn’t love the Lord. The Lord some time earlier had said to his apostles, ‘I’m now going to Judaea, to deal with my good friend, Lazarus, who’s fallen asleep.’

The apostles said, ‘Don’t go, Lord, for the Jews will kill you if you go.’

‘I know that,’ said Christ. ‘I shall go nonetheless.’

Then said Thomas, ‘Well all right, let’s go with him, that we may die with him.’

Absolute devotion to the Lord Jesus. It was simply, when faced with this idea that Jesus had bodily risen from the dead, Thomas couldn’t take it in. It wasn’t any indication of disloyalty to the Lord Jesus and, being honest, he expressed his doubt and said, ‘Except I see the nail prints in his hands and side, I will not believe’ (see John 20:25). What did the Lord Jesus do? Why, the next Sunday, he appeared and immediately he said, ‘Thomas, I believe

you were asking for some evidence to help you get over your doubts. Well here it is: put your finger into the print of the nails in my wrist, and thrust your hand into my side. You wanted evidence, Thomas. You haven't chosen the best kind of evidence that you could think of, have you? Because the evidence of touch and the evidence of sight, in the end, are not the highest kind of evidence that you could have. There's stronger evidence than that. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed, and believed on greater and firmer evidence than the evidence of sight and touch. But, Thomas, if you must have evidence, here it is' (see vv. 26–29).

I have found through a long career, assailed by external doubts if not internal ones, that whenever I've had my real doubts about holy Scripture—is the gospel true, or is the whole thing made up by religiously minded people, or is it a psychological deception—I've found that the answer is to take those doubts to the Lord and say, 'Here are my doubts: Lord, you give me the evidence.' It's not by trying to overcome the doubt. It is by appealing to the Saviour for the evidence that he overcomes the doubt.

We cannot forget the kindness of our blessed Lord when even John the Baptist fell into a period of doubting the Saviour. John sent messengers to the Lord Jesus saying, 'Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?' (Luke 7:19). Poor old John. How did it come, that the great forerunner, the greatest of all the prophets, fell to doubting? Did he doubt that the Lord Jesus was the Christ? Well, there was something he doubted, wasn't there? John had come and in the name of the Lord Jesus, the coming Messiah, he had preached that when the Messiah came, he would baptize people with the Holy Spirit, that is he would give people eternal life. And then said John, 'His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire' (Luke 3:17). That is, our Lord would give eternal life to the believers. He would judge and bring eternal judgment on the impenitent. And then John had faced that wicked old King Herod and publicly denounced him in the name of the coming Messiah for his immorality, and Herod had responded by putting John in prison.

It seems to me that John had expected that now was the time for Jesus Christ to prove himself. Here was an impenitent rascal, Herod, who had defied the gospel and defied our Lord's forerunner and publicly rejected the preaching of the gospel and the call to repentance. Must not the Messiah come and deal with him and publicly let John out of prison, and show the world what the Messiah thought of such impenitent rascals as Herod? But the Lord Jesus didn't come anywhere near the prison and Herod went on in his adultery and evil, utterly unchecked; and no bolts came from the blue, no visitation of judgment from the Messiah. And John, like a good many more before him, fell to wondering, 'Well how long is it going on? If Christ has come to deal with the wicked, how long, O Lord, will you not rise up and put evil men down? Are you really the Messiah then, or do we wait for another?'

How did John make his mistake? Our blessed Lord sent the messengers back to John and said, 'Tell John what you see and hear. Tell of my lovely miracles of healing. I'm doing things that the Prophet Isaiah prophesied I would do. The poor are hearing the gospel, and men and women are finding God and finding forgiveness and finding eternal life. Men and women are finding healing. Tell John that, and he will see that I'm fulfilling one part of the prophecy. But the other part, the execution of the judgment of God upon this evil world? No, John, that's not

coming yet. It was never meant to come yet. That lies in the future. The weeds will be allowed to grow with the wheat, until the harvest and then the judgment will come' (see Matt 13:30).

The failure to understand the timing of God's words meant that John got stumbled in his faith. Sometimes believers come to doubts that way. Some four years ago I was being driven in a car to Heathrow Airport, after a weekend at a Christian conference. Sitting on the seat beside me was a friend of mine, a younger man in his late 30s, a delightful believer. He'd been converted as a student. He was giving his life to the Lord and to the service of the Lord. To cut a long story short, in the last two years he had been afflicted with a tumour on the brain and they had operated and done what they could. He sat in the back seat of the car with me and said, 'I've been told that we can claim healing through the atonement and it's a tremendous comfort to me, and I'm claiming healing through the atonement. What do you think, David?' I found that a very difficult question to have to face in those circumstances. I said, 'I believe God is a God of healing, and the psalm says, doesn't it, that he heals all our diseases?' (see Ps 103:3).

He is a God of healing. If you cut your finger, you'll find that God has anticipated the wound and he's put a mechanism in your finger and all sorts of things will begin to happen. It will bleed and then it will coagulate and then there will come a scab on it to seal it, for the body has an inbuilt mechanism so that if you cut your finger, it can heal itself. It was the loving kindness of God that put the mechanism there. If you don't ever cut yourself, it won't ever need to work, but if you do, it's there, so that you can recover from cutting your finger. If it weren't there, you'd bleed to death. And in that sense, it is God who heals all our diseases. The wise old men used to say in Latin, 'It is the doctor who treats you. It is God who heals you.' If God hadn't put the healing mechanism there, the doctors could do what they like and you'd never be healed. He is the God who heals all our diseases, and he doesn't do it just for the believer. He does it for unbelievers as well. He's kind to the just and the unjust. God does heal.

That has nothing to do with the atonement: that's nature. But sometimes God, in his infinite mercy, is prepared to do a miracle of healing. I believe that, and I suspect you do. Every time a member of the assembly gets ill, at our prayer meeting we mention his or her name and call upon God that, even now when the doctors have come to the end of their resources, he might be pleased to intervene and raise that one up by a miracle of his grace. I hope you still believe that much, or else why pray! That has nothing to do with the atonement either. Said I to my friend, 'What we can't do actually is to claim that we have healing through the atonement. We have forgiveness through the atonement, and the weakest believer, the moment he or she believes the Saviour, has forgiveness.'

If I believe on the Saviour and you come to me and you say, 'Have you got forgiveness?' and I say, well some days I think I have and some days I think I haven't; please don't say to me, 'That's because your faith isn't strong enough. Now if you only had strong enough faith, you'd get forgiveness.' No, you don't have to have strong faith to get forgiven. The very moment the weakest little hand of faith goes out to the Saviour, in that moment the person is forgiven. If we had healing through the atonement, then the moment we ask for it in the name of the crucified Christ, we should get it, whether our faith was strong or weak. So I said to my friend, 'What we can get through the atonement is the redemption of our bodies, so thank the Lord for that. We have forgiveness now and along with the rest of creation, we groan within

ourselves, waiting for the redemption of our bodies. That will be far more than healing. When the blessed Lord comes and the dead in Christ shall rise, and we who are alive and remain, will be changed and caught up together with them to meet the Lord in the air—our very bodies redeemed, and we shall be given a new body like his glorious body (see 1 Thess 4:16–17; Phil 3:20–21). That’s what we can claim through the atonement and the Bible tells us quite plainly when that redemption is going to come. Not now. The redemption of our body waits until the Lord comes.’

My friend who was listening to this, sitting in the car with a tumour on his brain and clutching to the idea that he could claim healing through the atonement, turned and said to me, ‘David, you’re telling me what I don’t want to hear.’ So we parted and two or three months after that, I got a letter full of ‘hallelujahs’ from beginning to end. ‘I’ve just been to the hospital. The doctors can’t find a trace of the tumour. I’m healed, thank God. He’s honoured my faith. I claimed it and he’s given it.’ And three months after that, I got a letter from his widow and she said, ‘I feel like somebody who has climbed a terribly steep and dangerous mountainside, led by a guide and at the top, instead of finding a beautiful flower-covered plain, I find it goes immediately down a precipice to a chasm below. And, looking round, the guide has deserted me: my husband died yesterday.’

When we claim things that we shouldn’t claim and have no Scripture for claiming, then it can lead to doubt. John did that. How much better was Peter’s example. When he got out of the boat to come to the Lord Jesus and, looking at the waves, he began to sink, the Lord raised him up and said, ‘Peter, why did you doubt?’ Well one thing I’m glad about that story, the Lord didn’t watch him going down into the waters and say, ‘Peter, you jolly well deserve it: you shouldn’t have doubted.’ No, when the man began to sink because he doubted, the Lord grabbed him and lifted him up, and then preached the sermon to him. What a lovely Saviour he is! Why did Peter doubt? He needn’t have done. If he’d kept his eye not merely on the person of the Lord Jesus, but on the fact that, when he came out of the boat, he had the word of the Lord Jesus for it. He said, ‘If it is you, Lord, command me to come to you on the water,’ and the Lord said, ‘Come’ (see Matt 14:28–29). It wasn’t any overzealousness or excitement. He had the plain word of Christ for it and in response to that word, he walked. But when he looked around at the difficulty and forgot the Lord and forgot the word, he began to sink. But thank God, because he was responding to the word of the Lord, there stood the Saviour, ready to save him. ‘Why did you doubt, when you had my word for doing it.’

The soul that on Jesus has leaned for repose,
I will not, I will not desert to its foes;
that soul, though all hell should endeavour to shake,
I’ll never, no never, no never forsake.⁴

Worry

Said the Lord to the apostles as they were rowing across the lake, ‘Why are you worrying?’ I don’t know about you, but I feel like replying to the Lord Jesus, ‘What do you mean, why? Do

⁴ Attributed to Richard Keen, ‘How firm a foundation’ (c. 1787).

you think I lie there tossing on my bed with all sorts of worries going round in my head because I want to? I'd gladly switch them off if I could, but I can't.'

The situation was that they got into this boat and they're going across the lake and the Lord began to talk to them—a spiritual lesson about the leaven of the Pharisees. But the mention of that word 'leaven' provoked a whole chain of thought buzzing around in their heads. You know how words will do that sometimes: they provoke some thought in your mind and you can't concentrate on what the preacher is saying because of all these distracting thoughts. It happens sometimes to the good ladies when they're going to entertain the visiting preacher for lunch! He gets up to preach after the Lord's Supper and he goes on a long while, and he happens to talk about food. 'Oh, have I put the potatoes on, and do you think the oven has clicked on like it should? And when is the man going to stop preaching anyway?' And the thoughts go round in your head and you can't listen to what the man is saying. You might as well leave!

I worked as a farmer's boy years and years ago and my dear boss was a delightful Christian man. How many times he would sit in the Sunday evening meeting in the assembly there, and on the Monday he had to decide what forty employees had to do on the farm. You couldn't afford to have forty men just sit twiddling their thumbs and doing nothing, and it would all depend on the weather. Perhaps he had set them to do a task on Monday and, as he sat in the gospel meeting, the rain began to pelt on the roof. What do you suppose then went through the man's mind? You say, 'Well he ought to have concentrated on the word of God.' I'm sure he did, but I could understand it if, instead of listening to the preacher, he was thinking about what he was going to do with those forty men tomorrow morning. It is difficult, my brother, sometimes to switch off from the business of the day, to attend to the Bible reading. It's difficult sometimes to switch off in prayer, my dear sister, with thoughts chasing through your mind about how you're going to meet next month's mortgage.

Our Lord Jesus knew what was happening and that the disciples weren't really listening to him. When he referred to the leaven of the Pharisees, the word 'leaven' made them think of ordinary leaven and therefore of bread, and they remembered that they had forgotten to bring bread. They were so worried about that, they couldn't listen to what the Lord was saying—distracted by practical matters and taking attention from their spiritual lesson. So the Lord had to say to them, 'Well, gentlemen, just a minute. Do you remember when I fed the five thousand, how many basket loads of fragments you took up? And when I fed the four thousand, how many basket loads of fragments you took up? So why don't you use a little logic? Start with remembering how I got you out of difficulties in time past, and if I would do it then, wouldn't I do it again?'

How do I stop those thoughts chasing around? Well, one way of starting is to remember the past and the times I was worried before, and the way I saw Christ come in and meet the need. If I try to do that myself, I have a confession to make. There have been times when I've been extraordinarily worried and then the Lord has provided, and I've said to myself, 'You foolish man, why did you worry? The next time it happens, I will trust the Lord.' And the next time it happened, I worried all over again! But you are better Christians than that, with more sense in your heads! But the technique is to remember what he did in the past and to learn to argue that the Lord isn't irresponsible or inconsistent. If he provided in the past, we may be certain he will provide in the future.

His love in time past forbids me to think
He'll leave me at last in trouble to sink.
Each sweet Ebenezer I have in review
Confirms his good pleasure to help me quite through.⁵

He knows I need the time to think about spiritual things: I've a big eternity to prepare for. What a shame if I let worry about mere material things so engross me that I haven't got time and mental energy enough to think about those spiritual lessons I need to learn in order to prepare for God's great eternity. 'But your Father knows,' says the Lord Jesus. Think what he's done in the past. It will give you confidence to trust him that he will do it again for you in the future.

⁵ John Newton (1725-1807), 'Begone, unbelief!'

What Will Make Heaven, Heaven?

Thank you, Mr Chairman, for those kind words of welcome and thank you, my brothers and sisters and kind friends, for turning out to encourage a young preacher in his preaching! We will read tonight from the Gospel by Matthew and chapter 19.

Now when Jesus had finished these sayings, he went away from Galilee and entered the region of Judea beyond the Jordan. And large crowds followed him, and he healed them there.

And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, 'Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?' He answered, 'Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, "Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh"? So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.' They said to him, 'Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?' He said to them, 'Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery.'

The disciples said to him, 'If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry.' But he said to them, 'Not everyone can receive this saying, but only those to whom it is given. For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let the one who is able to receive this receive it.' (vv. 1-12)

And may that same Lord Jesus, who taught his disciples in that far-off day, draw near and teach us here this evening.

An expectation of heaven

For our meditation this evening, I would like you to come with me in your imagination to ancient Palestine and in particular to the banks of the River Jordan, at the time when the crowds were gathering around the Lord Jesus in vast throngs, ready for his final ascent on the capital city, Jerusalem. For the last many months, the Lord Jesus had been preaching and teaching and healing largely in Galilee, and more recently through Samaria as, little by little, he had been coming south towards Judaea. At long last, he had arrived in Judaea, opposite Jericho and the crowds that followed him now amounted probably to many thousands. They had seen his miracles, they had listened to his teaching and there had arisen in the crowd the expectation that perhaps, after all, this was the long awaited Messiah. And they had guessed

that, as he journeyed, he was ultimately on his way to Jerusalem. They said to themselves, 'Could this be the time when the Messiah will come suddenly to his temple and the son of David come to Jerusalem City?'

The crowd were all agog, as you may imagine. Presently, as he moved and crossed the river Jordan and passed through Jericho, he ascended the steep cliffs of the Judean hills on the famous road, and crested the brow of the hill. There they saw him call for a mule or a donkey and ride upon it, and his disciples covered the road with their clothes. The crowd in fervour were waving their palm branches, crying, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord' (Matt 23:39). They thought the kingdom of God was about to appear within a very few days, perhaps within the week. According to Luke's account of these things, our Lord at that stage told a parable, because some were expecting the kingdom of God immediately to appear and it wasn't going to appear immediately. The blessed Lord, as he knew full well and had told his disciples, would have to go to Jerusalem, and there he would be rejected. He would be cast out of the vineyard. He would be like the nobleman that had to go into a far country to receive a kingdom and then, and only then, eventually to return to set up his kingdom on earth. But in spite of the parable, the excitement scarce abated and many thought in their hearts that, yes, within a few days now, Jesus will turn out to be the King, the son of David, the long-awaited Messiah. The kingdom will be established, paradise on earth will begin.

You can understand their getting excited. Wouldn't you, if you thought the Lord was coming next Monday? Wouldn't you feel your pulse quickening? And suppose you thought next Saturday week, the kingdom of the Lord was going to descend upon earth and paradise be set up on earth. Why, if you weren't excited, then it would be because you were made of concrete! What a wonderful thing it was and I can feel for those people, as they traipsed up the hills, scarce noticing the climb, all full of excitement. 'Oh, what would it be, when the kingdom was established? What would life in the kingdom be like?'

Then a strange thing happened. While our blessed Lord stayed a while near Jordan, before his last ascent, there came one and another, individuals and groups, and they put some questions to him. And when he answered them, their brows knitted and their faces fell, for they began to perceive what life in the kingdom of God would be like when it dawned. And the more they listened, the more dismayed they began to be, until some of them in the end became quite disgusted and said to themselves, 'Well if that's what life is going to be in the kingdom of God, if these are the rules of behaviour that the King Messiah will lay down for his people, are we sure we want to be in the kingdom?' Certainly they were sure that if life was going to be like that in the kingdom, they didn't want it to start right now. They had no intention of living like that now, for that way of life sounded to them to be disastrous and guaranteed to undermine every pleasure they knew. So it was that about a week or so later, the great majority of that crowd joined the others in Jerusalem, and ultimately crucified him.

Living in heaven

It is a long way between then and now: we belong to a different dispensation and we belong to the church. But surely our hearts beat too with the expectation that one day the Lord Jesus will so come in the same way as his apostles saw him go. He shall ask of the Father and the Father will give him the uttermost parts of the earth for his possession. He shall sit on the

throne of his father David. He shall rule from shore to shore. What joy it will be to see him reigning, glorified, adored! And ours is an even greater and more glorious hope. We look for the Lord to come and take us home to the Father's house on high, to be with him and with him eternally. Have we never thought what life will be like when we're with him? Have we never spent five minutes thinking what it is that will make heaven heaven? What is it that, in essence, will make heaven the heaven we expect it to be?

And the answer to that is not the golden streets by themselves, nor even the fact that there will be no more curse and no more sickness and no more sorrow. The thing that will make heaven heaven at its very heart is the way people behave in heaven. What will it be that makes heaven heaven? Well, my brother, my sister, it will be the way the blessed Lord Jesus behaves toward you. It will be the way we behave towards him. It will be the way we behave towards one another. If we could get inklings of what heaven will be like when we arrive and how people will behave when they get there—and if it is true that we're longing to be home and longing to be in heaven—we would want to create a little bit of heaven on earth already, wouldn't we, and to anticipate it a bit? As far as it is possible, we would want to behave here and now in the way that people are going to behave when they get to heaven.

And so it seems to me that we can take lessons from these far-off days and from these far-off people, as we listen to them talking to the Lord Jesus and the Lord Jesus talking to them about the standards of behaviour that would mark life in his kingdom. And by the time the evening is out, we will be asking ourselves whether we can match up to that and how our behaviour compares with those whose inheritance is in glory.

A question of attitude

The first issue that they put to the Lord, according to Matthew 19, was a question brought by the Pharisees. They came, tempting him as usual and saying, 'Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife for every cause?' (v. 3 KJV). What they meant was as follows. The Pharisees had read in the ancient law given by Moses that if a man found some unpleasantness in his wife, then he might give her a bill of divorcement and put her away (Deut 24:1–4). And the learned rabbis had exercised their minds and their moral judgment, and let's hope also their moral conscience, in deciding what the Old Testament Scripture meant when it talked about this unpleasant thing that a man might find in his wife. Some rabbis said that the unpleasant thing mentioned would have to be some serious moral failure, some grievous infidelity towards the marriage, and that, and that only, would justify or permit a man putting away his wife.

On the other hand, there were other rabbis, and one in particular, who preached a much more popular view. They said that the unpleasant thing that a man might discover in his wife could be anything you care to mention. Suppose his wife developed, for instance, an unpleasant skin disease, then the man was perfectly entitled to give her a bill of divorcement and send her away. Indeed, the unpleasant thing could be almost anything under the sun—if she burnt the potatoes or spoiled his breakfast, made his bed the wrong way, or didn't always do exactly as he told her. So they were divided in Israel as to what this unpleasant thing was on account of which Moses' law permitted a man to divorce his wife, and they came to the blessed Lord Jesus and asked him about the question. 'What do you say? Is it allowed for a man to put his wife away for just any old cause whatsoever?'

Jesus answered them and said, 'Have you not read that he which made them from the beginning, made them male and female, and joined the two together that they might be one? Therefore, gentlemen, what God has joined together, let not man separate' (see vv. 4–6).

You say, 'He's talking about the garden of Eden, isn't he?'

Yes, that's right. He's talking about paradise, the lovely garden of Eden.

You say, 'What's paradise got to do with it? We're living in a broken, fallen world. How could you possibly insist upon the regulations that were laid down in paradise?'

But I thought the crowd were expecting the kingdom of God to appear in a day or two. I thought they were looking for the coming of the great and glorious kingdom of God, with all its paradise, its glories and joys. And if they were really looking for paradise on earth, then surely when it came to marriage, they wouldn't be content with less than the rules of paradise itself. But they hadn't got quite that far in their thinking.

They had their concept of what the kingdom would be. As the two on the road to Emmaus put it to the Lord Jesus some days later, 'We had expected that this Jesus would be the one who would liberate Israel.' Their idea of a paradise, their idea of the coming millennial reign of Christ, would first of all be political liberation. The Roman overlords would be booted out and when you went to Jerusalem, you wouldn't see foreigners living in the big houses and the big palaces. The locals would enjoy it as they had a right to, and all the foreigners would be booted out. And then the wealth would be redistributed and every man would sit under his vine and under his fig tree. Wouldn't it be delightful to have a nice patio with modern windows, and perhaps a little bit of air conditioning? And not only a farm that could keep you in good food and clothes, but perhaps a chariot or two?

In other words, it was going to be *things* that made the reign of the Messiah so enjoyable. They had forgotten that what will make his reign, even his reign on earth, so delightful, won't be simply the things. The thing that will make his kingdom so delightful is that as King, he will insist on certain standards of behaviour. It will be the way that people will treat each other, for this is paradise. They said, 'Why then did Moses allow us to write a bill of divorcement and put our wives away when they displeased us?' Our Lord replied, 'It was for the hardness of your heart, gentlemen.' And we might add that it was God's mercy to protect the women of those days. You can just imagine some old baron, because his wife had a pimple on her nose, gives her a bill of divorce and takes up with a young, shiny, bright, new thing. And God in his compassion for the wife lays down rules and regulations that limited man's cruelty in those far-off days and guaranteed the wife her right of maintenance and her part of the property—God mercifully limiting the cruelty of selfish men. 'You don't want that kind of behaviour, do you?' says Christ. 'It wasn't so in paradise, and for all who follow me, I propose to insist on the original standards of the ideal.'

Now I have no intention tonight to discuss with you the thorny problem of divorce. Though as the years go by, if the signs are true, we shall not only continue to get weather from the western side of the Atlantic, but the standards that now prevail in America will come here too, and divorce will increase in leaps and bounds. Someone ought to talk about it. It would need someone more qualified than I. And our young people ought to be taught in advance what Christian standards are, lest there happen here what has happened elsewhere. Young people enter into marriage thinking that if it doesn't work out, the Christian thing to do is to

divorce, and that to forbid divorce is un-Christian. It is well for people to be instructed in advance by those who are able. Remember, my older brothers and sisters who have the charge of training the younger generation in the assembly, upon you rests a very large responsibility to train the young people. They weren't brought up in your generation. They're being brought up in a very different world with very different standards, and they need gracious and loving and kindly instruction about how to behave in a Christian fashion.

But tonight, I'm thinking of other things. I'm thinking of heaven, and you will say to me, 'So what has all this got to do with heaven, because when we get to heaven, there isn't going to be any marriage—"they neither marry nor are given in marriage" (22:30)—so what has this got to do with that?' Well, it isn't quite the matter of divorce I'm interested in. I'm interested at this particular moment in the reaction within the disciples' hearts and minds, when they heard what the Lord Jesus had got to say. They said, 'Well, Lord, if that's the attitude you're going to take, if that's the situation between a man and his wife, it would be better not to get married then.' In that moment, perhaps they didn't realize what they were saying, for out it all came—what their concept of marriage was.

'Lord, I mean, why do men get married? Surely, Lord, it's for the pleasure and for the joy and to be comforted and to have somebody to make the breakfast and make the bed. And so long as she's pretty and lovely and behaves nicely, well it's marvellous. But, Lord, are you going to say that if she fell ill, or lost her beauty or something, I've got to still carry the woman? Well, there's no point in getting married like that: we would be better single.' All of a sudden, we see what their attitude of heart had been. Selfishness—their concept of happiness, their own self-centred enjoyment, and the wife there to minister to that and if she did it, she would be loved; and if she didn't do it like they wanted, she would be divorced. As for any concept of love being loyalty, it doesn't seem to have been there. Or any concept of true love being a loyal relationship between two persons, was not there. Their wives were servants, their wives were toy things; and if the toy got broken, it was ditched.

Changed attitudes?

Well I hope before they get home to heaven, they're going to be changed. Just you think for a moment, as I jump once more from one level to the next, what is going to make heaven heaven for you? You say, 'On thinking it over, my heaven will be grounded in this: the love of Christ to me.' Well, tell me about that love of Christ, my dear brother; what does it mean to you? Which of us could adequately describe all the fullness of the love of Christ? While we were yet sinners, while we were ungodly, while we were rebels, he loved us then, and gave himself for us then, that we might be reconciled to God. And then the love of Christ towards us during all these long years of our pilgrimage on this earth, and how many blots and blemishes and wrinkles he has seen upon our spiritual countenance, and how many unclean behaviour patterns in our personalities he has seen. Who can tell the marvel of it: he loves us as always he has loved us. He'll never cease to love us, for as a man should love his wife, so Christ loves the church and gave himself for her (Eph 5:25). Tell me, is this not the basis of your whole enjoyment of glory? I know it is.

Just you think, arriving in heaven and knowing you've got an eternity to spend there, you take every opportunity to get the heavenly omnibuses (or whatever they provide!) to go

round the walls of the new Jerusalem and spy out your estate. And, day after day, day after day, you discover the glories and the wealth of that heavenly abode, until your heart can scarce take it in. But imagine what it would be if one day there was circulated a rumour that Christ had lost interest in you and was proposing to divorce you. Not all the gems and gold and diamonds of heaven combined could prevail to make heaven heaven any longer. You say, 'But you've forgotten that when I get home to heaven, I shan't have any wrinkles, blots or blemishes. I shall be perfect, so Christ won't have any reason to divorce me.' All right, you'll be content in heaven, will you, if Christ doesn't divorce you?

Well, suppose that he ceases to be interested in you. He's going to have a few millions up there, so suppose he started to neglect you and treat you just like a toy or an ornament. Should it ever become apparent to you that Christ has lost interest in you, and he passed you by on the heavenly staircase and didn't even say a word, would your heaven be big enough then? You say, 'No, my heaven would be this, forever and forever and forever, that I am conscious that the Son of God personally loved me and treated me as a person and took an ever and eternal and continual interest in me.' My brother, my sister, I can assure you that thus it shall be. The blessed Lord who died for you when you were ugly, as ugly could be, will forever love you, not as a toy thing, but as a person, and love you and be interested in you forever.

Heavenly perspectives

Then it seems to follow in my thinking, if that's how we expect heaven to be, and we want to be there, shall not some of the glories begin to shine upon the way we behave now, in our homes and assemblies? Apparently, those dear disciples had a long way to go in learning the way that heaven behaves. They said, 'Lord, if that's your standard of behaviour, in our humble estimate, we'd be better not getting married.' The Lord wouldn't let them off with that one. 'Gentlemen,' he said, 'not all can receive what I'm about to say. There are some eunuchs born that way, some have been made so by human cruelty, to some is given the gift of remaining unmarried for the kingdom of God's sake. Gentlemen, don't suppose that that is the attractive way out, thinking that you would be better off and enjoy life better without the burden and the weight of having to look after somebody else, and always to consider somebody else rather than having your own freedom and enjoying yourselves.'

That's what the disciples were saying and you see that inherent self-centred concept of what pleasure and joy are. It would turn heaven itself into a self-centred home for individualists, each seeking his own pleasure, regardless of others. That's not heaven. They to whom God gives the unusual and exceptional gift of remaining single, he gives them that for the sake of the kingdom of God. Not so that they may retire to enjoy their own selfish pleasures irresponsibly, but that they might serve others the more fully and effectively in the service and the life to which God has called them. Oh, when shall we learn that the secrets of the joys of heaven are to be found as we forget ourselves and learn to live for others!

There came then, so we are told in subsequent verses, a rich, young man to the Lord Jesus (19:16–22). He too had a question. He said, 'Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?' As we read his story, we become aware of how the man was thinking. He was a rich, young man and like all rich, young men, I suppose, he had used his money in various ways

and particularly to enjoy life to the full. If he wanted a new chariot, he could afford a new chariot, so why not have a new chariot then? The latest bungalow with a beautiful swimming pool, why not? He could afford it, he had it. Then he'd heard about the kingdom of God and he brought the same ambition to the kingdom of God as he had brought to everything else. He said, 'I'm interested in this kingdom of God. I gather life there is going to be eternal. How do you get into this kingdom affair, because I'd be interested to know? I'm prepared to pay anything. What is the entrance fee to this club? What do I have to do to have eternal life?'

When our Lord Jesus replied, you will notice that, according to Matthew, he somewhat varied the language. Said he, 'If you would enter life, . . .'. He didn't say here, 'If you want to have eternal life,' for our Lord was surely not telling him that eternal salvation depends upon keeping of the law. We get eternal life simply through faith: 'it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast' (Eph 2:8-9). Let us be abundantly clear upon it again this evening. The gift of God, the free, unconditional gift of God, is eternal life through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Have you got it, my friend? Forgive my asking, but just let's make sure. You have? You've got eternal life? Marvellous. So what is this eternal life that you've got? You say, 'Well, I've got a life, like my physical life, only my physical life is only temporary and my eternal life is going to last forever. But there's more to it than that. It's not just a continuation of my life down here. It is a different life. It is a different quality of life. It is the rest and the life of God himself.' You are to be congratulated if you have that kind of life.

Just think for a moment of all the potential of the very life of God. How are you getting on with the enjoying of it? Have you had the time to explore much of it yet, to enter into life? You see, it's one thing to have life; it's another thing to enter into life. You can sometimes see a young man or a young lady and you sense in your bones that they've got all sorts of gifts and abilities they could use but, for some curious reason, they're not making the best of themselves. They're not exploring the possibilities. This girl here has a gift and if she applied herself, she could play the piano, because in her genes, in her life, there is the ability to play like a concert pianist. But no, she's content just to go on and she has not developed the life she has. It can be like that with eternal life. Paul, writing to Timothy, says, 'Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called. You've got it, Timothy, but go in for it, man. Take hold of it. Develop it, enter into it' (see 1 Tim 6:12).

What's life going to be like in heaven? You'll forgive a personal reminiscence. I do remember the days when I was a child and, at last, holidays came. And in those far-off days, if you got down to the seaside each day from your home, you were doing very well. We would, at last, get down to the seaside with loving parents and aunts and uncles and grandmothers. And when you got there, full of anticipation now of all the wonderful things you could do, lo and behold, all the adults sat down on deckchairs and all they thought about was talking! I can feel now the dismay and the frustration of those days — with the sea, with the sand and you could have used your bucket and your spade and made sandcastles and have done glorious things. But all they wanted to do was to sit down and talk. Of course, I didn't realize how hard my mother and father had worked, and for them it was paradise to sit down and ease their aching bones and heads. But for us youngsters, we weren't tired. We were full of life. We wanted to explore it and exploit it. To have to sit down and be good, while they talked, that wasn't heaven: that was torture!

When you get home to heaven, what are you going to do? You say, 'I'm looking forward to getting home to heaven, all burdens laid down and a beautifully-padded heavenly chair, and a heavenly footrest and I'm going to put my feet up for eternity and never do another stroke of work.' You are? Well, that'll get boring after the first ten million years! You won't be tired. You'll have the very dew of your youth—eternal life oozing out of every heavenly pore in your heavenly and glorified body! You'll want to live. 'Young man,' said our Lord to the rich young ruler, 'if you would enter life, keep the commandments. Not to get it, but to enter into it.'

The young man said, 'I've done all that.'

'Well would you like to go a stage further' said our Lord, 'and be eternal? Sell all you have and give to the poor. Come and follow me and you shall have treasure in heaven.'

That didn't sound a good idea to the young man, for he had rather a lot of wealth, and that didn't appear to him to be life. That didn't appear to him to be a recipe for enjoying life, and he went away. I fear he will never be in heaven.

Perhaps the instructions that our blessed Lord gave him were special instructions, so that we cannot draw straight lines to ourselves. Obviously, we cannot all sell everything we've got and give to the poor, and become itinerant preachers following the Lord Jesus round Palestine. We have to 'do what is honourable in the sight of all' (Rom 12:17), but the general principle remains. If you learn to live like a son or daughter of the kingdom and use your wealth and your assets for the blessing of others, you will find you have treasure in heaven. That is still true, isn't it? We have assets of one kind and another and we must be careful not to treat them as if they were our private property. We must come with all we have, like the early Christians came to the apostles and laid what they had at the apostles' feet, owning the rights of the risen Messiah over everything they had. And when they'd done it, it still remained in their power. That is to say, they were allowed if they wanted to, to act as stewards and decide what should be done with it. Only the principle at stake was this, that they had first given it to the Messiah, and as his stewards they would administer it for him.

If we act faithfully as stewards in that which is least, when the day dawns, he will have put into our hands the true riches. When you get home to heaven, will you have anything to give away? For our Lord talks about people there being given the true riches and the more true riches you have, the more you'll be able to pass them on to other people, won't you? I wonder what it will be like daily to receive from the blessed Lord, according to our capacities, spiritual blessings that we can scarce imagine. Great responsibilities and powers and administrative responsibilities put into our hands to administer, as we reign with Christ. Not for our own profiteering, surely, but so that receiving them from the Lord, we may be allowed that supreme blessedness such as the Lord Jesus taught us—'It is more blessed to give than to receive' (Acts 20:35). Oh, what a lovely thing. You've sensed it from time to time, haven't you, on earth, as you've taken something valuable perhaps to you and you've given it for Christ's sake? And in the giving, there has come up in your heart a sense of eternity, a sense of the joy of God, the sense of being infinitely wealthy. You have been able to give.

It's a little foretaste here on earth of what heaven will be like, when at last we get home and God puts into our hands the true riches that we might have the joy of receiving them from him and passing them on to others. My brothers, my sisters, it is an art to be learnt here. It is

as we are prepared to use our goods, time, gifts, assets as the Lord's stewards now and, according to the proportion in which we do it, that there will be put into our hands then, much or little of the true riches in the coming days.

May the Lord use his word in these quiet moments of meditation to make heaven real. Give us eyes of faith to see the very streets and gates of the eternal city. Give us a foretaste of what the joys of heaven will be and the delights of the behaviour of God and his redeemed. So that, even now as we are on our journey there, we might be given grace to begin to behave on earth as one day we hope to behave in heaven.

About the Author

DAVID W. GOODING (1925-2019) was Professor of Old Testament Greek at Queen's University Belfast and a member of the Royal Irish Academy. He taught the Bible internationally and lectured on both its authenticity and its relevance to philosophy, world religions and daily life. He published scholarly articles on the Septuagint and Old Testament narratives, as well as expositions of Luke, John, Acts, Hebrews, the New Testament's use of the Old Testament, and several books addressing arguments against the Bible and the Christian faith. His analysis of the Bible and our world continues to shape the thinking of scholars, teachers and students alike.